

ABDULKARIM SOROUSH: THE THEORY OF THE CONTRACTION AND EXPANSION OF RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE AND THE CHALLENGE OF CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Muhamad Bekti Khudari Lantong

Institute Agama Islam Negeri (IAIN) Manado, Indonesia

bekti.lantong@iain-manado.ac.id

Abstract: *This article elaborates the theory of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge (qabd wa bast-i ti'urik-i syari'at: nazariyah-i takamul-i ma'rifat-i dini), introduced by one of the greatest Muslim thinkers in contemporary era, who is popularly known as Abdolkarim Soroush. Soroush's religious thought and insight has its own perspectives and characteristics. His assumptions and approaches absolutely differ from, either Iranian previous thinkers and scholars in particular, or Islamic scholars in general. In assessing his thought in the light of the efforts of the religious revivalists (muhiyan-i din) of the last century, Soroush emphasizes that his idea, the theory of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge, provides a solution to the unresolved puzzle that all previous Muslim scholars and thinkers were faced with, that is, "to reconcile change and immutability; eternity and temporality; the sacred and the profane." Nevertheless, he claims neither perfection nor finality for his approach, for he believes that no one can have the final word and conclusion in the tremendous task of religious revivalism. In this sense, Soroush actually eager to criticize the idea of "wilayatul faqih" and its immutability within Shi'ite Imamah's doctrine. He also rejects the idea of a theocratic state in Iran, and promotes the concept of a religious democratic state, which he thinks it is the most ideal model for a modern democratic state. Method used in this study is documentation by referring and selecting Soroush's important works and writings, together with other writings by other writers and critics.*

Key Words: *Abdulkarim Soroush, Theory of Contraction and Expansion of Knowledge, Religious Knowledge, Contemporary Islamic Thought*

Abstrak: *Artikel ini mengelaborasi teori tentang penyempitan dan perluasan pengetahuan keagamaan (the theory of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge) yang diperkenalkan oleh salah seorang pemikir Muslim terkemuka di era kontemporer ini, yang lebih dikenal dengan nama Abdulkarim Soroush. Pemikiran dan ide keagamaan Soroush mempunyai karakteristik dan perspektif yang unik. Asumsi dan pendekatan yang dia gunakan sangat berbeda, baik dengan para sarjana dan pemikir Iran sebelumnya pada khususnya, maupun*

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dengan para sarjana Muslim pada umumnya. Dalam memposisikan pemikirannya di tengah arus pemikiran para tokoh revivalis abad ke-19, Soroush menyatakan dengan penuh keyakinan bahwa teorinya “the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge” atau “teori tentang penyempitan dan perluasan pengetahuan keagamaan” memberikan sebuah solusi terhadap kebuntuan pemikiran yang tidak dapat dipecahkan oleh para pemikir Muslim sebelumnya, yaitu “mencari titik temu antara sesuatu yang berubah (change) dengan yang tidak berubah (immutability); antara yang abadi (eternity) dengan yang sifatnya sementara (temporality); dan antara yang sakral (sacred) dengan yang sifatnya duniawi (profane). Namun demikian, Soroush menyadari bahwa pendekatan yang dia tawarkan tidaklah sempurna dan juga belum final, karena dia meyakini bahwasanya tidak seorang pun yang mempunyai kesimpulan yang final terkait dengan revivalisme keagamaan. Dalam hal ini, Soroush sebenarnya lebih tertarik untuk mengkritisi konsep “wilayatul faqih” dan sakralitasnya dalam doktrin Shiah Imamiyah di Iran. Dia juga menolak gagasan tentang negara Teokratik di Iran, dan memperkenalkan konsep tentang Negara-Demokratik-Relijius, yang menurutnya merupakan model yang paling ideal bagi negara demokrasi moderen. Metode yang digunakan dalam studi ini adalah metode dokumentasi, yaitu dengan merujuk dan memilih karya-karya utama yang ditulis oleh Soroush sendiri dan juga karya-karya lain yang terkait dengan, maupun yang mengkritik pemikiran Soroush.

Kata Kunci: Abdulkarim Soroush, Teori Penyempitan dan Perluasan Pengetahuan, Pengetahuan Keagamaan, Pemikiran Islam Kontemporer

Introduction

Abdulkarim Soroush is the *pen-name* of Hossain¹ Haj Farajullah Dabbagh, born in Tehran in 1945 to a religious family. He received his secondary education at the famous ‘Alawi school, a private school originally established by a group of religious merchants and run by a number of well-respected teachers, who were both well-grounded in the modern sciences as well as in religious sciences and teachings. The school aimed at educating individuals in both the modern and religious sciences. At university in Iran he studied pharmacology, going on to earn a post-graduate degree in analytical chemistry and the history and philosophy of science in London. Soroush also received an extensive traditional Islamic education and was as a result well-grounded in the Islamic sciences. During in England, Soroush participated in the political gatherings of Iranian students based in Europe and the United States. He delivered speeches which were transcribed and circulated in pamphlets or books, among others, *Falsafah-i Tarikh*² and *’Ilm Chist, Falsafah Chist?*³. Another book that he published was *Tadadd-i Dialiktiki*⁴, consisting of a series of his lectures delivered in an attempt to curtail the increasing influence of Marxist ideology on the minds of young activists in Iran. Being associated with, by some

¹ He was named as Hossein since he was born on ‘Ashura, the day commemorating the martyrdom of Hossein, the third Shi’ite imam, see Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran: Abdolkarim Soroush, Religious Politics and Democratic Reform*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), p.90.

² Abdulkarim Soroush, *Falsafah-i Tarikh, [philosophy of History]* (Tehran: Hikmat, 1978)

³ Abdulkarim Soroush, *’Ilm Chist, Falsafah Chist? [What is Science, What is Philosophy?]* (Tehran: Sirat, 1992)

⁴ Abdulkarim Soroush, *Tadadd-i Dialiktiki [Dialectical Antagonism]* (Tehran: Hikmat, 1978)

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scholars, as the Luther of Islam, Soroush is a prolific writer who wrote many books and articles, most of which is published in Persian and English language.

While the religious intellectual trend of Iran in the 1970s was associated with the name of Ali Shari'ati and Husayniyah-i Irshad, the corresponding trend in the post-revolutionary era has been identified with Abdulkarim Soroush and the journal *Kiyan*. The post-revolutionary religious intellectualism of Iran features certain unique characteristics as it evolves in a context which is socially and politically different from the pre-revolutionary era, though having its roots in it. This context has little precedent in Islamic history, where seldom has religious and political authority been united in one and the same institution. Unlike the religious thinkers of the previous era, the main figures of the new religious modernist movement have all had some kind of association with the ruling structure, which makes the task of any reform more difficult. This intellectual movement has, nevertheless, emerged from within the same ideological circles that shaped the revolution, and is headed by one of its best known figures, Abdulkarim Soroush.⁵

The formative years of post-revolutionary religious intellectualism went very much unnoticed by the religio-political authority, which by mid-1980 had already succeeded in consolidating its foundations and overcoming its rivals. Perhaps one can date the earliest activities of this Islamic intellectualism to the early 1980s when the first cultural organization of its kind was founded by a few young but intellectually-oriented revolutionaries who had dissociated themselves from purely political activities and who envisioned the empowerment of the intellectual, rather than the military or political, aspect of the Islamic society. In 1358 H/1981AD these individuals founded an institution called the *Hawzah-i Andishah wa Hunar-i Islam* (Center of Islamic Thought and Art), a deliberate echo of the name of the traditional Islamic seminary, *Hawzah-i 'ilmiyah* (Center of Islamic Sciences). The goal of this center was to promote Islamically-inspired fine arts and belles-letters. Yet the timing of its founding was significant, indicating as it did the intellectual orientation of its member at a time when the prevailing social atmosphere was increasingly directed towards religious emotionalism and popularism through reviving fanatical modes of expression in a society afflicted by revolution and war.

The original founders of the *Hawzah-i Andishah wa Hunar-i Islami* started over again, this time by the help of a few other like-minded individuals founding in 1363 H/1984 AD *Kayhan-i Farhangi* (Cultural Kayhan), a monthly cultural magazine devoted to issues of thought and literature, the first of its kind ever to be published after the revolution. The openness of thought that this magazine displayed during its early years was particularly striking because it did not devote its attention solely to traditional Islamic thinkers and preachers. Translations of works by famous Western literary and philosophical figures as well as Western literary criticism covered several pages in each issue. A number of Iranian well-known scholars were interviewed and introduced to readers. Topics such as religion and science, reason and revolution, freedom and social justice, Islam and the West, were among those addressed by the magazine. A vocal

⁵ Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and religious Modernism in Iran* [1953-2000], (Leiden; Boston; Koln; Brill, 2001), p.140.

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point of the history of the magazine came in 1988-1990 when it published a series of articles by Abdulkarim Soroush entitled “*Qabd wa Bast-i Ti’urik-i Shari’at* (The Theory of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge).⁶ These articles laid the foundation of Soroush’s epistemological approach to religious modernism. The argumentative nature of the articles and the implications that Soroush’s theory had for the religious and political establishment led to much controversy, so that the editorial board of the magazine was forced to resign. *Kayhan-i Farhangi* was, finally, closed down in 1990.⁷

The Theory of Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge

Soroush’s religious modernism thought has its own unique characteristics. His assumptions and approaches absolutely differ from, either Iranian previous thinkers and scholars in particular, or Islamic scholars in general. In assessing his thought in the light of the efforts of the religious revivalists (*muhiyan-i din*) of the last century, from Jamaluddin al-Afghani to Muhammad Iqbal and Ali Shari’ati, Soroush contends that his contribution, namely, his theory of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge, provides a solution to the unresolved puzzle that all previous Muslim scholars and thinkers were faced with, that is, “to reconcile change and immutability; eternity and temporality; the sacred and the profane.”⁸ Nevertheless, he claims neither perfection nor finality for his approach, for he believes that no one can have the final word and conclusion in the tremendous task of religious revivalism. According to Soroush, those who have attempted in the past to “reconstruct” or “revive” Islam wanted to preserve the immutability of religion, on the one hand, and yet render it compatible with the continuously changing nature of the modern world, on the other. Some have tried to strip from Islam irrelevant and or foreign elements in order to make it more effective and functional. Some have tried to empower it by adding to it elements borrowed from elsewhere, such as from science. Others, like Afgani, have seen the problem as lying within Muslims themselves and not Islam. Notwithstanding his appreciation of all these attempts, Soroush tries to take the problem to a different level by examining it from an epistemological perspective. He, fruitfully, states that all the solutions arrived at until today, though perhaps necessary, lacked an epistemological theory. The missing link in their series of efforts was that they did not distinguish between religion (*din*) itself, and religious knowledge (*ma’rifat-i dini*). Consequently, the inherent contradictions frustrated their attempts to reconcile a fixed religion with a changing world.⁹

According to Soroush, it is not Islam (as religion) that must be changed in order to bring about a reconciliation between the immutability of religion and the dynamics of the external world; it is rather man’s understanding of the religion (Islamic thought) that must be altered. The key principle in Soroush’s approach is the distinction that he makes between religion (*din*) and

⁶ See, *Kayhan-i Farhangi* [Cultural Kayhan] 5, no.2 (1367 H/1988 AD): p.12-18; *Kayhan-i Farhangi* 5 no.4 (1367 H/1988 AD):p.13-19; *Kayhan-i Farhangi* 5 no.12 (1367 H/1989 AD):p.11-16; *Kayhan-i Farhangi* 6 no.4 (1368 H/1989 AD): p.7-15; *Kayhan-i Farhangi* 6 no.5 (1368 H/1989 AD): p.6-11

⁷ Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Op.cit.*, p.142

⁸ Abdulkarim Soroush, *Qabd wa Bast-i Ti’urik-i Shari’at: Nazariyah-i Takamul-i Ma’rifat-i Dini* [The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Religion: The Theory of Evolution of Religious Knowledge], (Tehran: Sirat, 1994), p.47-52

⁹ *Ibid*, p.52

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religious knowledge (*ma'rifat-i dini*). The *first* is being unchangable (*thabit*), whereas the *latter* is constantly in a state of flux (*mutaghayyir*). The major principles of Soroush's theory of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge could be summarized as follows:

1. From an epistemological and historical point of view, religion (*din*) is different from the religious knowledge (*ma'rifat-i dini*)
2. Religion *per se* is divine, eternal, immutable and sacred
3. Religious knowledge is a human endeavour, like any other, such as, for instance, the attempt to understand nature. Thus, religious knowledge (*ma'rifat-i dini*) is not sacred
4. Similarly, in as much as it is a human endeavour, religious knowledge is certainly affected by and in constant exchange with all other fields of human knowledges
5. Religious knowledge is always in a state of flux, relative and time-bound¹⁰

He firmly emphasized that religious knowledge is the result of human's attempt to understand and interpret religion, which, in the case of Shi'ah, consists of the Qur'an, hadith and the teachings of Shi'ah Imams. Religion has a revelatory essence and as such may be true, perfect, comprehensive and immutable. Religious knowledge, on the other hand, though its subject matter is sacred, cannot retain any of these qualities because it, like any other branch of knowledge, develops in and is affected by the complexities of human social and intellectual interaction. Religious understanding and its interpretation always occur in a given context, and are produced by individuals with a distinct understanding of the world, nature, and man. In the process of bulding up any body of religious knowledge, a variety of pre-suppositions and methods are conciously or inadvertently utilized. These assumptions range from the philosophical, theological and historical perspectives, to more specific ones like the linguistic and sociology. All this implies that the understanding of religion and any knowledge of it are subject to expansion and contraction, because they are involved in a constant give and take with other disciplines of human knowledge. Religious knowledge, like other branches of knowledge, is mundane, theory-loaded, and thus relative, time-bound and constantly changing.¹¹

Soroush argues, furthermore, that the goal of the theory of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge is not to resolve the dispute between traditional and the dynamic jurisprudence (*fiqh sonnati va fiqh pouya*); nor is it the goal of this theory to modernize religion, to reinterpret or complement shari'ah, or to relativize or deny the truth. Rather, the theory aims to explicate the process through which religion is understood and the manner in which this understanding undergoes change. The theory proposes that so far as the secret of the understanding of religion and the transformation of this understanding are not revealed, the endeavor to revive religion will remain incomplete.¹²

Thus, the theory of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge or religious interpretation, which is originally an "interpretive-epistemological theory", belongs to three other domains as well, that is; *kalam* (Islamic theology), *ushul fiqh* (applied logic in Islamic

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.53-55. See also Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran (1953-2000): from Bazargan to Soroush*, (Leiden: BRILL, 2001), p.146-149

¹¹ Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Op.cit.*, p.148-149

¹² Abdulkarim Soroush, *Op.cit.*, p.34

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jurisprudence), and *irfan* (the esoteric dimension of Islam). *First*, the theory belongs to *kalam* because it has to do with theology and because it reveals the extent to which our previous assumptions and “our expectations from religion” influence our understanding of the Qur’an and the tradition. *Second*, it belongs to *ushul fiqh* because it reveals precisely which sciences religious law (*fiqh*) needs in order to accomplish the task of methodic conjecture (*istinbat al-ahkam*). The theory also explains the effects of the implicit and explicit assumptions of the practitioners of religious jurisprudence concerning the nature and the process of the production of religious edicts and jurisprudential understanding. Furthermore, the theory clarifies the suppositions of the concepts of “the transparence of the text” (*zohur*) and the reason why adjudication in particulars presupposes adjudication in principles, and the extent to which religious law (*fiqh*) is inspired by theology (*kalam*). *Third*, the theory belongs to *irfan* because it defines *shari’ah*, *tariqah* and *haqiqah* as three aspects of religion, each worthy of a particular group and heir to a unique perspective. The secret of the perennial conflict of the philosophers, jurisconsults, and mystics is thus revealed; they have clashed over discrepant interpretations of the above three domensions of religiosity, which have emerged due to different experiences and traditions.¹³

Debates on Soroush’s Theory of Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge

Abdulkarim Soroush – who is considered by some as the Martin Luther of Islam – has emerged as the foremost Iranian and Islamic political philosopher and theologian. His sprawling intellectual project aimed at reconciling reason and faith, spiritual authority and political liberty, ranges authoritatively over comparative religion, social science, and theology. However, it is only by understanding the local context of his intellectual endeavors that one can appreciate the universal significance of his thought. Like Shari’ati before him, Soroush is quite prolific. The development of his ideas in the past few years can be traced in a succession of articles that he regularly publishes in Tehran’s monthly literary and critical Journal *Kiyan*. He also remains close to the pulse of social developments through polemical duels, addressing university students on religious and national occasions, and even delivering occasional funeral orations. The currents of Soroush’s revisionist Islam flow in three fields: the epistemology and sociology of knowledge, philosophical anthropology and politycal theory, and ethics and social criticism.¹⁴

Nilou Mobasser and Forough Jahanbakhsh, among other thinkers and scholars, stated that for over two centuries Muslim societies have been experiencing the challenges of modernity and modernization. During this time their response in terms of thought and practice has swung like a pendulum between premature or even “radical” secularization (in the name of modernity) and the extreme reactionary trends of religious revivalism and fanaticism (in the name of religion). Now, at the down of the twenty-first century, it is only natural to expect that this pendulum should begin to find its balance. Islam that is emerging draws upon a rich religious, ethical and intellectual heritage and is responsive in a positive and serious sense, to the imperatives of modern human values. This book offers an overview of certain substantially important dimensions of the reformed Islam, which some would call upon it, “a Neo-Rationalist Islam”. In

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.35

¹⁴ Forough Jahanbakhsh, *op.cit.*, p.140-145

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order to explain the features of Neo-Rationalist Islam, it seems necessary to situate it, first, in the broader context of Muslim responses to modernity. Much has been written on the latter subject, and several categorizations and taxonomies applied in an attempt to differentiate the types of Muslim responses to modernity. One commonly used model is the bipolar category of fundamentalist/militant/political/ideological Islam versus a moderate/non-militant/modernist/liberal Islam.¹⁵

Accordingly, Banafsheh Madaninejad in his Ph.D. dissertation, entitled *New Theology in the Islamic Republic of Iran: A Comparative Study Between Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohsen Kadivar*, proposed such a different perspective on Soroush's idea. This dissertation describes the nature of what has been called *kalam-e jadid* (new theology) in the Islamic Republic of Iran. It argues that there are currently two kinds of "new theologies" in practice. One new theology that is more widely adhered to is an extension of classical theology and stays true to traditional precepts, while the second is postmodern in nature and breaks with tradition completely. The first strand of *kalam-e jadid*, referred to as "theology of selectivity", is represented here by the works of Mohsen Kadivar, the person who epitomizes the intellectual but tradition-bound wave of post-revolutionary theological thought in Iran. The second strand of *kalam-e jadid*, referred to as "postmodern theology", is presented via the works of Abdolkarim Soroush, the most representative thinker of this type of kalam. In making this distinction, this dissertation therefore delineates the different forms of post-revolutionary reformist theology in Iran and presents Soroush's work in terms of the greater postmodern discourse that feeds his work. The interest and importance placed on Soroush's work also speaks volumes about the receptiveness of Iranian reformist intellectual communities towards postmodern thought and the possibility of placing these communities within what has come to be known as the postmodern condition.¹⁶

In addition, another prominent scholar, Roy Jackson, in his book, *What is Islamic Philosophy*, delivered a supporting argument on Soroush's work. In this digressive book, Jackson, particularly in chapter 5; *Faith versus Reason* (p.71-75), refers to the contemporary Iranian philosopher, Abdolkarim Soroush, as an important thinker on the topic of religious knowledge and how this relates to reason. Furthermore, Jackson added that Soroush's best-known work, *The Hermeneutical Expansion and Contraction of the Theory of Shari'a*, is particularly concerned with epistemology and the sociology of knowledge. Soroush has a strong familiarity with Western philosophical ideas, which he synthesizes with his in-depth knowledge of the traditional Islamic sciences, as well as an awareness of more contemporary trends in Islamic intellectual thought. In his work on hermeneutics he raises the issue of the role of religion in the modern world, and he argues that it is quite possible for Islamic culture and values to survive whilst a society is modernized and secularized; the two need not conflict with one another. It is these arguments for a synthesis of religious knowledge and authority with that of secular and political liberalism that has resulted in Soroush being labelled the "Martin Luther of Islam".¹⁷

¹⁵ Nilou Mobasser and Forough Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, (Leiden: BRILL, 2009)

¹⁶ Banafsheh Madaninejad, (Ph.D. Dissertation, 2011), *New Theology in the Islamic Republic of Iran: A Comparative Study between Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohsen Kadivar*, The University of Texas at Austin. 2011.

¹⁷ Roy Jackson, *What Is Islamic Philosophy*, (London: Routledge, 2014), p.71-75

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Furthermore, Charles D. Fletcher, argues in his critical article that Islam in the last two centuries has faced a variety of issues such as nationalism, modernity and the West, science and religion, and applications of the Islamic sciences to a changing world. All these challenges can be summarised under the rubric of the efforts to revitalise, reconstruct, and reform Islam. Both Sunni and Shi'i have participated in the attempts to find Islam's place in a world dominated by Western political, military and technological power. Intellectual thinkers from Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d.1315/1897) to 'Ali Shari'ati (d.1397/1977) have struggled to re-think Islam in a modern age. During the 1990s, the Iranian lay thinker Abdolkarim Soroush distinguished himself as one of the most prominent intellectuals to emerge within the Islamic methodological and political discourse. Unlike most of his immediate predecessors, Soroush has developed his ideas and applications within an Islamic Republic complete with a political and legal system that is Islamic. In other words, he writes from within and about an Islamic state. Soroush has found wide appeal among the educated youth and the technocratic elite of Iran who are seeking to understand Islam's response to modern social and political issues.¹⁸

Accordingly, Tauseef Ahmad Parray wrote an interesting article entitled, *Iranian Intellectuals on "Islam and Democracy" Compatibility: Views of Abdolkarim Soroush and Hasan Yousuf Eshkevari*, which elaborate the compatibility of Islam and Democracy. He stated that Islam and democracy discourse, a hotly debated topic and a burning issue, has highly intensified over the last few decades and throughout the world with several Muslim thinkers (intellectuals) having taken strides to shape Muslim understanding of "Islamic democracy". In this paper, Parray seeks to address this issue in the thought and writings, by way of comparative study, of two prominent intellectuals of Iran: Abdolkarim Soroush, who argued that there is no contradiction between Islam and democracy, and Hasan Yousuf Eshkevari, who is at the forefront of articulating the relationship between Islam and democracy. The essay argues that (1) the efforts made by Soroush and Eshkevari, along with those of many other religious reformist intellectuals and political activists, have collectively given rise to a vibrant, intellectually sophisticated, and expansive discourse of Islamic reformism; (2) although, theoretically, there is no doubt in the argument that Islam and democracy are indeed compatible, there is lack and scarcity of literature on the practical framework or implementation of this envisioned formula of "Islamic democracy" – a challenge still faced by Muslim political theorist, particularly, in the 21st century.¹⁹

In addition, Arzoo Osanloo (University of Washington), in his article; *The Measure of Mercy: Islamic Justice, Sovereign Power, and Human Rights in Iran*, explores how human rights became the discourse through which state actors and individuals came to make sense of this sentence and how it set the stage for broader claims about the legitimacy of the nation-state. When agents of the state made claims about human rights, they were also making claims about the state's entry into the modern world and the legitimacy of the Islamic republic. Interviews with state agents revealed the politically charged nature of the issue and, in particular, their

¹⁸ Charles D. Fletcher, *The Methodology of Abdolkarim Soroush: A Preliminary Study*, in Journal of Islamic Studies (Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University, Islamabad), Vol.44, No.4 (Winter 2005), p.527-552

¹⁹ Tauseef Ahmad Parray, *Iranian Intellectuals on "Islam and Democracy" Compatibility: Views of Abdolkarim Soroush and Hasan Yousuf Eshkavari*, Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia), Vol 7, no.3, 2013. p.43-64.

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concerns with discerning local sources for human rights in Iran. Furthermore, Arzo added that, in the Iranian context, Abdulkarim Soroush has written about the relevance of the human rights discourse to modernity, “a religion that is oblivious to human rights (including the need of humanity for freedom and justice) is not tenable in the modern world” (2000: 128). Some modernist clerics in Iran have also recognized the important connection between the modern nation-state and human rights. For instance, Hujjatul Islam Mohammed Mujtahid Shabistari, a professor of theology at the university of Tehran, has stated, “If we accept that modernity is a global phenomenon today that is not exclusive to the West...then we must accept that the makeup of human relations today necessitates new formations and planning on a global scale. In this sense, human rights have become a lobal concern” (2000: 229)²⁰

Another supporting argument presented by M.A. Muqtedar Khan, ed., in his article, entitled; *Islamic Democratic Discourse: Theory, Debates, and Philosophical perspectives, Global Encounters; Studies in Comparative Political Theory*. According to Khan, the greatest contribution of these articles lies in its demonstration of how far many contemporary Muslim in telleduals and scholars have moved beyond questions regarding the compatibility of Islam and democracy toward a fuller development of and more critical engagement with democracy theory from an Islamic perspective and in light of current political exigencies. Among other modern scholars and thinkers whose ideas and thoughts elaborated deeply within the article is Abdulkarim Soroush.²¹

The debate on the topic is about to continue when Mohammed Hashash delivered his critical insight in his article, entitled; *The Neo-Mu'tazilite that Buries Classical Islamic Political Theology in Defence of Religious Democracy and Pluralism*. According to Hashash, the aim of this paper is to examine a leading project of reforming theology and politics for renewal and pluralism in Muslim majority societies. The ongoing debate over whether Islam can be a state religion or a mere religion within the state makes reading the (Islamic) past into the present or vice versa a controversial endeavour in prospecting future solutions. Due to this fact, engaging with theology politically and with politics theologically appears a requisite in contemporary Islamic thought. This paper contends that Soroush's project launches a radically new direction in Islamic theology and politics (political theology) that builds on classical mysticism and rational theology (of the Mu'tazila).²²

Valla Vakili, an Iranian critical thinker, highlighted the important contribution of Soroush in contemporary religious as well as political life in Iran, in his article, *Abdolkarim Soroush and Critical Discourse in Iran*, in *Makers of Contemporary Islam*. In this Article, Vakili argues that for many years following the advancement of his best known work, “The Theoretical Expansion and Contraction of the Shari'a”, Soroush dominated the Iranian intellectual and critical sense. Soroush's argument begins as part of a larger project of Islamic revivalism in the modern

²⁰ Arzoo Osanloo, *The Measure of Mercy: Islamic Justice, Sovereign Power and Human Rights in Iran*, Cultural Anthropology Journal, Volume 21, Issue 4, November 2006. p.570-602

²¹ M.A. Muqtedar Khan (ed.), Introduction, in *Islamic Democratic Discourse: Theory, Debates and Philosophical Perspectives, Global Encounters; Studies in Comparative Political Theory*, (London: Lexington Books, 2006), p.1-10

²² Mohammed Hashash, *The Neo-Mu'tazilite that Buries Classical Islamic Political Theology in Defence of Religious Democracy and Pluralism*, Brill; Studia Islamica 109 (2014), p. 147-173

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Muslim world. Contemporary Muslim thinkers often argue that Islam must be “reconstructed” or “revived” in order to meet the needs of modern Muslims and society. Soroush differs. He accepts the need to reconcile changes in the modern world with the immutability of religion, yet he does not propose the reconstruction or revival of Islam. For Soroush Islam is unchanging, and any attempt to reconstruct Islam is both futile and illusory. Religion need not to be changed, but rather the human understanding of it. In this distinction lies the key to reconciling a fixed religion with a dynamic world. To meet the challenges of modernity Muslims should seek not to change their religion but rather to reconcile their understanding of religion with changes in the outside world. This requires the conception of religion that accepts the inevitability of change in the human understanding of religion. Soroush advances such a position, on the basis of an analysis of the development and growth of religious knowledge (*ma'rifat-e dini*). While religion itself does not change, human understanding and knowledge of it does. Religious knowledge is but one among many branches of human knowledge. It is not divine by virtue of its divine subject matter, and it should not be confused with religion itself.²³

Last but not least, Shireen T. Hunter (ed.) in his book “Reformist Voices of Islam: Mediating Islam and Modernity” summarizes Soroush’s notion on the theory of religion, knowledge of religion, spiritual and temporal dimensions of religion and the appropriate domain of religion as follows: *First*, the essence of religion is different from human understanding and knowledge of religion. While the essence of religion is constant, human understanding of it is changeable. It evolves as human knowledge and experience of religion expands along with other fields of science. According to Soroush, “Just as no understanding of nature is ever complete and is enriched by new scientific works and the arrival of competing views and historical developments, so are understandings of religion”. *Second*, Human understanding of religion, like that of other spheres, is defective and is influenced by individual and collective pre-understandings and pre-judgements. Therefore, there is not a single reading of religion that is valid; rather, the validity of various readings is relative. This perspective leads Soroush to subscribe both to plural readings of Islam and to the view that there is more than one route to religious truth, and hence to believe in religious plurality. *Third*, Religion, which according to believers is “a sacred, divine and mysterious truth” is transformed into an earthly and human enterprise once it acquires “a visible and external existence”. According to Soroush the process could be perceived as “profanation of the sacred”.²⁴

The Notion of De-Ideologization of Religion

Soroush’s view on the ideologization of religion, which is in turn derived from his epistemological observation regarding the fluctuating nature of religious knowledge, puts him at odds not only with Iranian but also with most contemporary Muslim religious revivalists. Contrary to the prevailing tendency among Muslim modernists, which consists in developing an Islamic ideology, Soroush attempts to reverse, that is to say, he embarks on de-ideologization of religion. According to him, the disadvantages and harmful aspects of an ideology are much

²³ Valla Vakili, “Abdolkarim Soroush and Critical Discourse in Iran”, in John L. Esposito & John O. Voll (eds.) *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.157

²⁴ Shireen T. Hunter, *Reformist Voices of Islam: Mediating Islam and Modernity*, (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), p.78

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greater than than its benefits, particularly in the case of a religious ideology. Soroush argues that religion is far too comprehensive and vital to be enclosed within the fixed mould of an ideology. Religion provides man with all that an ideology can give and even more. Ideologies primarily function as a means for fighting against rival ideologies or other schools of thoughts. Therefore, they are created in such a way as to meet that particular purpose, that is, they are suitable for defeating a specific enemy in a specific society at a specific juncture in time. Therefore, ideologies are ephemeral. Religion, on the other hand, never targets a specific historical or social milieu, it is, to the contrary, everlasting. Since the primary goal of an ideology is mass mobilization, its doctrines, which often serve as party constitutions, require precision and straightforwardness.

Therefore, a religious ideology by definition teaches superficial and inflexible interpretations of God, man, history, etc. It provides an exoteric version of religion which ignores the depth of meanings hidden mysteriously within its doctrines awaiting interpretation. As far as mysticism is concerned, the ideologization of religion never goes beyond *shari'ah* and is incapable of benefiting from the esoteric levels of *thariqah* and *haqiqah*. Furthermore, in sociological terms, ideologies are useful for launching socio-political movements but are ineffective when revolutions are over and when it is the time for founding stable social institutions. Religion, according to Soroush, is functioning at both these times for it is capable of yielding itself to different understandings and interpretations. To the contrary, religious ideology requires the clergy (*ulama*) to act as a class of official interpreters.

Soroush also rejected the ideologization of society, for this is likely to give rise to dictators and totalitarian regimes. In an ideological society there is no room for reason and intellectual inquiry, for everything is pre-determined by the ideology; hence imitation, dogmatism, emotionalism, blind worship of individuals, as well as hatred of whatever and whomever is considered the "other" are promoted. Similarly, no intellectual inquiry about the official ruling ideology or criticism of anyone in power is permitted. Nor does an ideological society tolerate the plurality of ideas either. In an ideal religious society, however, no individual or religious opinion stands beyond criticism. No understanding and interpretation of religion is the best or final. There might be a prevailing interpretation of religion but certainly there is no official or absolute one.

The Idea of Religious Democratis State

Soroush's rejection of Islamic ideology (or ideologization of religion) as the legitimizing factor in an Islamic state does not amount to his negating the role of religion in politics. Rather, he advocates a religious democratic state (*hukumat-i dimukratik-i dini*) for which he argues the possibilities. A democratic state, in his point of view, is not only compatible with religion, but also essential to a religious society (*jami'ah-i dini*). Soroush's notion of a religious democratic state can be better understood in the light of the distinction he makes between two different understandings of religion, where each yielding an alternative type of religious society, which in turn, reflects one of two contrasting notions of religious state. *First, the fiqh-based state*, which in the final analysis, of a totalitarian nature, even though it may take on some democratic forms. *Second, the faith-based state*, which is considered to be an ideal form of a democratic state.²⁵

²⁵ Forough Jahanbakhsh, *op.cit.*, p.151-159

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Depending on which aspect of religion is emphasized, that is, *iman* (inner faith) or *'amal* (outward practice), two different understandings of religion will emerge. If *'amal* is given priority over *iman*, the religious society will be defined as one wherein the observance of all rituals and practices is given priority. Accordingly, the main task of the religious government in this case is to execute religious laws, the *shari'ah*, and to concern itself with and supervise the people's observation of their religious duties and rituals. In this case, *fiqh* is recognized as the core and kernel of Islam; the *fuqaha*, or experts in *shari'ah*, accordingly serve as custodians and will enjoy a prominent and privileged position in politics too. The state will be obliged in such circumstances, as part of its religious duty, to protect and implement the *shari'ah* even if it has to appeal to force. The *fiqh-based state* is predicated on the religious duties and religious rights of the ruler and the ruled. Methods of governance are also derived from religion.²⁶

Soroush argues, however, that *fiqh* only constitutes a portion of the Islamic tradition. Describing the relation between *fiqh* and *iman* (Islamic jurisprudence and faith), he uses the image of body and soul. Deriving much of his inspiration from al-Ghazali, he stated that a *fiqh-based state* may rule the bodies of the people but certainly not their hearts. According to him, what makes a society and thus its government religious is not the enforcement of the *shari'ah* which, historically speaking, has often been imposed upon Muslim society. He emphasizes that a religious society, and one which can be said to have a religious government, is one whose members embrace faith quite freely. Faith, not *fiqh*, is its main pillar. A *fiqh-based society*, according to Soroush, is neither religious nor democratic, regardless of whether it enforces the *shari'ah* or insists upon the observation of its rituals. It clearly remains a *fiqh* government and not a religious one. It is undemocratic because it imposes the enforcement of *shari'ah* and thus seeks uniformity in will and in the religious experiences of all members of the society. The absence of plurality of will and beliefs leads to monopoly over the truth and entails elitism.²⁷

The Rejection of the Clergy (*Wilayat-i Faqih*)

Another critical discourse of Soroush's religious thought is his strict and clearly rejection of the notion of institutionalizing of the *'ulama*, which is in the case of Shi'ite Imams in Iran, is the clergy (*wilayat-i faqih*). Soroush undoubtedly proclaim that "*no understanding of religion is ever sacred, absolute or final. Nor can any individual or specific group claim privileges on the basis of holding the true and final interpretation of religion.*" This applies especially to the Shi'ite clergy who, claiming to be the successors of the hidden Imam, consider themselves as the custodians of true Islam, which allows them to judge the correctness of all other interpretations of religion. The political consequences of this issue, particularly in the present-day Iranian context, are that the *'ulama* should no longer arrogate for themselves a special and privileged role in the political system. This brings Soroush into a face to face confrontation with the *fuqaha* and the advocates of *wilayat-i faqih*.²⁸

Conclusion

Soroush's thought is undoubtedly influenced by and has benefited from both modern non-Islamic and traditional Islamic ideas and sciences. His emphasis on the element of reason in

²⁶ Forough Jahanbakhah, *op.cit.*, p.151-159

²⁷ Forough Jahanbakhsh, *op.cit.*, p.151-159

²⁸ Forough Jahanbakhsh, *op.cit.*, p.160-165

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the understanding of religion and consequently in religious democratic government is, on the one hand, consistent with the Shi'ite sources of *ijtihad*, namely, the Qur'an, Sunnah and *'aql*, while on the other, it shows to an equal extent the influence of Western liberal thought. Likewise, his advocacy of rationalism and his recognition of reason, rather than religion, as the source of values such as justice and freedom, are not without precedent in Islamic tradition. Indeed, they are in accordance with the Mu'tazilite tendency to consider reason as the non-revelatory source for distinguishing between good and evil. Soroush's statement that "it is religion that must be just, for justice can not be religious", echoes the Mu'tazilite axiom that "God must necessarily be just."

While Soroush's position regarding *fiqh* is visibly influenced by al-Ghazali's views, his questioning of the comprehensiveness of the shari'ah as an all-encompassing system of human life in this and the next world leaves him open to charges of being an advocate of secularism. The priority and emphasis he gives to the element of *iman* (inner faith) over *'amal* (outward practice) in his definition of religion and religious society undoubtedly has its roots in the Islamic mystical tradition, in which Soroush is well grounded. However, he has been considered by some of his critics as too concerned with pushing religion out of public life and confining it to the private spiritual life of individuals, as is increasingly the case in the Western societies. Soroush's major departure from the thought of his religious modernist predecessors, such as Mutahhari and Shari'ati, lies in the fact that he has an equal profound knowledge of and acquaintance with both traditional Islamic sciences and modern Western philosophical and social sciences. He has been charged with positivism, liberalism and historicism, but not with ignorance or misunderstanding of Islamic teachings and sources. However, this study (article) has its own limitation. In fact, this study is basically elaborates only Soroush's theory of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge by documentation method and approach. Therefore, further study with different methods and approaches is still needed.

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