

# Reason and Freedom in Islamic Thought

The following are excerpts from the Keynote speech, given by Dr. Abdolkarim Soroush, at the CSID 2nd Annual Conference, held on April 7, 2001, at Georgetown University. The speaker was introduced by Professor Charles E. Butterworth, Program Committee Chair and Director of CSID.

It is a great pleasure to welcome Abdolkarim Soroush to this conference. Dr. Soroush is currently a visiting research associate at the Center of Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University. Normally, he is in Tehran at the Institute for Epistemological Research. Such formal affiliations aside, Abdolkarim Soroush is known above all for his writings on the subject of Islam and democracy, and for trying to bring philosophy and theology, from both Islamic and Western traditions, to bear on those questions.

Before turning the floor over to Dr. Soroush, let me add one quick note: a new book, "**Makers of Contemporary Islam**", edited by John Esposito and John Voll, has just been published. It contains a chapter on the thought and impact of Abdolkarim Soroush, as well as much information on other leading political thinkers in the Muslim world.



Thank you, Dr. Butterworth and everyone else. Since we are talking about new books, allow me to note that a book of mine is now in print in English under the title of "**Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam**". There, I talk about the relationship between democracy and Islam. Most of the points I will be discussing today are dealt with in greater detail in this work.

Coming from Iran and its *Shi'i* tradition, I have a lot of room to introduce philosophical ideas, including extra-religious ideas. *Shi'i* Islam has long been very comfortable with philosophy and has produced great metaphysical philosophers. The tradition lives on today in Iran, being taught in seminaries and universities across the country.

Things become very difficult and



Dr. Abdolkarim Soroush, addressing the CSID Second Annual Conference.

tortuous when one comes to the concept of democracy and Islam. On one hand, democracy has its roots in ancient Greece and comes down to us through Western philosophers, political thinkers, leaders, and so on. As a result, democracy seems a foreign idea and, thus, alien to Muslims. On the other, we have our own Islamic tradition, our own interpretation of religion and text. Reconciling the two can seem a futile and dubious task.

In the past, Muslims thinkers were not generally faced with secular traditions; their focus was always on the Islamic tradition, or that of another religion, such as Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and so on. Now, however, Muslims are before a new phase of history, where Muslims must adapt to a great civilization that is not based on religion, i.e., modern Western culture. There are all sorts of secular ideas and theories that must be addressed. Coming to terms with these non-religious ideas is the most challenging task facing Muslims in modern times.

Most of you are probably familiar with prominent reformers in the Muslim world such as Muhammad Arkoun, Hasan Hanafi, Hamid Naser Abu Zeid and others. What they are doing is reviving *Mu'tazilite* experience in the *Sunni* Islamic world. As you know, within the *Sunni* tradition there are two

rival theological traditions, the *Ash'arite* school and the *Mu'tazilite* school. Since their defeat, the *Mu'tazilites* have been marginalized in Islamic societies.

The *Ash'arite* tradition has produced great poets, mystics, and especially theologians, but few philosophers. One of the main principles of *Ash'arite* Islam is that there are no objective, external values; all values must come through religious revelation. This is a crucial point for understanding the problem we have at hand, that is, the conflict between democracy and Islam.

Though there are democratic values in Islam and though there is no conflict between democracy and Islam on a procedural level, the theoretical basis of democracy is problematic. Values of democracy and its criteria are extra-religious values which *Ash'arite* theologians reject, which makes it very difficult to explore this topic. Due to its secular value system, democracy cannot be reconciled with Islam without first unearthing sources for democratic values within Islam itself. Otherwise, the task is futile, as without this grounding, democracy will never be acceptable to a religious mind.

What most reformist thinkers in the *Sunni* world are trying to do is revive the *Mu'tazilite* school of thought. Their goal is to show that rationality per se is acceptable in the Islamic milieu, even when not based on religion. They strive to demonstrate that there are values that need not be derived from religion.

I am very happy about these developments, as this moves the *Sunni* world closer to a solution. We once had philosophers, theologians, and jurists who believed that ideas could be independent of Islam without being incompatible with Islam, and today their fertile work is being gradually reassessed around the Muslim

world.

Having written on this subject in Iran, I have suffered considerable hardship and criticism, but one consolation is the fact that there is such a large, welcoming audience to these ideas, as there are few epistemological obstacles in the *Shi'i* tradition to this project. Of course, there is opposition, but it comes largely from dogmatic traditionalists who fear change, as opposed to thinkers with genuine philosophical problems with rationality. The majority of Iranian society does not share the worldview of the dogmatists, so stimulating dialogues and lively philosophical debates are common in Iran among the religious classes as well as in university circles.

Contrast this to the case of my friend in Egypt, Dr. Hamid Nasr Abu-Zeid. As a result of a campaign against him—against which he received very little support from colleagues—he was declared a *murtad* or apostate. Dr. Abu-Zeid's offense was writing a book that argues for interpreting the Qur'an according to the *Mu'tazilite* tradition. The *Mu'tazilite* ideas of this book—which he considers his most important work—ran afoul of the *Ash'arite* sensibilities of the Egyptian religious establishment.

Isn't it time that we acknowledge that there are extra-religious values that are independent of religion, and that we do not need to justify everything using religious texts or prophetic tradition? You need only resort to your own reason, we're now being told, and not by non-Muslims, liberals, or

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***“We in the Third World have suffered greatly from the absence of freedom”***

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secularists, but by our Muslim forefathers. *Mu'tazilite* thinkers have already explored this area extensively and provided us the tools to solve many of our problems.

In a democracy, we need a new epistemological grounding today to calmly and reasonably engage with modern ideas; we need to embrace these new democratic ideas

rather than reject them as foreign to Islam. We can appropriate them—they are not the exclusive property of the West—and make them our own. I'm not saying that we should uncritically accept Western ideas, either; all ideas must be carefully examined in light of our tradition.

In fact, my forthcoming book is entitled “*Reinventing the Mu'tazilite Experiment*”, so this relates to my current research focus. I think that the Muslim world needs the re-invention and rethinking of *Mu'tazilite* tradition. Muhammad Arkoun, for example, is keen to reexamine the defeated philosophical movements within the Islamic tradition, giving them the credit and attention that they have been denied in the past. Arkoun is doing this



More than 125 people listened attentively, over lunch, and participated in the debate.

from a postmodern perspective, it is true, but the outcome is welcome, nonetheless.

In an Islamic milieu, there is no contradiction whatsoever between having a democratic rule and basing it on religious duties. There is no separation of church and state, as it were. Since Islam enjoins no particular form of governance, the specifics of governance are left in the hands of the people. The Prophet has left no rulings about whether a society should be led by a President, Prime Minister, or other type of leader, for example. It is up to us to decide.

What is more important is what our motivation is in seeking political power. Do we do it because it is our religious duty or because it is our secular duty? If you could convince your people that it is your religious duty to have a democratic system of governance, you would have succeeded in resolving the problem and obviating the distinction between secular rule and religious rule. This is gradually happening in Iran.

Islamic thinkers in Iran are working to show society—both the masses and the clerical establishment—that reformers are not heretical or weakening people's faith in Islam. To the contrary, they argue, reformers are actually strengthening the faith by reminding believers to exercise their religious duties, one of which is to have a democratic system of politics.

Muslims must be, after all, lovers of justice. 'Adl (justice) is the floor, as it were, of ethics and *ihsan* (generosity) is the ceiling. Thus, ethics lies between the two limits of justice and generosity. If we can not attain *ihsan*, we must at least strive to implement 'adl in society.

Muslims need to familiarize themselves with the theories of justice, that of the past—this important topic has been the focus of great thinkers since the time of Plato—but we must not forget that justice varies with time and place. We must figure out how justice is to be attained in modern times, under the conditions of modern life.

In the past, the focus of political theory was exclusively on the existence of a just ruler. A just society was assumed to result inexorably from the presence and leadership of a just ruler—nothing more needs to be done beyond giving leadership to this person. This naive view of society as depending on personal justice lives on in some societies, such as Iran (though, ironically enough, the nation's constitution tacitly endorses the separation of powers). Emphasis must be shifted from the lone leader to institutions, laws, and processes. There is no alternative to structural justice, we can not return to personal justice.

We in the Third World have suffered greatly from the absence of freedom. We have complained and written a lot, but justice has not been given enough attention. Now it's time for us to give prominence to the notion of justice. Justice is the mother of freedom. With structural justice—drawing on our past defeated traditions—we can have freedom and perhaps eventually create a better political system.

To read the text of the Conference Proceedings, please go to: [www.islam-democracy.org](http://www.islam-democracy.org)