

*Debating Religion and Politics in Iran:
The Political Thought of Abdolkarim Soroush*

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Executive Summary

Abdolkarim Soroush is a leading Iranian religious intellectual with highly controversial ideas on religion and politics. This paper and the Muslim Politics Program were made possible by the generous support of the Ford Foundation.

The main points of his political thought, discussed at greater length in this paper, are:

- No understanding of Islam is ever complete or final.
- No religious government should rule on the basis of an official Islamic political ideology.
- Human rights are the fundamental political criterion, and democracy is the only form of government that can both protect human rights and preserve a proper role for religion in politics.
- Institutional links between the clerical establishment and the government in religious states must be severed, in order to protect the integrity of religion and clerics alike.
- Iranian and Western cultures are not mutually opposed, but require continuous dialogue and constructive interaction.

Taken together, Soroush's positions provide a compelling alternative to the conception of Iran as a static society devoid of internal self-criticism, and a dynamic illustration of contemporary Muslim responses to the role of religion in politics.

Foreword

Seventeen years after the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a new and fascinating political debate is taking shape there. This debate centers around previously untouchable subjects at the heart of the revolutionary ideology itself. Today, students, professors, journalists, and political activists are discussing and challenging the current role of Islam in politics, including the legitimacy of the participation of clergy in government. They are also discussing the merits of pluralism, political participation, and interaction with the outside world, including the West.

One of these leading political thinkers is Abdolkarim Soroush, a university lecturer who has been described as an Iranian Martin Luther for calling into question a priestly monopoly on religious--and hence, political--authority. The American Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs has also recognized him as one of the leading contemporary advocates of new and fresh thinking in Muslim societies. Of course, his views have caused controversy, and have even resulted in threats against his life. But Soroush enjoys a great deal of popularity among Iran's youth and technocratic elite. He comes from within the Islamic Revolution itself, and, with these credentials, has been able to make an impact on the political scene.

Soroush is controversial for two reasons: he argues for a clear distinction between clerical and religious power; and he champions democracy, human rights, and interaction with the West. Soroush does not reject Islam's role in politics wholesale. In fact, he argues that democratic government must reflect the society it represents. Since Iran is a religious society, its government must have a religious character. But the criterion for governance must be human rights, which in fact guarantees the state's religious as well as democratic nature.

Understanding this debate over Islam and politics, and Soroush's contribution to it, is important for Western observers of Muslim politics because it provides an indication of a self-ascribed Islamic political system in flux, maturing and evolving to meet the demands of contemporary times. This evolution runs counter to the widely held perception that Islamic political orders are theologically rigid, capable of adapting to pragmatic necessity only at the expense of their core legitimacy. The openness of thought that Soroush exemplifies is particularly striking because it contributes to the debate over Iran's ruling doctrine, *vilayat-i faqih* (guardianship of the juriconsult), which legitimizes the political authority of leading religious interpreters. While indirectly criticizing this doctrine, he does not reject the Islamic Revolution or its broad goals. Rather, his argument that religiously imposed ideology is a distortion of religious values--which both hinders the pursuit of knowledge and corrupts political power--brings into question the particularities of the prevailing ruling structure.

Such controversies over Islamic political thought are also important because they suggest the ascendance of two new trends in Muslim politics more generally. First, Soroush is one of a number of thinkers who is making a substantial impact on religious thought in his society without having been molded by the traditional system of religious education. The emergence of these "new" intellectuals, modern trained and familiar with both Islamic traditions and Western fields of knowledge, is part of a larger movement toward the fragmentation of religious authority. There is no longer one clear voice speaking for Islam, but many competing voices. While the diversity of voices that results may not in itself guarantee political and social pluralism, it contributes to the evolution of thought and political culture underway in Muslim societies across the world.

Secondly, Soroush exemplifies a worldwide phenomenon that goes beyond this *de facto* multiplicity of voices by directly advocating pluralism and political participation and by validating them as inherently Islamic. The endorsement of these concepts provides

common ground for positive interaction between Muslim and Western societies and refutes the widely held perception that Iranian political society is monolithic in its thought, and permanently hostile to the West. The subtlety and richness of contemporary Muslim thought--of which Abdolkarim Soroush is one distinct and brave example--challenges the notion that an "Islamic state" is necessarily antithetical to Western values and interests.

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Post-revolutionary Iran often is depicted as a society devoid and incapable of self-criticism that is dominated by a monolithic view of religion and politics.* A revolutionary Islamic ideology is identified as both the legitimizing factor for the government, and as the sole standard of political discourse. This is a popular but inaccurate view.

In the seventeen years since the success of the Islamic Revolution (1978-1979), Iranian intellectuals have engaged in a serious debate on topics of fundamental political importance. At question are such vital issues as: Can there be one final interpretation of Islam? What is the role of religion in politics? Is Islam compatible with democracy? Has the post-revolutionary experience prompted a need for reform in the clerical establishment? What sort of relations should Iran have with the West? Abdolkarim Soroush is perhaps the foremost Iranian religious intellectual engaging in these dynamic discussions. His ideas on politics, and the religious paradigm he advances, are highly controversial in contemporary Iran.

Soroush argues for reform in key social and political arenas. Based on the conviction that no understanding of Islam is ever complete or final, he dismisses any attempts to formulate an official Islamic political ideology. He argues that while in religious countries religion and politics are connected intimately, religion should not be reduced to a political platform. In denying the possibility of ruling by one official religious ideology, he maintains, instead, that religious states must be democratic states. Soroush warns against the subservience of the clerical establishment to the government, and proposes fundamental reforms in this establishment. And he strongly supports the need for cultural dialogue between Iran and the Western world. These criticisms touch deep and sensitive topics, and they have earned Soroush both a receptive audience, and an active opposition.

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The significance of Soroush's critiques lies also in the critic. Unlike secular Iranian, or Western, critics, Soroush is a devout Iranian Muslim who participated in the early phases of the post-revolutionary government. He formulates his political thought entirely within his conception of Islam, and it is the compatibility between his religious and political visions that lends his criticisms such practical consequences. For Soroush projects an image of society in which democracy, freedom of expression, and sustained intercultural relations are the best guarantors of religion. His writings and talks blend religious and

poetic metaphor, and have found an eager audience among many of the educated Iranian youth anxious for an understanding of Islam responsive to modern social and political issues.

The significance of Soroush's thought is assessed here by addressing the following questions: Who is Abdolkarim Soroush, and why are his views important? How does Soroush conceptualize Islam? What role does he see for religion in politics? What are his views on the structure and purpose of the clerical establishment? How does he envision Iranian-Western relations?

Soroush and his Conception of Islam

Abdolkarim Soroush is the pen-name for Hossein Dabbagh, one of the most prominent contemporary Iranian religious intellectuals. Soroush studied at the 'Alavi secondary school in Tehran, one of the first schools to teach a combination of the modern sciences and religious studies. A highly disciplined institution, the 'Alavi school has produced a significant number of present mid- and high-level members of the Iranian government. At the university and post-graduate levels, he studied pharmacology in Iran, and the history and philosophy of science in England.

Soroush was close to both 'Ali Shariati (d. 1977) and Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari (d. 1979), two pivotal ideological figures in pre-revolutionary Iran. He returned to Iran from England in the midst of the Islamic Revolution of 1978-79. Immediately after the Revolution he held a high-ranking position on the Committee of the Cultural Revolution, charged with, among other tasks, shaping Iran's higher education system along Islamic lines. In 1987 he resigned from the Committee amidst disagreements over its purpose and effectiveness.

In 1992, Soroush established the Research Faculty for the History and Philosophy of Science at the Research Institute for the Humanities in Tehran, the first faculty of its kind in either pre- or post-revolutionary Iran. Soroush is currently a research fellow of the Faculty and a member of the Iranian Academy of Sciences. He has lectured extensively to both lay and theological audiences in Iran, from universities and mosques in Tehran to seminaries in Qum, and audiocassette recordings of his lectures circulate widely among Iranian students. His revolutionary credentials, academic training, relationship with key figures in the Islamic Revolution, and thorough knowledge of Islam allow him to speak with an authority shared by few among the Iranian religious intelligentsia.

Soroush positions his understanding of religion within a greater project of Islamic revivalism in the modern Muslim world. ² Contemporary Muslim thinkers often argue that Islam must be "reconstructed" or "revived" in order to meet the needs of modern man and society. Soroush takes a different view on this issue. He accepts that the modern world is constantly changing, and that there is a need to reconcile change in the external world with the immutability of religion. Yet his solution is not the reconstruction or revival of Islam. For Soroush, Islam is unchanging. Any attempt to reconstruct Islam is both futile and illusory, for it is not Islam that must be changed, but the human

understanding of Islam. ³ In this distinction lies the key to reconciling a fixed religion with a dynamic world. Just as there is no doubt that the world continuously changes, so too is there no doubt that man's understanding of religion changes. To meet the challenges of modernity, Muslims should not seek to change their religion, but rather should reconcile their understanding of religion with changes in the outside world. ⁴ This requires a conception of religion that accepts the inevitability of change in human understanding of religion. Soroush offers such a conception, and bases it on an analysis of the development and growth of religious knowledge (ma'rifat-i 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. ⁵ Religious knowledge is the product of scholars engaged in the study of the unchanging core of Shi'i Islamic texts--the Qur'an, the hadith, and the teachings of the Shi'i Imams. ⁶ These scholars interpret the texts through the use of various methods, ranging from the rules of Arabic grammar to inferential logic, from Aristotelian philosophy to contemporary hermeneutics. Religious knowledge changes then as a function of these methods. But it is also influenced heavily by the worldview that informs each scholar. ⁷ In addition to the use of particular methods for the study of religion, a scholar of religion also possesses a distinct understanding of the world, nature, and man's place in both. This is determined not only by his study of religion, but also by his understanding of advances in the natural and social sciences. ⁸ A medieval scholar's worldview, for example, dramatically differs from that of a modern one, resulting in different interpretations of religion and leading to different bodies of religious knowledge.

Religious knowledge changes and evolves over time, as more comprehensive understandings replace previous, more limited interpretations. Yet all interpretations are bound by the era in which a religious scholar lives, and by the degree of advancement of the human sciences and religious studies within this era. It is impossible to study the Qur'an without certain presuppositions derived from outside the Qur'an. These presuppositions, determined by a scholar's intellectual worldview (understanding of the other human sciences), ensure that any understanding of religion is time-bound. ⁹ For religious knowledge is created by the application of the "knowledge of the day" to the study of the core religious texts. ¹⁰ Religion on the other hand, is eternal, and the relativity of religious knowledge does not entail the relativity of religion itself.

The relativity of religious knowledge does not eliminate the possibility of discerning between "correct" or "incorrect" interpretations of religion. ¹¹ The responsibility for distinguishing between these interpretations falls upon the scholarly community. The central issue here is one of methodology. ¹² Like scientists, scholars of religion possess a methodology that is both distinct to their field of study and publicly accepted within it. Soroush holds that knowledge is public--as the creation of new knowledge is always in reference to the overall public body of human knowledge--so the criteria for judging correct from incorrect knowledge must be public as well. ¹³ He does not articulate this criteria, for Soroush is not concerned with distinguishing better from worse

interpretations, but rather with uncovering the means by which religious knowledge (of any quality) is formed and develops. [14](#)

Explicit within the argument is the total reconcilability between religious and scientific knowledge. [15](#) There is an intimate connection--a "continuous dialogue"--between religious and non-religious branches of human knowledge. [16](#) Hence the parallel growth of all human sciences can occur only in an open and rational intellectual climate. Soroush is committed to freedom of intellectual inquiry, and the right to criticize rationally all academic theories, religious or non-religious.

Soroush's position is fundamentally one of caution: caution against confusing religion itself with the knowledge gained from the study of it. To avoid this error is to understand religious knowledge as a human construct that necessarily and constantly changes. Muslims can then "reconstruct" their religious interpretations in accordance with their changing understanding of their world.

Soroush's concern is not solely with the articulation of a theory of religious knowledge, but it is also with the establishment of conditions necessary for the manifestation of this theory. His political critiques stem from this latter concern. In moving from the realm of theory to that of practice, he finds that there are significant social and political obstacles to the proper growth of religious knowledge. In identifying and criticizing these obstacles, he casts fundamental aspects of state and society in a new light. Soroush's comments on religion and politics, the role and structure of the clerical establishment, and relations with the West, are three illustrative examples of the application of his religious paradigm to practical matters.

The Role of Religion in Politics

Should religion act as a political ideology? Can a state base its religious legitimacy on a notion of Islamic ideology? Are religiously derived methods alone sufficient for the governance of a modern state? Soroush's answer to these questions is an emphatic no. He calls for the abandonment of Islamic "ideology" altogether, arguing that it hinders the growth of religious knowledge. And he maintains that religiously derived methods of governance are insufficient for administering a modern state. He rejects any government that claims legitimacy based on the implementation of some notion of Islamic methods of governance. Instead, Soroush considers a democratic government as the only one compatible with his notion of Islam. In fact, it is not only compatible with, but essential to, this notion. To understand why Soroush has reached these conclusions, the reasons for his total rejection of using Islam as an ideology must be examined first.

Islam as an Ideology

One of the striking features of the contemporary Muslim world is the emergence and power of Islamic political ideology. "Islamic ideology" has galvanized revolutionaries and legitimized political systems. It has gained acceptance as a political manifestation of Islam, and much of the debate surrounding it regards the form of Islam as an ideology,

not the existence of Islamic ideology itself. Soroush too considers Islamic ideology a central issue in the modern Muslim world. Yet he is not an Islamic ideologue. Instead, he completely opposes any form of Islamic ideology; indeed, he sees religious ideology as one of the primary obstacles to the growth of religious knowledge. [17](#)

Soroush defines ideology as a social and political instrument used to determine and direct public behavior. It "consists of a systematized and ordered school of thought ... that situates itself as [a] guide to action ... [and acts] as a determining factor in people's political, social, and moral positions." [18](#) In order to fulfill this guiding role, ideologies provide an interpretation of the world that is easily comprehensible to the public. This interpretation also must mobilize individuals toward particular ideological ends. Soroush argues that these ends generally are defined in opposition to a competing ideology. This confrontation between rival ideologies leads to an interpretation of the world as divided between two ideological poles. While this interpretation provides a clear object for mass mobilization, it is fundamentally reductionist, as it views the world solely in terms of the prevailing ideological discourse. [19](#)

Islamic ideology requires both a religio-ideological interpretation of the world and an ideological enemy. Revolutionary movements that embrace Islam as an ideology, such as those of the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1978-79), well illustrate these qualities. Possessed of a distinct enemy (the Shah), who himself represented an increasingly intolerable ideology (kingship), many among the Iranian revolutionary masses also followed a religio-ideological interpretation of the world. Undoubtedly this brand of Islamic ideology, as formulated by 'Ali Shariati and other thinkers, played a role in mobilizing the Iranian public and targeting them against the state. [20](#) As a revolutionary force, Islamic ideology has proven its power, and Soroush does not deny this. Yet he rejects ideology even for revolutionary ends.

The reason for this rejection lies in the characteristics of ideology, and their effect upon religion. In situating itself in opposition to a particular rival, and interpreting the world based on this rivalry, religious ideology reduces the complexity of religion to a fixed ideological worldview. [21](#) According to Soroush, it is impossible at any time to defend one understanding of Islam as definitive. All understandings change over time. To transform religion into an ideology is to cast it in a definitive, unchanging mold. This replaces religion with an ideological version of it, for the permanence of religion is now ascribed to the religious ideology. The use of religion as a political tool also subordinates the depth and complexity of religious understandings to the imperatives of a temporary political struggle. [22](#)

Ideological governments provide another view of the shortcomings of ideology. A government that rules through an official ideology possesses all the problems of ideology described above. Yet it also manifests additional impediments to the growth of religious knowledge. An ideological government must both develop and maintain an official ideological platform, that at once legitimizes the government and acts as an unifying and mobilizing force. To accomplish this it requires an official class of government-allied ideologues, the sole task of which is the formulation and defense of the ruling ideology.

In a government ruled on the basis of a religious ideology, this official class take the form of government-allied interpreters of religion. [23](#) Whereas in a revolutionary movement, a religious ideology serves the temporary purpose of overthrowing an established enemy, in an ideological state this ideology assumes an official and permanent form. Here religion becomes the servant of the government, as it is transformed into a legitimizing ideological base.

For Soroush, it is the official nature of this ideology, together with the existence of government-allied religious ideologues, that present a substantial challenge to the free growth of religious knowledge. [24](#) One of the conditions for the growth of this knowledge is the acceptance of transformation and evolution in religious understandings. Yet the articulation of an official ruling religious ideology restricts an individual's freedom to interpret religion. By forcibly imposing an ideological vulgarization of religion upon society, state-allied ideologues do not only reduce individual freedom. They also determine the acceptable standards and use of reason in religious inquiry, as any use of reason that is not based on the logic of the prevailing ideology is deemed unacceptable. Since unobstructed reason is necessary for the development of religious knowledge in conjunction with the other human sciences, these restrictive ideological standards doom the possibility for such development. [25](#) Additionally, the restricted range of free thought and rational inquiry in a religio-ideological state impedes not only the natural growth of religious knowledge, but also the continued development of the state:

In principle the possibility for the internal growth and development of a [political] system exists only when that system is flexible, and [when] the possibility for new reasoning and change exists within the system... if [this] does not exist, inevitably for reform, the foundation [of the system] must be inverted, and upon this inversion, a new foundation built. [26](#)

Clearly, to Soroush religious ideology is dangerous both to the proper pursuit of knowledge and the governance of society. Religious societies should resist the ascension of ideological regimes, and their transformation into an ideological society, for there are profound differences between these two societies:

In an ideological society, the government ideologizes the society, whereas in religious societies, the society makes the government religious. In an ideological society, an official interpretation of ideology governs, but in a religious society, [there are] prevailing interpretations but no official interpretations. In an ideological society, the task of [the formulation of] ideology is relegated to the ideologues. In a religious society, however, the issue of religion is too great for it to be relegated solely to the hands of the official interpreters. In a religious society, no personality and no fatwa is beyond criticism. And no understanding of religion is considered the final or most complete understanding. [27](#)

Soroush argues that religion itself contains all the ideals that religious ideologies manipulate, yet is not limited to these ideals alone. A comprehensive understanding of religion includes an appreciation of the religious injunctions to resist oppression, to act

justly, and to aid the oppressed that characterize a revolutionary ideology. ²⁸ Unlike religious ideology, this understanding is not limited to the combative and dynamic aspects of religion, but also includes the more peaceful, esoteric, and mystical aspects that religious ideology ignores entirely. Religion is "more comprehensive than ideology," and individuals should aspire for an understanding that includes and exceeds the values enshrined (imperfectly) in ideology. ²⁹ Not to do so is to discard religion for an ideological caricature of it. ³⁰

Islam and the Nature of Religious Government

While Soroush rejects the role of Islamic ideology as a governing platform, he does not advocate the simple separation of religion and politics. He argues instead that in a religious society politics inevitably takes a religious form. ³¹ Individuals in a religious society naturally manifest their commonly held religious sentiments in their politics. If a political system in such a society rests upon public opinion and participation, then this system will embody, in one form or another, these religious sentiments. The question for Soroush is not whether religion and politics are compatible, but what the nature of the interaction between the two should be. In addressing this question, Soroush reveals his fundamental concern that obstacles to the growth of religious knowledge not arise. This leads him ultimately in the direction of democracy. But the path to democracy begins with an analysis and rejection of alternative forms of government.

Soroush approaches the issue of religious government by asking whether in a religious society there is a religious right to governance, and which if any individuals possess this right. ³² He considers two ways of answering this question: one rooted in fiqh (jurisprudence), and the other in kalam (theology). The jurisprudential response emphasizes the need to implement religious justice, and the role of the faqih in interpreting and applying this justice. In a religious society the faqih enjoys the right to govern, and the exercise of this right requires the establishment of a particular type of religious (fiqh-based) government. Soroush rejects this as too limited an interpretation of religious governance. Fiqh is but one dimension of religion, and to understand religion solely in terms of fiqh is reductionist. While fiqh provides answers to strictly legal questions, it does not address deeper issues, such as the meaning of justice and freedom. ³³ To address these latter issues, Soroush turns to kalam: "The question of religious justice is a question for fiqh, but the question of a just religion is a question for kalam." ³⁴

Soroush maintains that a religious government must be a just government, and that justice is a term defined outside of religion. ³⁵ Religious justice, based on fiqh, and understood as the interpretation and application of Qur'anic law, can be derived directly from the Qur'an. Yet the concept of justice itself cannot be defined by reference to the Qur'an alone. Justice includes a conception of man, of what it means to be human, and of what rights man enjoys. This conception must accord with religion, but it cannot be defined on the basis of the religious texts alone: "we do not draw [our conception of] justice from religion, but rather we accept religion because it is just." ³⁶ The relationship between religion and justice can be understood only by entering into a theological debate that makes use of, for example, the combined terms of philosophical, metaphysical, political,

and religious discourse. ³⁷ This debate would reveal that man, by virtue of his humanity, enjoys certain rights that are not defined in the core religious texts. A religious state that reduces its notion of justice to the implementation of fiqh jeopardizes these extra-religious rights. ³⁸

Beyond the right to govern, there is the question of the values embodied in and the methods employed by government. Soroush argues that a religious government must embody religious values, yet necessarily must use methods developed outside of religion to protect these values. ³⁹ There are no specifically religious methods of governance. A government ruled on the basis of fiqh alone not only reduces the range of human rights, it also lacks sufficient methodological tools for governance. Soroush argues that religion does not offer a plan for government, and any attempts to derive such a plan from religion are wasted.

Bereft of any blueprint for government, Islam at best contains certain legal commandments. ⁴⁰ These commandments, interpreted through fiqh, can only respond to a limited range of legal issues. The rational administration of modern society requires more than a highly developed code of religious law. Modern methods of government should be derived instead from the modern social sciences--such as, for example, economics, sociology, and public administration. ⁴¹ These methods must not violate religious values, but they cannot be derived from religion itself.

Soroush's reservations about fiqh should not be misunderstood. He does not reject the existence of a religious leader, the faqih, in government, although he maintains that this leader, like all political officials, must be subject to criticism and removal by the people. His primary concern lies with the reduction of government to the implementation of fiqh. As a governmental head, the faqih is responsible for leading the state. The issue of leadership is distinct from that of administration. ⁴² A faqih, as the lone head of state, may lead the state successfully. Yet fiqh alone cannot administer the state successfully. Moreover, a state reduced to fiqh is essentially an ideological state; for in order to legitimize its emphasis on fiqh, and the exclusion of other aspects of religion, the state requires an interpretation of religion that accords primary importance to fiqh. ⁴³ This interpretation must be both final and official, and hence demands the creation of a class of state-allied ideologues. The result is the establishment of an ideological government that blocks the growth of religious knowledge through limiting religion to an ideological notion of fiqh. The rejection of a government based on fiqh does not amount to a denial of the doctrine of vilayat-i faqih. This doctrine--the guardianship of the jurisconsult--forms the theoretical basis of the Islamic Republic, calling for leadership by the faqih. According to Soroush, vilayat-i faqih as a political theory cannot be derived from fiqh. The theory is based on a consideration of the historical and theological importance of the Imamate (imat) and prophecy (nubuwwat), and the faqih's relationship to these two. This consideration, then, falls outside the field of fiqh, which is restricted to legal issues alone:

...the debate concerning it [vilayat-i faqih] is outside the scope of fiqh, because the questions of prophecy and Imamate are theological (kalami), not jurisprudential (fiqhi),

ones. Therefore the theory of "vilayat-i faqih" as a theory of governance must be debated in the realm of theology, prior to jurisprudence. [44](#)

Soroush's concern is that vilayat-i faqih not be misunderstood as a jurisprudential theory, but placed in its proper, theological context.

Islam and Democracy

Soroush's criticisms of Islamic ideology and his discussion of religious government reject the use of any religious interpretation as a governing platform. Rather than legitimize a government, Islamic ideology perverts religion and stunts the development of religious knowledge. Instead of defending religious rights and implementing religious justice, a religious government founded on fiqh alone compromises man's extra-religious rights and lacks the depth to govern properly. Yet Soroush sees a place for Islam in politics. He argues that the only form of religious government that does not transform religion into an ideology, or obstruct the growth of religious knowledge, is a democratic one. Soroush does not identify democracy with a particular western culture, as do many opponents of democracy who refer to it as *dimukrasi-yi gharbi* (western democracy), thereby turning it into the other that must be resisted. He considers democracy a form of government that is compatible with multiple political cultures, including Islamic ones. [45](#)

Soroush maintains that a government in a religious society may claim legitimacy either based on an interpretation of Islam or through representation of the popular will. The first leads to the reduction of Islam to an ideology. The second bypasses this problem and leads to democracy. If a government in a religious society reflects public opinion, then it necessarily will be a religious government. Citizens in such a society are concerned that their government not violate or offend their religious sentiments. A democratically elected government in a religious society cannot be an irreligious government, for irreligious sentiments do not characterize this society.

For a government to be both religious and democratic, according to Soroush, it must protect the sanctity of religion and the rights of man. [46](#) Yet in defending the sanctity of religion the government must not value a particular conception of religion over human rights. A government that rules by one official interpretation of religion, and demands that its citizens live according to this interpretation, sacrifices human rights for ideological purity. [47](#) The guiding criteria for governance instead must be human rights. [48](#) Soroush maintains that a religious society embraces religion in large part because it accords with the society's general sense of justice. Today this sense includes respect for human rights. If a government defends human rights, it also defends religion, as a just understanding of religion incorporates human rights: "observance of human rights...not only guarantees a government's democratic, but also its religious, nature." [49](#)

A government based on the will of the people does not derive its legitimacy from an Islamic ideology. It retains legitimacy so long as it rules in accordance with the wants of its citizens. A religious democratic government loses legitimacy when its actions not only oppose public will but violate the public's sense of religion. In a religious society, a

commonly held understanding of religion provides an outer limit on acceptable public actions. [50](#) This understanding must be allowed to grow over time, in order for it to reflect society's changing needs and beliefs. [51](#) Unlike an ideological government, a democratic government is rooted in this public understanding, and hence does not block the growth of religious understanding and knowledge. A democratic government, as opposed to one reduced to fiqh, does not follow a strict implementation of religious laws. Instead, religious laws, as they appear in the core religious texts, are interpreted and expanded upon using the tools of religious and non-religious branches of knowledge. [52](#) These laws must accord with society's general, yet changing, understanding of religion. Soroush argues that today this understanding includes a notion of human rights that demands individuals be free to choose their own form of government. [53](#) Any religious government that rules without societal consent, or restricts this right, abrogates the public's conception of justice and sacrifices its legitimacy.

Democracy is both a value system and a method of governance. As a value-system, it respects human rights, the public's right to elect its leaders and hold them accountable, and the defense of the public's notion of justice. As a method of governance, democracy includes the traditional notions of separation of powers, free elections, free and independent press, freedom of expression, freedom of political assembly, multiple political parties, and restrictions upon executive power. Soroush argues that no government official should stand above criticism, and that all must be accountable to the public. Accountability reduces the potential for corruption and allows the public to remove, or restrict the power of, incompetent officials. Democracy is, in effect, a method for "rationalizing" politics. [54](#)

The threat for a religious society is not the establishment of democratic government, for this would only preserve religion's role in government. It is instead that this society, for whatever reasons, loses its concern with religion, both at the individual and public level. No form of government is capable of forcibly making a people religious; this is something individuals choose for themselves. [55](#) In an increasingly secularized, irreligious society, a government that consistently applies the principles of fiqh would no more protect the role of religion, than would a democratically elected, irreligious government. Such a society has lost the internal concern with religion necessary for maintaining a religious government. A religious government can only remain so if its citizens maintain their faith:

[in] a religious society and a religious government, everything, including its government and law, rests on the believers' faith, and if this faith crumbles or changes, [the society's] government and religious law will be no different than in secular civil and legal systems. Islamic fiqh also may be implemented in a faithless and secular society with [some] profit. But both the practical success of Islamic fiqh and its existence and attractiveness are wound together in the faith and belief of the faithful.... [56](#)

Soroush's conception of Islam and democracy has met with much criticism in Iran, both from members of the 'ulama (religious scholars) and from lay religious intellectuals. [57](#) Some have argued that Soroush has a poor understanding of both Islam and democracy,

for otherwise he would not attempt to reconcile the two. One critic maintains that democracy is inseparable from liberalism and secularism, and hence fundamentally incompatible with Islam. This critic holds that, as Islam distinguishes between the rights of Muslims and non-Muslims, any government that defends equal human rights is non-Islamic. In a democratic state, religion is no longer the basis of government, and he argues that this will lead to the disappearance of religion from public affairs. This in turn causes citizens in this democratic state to forget their religious heritage, and treat religion as an obsolete relic. Finally, he laments that Soroush, by virtue of his large following among the country's youth, undermines the future generation's faith in Islam as a capable political force. [58](#)

Soroush's response to this criticism provides additional insight into his argument. He argues that to claim Islam and democracy are totally incompatible confuses the interpretation of Islam with Islam itself. This position, according to Soroush, ignores the outside presuppositions that influence one's understanding of Islam. Inseparable from any religious understanding, these presuppositions ensure that the human interpretation of religion always differs from the religion itself. It is not Islam, but this critic's interpretation of Islam that is opposed to democracy--just as Soroush's interpretation supports democracy.

The question of equal rights for Muslims and non-Muslims in a Muslim society highlights the divergence between Soroush and his critic. The latter argues that equality of rights among these two groups is forbidden in Islam (according to his interpretation). Soroush, in addition to his previous argument that human rights cannot be restricted to religiously-derived rights alone, maintains that this approach to the question of Muslim and non-Muslim rights is flawed. He argues that in a democratic state, neither Muslims nor non-Muslims derive their human rights from their faith. For both, these rights are a product of their membership within the larger group of humanity. Since for Soroush faith is not the basis of rights, a non-Muslim is not required to renounce his/her faith in order to enjoy equal human rights in a Muslim society. Nor are Muslims required to renounce their faith in Islam as the one, true religion, in order to accept equal rights for non-Muslims. [59](#)

At a different level, many critics have questioned Soroush's approach towards reconciling his understanding of Islam with democracy. They argue that Soroush over-emphasizes the role of social consciousness [60](#) in determining political structures, and pays too little attention to the institutional bases of a potential "religious democratic state." According to these critics, a publicly held understanding of Islam alone cannot provide the basis for a religious government; it must be founded on concrete religious institutions. [61](#)

These same critics also maintain that Soroush's position is neither theoretically sound nor historically accurate. It is theoretically weak because it does not present an institutional mechanism capable of translating public beliefs into political structures; rather it relies on the mere presence of these public beliefs alone. Moreover, it assumes both that this social consciousness is unified and that it will maintain its unity over time. [62](#) From a historical perspective, they argue that there are many religious societies in the contemporary world,

but no religious democratic states. The absence of democratic regimes within Muslim societies suggests either that a social religious consciousness is an insufficient guarantor of democracy, or that these societies are only superficially religious. [63](#)

The critics also reject Soroush's claim that modern conceptions of justice entail a notion of human rights with which religious understandings should and can conform. Instead they argue that today many religious societies--including Iran--do not espouse a general religious understanding that accepts these human rights. [64](#) In a modern religious society, publicly held religious values may prevent, rather than support, the establishment of a democratic state. These critics seek a response from Soroush that details, methodologically and institutionally, the way in which a religious democracy is established and maintained in a modern religious society. [65](#)

These criticisms challenge Soroush on a wide range of theoretical and historical issues. Soroush's critics point rightly to the absence within his framework of a developed institutional schema for a religious democracy. Given Soroush's approach, this is a necessary absence. He argues that no understanding of Islam can offer a detailed and effective blueprint for the foundation and administration of any form of religious government, democracy included. [66](#) It is wrong, he maintains, to judge the religious nature of a state based on the degree to which its institutions reflect some aspect of religion. The institutional role for religion in government is at best limited to the establishment of a legal code that incorporates, and is congruent with, fiqh. [67](#) Outside this restricted legal capacity of fiqh, according to Soroush, there is no way to institute religion in government. It is not institutions, but society, which provides the religious foundation for the political system in Soroush's thought. A religious society's social consciousness will lend a "religious coloring" to all political affairs.

For Soroush's argument to be valid, it would have to explain the absence of democratic regimes in modern religious societies. Many of his critics have argued that, on the basis of Soroush's argument, pre-revolutionary Iranian society was an irreligious one, for it lived under a monarchical, rather than a religious, government. [68](#) Moreover, if this society was irreligious, then it would have been incapable of launching an Islamic revolution against the monarchy. Hence Soroush must either deny the religious character of pre-revolutionary Iran--in the face of strong evidence to the contrary--or posit some arbitrary date at which the society passed from an irreligious to a religious phase.

Soroush's position on this can be read in either one of two ways. One reading can be taken from his frequent statements that "a religious society cannot have anything but a democratic government." This reading requires Soroush to label the majority of present-day religious societies that live under non-democratic regimes as irreligious. The second reading requires attention to his qualifying statements, where Soroush admits that non-democratic regimes may govern in a religious society, albeit through the use of force and without proper societal consent. [69](#)

Soroush also distinguishes between two types of religious societies. [70](#) The first is a society that is only superficially religious, and does not possess a highly developed public

religious consciousness. This society is superficially religious in that its members only abide by their religious duties (i.e., prayer or fasting) without demonstrating a deep concern about the role of religion in their lives. Soroush does not deny the importance of religious duties, but argues that while anyone is capable of praying or fasting, these outward signs of faith do not reveal the depth of a person's inner faith. One may pray out of habit, or obligation, but not out of faith, and love of God; so too with fasting.

In a truly religious society, according to Soroush, members observe these obligations with sincerity, and are deeply concerned with maintaining the role of religion in their private and public lives. ⁷¹ Based on this distinction, Soroush argues that pre-revolutionary Iran was, until a certain time, only superficially religious. ⁷² Iranians observed their religious obligations, but lacked the deep faith that would provide the basis for a motivating, public religious consciousness. As the Revolution demonstrated, this faith grew over time, marked by the emergence of both lay and clerical religious thinkers who prompted society to recognize its superficiality, and rediscover its faith. ⁷³

The task for Soroush is to describe precisely what constitutes a "religious society," beyond the rather vague statement that it reflects a powerful concern to maintain a public role for religion. One major feature of a religious society has already been mentioned-- that it is a society in which no one understanding of religion prevails, but multiple understandings coexist. A better understanding of Soroush's notion of a religious society and its religious consciousness, and the relationship of this notion to democracy, requires attention to his analysis of the clerical establishment. This establishment undoubtedly plays a pivotal role in influencing the public's religious beliefs, and hence in determining the role of religion in public affairs.

The Clerical Establishment

Soroush's concern that no religious interpretation claim final status has led him to dismiss Islamic ideology, and any government founded on it. In discussing the problems of an ideological state, he refers to the negative impact of state-allied religious ideologues upon the growth of religious knowledge. While this is a theoretical discussion of an ideological state in general, Soroush raises similar reservations about the role of the clerical establishment in contemporary Iran. He argues that the clergy and the centers of power are related in a way that prohibits the proper development of religious knowledge. In addition to this relationship, there are structural problems associated with the clerical establishment itself. Until these are recognized and reformed, neither religious knowledge nor public religious consciousness can evolve in the manner Soroush envisions.

In a religious state such as Iran, led by the faqih who is a member of the clergy, the role of the clerical establishment (sazman-i rauhaniyat) in public life is a sensitive one. Members of the Iranian Shi'i 'ulama have reacted strongly to Soroush's criticisms of the clergy, their method of religious instruction, and the role of the seminary (hauzah-yi ilmiyah).

Soroush argues that if religious knowledge is to evolve properly, the seminaries should meet certain conditions. Analysis of traditional religious texts based on the methods and findings of contemporary natural and philosophical sciences should be encouraged. Seminary students should be free to raise deep and wide-ranging questions about these texts. Above all, religion should not be confused with religious knowledge, and the respect and sanctity of the former should not be bestowed upon the latter. The human nature of religious knowledge must be stressed, and students and teachers should set no boundaries on the study of this knowledge. [74](#)

Soroush acknowledges that this description reflects the ideal, and that reality reveals another story. Indeed, the distinction between religion and religious knowledge is not stressed properly in the seminaries. Criticism of the classic Shi'i texts, produced by religious scholars over the ages, is interpreted as an attack upon the fundamentals of religion itself. Seminary students hold back their questions regarding these texts for fear that they be interpreted as lapses in faith. Soroush holds that while the boundary separating the core religious texts--the Qur'an, the hadith, and the teachings of the Imams--from questions of fallibility is maintained, it also unnecessarily extends to the teachings of select esteemed, yet nevertheless fallible, religious scholars. Soroush identifies one reason for this gap between ideal and actual conditions as the failure among both seminary students and teachers to distinguish between religious knowledge and religion itself. This results

In a religious state such as Iran, led by the faqih in the elevation of certain esteemed scholarly religious texts to the same epistemological status as the core religious texts, entirely removing the former from the realm of criticism. [75](#)

Such criticisms of the clerical establishment have earned Soroush a good deal of opposition, part of which can be attributed to the establishment's natural resistance to change. Reinforced by centuries of custom and tradition, the Iranian clerical establishment contains considerable organizational inertia. And when the call for change comes from the outside--for, regardless of Soroush's revolutionary or religious credentials, he is not a member of the 'ulama'--organizational interests demand greater internal solidarity in response to the perceived external threat.

Yet the opposition to Soroush runs far deeper than mere organizational inertia. In fact, Soroush's criticisms of the seminary method of instruction carry profound political import. By arguing that religious knowledge is one branch of human knowledge, and not divine by virtue of its subject matter, Soroush denies any group the possibility of advancing one understanding of religion as the truth. And by calling for the use of a variety of methods in the study of religion, he undermines any one group's monopoly on religious studies. This dual criticism considerably weakens the power of both the seminary and the clerical establishment. The latter is no longer custodian of a final religious truth, and the former is no longer the sole method for arriving at this truth. The seminary becomes one among many centers for religious instruction, and the clerical establishment one among many groups of religious interpreters. The political consequence of this is that the clerical establishment, no longer the guardian of the truth,

cannot justify a special role for itself in the political system. If religious knowledge is fluid, and not the sole property of any one group, then it cannot act as a criterion for privileging one group over another in political affairs. Members of the clerical establishment must enter the political arena on a similar playing field as lay members of society--and their political worth must be judged on their ability to carry out specific political tasks, not on their possession of a qualitatively distinct form of religious knowledge.

Soroush's critiques also weaken the internal solidarity of the clerical establishment. In arguing that all religious theories should be questioned, he seeks to demonstrate that no theory assume an extra-human, divine status. A consequence of exposing all theories to criticism is the weakening of the socializing process within the seminaries. The seminaries follow a prescribed course of teaching, with prescribed texts, questions, and stages. These accepted methods, established over centuries of practice, constitute a key feature of the clerical identity. Any serious change in this course of teaching--either substantive or methodological--will result in a change in the socialization process of seminary students. A wider range of critical thinking, extending to fundamental reconsideration of pivotal texts or methods, would weaken internal clerical solidarity and cohesion. This would not only challenge the established notions of clerical identity, but also weaken the establishment's ability to advance and defend certain common interests. If the clerical establishment is unable to maintain a dominant identity, it also will be unable to agree upon where its group interests lie, and how best to defend them against rival groups. Taken together, Soroush's criticisms provide a powerful challenge to the internal structure of the clerical establishment.

Beyond these internal criticisms lie deeper ones associated with the role of the clerical establishment and seminary in Iranian society and government. Iran possesses a religious government, and "a necessity of a religious government is the empowerment of the clergy and the seminaries." ⁷⁶ The clergy, who play an essential role in government, are trained solely in the seminaries. The seminaries, therefore, enjoy a special link to the government, one that Soroush argues restricts the range of academic inquiry in the seminary. Indeed, rather than provide a forum for the open criticism of religious knowledge and theories, the seminary reaffirms the ruling religious theories, according to Soroush. The need to encourage a rational intellectual climate is replaced with the need to teach in accordance with the ruling dogma. The seminary becomes the "ideologue and apologist for power," relinquishing its role as critic and teacher:

...rather than guiding and criticizing the ruler, [the seminaries] will offer opinions and issue fatwas that meet [the rulers'] tastes, or they will close the door to debate concerning various theoretical issues. If in the seminaries, for example, the right to discuss the issue of vilayat-i faqih is not exercised, and opposing and supporting opinions are not freely exchanged, this is an indicator of a problem that must be removed. ⁷⁷

The seminary's social role also undermines its academic integrity and independence. In addition to its academic responsibilities, the seminary also trains students to provide moral education for the public. Soroush argues that in providing public guidance,

preachers are often more concerned with maintaining popularity and expanding their audiences than in preserving their academic integrity. The result is that the integrity of religious knowledge is compromised by the need to popularize it. Any academic institution that assumes the task of public guidance faces this problem. The seminary must regulate its members and ensure that they do not vulgarize religion by introducing into sermons arguments that, while popular, are not based on a careful study of religious texts. [78](#)

The social role of preachers reveals a problem that is endemic to the clerical establishment itself. Soroush argues that the defining characteristic of this establishment is not the study of religion, or the role of public moral guide, or the attachment to political power. It is, rather, the derivation of income, or social or political status, from some form of religious activity--principally, academic teaching or preaching. [79](#) For Soroush, this relationship between religious activity--of any sort--and the means of one's livelihood is the most pervasive problem facing the clerical establishment.

Soroush argues that in accruing income (or status) through some form of religious activity, an individual may compromise the integrity of religion in order to maximize his or her income. [80](#) The example of the preacher who popularizes religion in order to attain a wider audience is applicable here as well; although it is not income that is sought, but social status. This is not a problem encountered by the clerical establishment alone, according to Soroush. In any field, one may have the opportunity to advance one's livelihood through compromising the integrity of one's profession. Undoubtedly the establishment possesses methods for determining and maintaining a certain level of professional capability and integrity. For example, through required training and examinations the clerical establishment can set a professional standard for its members. [81](#)

Soroush maintains that while regulation limits the potential for corruption, it cannot remove it altogether. For him, the individuals who represent the greatest potential for corruption are those who, after receiving their religious education, base their livelihood on the cultivation and defense of a particular notion of Islam. [82](#) Their livelihood depends upon the successful advancement of this religious interpretation, and to maximize the former they may compromise the latter. Soroush argues that even the existence of a reduced level of possible corruption should not be tolerated, for this corruption does not compromise only a professional ethic or standard; it also jeopardizes the integrity and sanctity of religion. To protect the purity of religion, the income incentive must be excised entirely from the clerical establishment. Religion must be removed entirely from the income/status equation: "religion must [exist] for religion's sake, not [for] financial income, political power, or social status/esteem." [83](#) This requires, in effect, the dissolution of the clerical establishment, for, in Soroush's view, the only individuals who should pursue religious activity are those who do not aim to base their livelihood on this activity. The material needs of these individuals must be met from another source independent of religious activity before this activity is pursued. [84](#)

By rejecting the existence of a class of individuals deriving income through religious activity, and arguing instead for the replacement of this class with self-funded

individuals, Soroush severely limits the potential size of the clerical establishment. In fact as an establishment it will no longer exist: "In this way an academic society of religious scholars will come about but not a clerical guild." [85](#) According to Soroush what is lost in size is made up for in quality: those individuals engaged in religious activity are not motivated by personal gain, but by a sincere desire to understand religion better, and to cultivate this understanding among the public. [86](#) Soroush cites the prophet and the Imams as examples of such sincere individuals. He recognizes that contemporary scholars and religious activists cannot duplicate the success and depth of understanding of the prophet and the Imams, but suggests that they should follow their example and seek religion only for its own sake, and not for self-aggrandizement. [87](#) Soroush admits that this is a long-term goal, the first step of which is the realization of the problematic effects of the relationship between income and religious activity. [88](#) This must be followed by gradual reforms toward the ultimate ends envisioned here.

Soroush does not consider those in the clerical establishment as active agents in the problems discussed above. Instead, he sees these problems as an unintended but unavoidable consequence of the clerical establishment's structure:

In other words, the discussion is not about ill intention or ill behavior on behalf of the clergy. It is about a foundation that grew wrongly.... Freedom should not be sold at any price and the institutionalization [professionalization] of religious science, has as its first sacrifice the freedom of religious scholars [89](#)

These structural criticisms constitute a serious challenge to the present-day Iranian clerical establishment. By calling for a divorce between religious activity and any form of power--financial, political, or social--Soroush undermines the institutional linkages among the clerical establishment, the seminary, and the Iranian state. Yet, as Soroush's critics have asked: How, in the absence of direct clerical involvement in the government, for the purpose of guarding and maintaining religious principles, can a government in a religious society be religious? Soroush's answer lies in part in the "society of religious scholars" that will replace the clerical guild, and its relation to the public religious consciousness.

In his comments on the role of the Catholic Church in Europe, Soroush has provided an implicit example for the Iranian clerical establishment. The latter is well aware that one of the main features of modern Western society is the foundation of secular nation-states and the weakening of Church power within these states. Wishing neither to sacrifice their social and political influence, nor to watch the religious bases of society give way to secularism, members of the Iranian clerical establishment recognize the need to avoid the Catholic Church's experience. And yet, if one links Soroush's discussion of the Western experience with his criticisms of the clerical establishment in Iran, it appears that the latter may--unknowingly and definitely unwillingly--go the way of their Western counterparts.

Soroush argues that the Western reaction to the power of the Church and the public role of religion was not necessarily an attack upon religion itself, but, rather, a response to

forces that used religion to prevent social, intellectual, and political change. ⁹⁰ Had the Catholic Church not clung so steadfastly to a particular notion of religion, and had it allowed for change, then the lay reaction against the Church and religion would not have been so strong. ⁹¹

The implicit lesson for the Iranian clerical establishment is clear: rather than resist change at all costs to maintain one vision of Islam, welcome and embrace change. According to this argument, the clerical establishment in Iran can only avoid the fate of the Catholic Church in Europe by allowing religious interpretations and theories to be reconciled with other branches of human knowledge. Likewise, the establishment must recognize that the best way to maintain a society's faith is not from above, through the imposition of a religiously-derived notion of government, but from below, through the continuous process of religious reinterpretation. Soroush's "society of religious scholars" plays an essential role in this process.

In discussing the relationship between religion and democracy, Soroush has had to face the difficulty of relating his concept of social religious consciousness to practical political affairs. His critics have sought an explanation for how this social consciousness will guard against the secularization of society without religious institutions charged with precisely this task. Soroush's insistence that a government cannot guarantee the religious nature of society, but rather that society determines the nature of government, places a heavy burden on the role of social consciousness.

One method for strengthening this consciousness, he argues, is through allowing and promoting change in religious knowledge. This method requires denying any one group a monopoly on religious knowledge, and any theory a privileged status. Beyond these negative injunctions there is also the need for positive growth in religious interpretations. The "society of religious scholars" plays a central role in stimulating this growth. According to Soroush, these individuals engage in religious activity solely out of a sincere motivation to understand religion, and to spread this understanding. He identifies individuals such as 'Ali Shariati, Mehdi Bazargan, Ayatollah Khomeini, and Ayatollah Mutahhari, as representative of this type of religious activist. Such individuals, he argues, engage in deep and sincere reflection on religious and social issues. They offer their notion of Islam to society, not as a model to be copied, but as an interpretation to be studied, debated, added to, and reformed. Soroush maintains that the free and lively interaction of these interpretations is an essential guarantor of a society's continued religious consciousness. This consciousness, so powerfully informed by these changing interpretations, will demand that politics remain congruent with religious values.

For Soroush, the establishment of a democratic government and the reform of the clerical establishment are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions for the promotion of an atmosphere conducive to the growth of religious knowledge. He also argues that cross-cultural interaction plays an important and necessary role toward this end. In defending the need for this interaction, he calls for greater dialogue between Iranian and Western cultures.

Relations with the West

Perhaps no other issue provokes such polarized reactions, both in Iran and abroad, as that of Iranian-Western relations. Within the Western world there are those who predict a "clash of civilizations" with Islam and implicitly with Iran, the latter seen as being at the forefront of the anti-Western battle. In Iran there is an equally heated concern over a Western "cultural invasion" (tahajum-i farhangi) that allegedly threatens to undermine the Iranian Islamic cultural identity. Between these two camps, those who call for a rational dialogue between the two sides run the risk of being labeled Islamic apologists or supporters of Western imperialism. Despite the increasingly polarized language of this debate, there is both the room and necessity for constructive dialogue between Iranian and Western cultures. Soroush's religious paradigm provides one way of conceptualizing this dialogue.

Soroush's argument that the religious sciences can grow only when engaged in an "intimate dialogue" with the non-religious sciences provides the foundation for intercultural dialogue. The human sciences--understood in the most comprehensive way as including all the natural and social sciences--are not restricted by national boundaries. ⁹² Advancements made in one country must transcend their country of origin in order to influence the greater body of international scholarly thought; more importantly, these advancements can only be made through an interaction with this wider scholarly community. The religious sciences in Iran, for example, can develop only when engaged in cross-cultural scholarly interaction with other sciences.

Soroush defended this position during his time as a member of the Committee of the Cultural Revolution in Iran. ⁹³ After the 1979 Revolution in Iran there was a strong backlash against everything Western, including the human sciences. It was argued that the Iranian higher educational system should be purged of Western influences, and that the subject matter and methodology of the system should be Islamicized. Soroush warned that this kind of thinking would jeopardize the growth of knowledge and aimed at an impossible task. It would be impossible, he argued, to replace the social sciences (which were at the forefront of the anti-Western attack) with Islamicized versions of them. The study of Islam is distinct from that of other fields, and the religious sciences are incapable of replacing the social sciences (the reverse is true as well). ⁹⁴ Soroush argued that the emphasis should not be on the unification (ittihad) of the religious and non-religious sciences (in order to Islamicize the latter), but rather on the interaction (irtibat) between these various fields. ⁹⁵ By focusing on the links between religious and non-religious knowledge, the universities could provide students with the necessary Islamic environment of learning. ⁹⁶ Soroush argued finally that it is both possible and necessary to borrow selectively from the West, without succumbing to a wholesale copying of Western culture. ⁹⁷ This last point allowed him to extend his argument to larger issues of Iranian-Western interaction.

The catchword for anti-Western sentiments in Iran is gharb-zadagi, or "weststruckness." ⁹⁸ Soroush's defense of intercultural relations comes partly in response to this concept. Soroush discerns two main themes in gharb-zadagi arguments. The first regards any

borrowing from the West as blind imitation and calls for a return to tradition. ⁹⁹ Soroush rejects this position on the basis that it treats the West as a unified entity, such that the appropriation of anything Western is equated with the copying of the West as an entirety. For Soroush, the West is not a single entity, but rather a compilation of diverse peoples, each with their own equally diverse cultures. ¹⁰⁰ It is impossible to copy the West as a whole, because the West as a whole does not exist. Soroush promotes the selective acceptance of worthy Western achievements and the rejection of aspects of the West that do not merit borrowing. ¹⁰¹

The second theme argues that Western dominance in all areas--cultural, political and economic--is a constitutive feature of modernity. The West has arrived, and neither Iran nor any developing nation can resist its domination. ¹⁰² Gharb-zadagi here is the recognition of and submission to this unfortunate historical reality. Soroush argues that this position suffers from a poor reading of history. It assumes the existence of an irresistible historical force that has placed the West in a dominant and Iran in a subservient position. It also suggests that, just as Western culture has fully arrived and proven its hegemony, so too has Iranian culture fully developed, and proven its weakness. Soroush, on the other hand, maintains that no culture ever fully arrives, but that all cultures change over time. To accept the principle of historical inevitability demands, in this case, the denial of the possibility of cultural change, and this possibility is a centerpiece of Soroush's argument.

In analyzing intercultural relations, Soroush calls for a move beyond labels such as gharb-zadagi. He argues that selective borrowing from Western culture can benefit Iranian culture, provided that this borrowing is the result of free choice. ¹⁰³ The only way for Iranian culture to grow is for it to open itself up to other cultures, to interact critically and freely with developments from outside of Iran. Selective, freely chosen interaction with the West does not amount to blind imitation of the West, and this is the true meaning of gharb-zadagi, according to Soroush. ¹⁰⁴ And yet, he maintains that to emphasize Iran's pre-Islamic or Islamic identity, and to exclude any Western influences, is just as dangerous as true gharb-zadagi. ¹⁰⁵ Excessive nationalism or excessive religious puritanism threatens the rational climate necessary for cultural interaction and growth. ¹⁰⁶

Soroush's discussion of selective interaction also applies to the process of development. Modernity, he argues, like the West, should not be regarded as a single entity. ¹⁰⁷ To recognize the diversity of experience within modernity is to allow for the potential to appropriate the lessons of some, but not all, of these experiences. Soroush dismisses the claim that there is only one path to development, which leads ultimately to a replication of a Westernized notion of modernity. He insists that aspects of modernity are compatible with a variety of cultures, and that developing nations may appropriate these aspects and shape them to meet their own needs without falling victim to an inevitable process of Westernization. ¹⁰⁸ Soroush neither denies the difficulty developing nations face in balancing cultural identity with development nor considers this difficulty insuperable. He suggests that among the first steps in overcoming this problem is for members of developing nations to avoid general, non-descriptive, dogmatic labels, and to interact rationally, selectively, and consciously with foreign cultures and concepts. ¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

From the conviction that it is impossible to have one definitive understanding of Islam, Soroush calls for a new look at old issues. He dismisses Islamic ideology as either a revolutionary tool or a political platform on the basis that it necessitates an official and fixed understanding of Islam. This position undermines the legitimacy of any religious government that seeks to implement one vision of Islam. Moreover, as man possesses rights that are compatible with, yet not defined in, religion, a government that rules by a strict religious interpretation jeopardizes these rights. One of the characteristics of religion is justice, and today justice entails respect for human rights.

Soroush argues that the only form of government that guarantees human rights is democracy. Based on the will and faith of the people, a democratic government does not rule by one religious understanding, but rather in accordance with the public's religious sentiments. As these sentiments change, and religious understandings evolve, the government will reflect these changes. Democracy is essential not only for the defense of human rights, but also for providing the conditions necessary for the growth of religious knowledge.

Among the first steps toward these conditions is the reform of the clerical establishment and the method of religious instruction. The relationships between religious activity and personal gain and the seminary and political power, must be severed in order for a new society of religious scholars to emerge. These individuals will play an essential role in contributing to society's religious consciousness, a central element in Soroush's notion of democracy.

The growth of this consciousness--of Iranian culture in general--requires a broad vision that recognizes the importance of intercultural relations. This recognition demands the rejection of both the principle of historical inevitability and the notion of unified cultural entities; a challenge to those who envision "Islam and the West" as being on an irrevocable collision course.

The issues Soroush addresses, from Islamic ideology to relations with the West, are core issues in post-revolutionary Iran. His ideas reflect a sober assessment of the experience of the last seventeen years, from within an Islamic framework. Neither Westernized nor secular, Soroush represents the revolutionary system criticizing itself. He has revealed that this system is capable of some degree of fundamental self-criticism, and in doing so he has identified the most critical and sensitive political topics in contemporary Iran. He also reveals the inaccuracy of the view that Iran is a static society permeated by an unchanging vision of Islamic ideology.

Soroush's work is important not only within Iran, but also within the context of the contemporary Muslim world; for Soroush represents the diversity of present-day Muslim encounters with Islam and politics. Influenced by both Islamic and Western ideas, yet neither dominated nor limited by either, Soroush resists broad categorization. He is neither a radical ideologue nor a detached secularist, neither revolutionary nor passive.

To understand Soroush--and to understand contemporary Muslim thinkers--requires the abandonment of generalizing labels and the embracement of nuanced distinctions. Surely it is this form of rational interaction, rather than the espousal of apocalyptic notions of a clash of civilizations or of a cultural invasion, that Western and Muslim societies need today.

Footnotes

Note 1: In the spring of 1996, a number of Soroush's lectures at the University of Tehran were disrupted by student groups opposed to his views. This followed upon similar, prior incidents at other universities. Soroush responded with an open letter to the President of the Islamic Republic, Hujjat al-Islam va al-Muslamin Hashemi Rafsanjani, in which he protested the treatment he received. For the text of this letter see Salam (13 May 1996): 24; and Kiyān 6, no. 30 (1996): 48. Consequently, due to the unwillingness or inability of authorities to guarantee his security, Soroush decided to suspend lecturing in Iran until such a guarantee is made. He has since then been on sabbatical, lecturing at universities and institutions abroad, including many in Western Europe and North America. For his present condition, in his own words, see the interview with him by the editorial board of Kiyān, "Barnamah-ha-yi Duktur Surush Baray-i Huzur dar Muhafil-i Danishgahi va Farhangi-yi Jahan" (Dr. Soroush's Plans for Appearance at University and Cultural Centers throughout the World), Kiyān 6, no. 32 (1996): 68-69. [Back.](#)

Note 2: Abdolkarim Soroush, "Qabz va Bast dar Mizan-i Naqd va Bahs" (Qabz va Bast at the Level of Critique and Discussion) Kiyān 1, no. 2 (1991): 5. A full elaboration of Soroush's theory of religion can be found in Abdolkarim Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-i Tiorik-i Shari'at* (The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of the Shari'a), (Tehran: Mu'assasah-yi Farhangi-yi Sirat, 1990). *Qabz va Bast-i Tiorik-i Shari'at* originally appeared as four separate articles in the monthly journal *Kayhan-i Farhangi*, from 1988-1990. The publication of the articles sparked a controversial debate within Iranian intellectual circles, reflected within the pages of *Kayhan-i Farhangi*. For a summary of this debate, see Mehrzad Boroujerdi, "The Encounter of Post-Revolutionary Thought in Iran with Hegel, Heidegger, and Popper," in *Cultural Transitions in the Middle East*, ed. Serif Mardin (New York: E.J. Brill, 1994), 248-255. [Back.](#)

Note 3: *Qabz va Bast-i Tiorik-i Shari'at*, 99. [Back.](#)

Note 4: "Qabz va Bast dar Mizan-i Naqd va Bahs," 9. [Back.](#)

Note 5: *Qabz va Bast-i Tiorik-i Shari'at*, 158. [Back.](#)

Note 6: *Ibid.*, 156. [Back.](#)

Note 7: *Ibid.*, 147, 162. See also Abdolkarim Soroush, *'Ilm Chiist? Falsafah Chiist? (What is Science? What is Philosophy?)*, 10th ed. (Tehran: Mu'assasah-yi Farhangi-yi Sirat, 1987), 23, 108. Soroush admits his own worldview is based on the philosophical

school of realism, in which there is a difference between an object (i.e., religion) and the perception of an object (i.e., religious understanding). For a criticism of this realist position, see Ahmad Naraqi, "Fahm-i 'Amiqtar?" (A Deeper Understanding?), Kiyān 3, no. 11 (1993): 16-20. [Back](#).

Note 8: He identifies cosmology, anthropology, linguistics and epistemology as the non-religious sciences that most influence the study of religion. See Abdolkarim Soroush, "Pasukh bih Naqd-Namah-yi Sabat va Taghir dar Andishah-yi Dini" (Reply to the Critical Essay Constancy and Change in Religious Thought), Kiyān 2, no. 7 (1992): 17. [Back](#).

Note 9: Ibid.; and "Qabz va Bast dar Mizan-i Naqd va Bahs," 10. [Back](#).

Note 10: Qabz va Bast-i Tiorik-i Shari'at, 262. [Back](#).

Note 11: "Qabz va Bast dar Mizan-i Naqd va Bahs," 11. Also, Qabz va Bast-i Tiorik-i Shari'at, 118. [Back](#).

Note 12: Qabz va Bast-i Tiorik-i Shari'at, 25. [Back](#).

Note 13: Ibid., 24; and 'Ilm Chiist? Falsafah Chiist?, 211, 221. [Back](#).

Note 14: Qabz va Bast-i Tiorik-i Shari'at, 44, 120; and "Pasukh bih Naqd-Namah-yi Sabat va Taghir dar Andishah-yi Dini," 16. [Back](#).

Note 15: Qabz va Bast-i Tiorik-i Shari'at, 185. [Back](#).

Note 16: Ibid., 104. [Back](#).

Note 17: See Abdolkarim Soroush, "Farbih-tar az Idiuluji" (More Comprehensive than Ideology), Kiyān 3, no. 13 (1993): 2-20. For a criticism of this article, see Jahangir Salihpur, "Naqdi bar Nazariyah-yi Farbih-tar az Idiuluji" (A Critique of the View More Comprehensive than Ideology), Kiyān 3, no. 15 (1993): 47-49; and by the same author, "Din-i 'Asri dar 'Asr-i Idiuluji" (Modern Religion in the Age of Ideology), Kiyān 4, no. 18 (1994): 36-41. "Farbih tar az Idiuluji," together with many of Soroush's other Kiyān articles, was later collected and printed in a book by the same name. See Abdolkarim Soroush, *Farbih-tar az Idiuluji (More Comprehensive than Ideology)*, (Tehran: Mu'assasah-yi Farhangi-yi Sirat, 1993). As many of Soroush's books are collections of articles or speeches originally published or delivered elsewhere, the titles of the books often do not reveal the content of the individual chapters. Hence most chapters are referred to here by their individual titles. [Back](#).

Note 18: "Farbih-tar az Idiuluji," 4. [Back](#).

Note 19: Ibid. [Back](#).

Note 20: For Soroush's views on Shari'ati, see, among others, "Shari'ati va Jama'ah-Shinasi-yi Din" (Shari'ati and the Sociology of Religion), *Kiyan* 3, no. 13 (1993): 2-12; and "Duktur Shari'ati va Baz-sazi-yi Fikr-i Dini" (Dr. Shari'ati and the Reconstruction of Religious Thought) in Abdolkarim Soroush, *Qissah-yi Arbab-i Ma'rifat* (The Tale of the Masters of Knowledge), (Tehran: Mu'assasah-yi Farhangi-yi Sirat, 1994), 381-440. For an overview of the ideological background of the Islamic Revolution, see Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: the Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, (New York: New York University Press, 1993). [Back](#).

Note 21: "Din, Idiuluji, va Ta'bir-i Idiulujik az Din" (Religion, Ideology, and the Ideological Interpretation of Religion), *Farhang-i Tous'eh* 1, no. 5 (1993): 11-12. This is a roundtable discussion on ideology in which Soroush participated. [Back](#).

Note 22: *Ibid.*, 10-12. [Back](#).

Note 23: "Farbih-tar az Idiuluji," 13. [Back](#).

Note 24: Soroush raises this argument in the context of Shari'ati's thought. For Shari'ati both promoted the ideologization of society and opposed the existence of an official class of religious interpreters. Soroush identifies this tension and argues that, had Shari'ati realized the essential connection between an ideological society and state-allied ideologues, he would not have supported an ideological society. For Shari'ati's discussion of this, see 'Ali Shari'ati, *Tashayyu'-i 'Alavi va Tashayyu'-i Safavi* ('Alavi Shi'ism and Safavi Shi'ism), collected works vol. 9, (Tehran: Intisharat-i Tashayyu', 1980). For Soroush on Shari'ati, see "Farbih-tar az Idiuluji," 7, 14. [Back](#).

Note 25: "Farbih-tar az Idiuluji," 13. See also Abdolkarim Soroush, "'Aql va Azadi" (Reason and Freedom), *Kiyan* 1, no. 5 (1992): 13-25. [Back](#).

Note 26: "Farbih-tar az Idiuluji," 13. [Back](#).

Note 27: *Ibid.*, 19. [Back](#).

Note 28: *Ibid.*, 8. [Back](#).

Note 29: *Ibid.* [Back](#).

Note 30: Abdolkarim Soroush, "Idiuluji-yi Dini va Din-i Idiulujik" (Religious Ideology and Ideological Religion), *Kiyan* 3, no. 16 (1993-1994): 25. [Back](#).

Note 31: Abdolkarim Soroush, "Jama'ah-yi Payambar Pasand" (A Society Admired by the Prophet), *Kiyan* 3, no. 17 (1994): 21. [Back](#).

Note 32: "Bavar-i Dini, Davar-i Dini" (Religious Belief, Religious Arbiter), in *Farbih-tar az Idiuluji*, 49. [Back](#).

Note 33: Ibid. [Back](#).

Note 34: Ibid., 50. [Back](#).

Note 35: Ibid., 52. For a discussion of the task government faces in distributing justice, see Abdolkarim Soroush, "Danish va Dadgari" (Knowledge and the Administration of Justice), *Kiyan* 4, no. 22 (1994-1995): 10-15. [Back](#).

Note 36: "Bavar-i Dini, Davar-i Dini," 52. [Back](#).

Note 37: Ibid., 50. [Back](#).

Note 38: Ibid., 52. [Back](#).

Note 39: Ibid., 57. [Back](#).

Note 40: Abdolkarim Soroush, "Khadamat va Hasanat-i Din" (The Functions and Benefits of Religion), *Kiyan* 5, no. 27 (1994): 12, 13. Soroush argues here that God did not give religion to man as a blueprint for the ordering of his external life, but rather as a guide to teach man the inner order necessary to prepare for the afterlife. For a related discussion, see "Din-i Dunyavi" (Worldly Religion), *Iran-i Farda* 4, no. 23 (1995-1996): 50-53. [Back](#).

Note 41: Abdolkarim Soroush, "Saqf-i Ma'ishat bar Sutun-i Shari'at" (The Ceiling of Livelihood upon the Pillar of the Shari'a), *Kiyan* 5, no. 26 (1995): 28. See also Abdolkarim Soroush, "Ma'na va Mabna-yi Sikularizm" (The Meaning and Basis of Secularism), *Kiyan* 5, no. 26 (1995): 4-13; "Khadamat va Hasanat-i Din," 13; and Abdolkarim Soroush, "Idiuluji va Din-i Dunyavi" (Ideology and This-Worldly Religion), *Kiyan* 6, no. 31 (1996): 2-11. [Back](#).

Note 42: "Saqf-i Ma'ishat bar Sutun-i Shari'at," 28. [Back](#).

Note 43: "Farbih-tar az Idiuluji," 11. [Back](#).

Note 44: Abdolkarim Soroush, "Tahlil-i Mafhum-i Hukumat-i Dini" (Analysis of the Concept of Religious Government), *Kiyan* 6, no. 32 (1996): 2. [Back](#).

Note 45: See "Arkan-i Farhangi-yi Dimukrasi" (The Cultural Pillars of Democracy), in *Farbih-tar az Idiuluji*, 269-272; and "Mabani Tiorik-i Libiralizm" (The Theoretical Bases of Liberalism), in Abdolkarim Soroush, *Razdani va Raushanfikri va Dindari* (Augury and Intellectualism and Pietism), 2nd ed. (Tehran: Mu'assassah-yi Farhangi-yi Sirat, 1993), 153-154. For an early discussion on democracy in the context of the Islamic Republic, see "Musahabah-yi Duktur Surush ba Ustad Shahid Pirmun-i Jumhuri Islami" (Dr. Soroush's Interview with the Martyred Professor on the Islamic Republic), in Murtaza Mutahhari, *Pirmun-i Inqilab-i Islami* (On the Islamic Revolution), 15th ed. (Tehran: Intisharat-i Sadra, 1995), 125-141. [Back](#).

Note 46: Abdolkarim Soroush, "Hukumat-i Dimokratik-i Dini?" (A Religious Democratic Government?), Kiyān 3, no. 11 (1993): 12. [Back](#).

Note 47: "Hukumat-i Dimokratik-i Dini?," 12. For a related discussion, see Abdolkarim Soroush, "Akhlāq-i Khudāyan: Akhlāq-i Bar-tar Vujūd Nadarad" (The Morality of the Gods: There is no Higher Morality), Kiyān 4, no. 18 (1994): 22-32; and "Az Tarikh Biamuzim" (Let us Learn from History), in Abdolkarim Soroush, Taffaruj-i Sun': Guftarhay-yi dar Maqulat-i Akhlāq va Sa'nat va 'Ilm-i Insani (Taffaruj-i Sun': Essays on Human Sciences, Ethics, and Art), (Tehran: Intisharat-i Surush, 1987), 265. [Back](#).

Note 48: "Hukumat-i Dimokratik-i Dini?," 15. [Back](#).

Note 49: Ibid. [Back](#).

Note 50: "Bavar-i Dini, Davar-i Dini," 56; and "Hukumat-i Dimokratik-i Dini?" 14-15. [Back](#).

Note 51: "Bavar-i Dini, Davar-i Dini," 56. [Back](#).

Note 52: Abdolkarim Soroush, "Mudara va Mudiriyat-i Mu'minan, Sukhani dar Nisbat-i Din va Dimukrasi" (The Tolerance and Administration of the Faithful, a Talk on the Relationship between Religion and Democracy), Kiyān 4, no. 21 (1994): 11. This issue of Kiyān is devoted entirely to discussions of religion and democracy, and includes three articles in response to Soroush's "Hukumat-i Dimokratik-i Dini?" [Back](#).

Note 53: "Bavar-i Dini, Davar-i Dini," 51. [Back](#).

Note 54: "Mudara va Mudiriyat-i Mu'minan, Sukhani dar Nisbat-i Din va Dimukrasi," 4. [Back](#).

Note 55: Ibid., 8. [Back](#).

Note 56: Ibid. [Back](#).

Note 57: For articles critical of Soroush's position on democracy, see 'Aliriza 'Alavi, "Hakimiyat-i Mardum dar Jama'ah-yi Dindaran" (The Rule of the People in the Society of the Religious), Kiyān 4, no. 22 (1994-1995): 26-30; Hasan Yusifi Ashkuri, "Paraduks-i Islam va Dimukrasi?" (The Paradox of Islam and Democracy?), Kiyān 4, no. 21 (1994): 24-29; Maqsud Farastkhah, "Rabitah-yi Din va Siyasat dar Jama'ah-yi Dini" (The Relationship between Religion and Politics in a Religious Society) Kiyān 4, no. 18 (1994): 33-35; Bijan Hikmat, "Mardum-Salari va Din-Salari" (Leadership of the People and Leadership of Religion), Kiyān 4, no. 21 (1994): 16-23; Muhammad Javad Ghulamriza Kashi, "Chand Pursish va Yik Nazar Piramun-i Nazariyah-yi Hukumat-i Dimokratik-i Dini" (A Few Questions and a Position on the View A Religious Democratic Government), Kiyān 3, no. 14 (1993): 26-31; Majid Muhammadi, "Ghusl-i Ta'mid- Sikularizm ya Nijat-i Din" (The Ceremonial Baptism of Secularism or the

Rescue of Religion), *Kiyan* 4, no. 21 (1994): 30-34; Hamid Paidar, "Paraduks-i Islam va Dimukrasi" (The Paradox of Islam and Democracy), *Kiyan* 4, no. 19 (1994): 20-27; Jahangir Salihpur, "Din-i Dimokratik-i Hukumati" (A Ruling Democratic Religion), *Kiyan* 4, no. 20 (1994): 6-11; and Murad Saqafi, "Mardum va Farhang-i Mardum dar Andishah-yi Siyasi-yi Shari'ati va Surush" (People and the Culture of People in the Political Thought of Shari'ati and Soroush), *Goft-o Gu* 1, no. 2 (1993-1994): 25-39. See also the 7 November 1995 issue of *Subh*, entitled "Vijah-yi Barrasi-yi Ara' va 'Aqa'id-i Duktur Surush" (A Special Analysis of the Opinions and Ideas of Dr. Soroush), which contains thirteen critical articles by various Iranian thinkers. [Back](#).

Note 58: Paidar, 22-27. [Back](#).

Note 59: "Mudara va Mudiriyat-i Mu'minan, Sukhani dar Nisbat-i Din va Dimukrasi," 6, 14. [Back](#).

Note 60: Although Soroush does not use the term "social consciousness" in his argument, it is the present author's opinion that this is the best English equivalent of Soroush's position. [Back](#).

Note 61: Farastkhah, 33-34; Hikmat, 21. [Back](#).

Note 62: Farastkhah, 33-35; Muhammadi, 33. [Back](#).

Note 63: Farastkhah, 34; Hikmat, 23; Muhammadi, 33. [Back](#).

Note 64: Muhammadi, 33. [Back](#).

Note 65: Ibid. [Back](#).

Note 66: "Khadamat va Hasanat-i Din," 12. [Back](#).

Note 67: Ibid., 14. [Back](#).

Note 68: Hikmat, 22; Muhammadi, 32. [Back](#).

Note 69: "Mudara va Mudiriyat-i Mu'minan, Sukhani dar Nisbat-i Din va Dimukrasi," 9. [Back](#).

Note 70: "Musalmani va Abadi, Kafiri va Kam-Rushdi" (Muslimness and Development, Unbelief and Underdevelopment), in *Farbih-tar az Idiuluji*, 315-317. [Back](#).

Note 71: Ibid. [Back](#).

Note 72: Ibid., 312. [Back](#).

Note 73: Soroush raises this point in discussing the role of Ayatullah Khomeini as a religious revivalist. See Abdolkarim Soroush, "Aftab-i Diruz va Kimyayi-yi Imruz" (Yesterday's Light and Today's Guide), *Kayhan-i Farhangi* 6, no. 3 (1988): 4-7. For a related discussion, see Abdolkarim Soroush, "Dark-i 'Azizah-yi Din" (The Sincere Perception of Religion), *Kiyan* 4, no. 19 (1994): 2-9. [Back](#).

Note 74: Abdolkarim Soroush, "Intizarat-i Danishgah az Hauzah" (The University's Expectations of the Seminary), *Salam* (5 January 1993), 5, 8. See also Abdolkarim Soroush, "Taqlid va Tahqiq dar Suluk-i Danish-juyi" (Imitation and Investigation in University Student Behavior), *Kiyan* 1, no. 1 (1991): 12-17. [Back](#).

Note 75: "Intizarat-i Danishgah az Hauzah," 5. For a highly critical response to "Intizarat-i Danishgah az Hauzah," see Ayatullah Nasir Makarim-Shirazi, "Bih Aqidah-yi Man Majmu'ah-yi in Sukhanrani 'Avvam-zadagi-yi 'Ajibi ast" (In My Opinion the Whole of this Talk Reflects Extreme Vulgarism), *Salam* (5 January 1993): 8. [Back](#).

Note 76: Ibid. [Back](#).

Note 77: Ibid. [Back](#).

Note 78: Ibid. [Back](#).

Note 79: Abdolkarim Soroush, "Hurriyat va Rauhaniyat" (Freedom and the Clerical Establishment), *Kiyan* 4, no. 24 (1995): 4. This article led to a heated debate in Iran, in which the Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Sayyid 'Ali Khamenei, commented indirectly yet unmistakably to Soroush's criticisms. See *Ittilaat* (Tehran edition), 10 September 1995, p. 7; and "Saqf-i Ma'ishat bar Sutun-i Shari'at," 31. In order to prevent the further politicization of the discussion, the editors of *Kiyan* decided in their October-November 1995 issue to cease publishing any articles related to "Hurriyat va Rauhaniyat." See *Kiyan* 5, no. 27 (1995): 2. For an extremely critical response to Soroush's position, see "Harf-ha-yi Kuhnah va Malal-Avar dar Zar-Varaq-i Andishah va Taffakur" (Old and Tiresome Words under the Cover of Thought and Reflection), *Subh* (2 January 1996), 7, 14. [Back](#).

Note 80: "Hurriyat va Rauhaniyat," 4. This is an issue with which Ayatullah Mutahhari was also concerned, although Soroush's position is considerably more far-reaching than Mutahhari's. For an article that questions Soroush's reading of Mutahhari, and challenges his description of the clerical establishment, see Ali Mutahhari, "Ustad Mutahhari va Hall-i Mushkil-i Sazman-i Rauhaniyat" (Professor Mutahhari and the Solution of the Problem of the Clerical Establishment), *Kiyan* 5, no. 25 (1995): 12-15. [Back](#).

Note 81: Ibid., 5. [Back](#).

Note 82: "Saqf-i Ma'ishat bar Sutun-i Shari'at," 30. [Back](#).

Note 83: "Hurriyat va Rauhaniyat," 6. [Back](#).

Note 84: Ibid., 8. [Back](#).

Note 85: Ibid. [Back](#).

Note 86: Ibid., 8-9. [Back](#).

Note 87: Ibid., 8. For an example of the type of religious activist Soroush envisions, see his article on the recently deceased Mehdi Bazargan, "An kih bih Nam Bazargan bud nah bih Sifat" (He who was a Merchant in Name, not in Character), *Kiyan* 4, no. 23 (1995): 12-20. The article's title is a play on words that reveals the essence of Soroush's point. Bazargan in Persian means merchant, and Soroush argues that Mehdi Bazargan was a merchant in name alone, and not in character, as he would not compromise or sell his belief in religion. Although written before his criticisms of the clerical establishment, this provides an excellent illustration of Soroush's ideal religious activist. [Back](#).

Note 88: Personal communication with Soroush, 27 November 1995. [Back](#).

Note 89: "Hurriyat va Rauhaniyat," 10. [Back](#).

Note 90: See "Sih Farhang" (Three Cultures), in Razdani va Raushanfikri va Dindari, 146. [Back](#).

Note 91: Ibid. [Back](#).

Note 92: Abdolkarim Soroush, "Ma'rifat, Mu'allifah-yi Mumtaz-i Mudernizm" (Knowledge, the Distinguished Products of Modernism), *Kiyan* 4, no. 20 (1994): 5; "Ulum-i Insani dar Nizam-i Danishgahi" (The Human Sciences in the University System), in *Taffaruj-i Sun'*, 198, 199; and Boroujerdi, 242. [Back](#).

Note 93: For Soroush's position on the relationship between the religious and non-religious sciences, within the context of the Cultural Revolution, see "'Ulum-i Insani dar Nizam-i Danishgahi," 190-202; and "Huvviyat-i Tarikhi-i va Ijtima'iyi 'Ilm" (The Historical and Social Identity of Knowledge), in *Taffaruj-i Sun'*, 203-227. [Back](#).

Note 94: "'Ulum-i Insani dar Nizam-i Danishgahi," 195. [Back](#).

Note 95: Ibid. [Back](#).

Note 96: Ibid., 200-202. [Back](#).

Note 97: Abdolkarim Soroush, "Gharbiyan va Husn va Qubh va Shu'un va Atvar-i Anan" (The Westerners and their Goodness, Baseness, Honors and Manners), *Kayhan-i Farhangi* 1, no. 2 (1984): 17; and "Sih Farhang," 117. [Back](#).

Note 98: For the classic articulation of gharb-zadagi, see Jalal Al-i Ahmad, *Gharb-zadagi* (Weststruckness), (Tehran: Intisharat-i Ravaq, 1962). For English translations, see

Ahmad Alizadeh and John Green, *Weststruckness*, (Lexington, KY: Mazda Publishers, 1982); R. Campbell, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1984); or Paul Sprachman, *Plagued by the West*, (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1982). [Back](#).

Note 99: "Sih Farhang," 111-112; and "Vujud va Mahiyat-i Gharb" (The Existence and Essence of the West), in *Taffaruj-i Sun'*, 240-242. [Back](#).

Note 100: "Gharbiyan va Husn va Qubh va Shu'un va Atvar-i Anan," 15; "Sih Farhang," 111; and "Vujud va Mahiyat-i Gharb," 244. [Back](#).

Note 101: "Sih Farhang," 112; and "Vujud va Mahiyat-i Gharb," 250. For Soroush's position in relation to his critics, see Boroujerdi, 242-244. [Back](#).

Note 102: "Vujud va Mahiyat-i Gharb," 242-244. [Back](#).

Note 103: "Gharbiyan va Husn va Qubh va Shu'un va Atvar-i Anan," 18; and "Sih Farhang," 119-121. [Back](#).

Note 104: "Sih Farhang," 128. [Back](#).

Note 105: *Ibid.* [Back](#).

Note 106: On the potential dangers of a religious society in which the excessive intensity of religious faith threatens the rational climate Soroush envisions, see Abdolkarim Soroush, "Dindari va Khardvarzi" (Pietism and Rationalism), *Kiyan* 3, no. 12 (1993): 8-14. [Back](#).

Note 107: See "Ma'rifat, Mu'allifah-yi Mumtaz-i Mudernizm." [Back](#).

Note 108: Abdolkarim Soroush, "Ma'ishat va Fazilat" (Livelihood and Virtue), *Kiyan* 5, no. 25 (1995): 9. [Back](#).

Note 109: "Musalmani va Abadi, Kafiri va Kam-Rushdi," 334. In one of his early post-revolutionary works, Soroush lamented the increasingly dogmatic, polarized language of intellectual debate in Iran. See Abdolkarim Soroush, *Idiuluji-yi Shaitani: Dugmatizm-i Niqabdar* (Satanic Ideology: Masked Dogmatism), 4th ed. (Tehran: Intisharat-i Baran, 1982). [Back](#).
