Religious Reform

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Abdolkarim Soroush
New 'Revival of Religious Sciences'

Abdolkarim Soroush (b.1945) is an Iranian philosopher-thinker whose innovative ideas on religious reform are sure to win him a place among the most prominent Muslim reformers of this century. A graduate of Tehran University in pharmacology, Soroush undertook postgraduate studies in history and the philosophy of science at the University of London in the early 1970s. His searching mind, already familiar with Islamic and Western classical philosophical traditions, was captivated by modern philosophy.

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Abolkarim Soroush at the ISIM Muslim Intellectuals Conference, April2000.

Prior to postgraduate work, Soroush was long preoccupied with textual interpretation – a product of his extensive, systematic study of Qur'anic exegesis, and classical theological, mystical and philosophical works such as Rumi and Al-Ghazali. These joined with new insights to draw him into a vortex of intellectual activity aimed at re-evaluating traditional metaphysics in order to find a convincing solution to the relationship between science and metaphysics/reason and revelation. Context has also contributed to Soroush's intellectual fruition as a Muslim reformer. In the 1960s, as a religiously committed and socio-politically concerned student, he pondered revivalist literature from Al-Afghani to Ali Shari^{c}ati. Since returning to Iran shortly after the 1979 revolution, he has experienced the rule of an Islamic government, the supremacy of an ideologized Islam, and the implementation of a jurisprudential understanding of Islam.

Contraction and expansion

His turbulent yet rewarding intellectual journey culminated in the development of his epistemological/hermeneutical 'Theory of Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge'. This theory, constituting the foundation stone of Soroush's reform plan, distinguishes him from other revivalists. Notwithstanding his deep appreciation of their endeavours, Soroush believes that his theory provides a hitherto absent but vital contribution, that is, an epistemological structure. To reconcile the immutable (religion) with change (dynamic world) it is necessary to distinguish between religion and religious knowledge. Religion is divine, eternal, immutable and sacred, while human understanding of it is in constant exchange with every field of human knowledge. As such, religious knowledge is in flux, relative, and time-bound. This recognition means that issues of reform can be addressed without compromising the sacredness of religion. Revivalists' neglect of this foundation has diverted their attention from fundamental questions. Consequently, solutions, though valuable, have been provisional. Nevertheless, Soroush claims neither perfection nor finality for his approach.

Soroush's goal goes beyond unsystematic reforms in certain selected, mostly legal, matters and his plan is multidimensional. Of its two major aspects, one is to prune elements and understandings that are considered superfluous and stagnant and have often obscured the essence of religion. The other is to equip religion with extra-religious means and values, chiefly in reconciling reason and revelation.

Reason and revelation

His pathology of contemporary Islam surfaces numerous ills. Although post-revolutionary conditions in Iran are central to his diagnosis, Soroush has no difficulty identifying these problems all over the Muslim world. First, he sees the ideologizing of Islam, the prevalent mode of Islamic resurgence since the 1960s, as detrimental to the essence of religion. Among other things, it makes religion an instrument for attaining goals. It promotes a dogmatic understanding of religion concerned with exoteric, accidental aspects, ignoring deeper meanings and resulting in intellectual rigidity and exclusivism. It fixes one understanding of religion as final, absolute, official, and beyond criticism. Demanding its official interpreters, it entrusts the clergy with a priori privileges and gives access to religious totalitarianism at societal and political levels. Soroush calls this the 'Islam of identity'. At best, it is an ideological means that may help Muslims overcome their modernity-inspired 'crisis of identity'; whereas the 'Islam of truth', understood as the essential truths to which prophets have invited humankind, is only remotely related to this 'expediental' Islam.

A second problem is the undue emphasis given to legal aspects of Islam (*shari^{c}ah* and *fiqh*) at the cost of ethics and theology. Soroush's critique of this imbalance targets traditionalists and some modernists alike, the former for reducing Islam to *fiqh*. The latter, trapped in this short-sightedness, have lost their ability to recognize ills at a deeper level and have thus reduced reform to partial and unsystematic legal solutions. Soroush does not underestimate the significance of *fiqh* and *shari^{c}ah*. What he argues against is ascribing to it primacy, comprehensiveness and finality. Inspired by his 'mentor' Al-Ghazali, he believes that *fiqh* is neither the core of Islam nor its totality and should thus be confined to its own sphere. Moreover, a *fiqh*-based understanding of Islam puts a premium on *^{c}amal* (outward practices) rather than *iman* (inner faith). It envisions a society wherein the enforcement of the *shari^{c}ah*, ritualism and uniformity in religious experience prevail. This absence of plurality leads to hypocrisy and monopoly on truth.

These two ills have not only caused a stagnation in religious thought, they have promoted a 'maximalist' view of religion. They have prevented a dialogue among Islamic religious sciences and between Islam and the human sciences, necessary components to a revitalization of Islamic thought. Only through such recognition and willingness to enter into a give-and-take process will Islamic thought break the shackles of rigidity and absolutism. This is a summons to the invigorating role of reason, a call deeply aligned with Mu^{c}tazilite rationalism and resonating with the pleas of Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Iqbal.

A 'maximalist' view of religion affirms that what Muslims need to solve their problems or administer their public and personal lives is all provided in Islam as if religion were a repository of pre-packaged solutions for all problems at all times. This deprives Muslims of the intellectual challenge and benefit of other means and values. In practice, it recedes to *fiqh*, which, in its most lively manifestation, *ijtihad*, is ironically the most in need of extra-religious knowledge. A 'maximalist' view of religion is perhaps best exemplified in the prevailing discourse on Islam and politics. It teaches that *shari^{c}ah* is an all-comprehensive system of law that provides for political needs. This juridical approach to politics not only disregards the very nature of the matter, it ends in some un-resolvable contradictions.

Islam and democracy

Soroush argues that discussion about Islam and politics should be approached from outside of religion. Reconciling religion and democracy is of the same nature as reconciling reason and revelation; both involve extra-religious values and means. In essence, the nature of the state and values and methods of governance are not matters of religious jurisprudence but belong to political philosophy. With regard to religion, they should be addressed in *kalam* (theology). Human beings qua human beings are entitled to a priori rights, including political ones. Pivotal values of democracy – justice and freedom – are extra-religious, though upheld by religious systems. Methods of governance are also non-religious. Administering public life is a rational matter that should benefit from modern social sciences, economics and administration. *Fiqh* is neither a science of administration nor a government platform. Anything found in religion in this respect is 'minimal' and 'accidental'; it is not 'essential' to religion. Arguing for the possibility of a religious democratic state, Soroush believes that if democracy is irreconcilable with the normative legal reading of Islam, it can be compatible with another understanding that accords primacy to human values such as rationality, justice, freedom and human rights. Therefore, democracy can work in a religious society only if the respective theoretical foundations are harmonized.

Islam and modernity

Acutely aware of an epistemological break between the old and modern worlds, Soroush believes that any serious attempt at Islamic modernism should begin by equipping itself with modern concepts, perceptual outlooks and intellectual means. Of the several issues addressed by Soroush, two are modern: critical reason vs. traditional hermeneutical reason, and rights vs. duties.

Modern Muslim thought needs to adopt critical reasoning, a tool that not only involves a critical historical approach to traditional religious paradigms but can also suggest alternatives. One of the most decisive paradigmatic changes of the modern world is that most of its concepts and institutions are right-based, reflecting the shift in human self-perception from duty-bearing to right-bearing. Equally critical of the shortcomings of the past duty-oriented mentality and the current right-oriented mentality, Soroush proposes a third paradigm in which elements of rationality and rights are tempered by a form of religiosity that prevents human beings from assuming God-like characteristics and obliges them to God. However, the nature and definition of this religiosity and obligation differ radically from conventional notions that are primarily geared to external behaviour.

Far from inviting secularism, Soroush advances a learned and examined kind of religiosity. This dimension of his project deals, one might say, with reviving a higher mystical type of religiosity. It is an 'experiential religiosity' based on the love of God, the prototype of which is the 'prophetic experience' of Muhammad. What the demystified modern world is in need of is an 'experiential' not 'expediental' religiosity where God is experienced as a gracious Beloved, not as a stern Law-giver. His commands are observed not out of obligation to legal duties but out of compulsion of love.

Soroush's reform plan targets the shortcomings of both tradition and modernity. While advocating adoption of certain modern elements to strengthen the tradition, it searches the deep layers of tradition to offer a remedy for the spiritual impoverishment of the modern age. In order to become functional in the modern world, religion needs to interact meaningfully with modern concepts, outlooks and institutions. To this end, Soroush moves reform from the plane of *fiqh* to deeper levels of theology and philosophy where essential concepts of God, humankind and religiosity are to be redefined. This is predicated on the recognition of the need for a dialogical pluralism between inside and outside of religious intellectual fields. The complementarity of Soroush's project lies in the fact that it invigorates the intellectual rational tradition of Islam and at the same time accentuates its spiritual richness. The effect is to restrain the arrogance and self-centredness of modern humankind.

Bibliography

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Those technical terms in quotation (e.g. 'maximalist', 'experiential religiosity', etc.) are taken from Soroush's own works hitherto in Persian. For the sake of space limitation no individual reference is given here.

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