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Notes, Debates, and Commentaries

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Abdolkarim Soroush: The Neo-Muʿtazilite that Buries Classical Islamic Political Theology in Defence of Religious Democracy and Pluralism

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Introduction

The "search for beauty in Islam" seems to be occupying the attention of scholars "within" and "without" this faith.[1] Muslim majority societies have been the most concerned with such a search, especially for the last two centuries characterized by a turbulent encounter with (Western) modernity, because they have experienced the ugliness that replaces such a beauty, ugliness that deprives them of liberty, equality, and social justice. As notable examples, the Islamic

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1 Amidst the vast literature written in English, few examples suffice here: Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam: A Conference of the Books*, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefied, 2006; Ziauddin Sardar, *Desperately Seeking Paradise: Journeys of a Skeptical Muslim*, London: Granta, 2005; Abdennour Bidar, *Self islam: Histoire d'un islam personnel* [*Self Islam: Story of a Personal Islam*], Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006; Fred Dallmayr, "Islam and Democracy: Reflections on Abdolkarim Soroush," 2001, http://www.drsoroush.com/English/On_Dr Soroush/E-CMO-20010407-Islam_And_Democracy-Reflections_On_Abdolkarim_Soroush. html. Dallmayr says "It is time to recuperate the meaning of Islam as a summons to freedom, justice, and service to the God who, throughout the Qur'an, is called 'all-merciful and compassionate' (*rahman-i-raheem*)."

State of Pakistan, or the *Muslim Zion*,[2] and the Islamic Republic of Iran have forcefully read the modern state into Islamic sources to keep the binary of religion and politics, or religion and state (*dīn wa dawla*), bound together. The fact that they have managed to name and establish themselves as Islamic States does not convey much when it comes to what a modern state achieves and realizes for its individuals, society, and the global community. The same could be said about the Arab States and monarchies that have oscillated between either stressing religion in their constitutions and laws or demurring it and leaving society to deal with it, and thus opting for not solving the issue of what form the state takes, on what legitimacy to be grounded and what laws to be enforced. The delicacy of the matter becomes clearer if examples of states currently experiencing waves of the so-called Arab Spring are kept in mind (e.g. Egypt and Tunisia). The place of religion in politics is still being substantially discussed.

For some, the "Islamic State" is simply impossible.[3] Marring the beauty of a universal revelation with the narrowness of politics is not the way for treating revelation. Accordingly, renewing the understanding of religion becomes pivotal for any discourse of change for individual, social, and cosmic wellbeing. Such is the general context in which a radical reformist emerges, from "within" the Islamic State institutions, and the Islamic tradition, i.e., the Iranian philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945, Tehran).

The aim of this paper is to examine a leading project of reforming theology and politics for renewal and pluralism in Muslim majority societies. The ongoing debate over whether Islam can be a state religion or a mere religion within the state makes reading the (Islamic) past into the present or vice versa a controversial endeavour in prospecting future solutions. Due to this fact, engaging with theology politically and with politics theologically appears a requisite in contemporary Islamic thought. The importance of theology stems from the fact that Muslim societies are religious, and their main references for what concerns political governance and cultural life originate from religious texts,

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2 Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea*, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2013.

3 Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012; Abdullahi An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Sharia*, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

henceforth the relevance of political theology,[4] or what Mohammed Arkoun calls "applied Islamology."[5]

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4 I make two notes here. One, by political theology I simply and briefly mean the intertwining territories between religion and politics, namely, the incorporation and interpretation of some theological aspects of religion in the public debate for public use. For example, theological debates on some of the attributes of God, like Oneness, Justice, Forgiveness and Mercy, or the ontological equality in creation and judgement between man and woman, are issues that stir re-interpretation in Islamic thought, both past and present, for political debates on social justice and freedom. It is in this sense that religion cannot be excluded from politics nor can politics be severed from religious contribution, seeing that some theological matters, even though metaphysical or ontological in nature, are relevant for mundane and epistemological reconsiderations. This does not, however, necessarily mean that Islam speaks of a State in its major sources of reference, but means that the public sphere cannot be isolated from the moral codes that are directed particularly to the individual. As a social being, the individual cannot be asked to leave to the private sphere what he (or she) believes is essential in his life. Accordingly, Islamic theology is also political. Two, if Muslim scholars and Muslim citizens are deprived of their major sources, which are substantially religious/ Islamic, in their involvement in politics in this period of debating modernity, then they are deprived of their right to their own sources, thus their right to think from within, and that is contrary to some of the major values of modernity. Otherwise said, Islamic thought, at least in this historical period, cannot be but religious, minimally or maximally. As to the future, it is up to future generations of Islamic scholarship to debate. I consider that most contemporary Muslim scholars that speak of reform from within hold the same perspective. For a perspective from comparative political thought, the work of Nader Hashemi is interesting in this regard: *Islam, Secularism and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, Chapter I, pp. 23-66. Still, I note that though he tries to defend his idea that a (liberal) democratic change in the Islamic world should go through the integration of theology in the political debate, as I also noted above, he fails to give ample evidence and examples from contemporary Islamic scholarship. This article, then, with some coincidence, may be a modest contribution in this direction of reading this scholarship from political theology perspectives.

5 "Applied Islamology" is a new field of research that Arkoun kept calling for in his scholarship. Its aim is to think of the unthought in Islamic thought, through reading the tradition using new methodologies of history, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, etc. "Applied Islamology" appears substantially different from the more political science oriented call for "Islamology," the study of religion in International Relations Studies, as advocated by the Syrian-German Bassam Tibi. As a political theologist, Soroush can also be called an Islamologist in the Arkounian sense since he brings Islamic theology back to the mundane world and its affairs, and opposes the dichotomy of secular vs. divine, religion vs. politics, reason vs. revelation: Tibi, *Islam's Predicament with Cultural Modernity: Religious Reform and Cultural Change*, New York and London: Routledge, 2009; Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, London: Saqi Books and The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2002.

This paper contends that Soroush's project launches a radically new direction in Islamic theology and politics (political theology) that builds on classical mysticism and rational theology (of the Muʿtazila).[6] This argument will be defended by introducing the studied scholar's philosophy of religion,[7] following three axes that, first, grasp the comprehensiveness of a world religion like Islam, and, second, clarify the aspects of newness (or modernity) in the project: world, individual, and society axes.[8] The first two axes are substantially theological, and the third axis is political. World axis introduces Soroush's perception of 1) God, 2) Revelation, and 3) the Prophetic mediation and wording of the Quran, thus the link between what he calls "thick" and "thin" reality (i.e., otherworld, and this-world). Individual axis presents major concepts in his philosophy of religion (like "essentials" and "accidentals," "minimal" and "maximal" religion, "master" and "slave" values), and the role of reason in the individual's "experiential religiosity." The third axis, society axis, which is the most political, condenses his views on "pluralist society," "positive and negative pluralism," "this-worldly fiqh," "objective ethics," and his concept of "religious

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6 Among the main scholars I have in mind in referring to contemporary Islamic thought are the ones that I refer to as "hermeneutists" or "textualists" like Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (d. 2010), Mohamed Arkoun (d. 2010), Hassan Hanafi (b. 1933), Amina Wadud (b. 1952), among others. For more, see: Mohammed Hashas, "On the Idea of European Islam: Voices of Perpetual Modernity," PhD Dissertation, LUISS University of Rome, 2013, available at: http://eprints.luiss.it/1237/.

7 Following Soroush's definition, "philosophy of religion means religiosity"; "It is concerned with the inner and outer domains of religion." Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, trans., Nilou Mobasser, ed., Forough Jahanbakhsh, Leiden: Brill, 2009, p. 69.

In other words, I take "inner" here to mean theology, more precisely rational or philosophical theology known as *Kalam* in Islamic scholarship, and "outer" to mean politics, henceforth my later reference to Soroush as a political theologist. That is, the *Mutakallimūn*, practitioners of kalam, were both theologians and philosophers. In this perspective, I follow the argument of George Hourani's *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985, Majid Fakhry's *Ethical Theories in Islam*, Leiden: Brill, 1991, and Mariam Al-Attar's *Islamic Ethics: Divine Command Theory in Arabo-Islamic Thought*, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2010.

8 Elsewhere I study The Idea of European Islam following these axes in this order: world, society, individual (Hashas, "On the Idea of European Islam," op. cit.). In this article I put the individual in the middle for two major methodological reasons: the first one is that Soroush himself prioritizes the place of the individual over society in relationship with religion, for the latter targets the individual first; the second reason is that leaving society axis for the end matches the aim of reading Soroush here, namely understanding his theological advances first, and then their impact on society and politics.

democracy" that results from his theological approach. A biographical sketch precedes this work.

Biographical Sketch

Soroush's encyclopaedic *overture* to physics, philosophy of science, epistemology, hermeneutics, Islamic fiqh and Sufism makes him stand high among the contemporary Muslim philosophers. Forough Jahanbakhsh introduces him as follows, "He is undoubtedly one of the most systematic architects of the Neo-Rationalist Islam, and one whose ideas have introduced a paradigm shift in Muslim religious thought."[9] The American journalist Robin Wright calls him the "Muslim Martin Luther," though he [Soroush] avoids such a comparison.[10]

Soroush studied at the 'Alavi secondary school in Tehran, one of the first schools to teach modern sciences and religious studies. At the university he studied pharmacology as well as philosophy with the Iranian philosopher Ayatollah Murtaza Mutahhari (d. 1979); he was also close to the famous ideologue and public intellectual Ali Shariati (d. 1977).[11] He continued his studies in history and philosophy of science in England. There, besides his studies, the young Soroush emerged as a public speaker within the Muslim Youth Association and a critic of the Shah's regime, a fact which gained him an invitation to be back to Iran amidst the Islamic Revolution (1978-1979), and he held afterwards a high-ranking position on the Committee of the Cultural Revolution in charge of shaping Iran's higher education system along the revolution's lines. In 1987 he resigned from the Committee for disagreements on its efficiency and purposes. In 1992, Soroush established the Research Faculty for the History and Philosophy of Science at the Research Institute for the Humanities

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9   Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. xvii. *Time* magazine proclaimed Soroush among the 100 most influential people in the world in 2005, and in 2008 *Prospect* magazine proclaimed him the 7th most influential intellectual in the world.

10   Qtd in Hamid Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire*, Oxon: Routledge, 2008, p. 117. Other journalists and academics have given the same label to other Muslim scholars, like the Syrian Muhammad Shahrur, the Egyptian female scholar in al-Azhar women's college Su'ad Salah, or the Swiss scholar Tariq Ramadan: Michaelle Browers and Charles Kurzman, *An Islamic Reformation?*, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2004, p. 6.

11   Besides these two and others, Soroush is especially influenced by Jalal Eddine Rumi (d. 1273) and Mulla Sadra (d. 1640) on spiritual teachings, al-Ghazali (d. 1111) on fiqh and spirituality, Mohamed Iqbal (d. 1938) on the rational-spiritual revival in Islam, Allama Muhammad Tabatabai (d. 1981) on the interpretation of the Quran, and Karl Popper (d. 1994) on the philosophy of science.

in Tehran, the first faculty of its kind in modern Iran. During the 1990s he began to publicly criticise the Islamic government and the clergy. In September 2009, he wrote an open critical letter to the spiritual leader Ayatollah Khamenei in which he accuses him for being responsible for the socio-economic and cultural draught the country had sunk into. In 2000, he was forced to leave the country, and has since then been a visiting scholar in American and European universities (Harvard, Princeton, Yale, London, Berlin, Amsterdam, etc.).[12]

1   *World Axis: between Thick and Thin Reality*

Soroush's philosophy of religion is historicist. In studying religion he takes into account its internal dynamics and external influences. There is no pure religion, and no pure Islam. Between 1987 and 1989, he developed his theory *The Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge*, which is an epistemological and hermeneutical theory about understanding religion as a form of human knowledge that is vulnerable to fallibility and evolution since it is based on human interaction and human learning. It is only through them that one can understand religion. Between 1997 and 1999, he developed his theory of *The Expansion of the Prophetic Experience* in which he deals with the historicity of the Prophet's revelatory experience, the Prophet's impact on revelation. These two theories would impact the outcome of his overall project: the world is *a priori* pluralist, and he terms this "negative pluralism," and *a posteriori* also pluralist, and he terms this "positive pluralism." With these concepts (to be explained below), Soroush arrives to the fact that human beings or believers do not have to expect too much from religion, and he terms this "minimalist religiosity" against the "maximalist" one, for history and believers themselves add to religion "accidentals," which cover the "essentials." To uncover the "essentials"

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12   For the political and intellectual place of Soroush in Iran and the Islamic world, see: Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy, and Religious Modernism in Iran (1953-2000): From Bazargan to Soroush*, Leiden: Brill, 2001, pp. 140-171, Chapter 5: "Post-Revolutionary Religious Intellectualism and Democracy: Abdolkarim Soroush"; Safet Bektovic, *Theological and Philosophical Discussions in Islamic Thought: Background, Classical Problems and Modern Expressions*, trans., Fahreta Ajanovic, Copenhagen: ANIS, 2012, Chapter 15: "Humanisation of Islam and democracy—Soroush"; Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent: Abdolkarim Soroush, Religious Politics and Democratic Reform*, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008, Chapters "Abdolkarim Soroush, the Intellectual Voice of the Islamic Republic," and "The Silence of the Sharīʾa: Soroush and the Theological Foundations of Political Reform"; Pernille Bramming, "Iran: We Want A Religious Democracy! Leading Iranian Reformist Abdolkarim Soroush Defends Former President against a Danish Rebellion," Weekendavisen, December 23, 2009, www.weekendavisen.dk.

of religion then requires uncovering the beginnings of a revelation and its later developments in light of the Prophetic experiences, historical exigencies, and human interaction. The outcome of the study of the history of religion is knowledge about this religion and not religion *per se*.[13]

God, Revelation, and Prophet

I suffice myself here with referring to two major relevant points. One, Soroush's major idea is that religion does not say "everything." It is not "maximalist"; it is "minimalist" (as will be further explained below). The attributes of God have been historically debated by Muslim theologians, and there is no one answer to what they mean. For example, despite the various available interpretations, how does God speak remains a controversial issue. The same can be said about the issue of predestination (*qadar*). "No one can prove that religion has said all that there is to say about God's qualities and attributes."[14]

Two, and most importantly, Soroush's perception of God's will and revelation breaks away from the dominant view about God and the Quran as His Word. He says: "until and unless we have a correct conception of the relationship between God and the world, we will not have correct theories about the Prophet and revelation either."[15] The conception he offers, and which he considers to be "in line with the philosophy of Islamic philosophers,"[16] is not to see God's rule of the world as a human king rules a country. "God governs the world in the way that a soul governs a body (according to classical natural philosophy)."[17] The body seems independent in its action but its overall being is under the soul's influence, and in between there are various factors that intervene, internal and external. Otherwise said, it is the question of God's intention and will that becomes of vital relevance at this point. Soroush asserts that "God is not an agent with intentions"; "Although everything occurs with God's

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13   Until now, the two texts available in English by the studied scholar, and which include illustrative introductory chapters by the editors and translators, are the following: Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, eds. & trans., Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience* (op. cit.); Soroush's personal website: http://www.drsoroush.com. The subsequent citations of Soroush are to these texts and editions.

14   Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 107.

15   Ibid., 340.

16   Ibid., 340.

17   Ibid., 340.

permission, with His knowledge and based on His will, He exercises His will in a different way from human beings,"[18] This means that He cannot change will according to the change of events. He does not take decisions on demand, "that God can have a changing will is an impossibility."[19] So, how can revelation be explained? Did it not take twenty-three years to descend on the Prophet, according to the dominant view? What about the later revealed verses that abrogate previous ones? Does not this mean that God changes His will? To alike questions, Soroush provides a new answer.

Soroush argues that the revelation God sent to humanity through the Prophet Muhammad is Muhammad himself. What God did was that he put His overall message in one human being, Muhammad; God prepared a "teacher" and the rest was the work of this "teacher."[20] Muhammad becomes the caliph (vicegerent) of God, His will and Word, but not exactly as God, because he remains a human being, thus bears limitations (which will be discussed later in the minimals and accidentals of religion). A couple of citations lead to the point Soroush introduces. One, God's speech should be understood metaphorically: "[T]he attribution of speech to God, like the attributions of other human characteristics to Him, is to be taken metaphorically. They are not anthropomorphical."[21] Two, Muhammad was the word of God: "Muhammad was the book that God wrote and when Muhammad read the book of his being it became the Qur'an. God wrote Muhammad and Muhammad wrote the Qur'an, just as God created the bee and the bee produced honey. And honey was the product of revelation."[22] Three, as a book of God, Muhammad becomes His agent, which is the way to solve controversial theological issues:

> The solution to all these problems is to see the Prophet's powerful and sanctioned being as the acting agent, the exerciser of intentions, the creator of the verses and the formulator of the precepts, a being who is so powerful that he is God's caliph on earth, his hand is God's hand, and his word is God's word. And the Qur'an is his miracle.[23]

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18   Ibid., 339.
19   Ibid., 339.
20   Ibid., 338.
21   Ibid., 329.
22   Ibid., 329.
23   Ibid., 340.

Soroush refuses to see Muhammad a mere "recipient," "reporter," and "mimic" of Gabriel's mediation. He also refuses to "reduce to zero" Muhammad's religious experience and his spiritual closeness to God.[24] Further than that he finds it unreasonable and unacceptable that Gabriel keeps moving back and forth between God and the Prophet, carrying each time a verse for particular events. This contradicts God's unchanging will. As a way out of this theological dilemma about the place of Gabriel in revelation, Soroush advances another innovative idea: "He [God] did everything through the Prophet's mediation;" "Gabriel was part of the Prophet."[25]

Quran: Revealed by God but Worded by the Prophet

Following what was said above, Soroush believes in the createdness of the Quran at Muhammad's moment. That is, the Quran is neither a text authored by Muhammad, at Muhammad's will, nor a word-for-word translation of revelation. Soroush holds the opinion that revelation is not the Quran Muslims have now. Revelation is the divine message inspired to Muhammad by God. He uses the German term "*Blick*" to mean that revelation is an "attitude" or "outlook" that is sent/revealed to Muhammad, an exemplary and perfect man. Muhammad's prophethood is the historical exposition of this revelation. The Quranic verses then were not revealed the way they are now; they are "signs" of revelation, and are "informative" of the way Muhammad reacted to revelation, the *Blick*, within the Arabian historical context, and according to what his companions were asking him about, and in the language they spoke and understood. This means that the Quranic laws were mere propositions of the Prophet, his transmission of the message of revelation, to his companions at the time. These laws are historical and are not final. This also means that the Quranic length could have been longer if the Prophet lived longer, and if more questions from the companions were raised. This then also means that the written Quranic injunctions as they are recorded now are not revelation *per se*, but one of its manifestations.[26]

Henceforth, the Quran is not the Word of God created at a certain point of time before its revelation as the medieval rational school of the Muʿtazila

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24   Ibid., 329.
25   Ibid., 338. Soroush is especially inspired by the Quranic image of a bee that produces honey; likewise, God created Muhammad, and inspired revelation to him, and the latter produced it according to particular linguistic, and socio-cultural circumstances (Ibid., 330).
26   Ibid., see chapters 1, 2, and 3.

argue, but it is the Word of Muhammad himself. Accordingly, Soroush is going
beyond where the Muʻtazila stopped:

> Let me also add here that I consider myself a "neo-Muʻtazilite." I believe
> that the Qurʼan is God's creation. The Muʻtazilites said this. But we
> can take one step further and say that the fact that the Qurʼan is God's
> creation means that the Qurʼan is the Prophet's creation. The Muʻtazilites
> didn't explicitly take this step but I believe it is a necessary corollary of
> their creed and school of thought.[27]

This is undoubtedly a ground-breaking move in Islamic theology.[28] Isn't it a
"Copernican Revolution" in Islamic thought?[29]

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27   Soroush, "I am a Neo-Muʻtazilite," July 2008, at http://www.drsoroush.com/English/
      Interviews/E-INT-Neo-Mutazilite_July2008.html. The idea of not only reviving but also
      tring to go beyond the Muʻtazilite tradition is what I see contemporary Islamic scholar-
      ship moving to. This also corresponds to a similar thought that comes from "without".
      George Hourani writes:
      > If I had a choice of what intellectual path Muslims should follow—a choice which I do
      > not have, looking at Islam from outside—I would start over again at the points where
      > the early jurists and the Muʻtazilites left off, and work to develop a system of Islamic
      > law which would openly make use of judgments of equity and public interest, and a
      > system of ethical theology which would encourage judgments of right and wrong by
      > the human mind, without having to look to scripture at every step. The Muʻtazilites
      > were correct in their doctrine that we can make objective value judgments, even if
      > their particular theory of ethics had weaknesses, which would have to be revised by
      > modern ethical philosophers and theologians. So I think this is the best way for
      > Muslims to revive Islam, and I wish them success in a formidable task.

      Hourani, *Reason and Revelation in Islamic Ethics*, op. cit., p. 276.

28   I should note that, among modern and contemporary Muslim reformists, the Pakistani
      scholar Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) might be the first to speak of an idea close to Soroush's.
      While I cannot make sure of whether and how far the latter is acquainted with the
      former's work, because of the language barrier that hinders my access to the texts of
      Soroush in Farsi, the difference in novelty of the Iranian scholar goes beyond the "hesitant
      declaration" of Rahman about the linguistic intervention of the Prophet in the wording of
      the Quran. More clearly, in his work entitled *Islam*, Rahman does not clearly say that
      the Quran is the Word of the Prophet but says that the Prophet must have conveyed the
      revealed message of God through his linguistic intervention as a way of expressing it more
      adequately to believers, according to the impact, or feeling, it left on him. He puts it
      this way:
      > The Quran is, therefore, purely divine. Further, even with regard to ordinary con-
      > sciousness, it is a mistaken notion that ideas and feelings float about in it and can be
      > mechanically "clothed" in words. There exists, indeed, an organic relationship between

In his new philosophy of religion, which bolsters the ground for new rational theology, revelation is certainly seen as divine, from God, and belief in God and His Prophet is not doubted. Yet, what is now being advanced is that revelation—revealed as Quran and compiled in a book format as *Muṣḥaf*—is not the exact words of God. God's revelation is like a muse, an "inspiration" for poets, and Muhammad transmitted this "inspiration," in the language he knows, and the style his people understand, to reveal the essentials of the new religion of Islam, without doing without the accidentals, i.e. the socio-cultural circumstances that bound both the Prophet and his community. If Muhammad lived in a different context, time and space, revelation could have been translated differently, but its core message would have been the same.[30] This means that a lot of the accidentals are additions that a believer in Islam

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feelings, ideas and words. In inspiration, even in poetic inspiration, this relationship is so complete that feeling-idea-word is a total complex within a life of its own. When Muhammad's moral intuitive perception rose to the highest point and became identified with the moral law itself [...], the Word was given with the inspiration itself. The Quran is thus pure Divine Word, but of course, it is equally intimately related to the inmost personality of the Prophet Muhammad whose relationship to it cannot be mechanically conceived like that of a record. The Divine Word flowed through the Prophet's heart.

Rahman, *Islam*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 33.

While these two, slightly Rahman and substantially Soroush, deal with the role of the Prophet in revelation and its wording, other hermeneutist-historicist scholars have taken different directions. The direction that appears close to Rahman-Soroush's view in what concerns language use and socio-historical context of revelation and its prescriptions is the one which proposes a profound differentiation between the Quran as a revelation, but still as a Word of God, and the Quran as a written manuscript called al-Kitab, in the work of Muhammad Shahrur, and al-Mushaf, in the case of Mohammed Arkoun and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: Shahrur, *al-Kitāb wa al-Qurʾān: qirāʾa muʿāṣira* [*The Book and The Qurʾan: A Contemporary Reading*], Damascus: al-Ahālī for publishing, 1990; Andreas Christmann, ed., and trans., *The Qurʾan, Morality, and Critical Reason—The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009; Abu Zayd, *Rethinking the Quran: towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics*, Utrecht: Humanistics University Press, 2004; Arkoun, *Islam to Reform or to Subvert?* London: Saqi Books, 2007. Among these, Soroush stands as the most innovative theologian, as this paper will illustrate.

29   Muhammad Shahrur and Tariq Ramadan say there is a need for a Copernican Revolution; while Shahrur attempts a theological work in that direction (cited above), Ramadan does not (yet): Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 53.

30   Soroush, "The Word of Mohammad," interviewed by Michel Hoebink, December 2007, http://www.drsoroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-The%20Word%20of%20 Mohammad.html.

has to understand according to various circumstances. Only such a historicist view of the main source of Islam, Quran, saves the Islamic core message of spiritual guidance that centralizes the individual.

As a consequence, Soroush opposes the orthodox idea of the infallibility of the Quran. Considering the fact that it is Muhammad's word, which takes into account various factors to make it accessible to believers, some of it, he claims, can be fallible. Fallibility here means that the Prophet's word (Quran) is open to changes according to context; his word is not permanent, especially when it comes to "accidentals," and not "essentials" in religion. As to "the end/seal of prophecy" it does not mean the end of religious knowledge, but simply the end of the revelation, the descent of new guidance, a new prophet. It also does not mean that the dictates of the prophetic experience are final, perfect, and maximalist. While religion and revelation are complete, religious knowledge and interpretations are not.[31]

Religion: Essentials and Accidentals

Soroush's new interpretation of revelation and the Prophetic experience make him believe that the believer's high expectations of religion can be dangerous. "Maximum religion" or "maximum religiosity" is not easy to achieve because there are many accidentals that stand before one reaches the "essentials." To reach the "possible maximum" of religiosity, the believer has to exert himself and try to catch the *Blick* of revelation as the Prophet did, and lead a spiritual, internal experience, as prophets do; this is what he refers to as "experiential religiosity."[32] The ijtihad of the believer starts from a "cultural translation"[33] of the past and early experience of revelation into the present. This means that linguistic, socio-political and economic circumstances have to be translated from past to present; they are "accidentals", and to reach the essentials, this historical translation of the revelation and its experiences into the present has to be undertaken, following epistemological and hermeneutical modelling that serves the purpose: "The events that have taken place in the history of Islam, whether in the age of our main religious leaders or thereafter, are all accidentals and might not have occurred. This being so, they cannot be included in the articles of faith."[34] Soroush includes what is seen by the orthodoxy such as fiqh essentials and worship obligations as accidentals:

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31   Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 52.

32   Ibid., 202.

33   Ibid., 89.

34   Ibid.

> There can be no doubt that the underlying contention is that most of the precepts of fiqh and even its basic tenets are accidentals. Even prayers and fasting have been made proportionate to what people can endure on average. If their endurance was much greater, the obligations may well have been more severe.[35]

Soroush is not worried about what kind of fiqh would emerge from his philosophy of religion. He says this should not be a detaining concern for now. Otherwise put, "historical Islam" has to be differentiated from "the spirit of Islam." Soroush outlines fourteen points that can help in deconstructing historical Islam to reach its essence, goal and spirit:

> Religion does not have an Aristotelian essence or nature; it is the Prophet who has certain goals. These goals are religion's essentials. In order to express and attain these intentions and to have them understood, the Prophet seeks the assistance of (1) a particular language, (2) particular concepts and (3) particular methods (fiqh and ethics). All of this occurs in a particular (4) time and (5) place (geographical and cultural) and for (6) a particular people with particular physical and mental capacities. The purveyor of religion is faced with specific (7) reactions and (8) questions and, in response to them, gives (9) specific answers. The flow of religion over the course of time in turn gives rise to events, moving some people to (10) acquiesce and others to (11) repudiate. Believers and unbelievers fall into (12) particular relationships with each other and religion; they fight battles or create civilizations, (13) engage in comprehending and expanding religious ideas and experiences or (14) wrecking and undermining them.[36]

These features of accidentals in religion challenge the common view believers have of it, i.e. "the maximalist expectation of religion." Believers generally wish to find everything in religion, as a "maximal source and reservoir;" they seek perfection in religion, and forget about the accidentals that hinder the direct sight of its essentials. Again, for the case of fiqh law, and though he states repeatedly that his concern is not merely to challenge these current orthodox norms but to raise primarily theoretical concerns, Soroush believes that classical ijtihad extracts maximums from minimums, and makes of legal norms a final verdict instead of considering them minimums that are able to

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35   Ibid.
36   Ibid., 90-91.

be readjusted according to circumstances and the spirit of religion. When "normal conditions" for a normal life are not applicable, legal norms should not be applied maximally as they are now, for the maximum religiosity and its possibility is absent; the accidentals are many to make the maximum applicable.[37]

Religion: Minimalist, Not Maximalist

The theories of religious knowledge, its contraction and expansion, and the expansion of the Prophetic experience lead to a pluralist view of religion. Soroush outlines two main pillars of religion: 1) "diversity of understanding religious texts," and 2) "diversity of interpretation of religious experiences." The outcome of the two, respectively, is 1) intra-religious and 2) extra-religious pluralism. For diversity of understanding religious texts, Soroush recognizes that historically no religious text has been interpreted without disaccord among believers. The history of theology testifies to this. Against this maximalist perception of religion, he emphasises its minimalism, since "[A] maximalist religion undermines religion itself."[38]

Besides analytical understanding of religion, Soroush takes a lot from the Sufi tradition, especially from his mentor the famous jurist and Sufi Jalalu Addin al-Rumi. Rumi saw all religions as truth systems within truth—"truth within truth." Each religious system of truth comes at a certain point of time, with particular Prophetic experiences; these do not catch all human experiences; they leave space for difference; believers have to live them differently. No believer can grasp the picture of truth, unless he walks in one of its paths, and its paths are many. However he tries, the believer would be bound by time and space circumstances. This is God's will, "The first sower of the seeds of pluralism in the world was God himself who sent us different Messengers."[39] God intended the text to have no one meaning, "We therefore have to say that they are all the Creator's intentions."[40]

As to "diversity of interpretation of religious experiences," it derives from the "diversity of understanding religious texts." Like texts, humans are pluralists, and they project their pluralism on texts and their meanings. Especially in Islam, there is no religious authority to decree one interpretation, and the individual is the one who lives the religious experiences and is solely judged by God according to that, "Everyone carries their own burden of responsibility

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37   Ibid., 94-97.
38   Ibid., 107-115.
39   Ibid., 130.
40   Ibid., 178.

and appears before God singly."[41] Pluralism then is no longer about asking if a system of interpretation or a personal interpretation of it is true or false, but about seeking to understand meaning in it, "The point is that we should not ask these questions [of truth and falsehood] in the first place and we should look at the plurality of people's views and beliefs from a different perspective and that we should see and read a different meaning and spirit into it."[42] All interpretations are fluid, open to assumptions and extra-religious influence, "the world is filled with impure identities […] the reason for this impurity is the humanization of religion."[43]

2 Individual Axis: Reason and Spirituality

Reason: the Source of Ethical Values

Soroush affirms that "many of my [his] views are rooted in medieval Islamic thought."[44] Though he acknowledges the Ash'ari main Sunni trend that has dominated Islamic thought for their revelation-empirical view of the world, he still feels closer to the Mu'tazila in theological matters, like the use of reason to understand revelation, the createdness of the Quran, and the objective value of values—whether moral values can be discovered by reason alone or have to be realized by reason and through the mediation of revelation. The concerned philosopher believes that reason can discover them independently, "[L]ike the Mu'tazilites, I believe that human reason discovers them as evident and can, therefore, establish a revelation-independent reason."[45]

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41 Ibid., 123.

42 Ibid., 122-123.

43 Ibid., 143-144. Soroush says that "a human religion is gradually born which is in keeping with human beings and an answer to their real circumstances" (Ibid., xxiv-xxvi). For the case of Islamic main sectarian division, he says "[N]either Shiism nor Sunnism is pure Islam"; "We have no pure race in the world, no pure language and no pure religion." (Ibid., 143).

44 In "I am a Neo-Mu'azilite" he says that even his first and main theory is rooted in both the Ash'aria and Mu'tazila teadition: "Mu'tazilites and the Ash'arites took on added importance for me. They became illustrations of the theory of contraction and extraction, and were used to explain, defend and confirm the theory." Soroush, "I am a Neo-Mu'azilite," interviewed by Matin Ghaffarian, July 2008, http://www.drsoroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-Neo-Mutazilite_July2008.html.

45 Ibid.

Soroush trusts reason, and speaks of levels of reasoning for the establishment of justice and freedom.[46] For him, those who fear reason fear freedom. Those who fear freedom have no other alternative to their archaic and dogmatic ideas. Consequently, they prefer enclosure to openness that reason and freedom exert. The use of reason is vital for "this-world," because man lives here and now. There is no higher morality [super-human, or metaphysical]; morality is lived and not "imagined morality," morality that caters for the needs of this world; "morality is subordinate to the world and society. It serves human life. If life changes, morality, too, will have to change."[47] "Imagined morality, even if it is actualized, will work no miracles, for it sits above mundane life."[48] He believes the divine message adapts to human needs, "It is not the human morality but the divine morality and justice that adjusts itself to all societies. It behooves us, fallible creatures, to act as fallible creatures not as infallible gods. One should leave God's work, God's morality, and God's affairs to God."[49]

Still, Soroush does not claim that reason *a priori* flushes out everything right or good. He gives space to experience, which can be derived from various ways

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46   He speaks of universal, particular, acquired, innate, practical, and pure reasons. See Chapter 6 "Reason and Freedom," and chapter 7 "The Ethics of the Gods" in Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, 88-121.

47   Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy*, 109.

48   Ibid.

49   In summing up a chapter on "The Ethics of God," which is about the philosophical debate about morality, and its types, he says the following:

> In any case, here is the synopsis of the argument. First, even if there is such a thing as an ideal morality, it is the same thing as the actual morality. Second, the actual morality is amendable but not eradicable. Third, if there is to be an invitation to morality, it will have to be toward concrete and accessible rules not toward some abstract ideas that bend to any conceivable form yet solve no specific moral dilemma. Fourth, if there is to be a struggle, it should be against the bases and antecedents that cause moral exceptions to become rules and vice versa and the ideas that promote an alien and abstract "higher" morality. Fifth, if there is to be a judgment, it should be based on moral commands that yield the most sincere, generous, and straightforward responses to the most dexterous forms of subterfuge and sophistry.
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> This is the essence of moral practice in society. It is, indeed, analogous to the scientific practice in nature. As such, it is a useful guide. This is a humble vision of morality apropos of fallible human beings who are far from being Gods. It is not the human morality but the divine morality and justice that adjusts itself to all societies. It behooves us, fallible creatures, to act as fallible creatures not as infallible gods. One should leave God's work, God's morality, and God's affairs to God. This is the meaning of reliance on God (*tavakkol*).

Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, pp. 120-121.

of life, to give meaning to this reasoning. He takes this esteem of experience from the Ash'aria to measure rational advances, which the Mu'tazila do not esteem high. He is critical of philosophers who use reason to distance people from spiritual experiences, "by emphasizing rational analyses, philosophers distance people from and make them oblivious to spiritual experiences. They close people's eyes to insight and open them to learning."[50] In sum, the rational heritage of the Mu'tazila on which he builds opens, as he says, new pathways out of the limited circle and debate of tradition and modernity:

> Everyone speaks about tradition and modernity as if they were closed chests, and then they try to describe their similarities and differences. I think that this is out of keeping with the analytical approach. We have to open the chests of tradition and modernity, take out their components and demonstrate the link between them. Speaking in this closed way is not going to take us anywhere. I started the Mu'tazilite project in order to breathe new life into tradition and modernity. Rereading, reconsidering, renewing and assessing the views and ideas of the Mu'tazilites and their school of thought, which are hefty components of tradition, can bring new gains, and truly show us the way both to using tradition and to extricating ourselves from tradition. This is the kind of potential I see in the Mu'tazilite project and I'm trying to take advantage of it.[51]

Following the context that brought about the rationalist heritage of the Mu'tazila and other schools, Soroush calls for the revival of "theological dialogue" which develops pluralism in thought and "reasoned religion," and leads to "epistemological pluralism" (his words, to be explained below). Rekindling the flames of "rational and theological religion" would shatter certitudes through skepticism and doubt. One certitude and truth bring about dogma and intolerance. Needless to say that certitude here is not compared to scientific certitude/ truth. It is of a different genre. "Reasoned religion" or "theological religion" is pluralist:

> By *lighting the flame of reason*, theologians rescue believers from the chilling aridity of mindless dogmas and contribute to the warmth of wisdom. *Theological religion is a hundred times better and sweeter than common, emulative religiosity*, and it nurtures within it a plurality of which there is

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50   Soroush, "I am a Neo-Mu'tazilite," July 2008, at: http://www.drsoroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-Neo-Mutazilite_July2008.html.

51   Ibid.

neither sight nor sound in the parched desert of common religiosity. This is a plurality that is built on doubt, not certitude, and it is a pluralism that is negative, not positive."[52] [Emphasis added]

As is the case with the place of reason in human interaction with religion for the understanding of ethical values and liberty, the feel of religiosity is also based on human experience.

Experiential Religiosity

Soroush's intimacy with religion is heavily influenced by the Prophetic experience as well as mystics' experiences. He affirms that religions generally address either society first, and afterwards the individual, or the individual first, and by implication society at large. He opts for the second view: the wellbeing of the individual is what religion targets; when the individual benefits from religion, society does, too.[53] Yet, he underlines the fact that only through personal religious experience, intimate interaction with religion individually, that one can better understand human diversity, revelation and God. He is against taking Islam as an identity marker, and is for considering it a path of truth, which is more enriching to the individual and society.[54]

Soroush states that Prophets when they preach to ordinary believers, they preach to all equally. The individual has to ask himself whether such a prescription or ritual is for him or not; his intimacy with religion would give him an answer. Some believer, says Soroush, may find prayers more interesting to his spiritual experience, and another may find hajj (pilgrimage) more touching, while another may find *zikr* (remembrance and invocation of God) or serving the masses more invocative of religiosity,[55] and interaction with "thick reality" (i.e. otherworld, vs. "thin reality", this world).[56] He admits that the individualization of religiosity may lead to "the disintegration and dismemberment of religion", that is why he adds that "the Prophet's personality is pivotal and irreplaceable" as an example to follow, an example of "spiritual guardianship," and not "external guardianship" which often becomes a community or political identity.[57] "It is on this basis that the experiential believer moves away from the religion of the common people and towards true religion. He steps into the

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52   Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 150.

53   Ibid., 206-207.

54   Ibid., 323.

55   Ibid., 204-205.

56   Ibid., 326.

57   Ibid., 204.

radiance of God's guardianship and approaches Him singly."[58] Diversity of religious experiences breeds pluralism and various paths towards truth. However, pluralism is not easy to govern unless a clear political theory develops out of "theological religion" and "experiential religiosity."

3   *Society Axis: Pluralism and Religious Democracy*

Soroush does not see any intrinsic antimony between religion and democracy, religion and reason, and between religion and liberty. Previous concepts of essentials/ accidentals, maximal/ minimal religiosity, master/ slave values, secular fiqh and objectivity of ethical values all lead to a political conception of society that cannot be but democratic, and at the same time religious. The above theological re-reading of the accumulated understanding of religion convinces Soroush that the Islamic major references (Quran and Sunna) nowhere speak of an Islamic State as such. On the contrary, "the anachronistic fallacious contradictory notion of the Islamic state proves to be so ineffective and totalitarian in practice."[59] What Islamic teachings emphasise is good governance, based on moral conduct that guarantees individual freedoms and secure social justice, henceforth his concept of various labels: "religious governance," "democratic religious governance,"[60] or simply, "religious democracy."[61]

Pluralism: Positive and Negative

Religious diversity, based on previous theological conceptions and derived concepts, results in two kinds of pluralisms: positive and negative. Positive pluralism is the norm in the world. The world is *a priori* pluralist, but it is positive because this realization from within religion comes later, *a posteriori*, after each religion realizes its various interpretations and also realizes the diversity of the world. It is rich; it admits various interpretations, and acknowledges that none of them can be swallowed up or dissolved, since each of them has "incommensurable particularities."[62] Different prophecies cannot be compared in *"kind"* but in *"degree,"* since they all preach a version of truth, from the same God. Positive pluralism is based on unity and nominalism. Religiosities based on "reason" and "experience" give rise to pluralism, while religiosity based on pragmatism and instrumentalism ("pragmatic/instrumental" religiosity) does

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58   Ibid., 205.

59   Ibid., 266.

60   See his chapter entitled "The Idea of Democratic Religious Government," in *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy*, p. 130.

61   Bramming, "Iran: We Want a Religious Democracy!" Op. cit.

62   Ibid., 137.

not. Negative pluralism is "pragmatic/ instrumental." It is inauthentic, and lacks something, like certitude or truth.

In an epistemological differentiation of pluralisms, Soroush says that positive pluralism is "reason" based, while negative pluralism is "caused": by reasons he means the interpretative rules of a phenomenon, while the causes are its changing events. Reasons identify and explain facts, and the relation between causes-and-effects, while causes only account for the proximate effects.[63] Soroush's epistemological position rests on "reasoned pluralism," and "hermeneutic pluralism," for they affect religious understanding, and lead to "epistemological pluralism."[64] Reasoned pluralism (positive pluralism) embraces plurality to which everyone is invited to participate, according to their truth. This engenders "rational modesty."[65] This means that no one considers his beliefs as the chosen ones, or the only true ones any longer. Monopoly of God and truth is over; pluralism, which is the norm of the world, prevails. Politically, no society then has to be governed by one ideological/ pragmatic/ instrumental interpretation; a "pluralistic society" is free and open as nature, unlike the "ideological society" that narrows down the premises of the truth(s) and ideologies it embraces.[66] Theologically (philosophically), truth, guidance, felicity, and salvation have to be considered as a shared asset; a path of truth enlightens the other; they do not need to be all similar; worship has to be sincerely to God and not to particular sects or blind rituals, or historical incidents or figures. Soroush is by no means implying that rituals have to be left aside for pluralism; rather, he says that they have to be perceived differently, modestly, pluralistically, and rationally. He puts it this way:

> This is not to say that the followers of all sects and religions should needlessly abandon their own practices, rituals and beliefs, and turn into a uniform mass. All that is required is for them to look at the plurality and diversity of rituals and beliefs from different perspectives; not to imagine that the essential core of rightful guidance is confined to the teachings of

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63   Soroush is critical of most of Western philosophy since the 18th century as it entered the phase of turning causes into reason in determining and producing knowledge. This is for him what relativism and postmodernism is about.

64   Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 152; pp. 160-161. In the same line of thought, he says "We have no other option but to accept plurality" (Ibid., 147). He also uses the term "rational modesty" (Ibid., 156) and "critical rationalism," (Ibid., 157) to express the same point.

65   Ibid., 156.

66   Ibid., 152.

theology and fiqh; and not to operate on the basis of the assumption that anyone who has a few specific articles of faith engraved on their minds (Shiis, Sunnis, Protestants, Catholics, etc.) is rightly guided and saved, whereas anyone else is misguided and doomed. Let them also take into account people's deeds, longing and diligence. Let them not imagine that Satan has the upper hand over God. Let them also study the hidden ways in which God chooses to guide people. And let them, most of all, value moral virtues higher than mental habits and sharia practices.[67]

For Soroush, it is easy to be an "emulative" believer who stops at his tradition of truth and negates the rest. On the other side of such religious perspective stand "reasoned believers" or "reflective believers."[68] The latter cannot, and should not, try to turn the former into reasoned ones. The world is full of emulative believers, and they only need to enlarge the scope of their understanding of religion for more pluralism, beyond differences that historical accidentals have brought about. The essentials are what should unite people to reclaim the pluralist world. "What remains is the necessary minimum of spirituality and guidance granted and bequeathed to humanity."[69]

Fiqh: This Worldly, and Accidental

Soroush is demanding to consider fiqh and religion in general this-worldly, and not other-worldly. When considering religion this-worldly, Sharia and ethics precepts [should and should not, dos and don'ts] are considered *"necessary and sufficient"* to run the social affairs and solve the problems that emerge from them. This means that the rationale behind law can no longer be said to be a divine secret or a hidden divine *hikmat*/ rationale. Law has to be judged according to its "immediate—and not ultimate—consequences." Otherworldly oriented religion sees laws as duties the main aim of which is the production of felicity in the hereafter; the consequences are reaped in the hereafter, and not here. This otherworldly view lags behind society needs. It loses the spirit of religion and busies itself with the accidentals and the hereafter, without making a link with this world. In 1996 in Harvard University, Soroush titled his lecture as "Is fiqh possible?"—following Kant's question "Is metaphysics possible?" and Iqbal's "Is religion possible?"[70]—and came to the conclusion

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67   Ibid., 142.
68   Ibid., 149-150.
69   Ibid., 145.
70   Soroush is inspired by the Indian-Pakistani poet-philosopher Mohamed Iqbal's seventh lecture, entitled "Is religion possible?" in his widely read work *The Reconstruction of*

that a fiqh that tries to place both this-worldly and otherworldly affairs on a par is impossible.[71] Doing so "reduce[s] the role of fiqh to zero."[72] Fiqh is incomplete; it is perfect in terms or precepts (theory), and not in planning; it is minimalist, not maximalist; it is not religion.[73]

This view is further solidified with the idea Soroush has on (most) ethical values: they are objective, thus also minimalist, accidental, changeable, and this-worldly (secular). He argues that "ethics is for life;" "It teaches us how to live;" "It serves and is subject to life."[74] He distinguishes between "master values" and "servant values." The latter are "for life;" the former are what "life is for." Most values—he says, presumably, ninety-nine percent—are servant values, since they are for life. For example, human beings do not live to tell the truth; they tell the truth to live. Ethics have context. In war, one may lie to survive. Servant values are etiquette, and they change according to context. So, when people say modern life has changed values, they mean that servant values have changed because of life circumstances. This is not relativism, argues Soroush, for relativism touches also the master values. Master values, which "life is for," are very few, and without them life is meaningless; they do not change according to context; they are not an etiquette, "In the absence of these values, life is not worth living. They basically consist of the things that human beings hold most dear, such as "God" or "humanity" or "life itself."[75] Soroush does not see any intrinsic value in values. Their benefits convey how good or bad they are, "Telling the truth is not intrinsically good and lying is not intrinsically bad. Their goodness and badness arise from their effects and consequences in life."[76]

Religious Thought in Islam (London: Oxford UP, 1934). In turn, Iqbal adopts the question format from Immanuel Kant's "How is Metaphysics in General Possible?" (1783) found in the latter's work; Paul Carus, ed. *Kant's Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Chicago, Open Court Publishing Company, 1912, pp. 1-163.

71   He refers to Muslims jurists and philosophers, like al-Razi (d. 925) and al-Ghazali (d. 1111), for accord on this matter. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 96.

72   Ibid., 101.

73   Ibid., 100-101.

74   Ibid., 104.

75   Ibid., 106.

76   Ibid., 105. Soroush's advances here are teleologist, and partly consequentialist. He cannot be said to be fully consequentialist since he still gives high value to the "master values" which give meaning to life, and thus develop internal, spiritual, and existential need for them; a full consequentialist does not do that. Soroush is a Muʻtazilite in this point, which will be noted below.

Human Rights: Liberty and Equality

Based on the idea of objectivism of ethical values, the supremacy of "collective reason" (and not "isolated individual reason") that prioritizes the public good,[77] it follows that "human rights lie[s] outside of the domain of religion," namely "in the extra-religious area of discourse."[78] It should be underlined that Soroush says "extra-religious" and not "outside religion" because he believes that religion defends human rights, though it may not appear to be doing so at some particular time, and under particular interpretations.[79] He further says: "Observing human rights (such as justice, freedom, and so on) guarantees not only the democratic character of a government, but also its religious character."[80] Human rights, based on freedom and equality of all citizens before the law, guarantee satisfaction to both the Creator and the created;[81] "democratic religious regimes need not wash their hands of religiosity nor turn their backs on God's approval."[82]

Accordingly, Soroush is empowering the people to use "common sense" in pursuit of their meaning of religion, by opening up to "pre-religious" and "post-religious" concerns.[83] Pure religion does not exist, as seen earlier. It is the people who make laws, according to their needs and religiosity. A revealing passage clarifies it better:

> Laws are written for the people. The law should take into account people's faults, immorality, sloth, corruption, greed, and deviousness. The law is not written for the angels or for rehearsals's sake. It is absurd to claim that the law is perfect and the people imperfect. A law that does take into account people's imperfections is itself imperfect.[84]

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77   Soroush says "[B]y reason I do not mean a form of isolated individual reason, but a collective reason arising from the kind of public participation and human experience that are available only through democratic methods." Ibid., 127.

78   Ibid., 128.

79   He acknowledges that before modernity duties were more centralized in politics than rights, and simultaneously underlines the fact that fiqh scholars as well as philosopher-theologians (*al mutakallimoun*) debated freely the issues of free will and responsibility, which are thus not totally new issues raised only with liberalism and secularism. Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy*, p. 128.

80   Ibid., 129.

81   Ibid., 130.

82   Ibid., 128.

83   Ibid., 130.

84   Ibid., 78-79.

It becomes evident then that Soroush bases his political project of a "religious democracy" on the fact that a religious society has the right to embrace its religious references on the dictates of collective reason, freedom and equality, on the condition of reading religious dictates in the light of historical changes. A religious state imposes its theocratic doctrines, which are dogmatic and exclusive of non-believers and dissenting believers as un-equals. This is neither satisfactory to God nor to the people, and extremely fails to answer the aspiration for justice in society. Imposed religiosity breeds fake belief, oppression, and hypocrisy. What is proposed here is that a religious society embraces human rights and democracy under which reason and revelation concord. Ethics and spirituality are more important, when consent of the people makes laws that may appear inacceptable by religious orthodoxy or unreflective believers.[85] At the heart of such a religious democratic government is the independence of the judiciary, which has roots in the precepts of fiqh.[86]

Reflective Closure

Having read Soroush theologically and politically, following the trilogy world-individual-society axes, it becomes evident that his philosophy of religion opens a totally new paradigm of thought in Islamic scholarship. I underline three major points that I would like to end with as critical reflections that are based on my above methodological examination of his work. First, the paradigm shift Soroush launches appears rooted in the tradition. It does not deny it, but builds on it, and re-reads it in the light of the accumulated religious and non-religious experiences that have developed since the advent of Islam. The

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85   Soroush does not deny the fact that liberty and equality would bring to the surface of society behaviours that are seen unacceptable by Muslim orthodoxy and majority Muslim believers. An example of this case is homosexuality about which Soroush says the following:

>   It is a sin if two men have sex with each other. It is the belief of all Muslims [...]. Homosexuals have been created as such and they are not doomed because of that. In the religious democracy which is our political goal, it will be possible to leave the question of punishment to God, so long as homosexuality is practiced in secret. According to Islam, it is a kind of moral corruption, and therefore one should not encourage others by practicing it in the open. It is possible that in future there will be interpretations allowing homosexual practices, but at present I know of no Muslim scholars who think along those lines.

>   Bramming, "Iran: We Want a Religious Democracy!" Op. cit. 4.

86   Soroush, "The Crust and the Core of Rule by the People," 1 December 2012, at: http://www.drsoroush.com/English/By_DrSoroush/E-CMB-20111201-The%20Crust%20and%20the%20Core%20of%20Rule%20by%20the%20People.html.

mystic and Muʿtazila traditions could be read throughout Soroush's various concepts. He is in this sense a radical reformist from "within." He calls for faithful "experiential religiosity" that revives the moment of revelation, the way Muhammad incorporated it for himself first, before he shared it with his companions in his struggles for social justice and liberation of individuals from the tutelage of oligarchy. Soroush calls for perpetual renewal of faith and rational spirituality that does not deny God or prophethood simply because human reason claims to be able to take charge of world affairs, without reference to the metaphysical, or "thick reality" in his words. Rational spirituality serves for the protection of master values that give meaning to humanity and life. That is why he is confident when he says that his project does not betray religion, because he believes that it is liberating, and liberty is needed to also understand religion. It is time to either revise the terms liberal and secular, for they have gained over time an irreligious tone especially in Western scholarship, so that we can use them to describe a scholar like Soroush, or coin more adequate terms that embrace the divinely-willed pluralism he speaks of.

Two, while it is possible to compare Soroush's work with other contemporary reformist projects, it is also possible to strongly underline the fact that his theological advances are unprecedented. Though these projects may all meet on the political propositions they defend (liberty, equality, and social justice), their theological interpretations make them stand apart. Soroush's theological consideration of the Quran as the Word of Muhammad may not be compared to Shahrur's differentiation between al-Quran and al-Kitab, or Abu Zayd and Arkoun's differentiation between oral revelation and its written non-equivalent. It may be possible that their projects become more influential than his, for the reason that they do launch a deep critique on the theological level but do not go so far as to challenge a deeply rooted idea about the Quran as the Word of God.

To say that the Quran is the Word of Muhammad—which is inacceptable and "un-Islamic" for the conservatives—means two things that can be put simply here: one, that Islamic theology got it wrong from the beginning, and all these centuries the tradition was on the wrong track; two, that this religion will be deserted and trust in it will evaporate. Soroush is of course against such a view. He does not regret the way the Quran has been interpreted historically. He, on the contrary, has learnt a great deal from it. Still, he believes that it is high time to eternalize this religion by making it more adaptable to human changes; and the only way to preserve its beauty and contribution to humanity is to re-read it anew, without this being a denigration of it. If Soroush were not a devout and profound believer and lover of God, he would not have gone so far as to reach these "limits" for the sake of saving the beautiful image he has of

God and the Prophet, and spirituality in general. That is why it would be more respectful not to call him a "Muslim Martin Luther," first since that deprives him of his own religious experience, which is fundamental for any reflective believer, second because Luther was conservative compared to the pluralism of Soroush, and third, and most importantly, because the theological division that swept Christian Europe with the Reformation of Luther swept the Islamic world in the 7th century (Khawarij, Murji'a; Shi'a, Sunni, etc.).[87] Soroush's project may be, in that sense, more unifying, more centripetal, of various theological schools in Islam (intra-religious dialogue). It may also open a fertile space for further inter-religious dialogue.

Three, since I have read Soroush as a neo-Mu'tazilite political theologian, I should open this paper to further reflexions by stating the following historical vital fact that I take from Mohamed Abed Aljabri (a neo-rationalist, neo-Averroist). This fact is that Islamic theology is deeply political; it developed because of the major civil war that ended in the Shi'i/ Sunni divide, and the appropriation of the right to rule as Caliph by dynasties, since the middle of the 7th Century CE. Aljabri says that at the time, the Arab-Islamic world was an emerging power, and it considered the Persian and Greek heritage from the perspective of superiors, and thus found it tenable to appropriate these traditions and Islamize them when adjustable, or reject them when not. Aljabri argues that Islamic theologians, both Sunni and Shi'i, since then never distanced themselves fully from politics (apart from the isolationist mystics whose approach he does not appreciate), even when the ruler is tyrant, because they considered unity of the Islamic lands more important than individual freedoms and social justice. Aljabri says that this type of political theology does not touch the heart of the message of Islam, which is public good. Aljabri "accuses" especially the authoritarian culture of late Persian rulers, and its adoption by the early Arab Caliphs (since Mu'awiya (r. 661-680)) for the political failure in Islamic theology. The point to retain here is that theology seems inseparable from politics, and if Islamic theology was influenced by political turmoil and

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87   I am very much for profound comparisons between Christian and Islamic history, evolution, and reformation. I just have reservations about quick comparisons that stop at the labels, and leave aside historical details that impact theological interpretations. While comparisons are welcome, this does neither mean that "the future of Islam" or "Islamic theology" will be exactly like the "present" or "past of Christianity." Each religious traditions has to speak for itself and liberate itself from projections, without this meaning it to be a closure. Isn't it at the end history that matters and counts when it comes to understanding religions? Aren't accidentals more influential on individuals and communities than essentials that only few reach? I close this unfinished note.

pre-Islam/un-Islamic cultures in the past, it appears to be experiencing the same process in its encounter with (Western) modernity. The major difference is that in the past the appropriation of cultures outside the scope of Islam was from a triumphant position (the Arab-Muslims in the Peninsula as a political power), and now, the appropriation of modernity also appears, for some, to be lying outside the scope of Islam, but the tone of this phase of appropriation seems to be from a week position, not to say a loser's. That is why Aljabri says that reform is a must and from within, without closing eyes to the world without.[88] As a reformist from within, then, Soroush's project considers all these historical factors accidentals within which only essentials count for faithful and reflective religiosity. That is, he enters modernity confidently, in his own spiritual way, both by aborting some of its irreligious/un-religious claims and by enriching it with religious ones. He is a product of an unhealthy political context, characterized by various dilemmas and searches, and his theology is his unique and innovative answer to it. Whether he is the theologian-philosopher of the future or the present, there is no doubt that his work will be noted in history as revolutionary, or awakening, to use a term close to the Islamic diction. He might be inspiring to a whole young generation that is searching for beauty in its tradition, innovatively, critically, rationally, and spiritually. Meanwhile, the conservatives will not let him go with it easily!

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88   Mohamed Abed Aljabri, *naqd al-ʿaql al-ʿarabī III: al-ʿaql al-siyāsī al-arabī* [*Critique of Arab Reason III: The Arab Political Mind*], Beirut: Markaz dirāsat al-waḥda al-ʿarabiyya, 1990; *naqd al-ʿaql al-ʿarabī IV: al-ʿaql al-akhlāqī al-ʿarabī* [*Critique of Arab Reason IV: The Ethical Arab Mind*], Beirut: Markaz dirāsat al-waḥda al-ʿarabiyya, 2001.