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’s University and an expert in Islamic and Western modern and philosophical traditions, Soroush was captivated by modern philosophy.

Soroush’s goal goes beyond unscientific reforms in certain selected, mostly legal, matters and his plan is multidimensional. Of its two major aspects, one is to go beyond the terminologies and understandings that are considered superficial 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 God 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 dimension of the religion as final, immutable and sacred, while human understanding – and revelation – is to be redefined. This is Soroush’s ‘Islam of identity’.

A second problem is the undue emphasis on legal aspects of Islam (from 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 a system of law that provides for political administration and the latter for reducing reform to partial and unsystematic legal solutions. Soroush does not underestimate the significance of fiqh and shari‘ah. What he argues against is ascribing to it primary, comprehensive, and final authority. Inspired by his mentor Al Ghazzali, 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 ‘amal (outward practice) rather than on huqûq (faith). It envisions a society wherein the enforcement of the shari‘ah, ritualism and uniformity in religious experience prevail. This absence of plurality leads to hypocrisy and monopolies on truth.

These two ills have not only caused a stagnation in religious thought, they have provoked 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 Islam break the shackles of rigidity and absolutism. This is a summons to the invigorating role of reason, a call deeply aligned with Murtazite rationalism and resonating with the pleas of Muhammad Abduh and Muhammad Iqbal.

Soroush’s ‘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 reservoir of knowledge. It is arguably the most in need of extra-religious knowledge. A maximalist sort of religion is perhaps best exemplified in the prevailing discourse on Islam and politics. It teaches that shari‘ah is an all-comprehensive system of law that must be at the center of the political process. This jurisdictional 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 involving extra-religious values and means. In essence, the nature of the state and values and methods of government are not matters of religious justification but belong to political philo-sophy. With regard to religion, they should be addressed in kalam (theology). Human beings are spiritual beings with extra-religious means and values. In political contexts, religion needs to interact meaningfully with modern concepts, outlooks and institutions. To this end, Soroush moves reform from the plane of figh to a deeper level of theology and philosophy where essential concepts of God, humankind and religiosity are to be redefined. This is possible through 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 integrates the intellectual rational tradition of Islam and at the same time accentuates its spiritual richness. The effect is to retain the amalgamation of reason and self-centredness of modern humanism.

Abdolkarim Soroush at the ISIM Muslim Intellectuals Conference, April 2000.

Bibliography


Those technical terms in question (e.g. ‘maximalist’, ‘revelational value’) are not taken from Soroush’s own works in Itibar in Persian. For the sake of space, I limited my personal reference in the text.

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