

Soroush's Theory of Qur'anic Revelation: A Historical–Philosophical Appraisal

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Introduction

WHAT IS taken to be 'revelation' (*tanzīl*) and 'divine communication' (*waḥy*) are central to the way Islam has been conceived doctrinally throughout its history. Although there are varied views about the nature of the Muslim revelation, its doctrinal centrality to Muslim religious thought cannot be denied. In Muslim theology, a prophet/messenger is someone who receives divine revelation and is obliged to convey it to other people in order to guide them;¹ thereby, understanding the nature of revelation is also vital to the comprehension of Muslim prophetology. From the early development of the theological debates within the Muslim communities, the idea of the 'Word of God' turned out to be highly debatable and controversial. Whether the Qur'an is 'created' or 'eternal' has been just one significant aspect of this heated discussion.²

In post-revolutionary Iran, especially after the death of Ruhollah Khomeini (d. 1989), those who are commonly described as 'religious intellectuals' (*rawshanfikrān-i dīnī*)³ have called into question the traditional understanding of Islamic thought that is supported by the ruling Shi'i clerics in Iran. Not surprisingly, one of the main topics under scrutiny has been the nature of revelation and prophethood.⁴ One prominent religious intellectual who has addressed these subjects is Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945).⁵

In this chapter I shall first sketch the intellectual biography of Soroush and then elucidate his theory of revelation; I shall then argue

that his conception of revelation has a forerunner in the positions of some Mu'tazilī theologians. This will be followed by my brief philosophical critique of his theory of revelation. Finally, I shall outline some of the implications of this theory of revelation for secular law and science, as well as its implications for prophetology.

Soroush: An Intellectual Biography

Soroush is considered one of the foremost contemporary Muslim thinkers defending the radical reform of Islamic thought.⁶ *Time* magazine named him one of the world's hundred most influential people in 2005,⁷ and in a poll conducted in 2008 by *Prospect* magazine and *Foreign Policy*, in which over half a million people all over the world voted, he was named the world's seventh top public intellectual.⁸ Soroush, as we will see, has also played a central, if controversial, role in the Iranian post-revolutionary intellectual discourse, to the extent that if one were to name one intellectual that stands out in the intellectual panorama of post-revolutionary Iran, it would be him, very much the same way 'Alī Shari'atī (d. 1977)⁹ would be the obvious name associated with the intellectual discourse of pre-revolutionary Iran.¹⁰

Soroush was born in 1945 in southern Tehran into a devoted Twelver Shi'i, lower middle-class family. He underwent primary schooling at the Qā'imīyya School,¹¹ then pursued his higher education at 'Alawī School, a private foundation designated to promulgate Islamic teachings and ethics which was founded by a clergyman called 'Alī Aṣghar Karbāschīyān in 1955. Soroush attended extra-curricular classes on the exegeses of the Qur'an run by the lay teacher and director of the school Riḍā Rūzbih (d. 1973), where Rūzbih attempted to justify the Qur'anic verses on the basis of science in order to reconcile science and religion. Soroush, however, was rarely persuaded by Rūzbih's arguments and had great difficulty convincing himself of their coherency.¹² These classes and arguments regarding the relationship between religion and science were landmarks in Soroush's academic and intellectual career. He then sat the entry exam for university and was awarded a place at the University of Tehran to study pharmacology.

Along with pharmacology, he also studied philosophy and Islamic studies. His motivation to study philosophy came from reading the work by Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'ī (d. 1981), *Uṣūl-i falsafa wa rawish-i ri'ālism* (The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Realism),¹³ annotated by his famed pupil and a religious intellectual heavyweight of the Islamic Republic in his own right, Murtaḍā Muṭahhari (d. 1979).¹⁴ This was an introductory book to Muslim philosophy which attacked the popular Marxist literature of that time. The work made an impression on Soroush, especially since his period of study coincided with the power struggles and upheavals of, and Iranians' increasing protest against, the monarchical regime of Muḥammad-Reza Pahlavi (r. 1949–79). The events of this period served as another milestone in Soroush's academic life, for it led him to reflect on the correlation between politics and religion.¹⁵

Soroush then, in 1973, moved to London where he first studied analytical chemistry at the University of London (gaining an MSc), and then philosophy and the history of science at Chelsea College, although he left London for Iran a few months after the 1979 revolution without finalising his PhD. This academic move marked a noticeable and informative change in his intellectual career. He says, 'I was grappling with the questions of the relationship between science and philosophy, that is, science and metaphysics. No single waking minute would pass, whether walking, riding on the subway, sitting at home, or working in the library, unless I was struggling with some serious and grand problem.'¹⁶ Moreover, the aforementioned period in his thought was noteworthy in another respect, and that was his close study of the thought of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273), the Persian poet and mystic. This encounter came to have strong and lasting effects on his controversial theory that became known as the 'Theory of the Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge'.¹⁷

The period of Soroush's academic study in London laid the foundation for a series of books which he would publish in Iran with the intention of introducing the disciplines of the philosophy of science that were not taught there at that time. One of these works, *Nahād-i nā-ārām-i jahān* (The Dynamic Nature of the Universe) was written during that period in London.¹⁸ Another book that he wrote at this

time, and which was first published in 1978, was *Tadādd-i diyāliktikī* (Dialectical Antagonism).¹⁹ Marxist thought was widespread and may be regarded as having been a prevailing discourse of that time,²⁰ and this prompted Soroush to provide an intellectual response to the Marxist challenge to Muslim thought. To these ends, he wrote this book, which was a critique of some of the Marxist arguments. Influenced by Popperian philosophy of science, especially Karl Popper's demarcation criterion between science and pseudo-science, Soroush criticised the Marxist theory of dialectical materialism and showed it to be non-scientific, contrary to the claim of its advocates.

Just over a year after the revolution, in the spring of 1980, universities in Iran were closed due to political reasons. A notorious council, the Advisory Committee on Cultural Revolution, was then formed to revise the curricula and reopen the universities. Soroush was one of the seven members of this committee appointed by Khomeini.²¹ In 1983, after the reopening of the universities, he resigned at the time when the committee was about to increase its membership and transform itself into the Council of the Cultural Revolution. He joined the Academy of Philosophy and the Institute for Cultural Research and Studies in 1983, and immersed himself in teaching and introducing Iranian academia to the history and philosophy of science, philosophy of social sciences, philosophy of religion, philosophy of history and Islamic mysticism (especially Rūmī's thought). His lectures on the interpretation and explanation of Rūmī were broadcast on television on a weekly basis at the time and received tremendous positive feedback.

Having studied philosophy and history of science and considered them critical prerequisites for the interpretation of religion, he founded the faculty of history and philosophy of science at the Institute for Cultural Research and Studies in 1992. He then published a series of articles in *Kayhān Farhangī*, a journal devoted to the social and human sciences, and later in *Kiyān*, an influential monthly journal devoted to religious intellectuals, especially those who held similar ideas as Soroush. He wrote these articles in order to acquaint readers with the philosophy of science, religion and sociology; to defend the social sciences, which were denigrated as

atheistic fields in the revolutionary atmosphere of Iran; and to criticise the official reading of Islam propagated by the ruling clerics.²²

Sorush's Theory of the Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge

In order to understand Sorush's position on the Qur'anic revelation, one needs to understand the cornerstone of his theorisation, his Theory of the Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge. In it, he tried to find an explanation for the diversity of interpretations of the Qur'anic verses and Sunna. Sorush asked why no unanimous and definitive understanding of the same verse could be arrived at when interpreted by scholars from different schools of thought, and even by individuals.²³ The Theory of the Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge is usually characterised by its epistemological approach towards religious texts. Simply put, in this theory, Sorush distinguishes between religion *per se* and religious knowledge. According to the theory, interpretations of religious texts are contingent upon the conceptual frameworks within which interpreters interpret the texts; hence their interpretations are time-bound and temporal. In addition, the theory holds that the final interpretation of religious texts is not attainable, leaving us only with contingent interpretations of the text. The Theory of the Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge became a cause célèbre for a long time among Iranian intellectual circles inside and outside of Iran, and had a colossal impact on them. The major principles of Sorush's theory, which has a significant bearing on his discussion of the nature of a democratic religious state, among other issues, may be summarised as follows:

1. From an epistemological and historical point of view, 'religion' is different from 'the understanding of religion' (although, later, Sorush denied, or at least significantly modified, this distinction in his Theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience).
2. Religion *per se* is divine, eternal, immutable and sacred.
3. An understanding of religion is a human endeavour like any other human endeavour, such as the scientific attempt to

understand nature. Thus, religious knowledge, like any other kind of knowledge, is secular and not sacred.

4. Similarly, inasmuch as it is a human endeavour, an understanding of religion and religious knowledge is certainly affected by, and in constant exchange with, all other fields of human knowledge.
5. This being the case, religious knowledge is dynamic, diverse and time-bound.

Soroush's Theory of the Qur'anic Revelation

One of the main questions concerning the nature of Islamic revelation can be formulated as follows: What is the relationship between Muhammad, considered by Muslims to be the prophet of God, and the divine revelation? More specifically, what is the role of Muhammad in the process of revelation? According to the dominant understanding of revelation in Muslim theologies, Muhammad is regarded as the recipient of the divine message that had been passed faultlessly to him through, among other ways, the archangel Gabriel. One of the implications of this account is that, in the process of receiving the revelation, Muhammad is nothing but a faithful and mainly passive recipient.

Soroush criticises this dominant view, trying to provide a radically different account of the relationship between Muhammad as the prophet of God and the phenomenon of revelation.²⁴ For Soroush, the role of Muhammad in the process of revelation is by no means that of a passive recipient. Instead of conceiving of Muhammad as the recipient of the revelation, Soroush considers him the originator of the revelation. To make it more understandable, he draws an analogy between revelation and poetry: "The metaphor of poetry helps me to explain this. Just like a poet, the Prophet feels that he is captured by an external force. But in fact – or better: at the same time – the Prophet himself is everything: the creator and the producer."²⁵ Therefore, for him, it is Muhammad rather than God that is central to the process of revelation.

If, according to this theory, Muhammad is central in the process of revelation, then what is the role of God? For Soroush, God's role

is to spark Muhammad's inspiration; Muhammad underwent a spiritual experience in which he was overwhelmed by the ubiquitous presence of the Divine. The Muhammadan revelation of God, thus, is the consequence and outcome of Muhammad's encounter with God. The content of the revelation, therefore, cannot be literally ascribed to God, because it is not directly the word of God. Rather, it is directly the word of Muhammad himself. However, since what Muhammad said was the result of his esoteric encounter with God, one is entitled to ascribe Muhammad's words, which are canonically recorded as the current Qur'an, to the God of Islam, but only in an indirect and figurative way: "The one who is speaking is, in fact, Muhammad whose word has become identical to the word of God because of his closeness to Him. The attribution of speech to God, like the attributions of other human characteristics to Him, is to be taken metaphorically. They are not anthropomorphical."²⁶

In the prevalent understanding of revelation, on the contrary, God reveals to Muhammad His own words, in the Arabic language, that contain eternal truths. According to this conception, Muhammad does not play any determining role in shaping the content of the revelation. He only receives the revelation and conveys it as it is to people. The disagreement between these two theories about the nature of revelation is very deep.

One of the key questions that can be raised about the Soroushian theory of revelation is, why would God not speak the language of human beings? Soroush's answer is that God cannot speak in a human way because He is beyond and above anything related to human characteristics, and consequently He is free from the attribute of speech in an anthropomorphic sense. God, as Soroush describes Him in mystical terms, is beyond form (*bī-ṣūrat*) and hence every human form and attribute that is ascribed to Him must be interpreted and understood only figuratively.

The underlying idea that God has no form, which can be called 'the beyond formness of God', is, at least theoretically, commonly agreed upon by the majority of Muslim theologians, philosophers and jurists.²⁷ God is considered transcendent, which, *inter alia*, means He is transcendent of and beyond any forms including human form. Their dispute, however, seems to be over the extent to which

they are prepared to apply the beyond formness of God to theological issues, such as the issue of the revelation. For example, although some Qur'anic verses have apparently attributed some corporeal aspects to God, such as His having hands (Q. 38:75, Q. 39:67, Q. 48:10) or eyes (Q. 6:103) or His sitting on the throne (Q. 7:54), the overwhelming majority of Muslim theologians and philosophers deny any corporeal attribution to God and consequently interpret those verses metaphorically.²⁸ But, again, the majority of Muslim theologians (if not philosophers) are not ready to take some other divine attributes such as God's speech metaphorically, whereas Soroush explicitly and wholeheartedly takes the attribution of speech to God completely metaphorically.

Contrary to God, whom he characterises as being beyond any form, for Soroush, revelation is not beyond any form. It takes a specific form, that is, the Arabic language, and was arguably influenced by the particular time and place in which Muhammad was born and lived, as well as by what happened to him, as a matter of chance or otherwise, during the time of his prophethood, such as the wars he experienced, the incidents that occurred and the questions that were put to him. According to Soroush, everything that occurs in this world has a natural cause, and the revelation is no exception to this rule.²⁹ To justify this claim, he appeals to a principle set by Mullā Ṣadrā Shīrāzī (d. 1050/1640). According to this principle every hadith, originated or emergent, or accidental (*'araḍ*), is preceded by time and material potentiality (*kull ḥādīth masbūq bi mādda wa mudda*). This means that in order for every temporal being (*ḥādīth zamānī*) to come into being, it needs to actualise its potentialities; in order for that temporal being to actualise its potentialities, it requires material prerequisites.³⁰ This principle can be called 'the principle of materiality and temporality of every accidental being'. Since for Soroush revelation, even though it has something to do with divinity, is an accident and temporally originated like other events in history, the principle is instantiated, and consequently revelation requires natural explanation.

Because, on the one hand, God is beyond form, including human forms and attributes, and on the other hand, God's divine revelation is temporal and is expressed in human language, it follows that it is

impossible to ascribe the letters of the Qur'anic revelation literally to God. However, since Muhammad was supposed to have undergone a mystical encounter with God, revelation is to be figuratively rather than literally ascribed to God. It is because Muhammad's encounter inspired him to utter what he said that it was recorded as divine revelation in the form of the current Qur'an. Consequently, Muhammad's words can be taken as God's words, though the content of the revelation belongs to Muhammad himself.

One can summarise Soroush's argument for his theory of revelation as follows (P stands for Premise; R stands for Result):

- P 1: Revelation is an accident (event),
- P 2: Every event has a natural explanation,
- R 1: Revelation has a natural explanation.
- P 3: God is beyond all human forms and attributes,
- P 4: Speech is a human form,
- R 2: Speech cannot be literally ascribed to God.
- P 5: Muhammad is the prophet of God,
- P 6: Revelation is a kind of speech,
- P 7: Muhammad as a prophet of God underwent an encounter with God, as a result of which revelation emerged.
- R 3: Revelation is to be literally ascribed to Muhammad and figuratively to God (R 1 and R 2).

Objections to the Soroushian theory of revelation

It is worth noting that the above argument is an *a priori* argument. In this argument Soroush only relies on philosophical principles (such as the principle of 'the beyond formness of God' and the principle of 'the materiality and temporality of every accidental being') to justify his position. He does not support his theory by a *posteriori* justification. However, in his earlier works, Soroush strove to provide us with an *a posteriori* argument for his theory of revelation. He argued that, as the biography of Muhammad witnesses, his prophetic experience was subject to contraction, ups and downs, expansion and development. He concluded that it was revelation that complied with the Prophet, not the Prophet who complied with revelation.³¹

Since Soroush did not pursue this line of argument in the above-mentioned formulation of his theory, one may conclude that he is no longer inclined to support his theory by an *a posteriori* argument. If this is the case, then this may be due to some criticisms that were levelled against it. For instance, Arash Naraghi (Ārash Narāqī, b. 1966), an Iranian-American philosopher of religion, criticised this kind of argument by contending that the expansion and development of Muhammad's prophetic experience during the time of his prophethood is compatible with the traditional conception of revelation, and therefore the developmental feature of revelation cannot necessarily be taken as a justification for the Soroushian theory.³² According to Naraghi, during the process of revelation Muhammad gradually obtained a greater capacity for receiving revelation. This increasing capacity meant his prophetic experience was subject to development. However, the mere fact that the prophetic experience of Muhammad was subject to development does not necessary entail, Naraghi argues, that it was revelation that complied with Muhammad, because this fact is also compatible with the prevalent account of revelation, according to which, the content of the Qur'an was literally revealed by the God of Islam to Muhammad and his capacity gradually developed on receiving the revelation.

Although it appears that Soroush has abandoned or at least has no longer relied on this *a posteriori* argument, others tried to defend his theory by presenting a revised version of this kind of argument. For example, Muḥammad Mubāshirī, an Iranian philosopher of science,³³ attempted to support this version of the theory through 'inference to the best explanation' ('hypothetical deduction' or 'abduction'), a scientific method of explanation used in modern philosophy of science.

Briefly speaking, 'inference to the best explanation' (in short, ITBE) means if there are rival explanations A, B and C for a set of evidence or data S, then A is more likely to be true if it explains S better than the alternative hypotheses, B and C. From a philosophical point of view, the main question of ITBE is, what criteria are to be satisfied for a theory to be considered the best explanation? Two criteria that are usually proposed are 'simplicity' and 'explanatory

power'. Meeting the criterion of simplicity means 'postulating the existence of fewer entities'. If a theory can explain the given data by postulating the existence of only one entity, then this theory is simpler than those alternative theories that explain the same data by postulating the existence of two or more entities. The second criterion, the criterion of explanatory power, is achieved if a theory, compared with other rival theories, can explain more phenomena with fewer or an equal number of hypotheses; that theory, then, has more explanatory power than its rivals.³⁴

Without illustrating its criteria in detail, Mubāshirī relies on ITBE to show that Soroush's theory of revelation and that of some of his advocates, such as the self-exiled Iranian investigative journalist and writer Akbar Ganji (b. 1960) who had a role in supporting and expanding this theory of revelation,³⁵ can explain the phenomenon of revelation with more explanatory power than the traditional theory. This is because Soroush's theory does not postulate the existence of God to explain the content of the Qur'an and its origin, whereas the traditional theory does. Consequently, Soroush's theory is simpler and therefore it is the best explanation of the phenomenon of revelation.

Both of these *a posteriori* and *a priori* arguments have faced a number of challenges. For instance, distinguishing between two divergent conceptions of God in Muslim thought (the God of philosophy and the God of mysticism), Abolghasem Fanaei (Abū'l-Qāsim Fanā'ī, b. 1960), an Iranian-British scholar of ethics and religion, has tried to reinterpret the principle of 'the formlessness of God' in a way that allows us to literally ascribe the attribute of speech to God.³⁶ He explains that in Muslim philosophy, rather than mysticism, this principle is conceived in such a way that God cannot take any human form or attribute, including the attribute of speaking. This is because, according to the philosophical understanding of God, 'beyond formness' is an exclusive qualifier that qualifies God and thereby prevents Him from taking any forms.

The mystical conception of God, on the other hand, Fanaei argues, portrays God as being absolutely free from any quality and limitation, including (and not excluding) the quality of being beyond form. Therefore, the God of mysticism who is beyond form

in His nature is able to take any form, including the form of being a speaker; at the same time, since He is not confined to any form He might have taken, He remains transcendent and beyond form. Thus, according to Fanaei's account, He is beyond form simply because He is not limited to any specific form, not because being beyond form is His exclusive form. Therefore, Fanaei concludes, God can manifest Himself as a speaker and can really talk to prophets. This requires that God is both beyond any form and takes some form. In this view, it is God who literally speaks in the Qur'an and not the Prophet.

Other critics have tried to show that Soroush's theory of revelation is not consistent with the way the Qur'an itself describes the phenomenon of the Qur'anic revelation. Abdolali Bazargan ('Abdol'alī Bāzargān, b. 1943), an Iranian-American religious intellectual and Qur'anic exegete, for instance, mentioned in his critique of the Soroushian theory of revelation a number of the Qur'anic verses, arguing 'we cannot find even one verse [in the Qur'an] in which the Prophet addresses people in his own words and not in the words conveyed to him by God'.³⁷ Soroush answers this objection by formulating a methodological principle which stipulates that when talking philosophically about the nature of revelation, no theory about the nature of revelation should be taken for granted, even if it seems to be supported by the apparent meanings of the Qur'an; in other words, we should talk about the revelation from the outside and not from within the scripture:

You cannot appeal to this or that verse that was uttered by the Prophet or say that this or that verse is inconsistent with that theory. The theory offered from the outside of the revelation would apply equally to all the verses, as long as the theory is correct. Then, if it is correct, we have to annotate the verses on the basis of the theory and annotate them in a way that does not alter the theory.³⁸

The Historical Roots of the Theory

Although it seems apt to label the Soroushian theory of revelation as a modern theory of Muslim revelation, this by no means implies

that it is not rooted in the history of Muslim theology. In fact, it is reasonable to claim that this theory is influenced by the tradition of negative theology (apophaticism) in Muslim thought at the epistemological level and is affected by the theology of the Mu'tazilīs at the ontological and metaphysical level. In this section I shall elaborate on these points.

The extent to which human beings can know God (if at all) is the subject of a long-standing debate in the history of theology and philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. According to negative or apophatic theologians, such as Philo of Alexandria (d. c. 50), Clement of Alexandria (d. c. 215), Moses Maimonides (d. 1204) and Meister Eckhart (d. c. 1328), God is beyond the reach of human knowledge. They conclude that human language (words, concepts, theories and so on) cannot be used in a literal way to describe God. Religious language is taken to be 'non-cognitive',³⁹ or at least not literally cognitive. Negative theologians emphasise that we, as finite beings, are not able to know God and talk about Him literally and positively. In other words, God is unimaginable, incomprehensible, ineffable and irreducibly other.⁴⁰

On the other hand, proponents of positive or affirmative (cataphatic) theology accept that God transcends all human forms and attributes. Nevertheless, they hold that every term that refers to 'good' and 'beauty' in ordinary language can be analogously applied to God, such as 'God is good' and 'God is love'.⁴¹ Consequently, for affirmative theologians, the language of religion turns out to be 'positively cognitive'. Generally speaking, the main distinction between these two trends in theology lies in their claim about the incapacity or capacity of human cognitive faculties to know and describe God.

It seems plausible to claim that the banner of the tradition of negative theology in the history of Muslim thought was raised by the Mu'tazilīs, although they were not alone in this. For example, Dirār b. 'Amr (d. 200/815), an important Mu'tazili theologian, tried to justify negative theology by drawing an analogy between self-knowledge and knowledge of God. He says, 'we know from ourselves that an outsider is never able to explore the hidden sides of our nature to the same extent that we are aware of them ourselves. This

is why we must be satisfied with negative theology.⁴² According to this apophatic position, all attributes of God should be read negatively. God, for instance, is omniscient, and in this tradition this merely means he is not ignorant. Hence the language of religion has only a negative status, that is, it cannot describe God literally and in a positive manner.

The way Soroush makes use of negative theology to support his position, however, differs from the predominant direction it takes in apophatic Muslim theology. While Muslim theologians, especially Mu'tazilis, readily admit that the human capacity to comprehend God is limited,⁴³ it appears that the majority of them are not inclined to develop this principle in such a way as to fully include Muhammad's own capacity to comprehend God. Rather, it seems that they are inclined to fully or partially exclude Muhammad's capacity to comprehend God from having any such kind of limitation because of his unique status as the prophet of God. But Soroush explicitly states that the limitation of the human mind in comprehending and describing God has no exception and hence this includes Muhammad's own mind as well. According to him, 'what Muhammad brought into play were his own limitations in existential and historical terms, in terms of his learning and his character, and so on and so forth; limitations that no being can avoid or escape'.⁴⁴ If one does not exclude Muhammad from having these human limitations, it implies that the content of the Qur'an is not divine in the prevalent sense of the term, due to the fact that Muhammad's capacity to comprehend and describe God is subject to the cognitive limitations inherent in all human beings, without any exception.

As I said earlier, Soroush seems to be epistemologically influenced by the tradition of negative theology, and as we have seen he utilises this tradition in a radical manner. I also said he is metaphysically affected by the Mu'tazilis who, unlike some Asha'ris and all Hanbalis, believe that the Qur'an is created, which in the last analysis partially means it is humanly constructed. Mu'tazilis deny the existence of an eternal and uncreated Qur'an because they consider this doctrine contradictory to the unity of God.

According to Mu'tazilis, there is no difference between those Muslims who believe in the eternity of the Qur'an and those

Christians who believe that Jesus is eternal and not created based on the doctrine that he is the Word of God.⁴⁵ However, most Mu'tazilīs also believe that the Qur'an is created in the Preserved Tablet (*lawḥ mahfūz*). The Preserved Tablet itself is believed to have been created before the world. The important question arising here is, what is the relationship between the Qur'an that exists on earth among human beings (i.e. the available copies of the Qur'an) and the Qur'an in the Preserved Tablet? Some theologians, such as Ibn Kullāb (d. c. 240/854–5), who believed that the Qur'an was eternal and uncreated, believed that the existent Qur'an was an expression (*'ibāra*) and imitation (*hikāya*) of the uncreated Qur'an. This implies that the meanings of the Qur'an are uncreated but its wording is created.

However, those Mu'tazilīs, either Baghdādī or Baṣrī Mu'tazilīs, who believed that the Qur'an was created did not imply that it was humanly constructed. Rather, they thought that the Qur'an was created in the Preserved Tablet before the creation of the world and was revealed to Muhammad from that place in the course of Muhammad's life.⁴⁶

There exists, however, a controversy among Mu'tazilīs regarding the relationship between the earthly Qur'an and the preexistent Qur'an in the Preserved Tablet. It appears that Baṣrī Mu'tazilīs believed that the preexistent Qur'an was inliterated in (i.e. transformed into) the earthly Qur'an, whereas Baghdādī Mu'tazilīs maintained that the earthly Qur'an was an expression and imitation of the preexistent Qur'an in the Preserved Tablet but not its inliteration.

Although the majority of Mu'tazilīs held that the Qur'an was created by God in the Preserved Tablet, some of them denied the existence of the preexistent Qur'an in the Preserved Tablet. Ibrāhīm al-Nazzām (d. c. 220/836), a prominent Mu'tazilī theologian, for example, is reported to have believed that the revelation was created in the air at the time it was being revealed to Muhammad, not prior to it, in the form of sounds, although it was beyond a specific language. It is the reader, including Muhammad in the case of Islam, who chooses the language by which that body of revelation is read. This means the existent Qur'an is not even an imitation of the

Word of God. Rather, it is something that is paraphrased by the language chosen by the reader of the Qur'an.⁴⁷

A question worthy of asking now is, what is the relationship between these accounts and Soroush's theory of revelation? Soroush describes himself as a 'neo-Mu'tazilite',⁴⁸ thus it is not surprising that his theory of revelation is incompatible with that of at least some Ash'arīs and all Ḥanbalīs. However, it seems that his theory is incompatible with the position of the majority of Mu'tazilīs as well.

As we have seen, the standard Mu'tazilī position is that the Qur'an was created by God in the Preserved Tablet before the creation of the world. Soroush, on the other hand, does not seem to feel any need to postulate the existence of the Preserved Tablet to explain the Qur'anic revelation. Although his theory is closer to Nazzām's theory of revelation, especially when Nazzām assumes an active role for Muhammad and all other readers of the Qur'an, Soroush diverges from him by supposing that revelation is created by Muhammad rather than God. Soroush is aware of this divergence when he says,

I believe that the Qur'an is God's creation [*makhluq*]. The Mu'tazilites said this. But we can take one step further and say that the fact that the Qur'an is God's creation means that the Qur'an is the Prophet's creation. The Mu'tazilites didn't explicitly take this step but I believe it is a necessary corollary of their creed and school of thought.⁴⁹

However, it seems that his historical judgement of Mu'tazilīs is not accurate, because there is, at least, one Mu'tazilī theologian who took this step: Mu'ammār Ibn 'Abbād al-Sulamī (d. 215/830), a leading Mu'tazilī theologian from Basra, believed that the Word of God 'is only a capacity created by God in man enabling him to produce a word which expresses the will and design of God'.⁵⁰ For him, the Qur'an is not directly the work of God, but the work of nature. The Qur'an, he believed, is an accident, and God does not create accidents. God only created substances; accidents are voluntary creations of substances rather than of God.⁵¹

For Mu'ammār this distinction between substances, which are created by God, and accidents, which are created by nature, is

necessary, because if substances and accidents were both created by God then there would remain no room for the free will of human beings. Therefore, according to Mu'ammad, God only created the entity (substance) of the Prophet Muhammad, and the Qur'an as an accident of his entity was created by Muhammad himself rather than directly by God. However, because God created Muhammad in order to communicate through him to humankind, Muhammad's words are, in a figurative sense, the Word of God.

The similarity between the two theories seems striking. As we have seen, Soroush also says, 'I am not saying: God does not speak; I am saying in order for God to speak, a Prophet speaks and his words are considered to be God's words.'⁵² Both theories ascribe the content of revelation literally to Muhammad and figuratively to God. To put the matter another way, in both theories the content of the Qur'an is a humanly constructed work, but a person who was created by God to convey the will of God produces it, and this allows us to ascribe the words of that person figuratively to God.

The debate over the nature of the Qur'anic revelation in the early history of Muslim theologies can be, by and large, classified as shown in Figure 6.1.⁵³

The Philosophical Assessment of the Soroushian Theory of Revelation

We have shown how, for Soroush, the Qur'anic revelation is literally taken to be the word of Muhammad himself and only metaphorically the word of God. This position places his theory of revelation a far cry away from dominant theories of revelation, such as the Hanbali theory.

The Qur'anic revelation is, for Soroush, the result of a religious experience, which, like other kinds of human experience, is bounded by the inherent limitations of humanity. Therefore, from this perspective, what is divine is that which inspired Muhammad to say what he said. This means it is the process of the revelation that is considered divine, while the Qur'an – the product of the process – is not regarded per se as divine, sacred and absolute, but human, historical and conditioned.

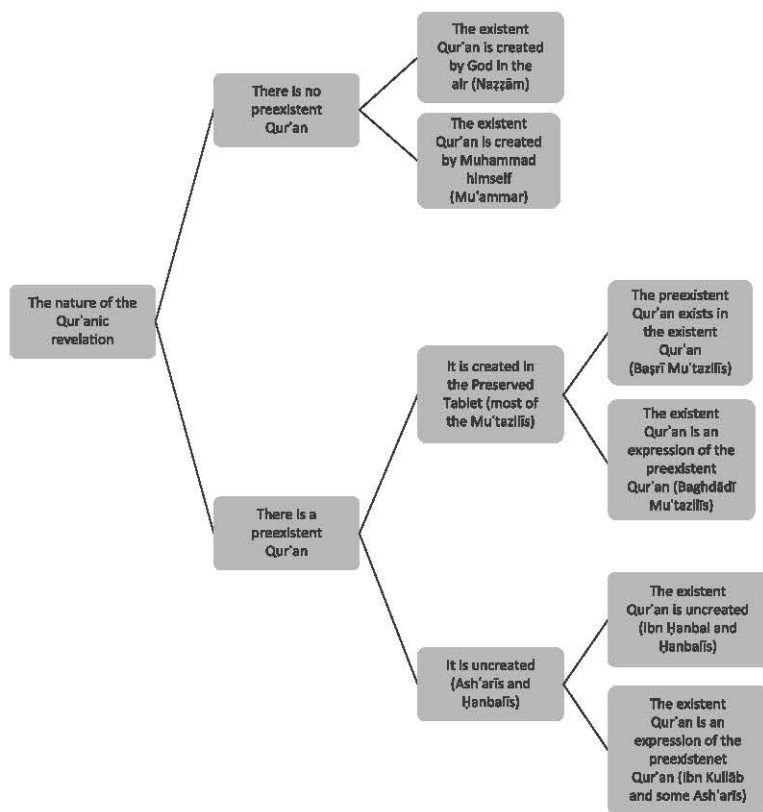


Figure 6.1. Schematic diagram outlining the various views about the nature of the Qur'anic revelation.

By taking into account direct realism, critical realism and non-realism – the triad of conceptions prevalent in modern epistemology and the philosophy of science – and applying them to the philosophical study of religion, the main philosophical question regarding the Soroushian theory of revelation is, what categories in question can best explain his theory of revelation: religious direct realism, religious critical realism or religious non-realism? However philosophically categorised, another question is whether his theory of revelation can be defended against epistemological criticisms that are (or can be) levelled at that category to

which it belongs. One might ask why this question of realism/non-realism is important in the evaluation of Soroush's theory of revelation. The significance of the realism/non-realism issue lies in the fact that every theory of revelation is faced with the question of what the relationship (if any) is between historical reality (as reflected in the Qur'an) and divine reality (which is taken to be the source of the Qur'an).

Briefly put, according to direct realism, sometimes called naïve realism, human beings' understanding of an independent reality is essentially dependent upon reality itself and is not significantly shaped by our cognitive apparatus. But according to non-realism, sometimes called anti-realism, one cannot talk of an independent reality; rather, what is characterised as reality is, in one way or another, fully contingent upon us human beings. Critical realism, sometimes called indirect realism, however, takes a middle position, according to which there is an independent reality (unlike non-realism) that we as cognitive agents have an understanding of, but our understanding of reality is directly shaped by elements independent of reality and dependent upon us (unlike direct realism).⁵⁴

In what follows, I will argue that the Soroushian theory of revelation can be properly categorised and classified as a critical realistic interpretation of the Qur'anic revelation. Then, I will show that Soroushian critical realistic interpretation of the Muslim revelation is confronted with the same problem that the British philosopher of religion and theologian John Hick (d. 2012) faced in his critical realistic interpretation of religion. The problem is that Soroush's theory of revelation seemingly turns out to be inconsistent, since it is in danger of lapsing into a relativistic position, though it is supposed to be non-relativistic due to its critical realistic position. The way Hick endeavoured to defend his position against this problem is beyond the scope of this article, but I will argue that Soroush's theory has not been able to rebut the above-mentioned objection.

Soroushian critical realistic interpretation of revelation

First of all, it seems clear that Soroush's interpretation of revelation cannot be taken as a direct (naïve) realistic interpretation. Religious

direct realism, like philosophical direct realism, makes the assumption that we can perceive, in principle, things as they are. This is a theological and philosophical position regarding the nature of religious knowledge, to the effect that religious language can and sometimes does reflect, as it is, the transcendental reality, namely God and His attributes. Consequently, religious language ought to be interpreted, in principle, literally and not metaphorically.

Soroush proposed his theory of revelation to counter the prevalent understanding of revelation held by the majority of both Sunni and Shi'i Muslims, past and present, which is rooted in a direct realistic interpretation of religion. Moreover, Soroush makes the distinction between 'essentials and accidentals in religion' and 'maximalist and minimalist views of religion', and delineates between the divine aspects and human aspects of revelation in order to show that religious direct realism cannot account for the complexity of the formation of Islam. Soroush defines accidentals of religion counterfactually, namely in terms of what could have been rather than what currently is. He takes almost all traits of religions, including Islam, as accidental. He considers, among other things, Arabic language and culture, reactions of the Qur'an to questions put to Muhammad and oppositions against him, and terms, concepts and theories used by Muhammad as accidentals of Islam.⁵⁵ He further criticised what he calls a 'maximalist view of religion', by which he means a position according to which 'all the necessary and sufficient measures, instructions and rules for economics, governance, commerce, law, ethics, knowledge of God and so on for any kind of mentality or life, whether simple or complex, have been included in Islamic law'.⁵⁶ Furthermore, his emphasis on the inherent limitations of human understanding of the divine and on the historicity of all aspects of religion can be taken as his fundamental departure from religious direct realism.

However, my argument here is that there still remains, to a slight degree, an apparent similarity between his theory of revelation and religious direct realism in the interpretation of religion. Irrespective of that apparent similarity, it seems reasonable to claim that his analysis of revelation cannot be taken as reflecting direct realistic interpretation of revelation.

Does the position of Soroush also have something to do with non-realism? Religious non-realism (sometimes called religious anti-realism) is primarily a position regarding the analysis of the nature of religious language. It is a position that takes 'God', which is a key term in the Semitic religions (and also in Zoroastrianism and some branches of Hinduism), to be a word that does not refer to anything beyond the domain of language and/or states of mind. According to this position, there is nothing out there (or up there) that can be labelled in language as God or anything similar to it. For religious non-realists, however, what is to be denied is the realistic interpretation of religion and not its subjective interpretation. Therefore, they are not anti-religious but they are against the realistic interpretation of religion.

Can Soroush's theory be categorised as, and analysed according to, a non-realistic interpretation of religion? His epistemological position, at least as far as he himself has explained it, does not seem to deny all kinds of realism. For instance, he writes, 'the Theory of Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge is a realistic theory, that is to say, it intentionally makes a distinction between the object and the perception of the object'.⁵⁷ But all non-realist/anti-realist theories try to blur or eliminate the underlying distinctions between the object and the subject of knowledge. However, in some of his recent lectures, Soroush has described God in a way that verges on a non-realistic way of talking about God. For instance, in one of his lectures he speaks about the centrality of love to make sense of God, and goes further to implicitly claim that love as God means God is nothing but love, and thereby seems to be blurring the distinction between the subject and object when talking about God.⁵⁸

Although a few of his recent lectures seem to point to a shift towards religious non-realism, there is not yet any unambiguous evidence showing that his position has completely changed to this. Even if this shift has recently taken place, it is beyond reasonable doubt that Soroush had tried to base his religious epistemology on the tradition of critical realism. His critical realistic stance in analysing religion can be seen in his debates regarding religious pluralism. In order to defend religious pluralism, he draws some conclusions from

his earlier debates about his Theory of the Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge:

The main theme in the Theory of the Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge, roughly speaking, is that our understanding of religious texts is necessarily diverse and divergent and cannot be reduced to a single understanding, and that not only is religious knowledge diverse and divergent but it is also fluid. This is because religious text is speechless, and our expectations, questions and presuppositions contribute to the understanding of the religious text and its interpretation – this is the case in the fields of law, tradition (Sunna) or Qur'anic exegesis. Since no interpretation is possible without its being based on an expectation, question and presupposition, and owing to the fact that these expectations, questions and presuppositions stem from outside of religion, and because that which is outside of religion is changeable and fluid, and science, philosophy and human production are continually increasing, accumulating, changing and evolving, the interpretations which are made in the light of those expectations, questions and presuppositions become diverse and changeable.⁵⁹

Upon this epistemological–hermeneutical foundation Soroush builds his definition of religious pluralism. Soroush argues that it is not only the way in which religious text is read and understood that is inevitably diverse and changeable, but also that religious experiences, upon which religion is essentially built, are inevitably diverse and changeable. According to his philosophical anthropology, no human experience, including prophetic experience, can be perfect. We are therefore presented with pluralism in understanding and interpreting religious texts (hermeneutical pluralism) as well as pluralism in religious experience (existential pluralism). There are different and irreducible readings and interpretations of religious texts and also there are different, divergent and irreducible experiences of what is taken to be the object of all these experiences (God or the Divine). For Soroush, religious experience is 'an encounter with the Absolute and the Transcendent' (*muwājiha bā amr-i muṭlaq wa muta'ālī*).⁶⁰

Soroush, who translated into Persian some of Hick's articles on religious pluralism, takes inspiration from Hick, and other

philosophers of religion and theologians, to formulate his theory explained above. Soroush takes, *à la* Hick, religious experiences to be various experiences of the Transcendent, or to put it another way, he believes the Transcendent is experienced in every culture and religion in a different way, and even within a specific religion it is experienced differently from one person to another. As can be seen, Soroush's defence of religious pluralism takes what he calls the transcendent to be an independent object that all religions strive to make sense of. That is why his position is realistic. According to him, however, every experience needs to be conceptualised and there is no pure and meta-linguistic experience. In order to make an experience understandable, he argues, one utilises one's cultural and linguistic possibilities. In his analysis, this explicates the historical aspects of religions, the aspects that differ from one context to another. He explicitly claims that his religious epistemology is based on critical realism and not other epistemological rivals, that is, direct realism or non-realism:

My position is actually that of complex and critical realism, in the sense that the real world, whether the world of religion, philosophy or nature, is more complex than one can capture in simple-minded rational judgements . . . One of the distinct consequences of critical realism is that the majority of people's certainties are no more than conjectures; this is not to say that human beings can never attain reality, but it means that the discovery of reality has no distinct criterion. Those criteria that are mentioned in traditional philosophy, such as certainty and self-evidence, are all flawed.⁶¹

Now, let us ask what critically can be said about this position: Can religious critical realism remain faithful to its middle-of-the-road position between direct realism and non-realism? Or will it be, in the final analysis, reduced to either direct realism or non-realism? If this position reduces to non-realism or direct realism, what factor makes it turn out to be so? In what follows I will briefly address these questions.

Religious critical realism has encountered the following problem: it makes God inaccessible or, as the American philosopher of religion

and epistemologist William Alston (d. 2009) puts it, religious critical realism attributes 'transcendence to God so radical as to rule out the possibility of using any human concepts to make realistically true statements about Him, and to rule out the possibility of knowing some of them to be true'.⁶² It seems Alston is right in his description of Hick's apophatic theology. Hick characterises the Real as something which

cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, conscious or unconscious, purposive or non-purposive, substance or process, good or evil, loving or hating. None of the descriptive terms that apply within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the unexperienceable reality that underlies that realm. All that we can say is that we postulate the Real *an sich* as the ultimate ground of the intentional objects of the different forms of religious thought-and-experience.⁶³

It is a radical affirmation of divine ineffability. Hick goes further to claim, as just quoted, that the existence of the Real can only be postulated but cannot be proved or justified. In an interview with Soroush, Hick clearly says, 'I have not found the theistic arguments persuasive. I cannot prove religious realism and I think realistic interpretation of the world is merely a possible interpretation.'⁶⁴ Soroush agrees with him, and Hick continues, 'I would think one can interpret the world religiously or not. In other words, one can interpret the world in a religiously or non-religiously realistic way.'⁶⁵ Don Cupitt (b. 1934), a British philosopher of religion, and himself a religion non-realist, criticises Hick at this point:

Hick has given no reason, and has admitted that he *can* give no reason, for describing it [i.e. the Real] as the 'Real,' rather than as merely an ideal focus of inspiration. All he can say is that in using religious language *he intends* it to have real reference, and he thinks that most ordinary people have always intended realism. [brackets added, emphases original]⁶⁶

Cupitt is therefore criticising Hick's realistic interpretation of the 'Real' as nothing but an arbitrary interpretation. Consequently, religious critical realism is theoretically no more defensible than

religious direct realism. Based on this criticism, one might ask why the idea of the 'Real' has been preserved in Hick's religious epistemology given the fact that he concedes that he cannot prove or justify religious realism and the reality of the 'Real' vis-à-vis religious non-realism.

Here, influenced by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (d. 1804), Hick has a practical answer, which is that all the ultimate realities in all the great world religions, which he called the Real, play an existential role; that is to say, they transform the human condition: 'the personal deities and non-personal absolutes have a common effect . . . in the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to a new centeredness'.⁶⁷ This new centeredness is 'Reality-centeredness' and reality here belongs to practical reason, that is, it has a moral meaning, such as 'becoming an unselfish moral agent'.⁶⁸ Therefore, the 'Real' is the name of a being that is understood in different religions and cultures (in Islam, Allah; in Judaism, Jehovah; in Christianity, the triune God; and so on) and the 'Real' is taken in Hick's thought to be the source of existential and moral manifestation.

Hick also talks about 'transformational parity'. It means that since all great world religions can transform their believers from self-orientedness to reality-orientedness, all religions are equally true. But 'true' here does not mean theoretical truth in the prevalent sense of correspondence to reality. Hick's religious pluralism is not pluralism of truth, namely, he does not claim that the doctrine of all the great world religions are epistemically equally true; rather, it is a salvific pluralism: 'each of the great traditions constitutes a context and, so far as human judgment can at present discern, a more or less equally effective context, for the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centeredness'.⁶⁹

It might be contended that it is far from clear why one needs to take for granted the reality of the 'Real' in order to account for what Hick describes as 'the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness'. It seems that Hick's pluralism is a kind of exclusivism, though it is a moderate exclusivism compared with the exclusivist approaches of the mainstream of almost all the great world religions. For it confines salvation to

the great world religions and only excludes purely secularists and humanists (those who do not believe in the 'Real' in its broad sense) from salvific transformation. If the sign of the truth with regard to religions is the ability of religious traditions to transform their believers from self-orientedness to reality-orientedness, and if all the great world religions more or less have the same ability to bring about transformational parity, then

Transformational parity can also be used as an argument against salvific pluralism. The basis for this claim is the fact that people making a 'secular' (non-religious) commitment to some goal, value, or metaphysical perspective – be it concern for the environment or world hunger or emotional health – often appear to have their lives transformed in ways quite similar to the ways in which the lives of religious believers are transformed. They, too, appear to have changed from self-centeredness to a focus on reality outside of self.⁷⁰

To sum up, the main criticism raised against the religious critical realism of Hick is that if nothing can be presented to justify the proposition that 'the Real exists independent of us' and also that 'transformational parity' can in principle be applied to non-religious commitments (such as some humanitarian philanthropies), then Ockham's razor (which states that plurality should not be posited without necessity) must be utilised to eliminate the 'Real' as constituting a part of the explanation of religious language. If this criticism is defensible, then religious critical realism thus formulated is untenable.

So far, I have critically sketched Hick's account of religious critical realism and its application to his religious pluralism, due to the fact that his philosophical and theological position is much the same as that of Soroush. Both Hick and Soroush themselves have also endorsed this similarity.⁷¹ Moreover, considering the fact that the religious epistemology of Soroush has not hitherto been elaborated as much as that of Hick, one can make use of Hick's epistemology to have a better comprehension of the Soroushian religious epistemology.

It seems reasonable to claim that the Soroushian religious critical realism and, specifically, his theory of revelation suffer from the

same problem with which Hick's religious epistemology has been faced. It appears that, ultimately, the idea of God plays no substantial role in the Soroushian theory of the Qur'anic revelation. For Soroush, what is central in making sense of the phenomenon of the revelation is Muhammad, a man with all the limitations and shortcomings of a human being: 'God simply sent the "teacher"; everything else revolved around his experiences and his reactions.'⁷²

It might be said, in rebuttal of my analysis, that although Soroush's theory takes the person of Muhammad and not the divine intervention to be central to the revelation, he frequently qualifies this by commenting that the revelation spoken by Muhammad occurred only with God's permission, for He had sent him as His prophet. But, everything considered, this addendum does not add anything to his account of the revelation because, according to apophatic theology, to which Soroush also subscribes, nothing literal can be said about God. Therefore, when Soroush writes that Muhammad was 'permitted' by God or God 'sent' him as a prophet, this is to be read metaphorically: 'the attribution of speech to God, like the attributions of other human characteristics to Him, is to be taken metaphorically. They are not anthropomorphical.'⁷³ If the idea of God and His attributes is to be interpreted metaphorically, one might wonder why we need the metaphor of God's chosen one or the one endorsed by God to elucidate the phenomenon of revelation. It might be because we have good reason to believe in God. But Soroush has conceded in his dialogue with Hick that he has not found the theistic arguments persuasive.⁷⁴

If this is so, why then does Soroush still utilise the idea of God and prefer religious critical realism to religious non-realism or relativism? His answer is that one can believe in the being beyond form (*amr-i bī-ṣūrat*) even if it is reasonless (*bī-dalīl*), since, according to him, rationality itself is not rational but a fundamental, that is, irrational, choice. Rational people have faith (acceptance without reason) in rationality: 'when you decide to be rational and to trust in rationality, this decision itself is not based on rational proof, because if it were so, it would become a circular argument: to use rationality in order to justify itself'.⁷⁵ Soroush suggests that if trust in rationality is a fundamental and reasonless decision, one

can also make another equally fundamental and reasonless decision: to opt for love. This decision to opt for love paves the way for believing in the being beyond form. The objectionable point here, however, is that Soroush is suggesting something that leads to relativism: believing in God (or in his mystical terminology 'the being beyond form') is epistemologically equal to not believing in Him, and there is no theoretical way to prefer one over the other. That is because both sides are finally and fundamentally non-rational, and we are left only with making a fundamental decision as to whether we would like to commit ourselves to theistic or atheistic (or non-theistic) beliefs.

If his epistemology, in the final analysis, is relativistic, then it is inconsistent. When asked whether his religious epistemology is relativistic, he replied that he works within the tradition of critical realism, which is non-relativistic,⁷⁶ but I have shown that his position does not remain faithful to critical realism.

Some Implications of the Soroushian Theory of Revelation

Due to limitations of space I cannot dwell on the implication of the Soroushian theory of revelation, but a quick glance is in order. In the prevalent understanding of Islamic revelation, the Qur'an is taken as the eternal Word of God for the guidance of humanity. Believing that the Qur'an is the direct and verbatim manifestation of the Word of God (inlibration) paves the way for – although it does not entail – the idea of the eternity of the content of the Qur'an, including the eternity of Qur'anic laws, since it is theologically widespread to think that as God is eternal and God's words are not separable from Him then the content of the Qur'an, His Word, is eternal too.

The Soroushian theory of revelation paves the way for demystifying and de-sacralising the content of the Qur'an without allegedly compromising its divine roots by analysing it in terms of a respectable human effort to discover and disclose the will of God. Accordingly, as the human aspect of the Qur'an is pivotal in this analysis, one cannot take the Qur'anic content, especially the

Qur'anic legislation (*tashri'*) as eternal. Rather, the implication of this theory is that, due to the significant differences between the *modus vivendi* in the era of Muhammad (as reflected in the Qur'an) and that of modern-day life, the content of the Qur'an is temporal until proven otherwise. Soroush's theory of revelation implies that Muslims can embrace modern legal systems, especially the Declaration of Human Rights, because Qur'anic legislation was nothing but a human effort to organise Arabic society in accordance with the contingencies of the period (the first/seventh century) in which the Qur'an was revealed.

This theory of revelation has also far-reaching implications for prophetology. Compared with prevalent prophetology, according to which the Prophet is regarded as the person chosen by God to convey the divine truth, Soroushian prophetology depicts the Prophet as a mystic who presents his divine discoveries for people's guidance. The main difference between these two prophetologies is not only that in the former the Prophet is a recipient while in the latter he is a discoverer, but also that in the latter the Prophet is not infallible in his discoveries:

In the traditional view, the revelation is infallible. But nowadays there are more and more interpreters who think that the revelation is infallible only in purely religious matters such as the attributes of God, life after death and the rules for worship. They accept that the revelation may be wrong in matters that relate to the material world and human society. What the Koran says about historical events, other religious traditions and all kinds of practical earthly matters does not necessarily have to be true.⁷⁷

We should not take the phrase 'the revelation is infallible only in purely religious matters' as an expression of Soroush's own position, because his position, as illustrated above, entails the fallibility of revelation even in purely religious matters.

By the same token, the Soroushian theory of revelation can be looked upon as an answer to the seeming conflicts between some Qur'anic verses and the established findings of modern sciences. It takes the Qur'anic verses as reflecting, in principle, the level of knowledge available to Muhammad and people in his era; hence

these verses can be overlooked without damaging the main message of the Qur'an.

NOTES

- 1 Uri Rubin, 'Prophets and Prophethood', *EQ*, vol. IV, pp. 290–91.
- 2 See Arent J. Wensinck and Andrew Rippin, 'Wahy', *EP*, vol. XI, pp. 55–6; Yahya Michot, 'Revelation', in Tim Winter, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 180–96.
- 3 What unifies these religious intellectuals, despite their differences, are their theorisation and promotion of a reformist Islam and their critique of revolutionary Islam. They reject, most importantly, the intermingling of religion and politics in the form of the 'guardianship of the jurist' (*wilāyat-i faqih*) or any other form. Therefore, they reject the very idea of a religious government backed by revolutionary rulers of Iran. See Farhad Khosrokhavar, 'The New Intellectuals in Iran', *Social Compass* 51, no. 2 (2004), pp. 191–202.
- 4 Some other issues widely discussed by religious intellectuals are whether and to what extent Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) can find answers to modern social and scientific problems, and whether it is compatible with human rights; whether Islam is compatible with a parliamentary democracy; whether the advancement of secularism can be halted; and whether salvation can be found in other religions. See Eva Raket, *Power, Islam, and Political Elite in Iran: A Study on the Iranian Political Elite from Khomeini to Ahmadinejad* (Leiden, 2008), chapter 4.
- 5 Some other religious intellectuals are Muḥammad Mujtahid Shabistari (b. 1936) and Muḥsin Kadiwar (b. 1959). For an overview of their thought, see Mahmoud Sadri, 'Sacral Defense of Secularism: The Political Theologies of Soroush, Shabestari, and Kadiwar', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 15, no. 2 (2001), pp. 257–70.
- 6 By 'radical reform' I mean a kind of reform that does not confine itself to the hermeneutical realm (i.e. only suggesting new interpretations of the Qur'an and/or Sunna), but reconsiders critically the underlying philosophical and theological tenets of Islamic thought.
- 7 Scott Macleod, 'The 2005 TIME 100: Abdolkarim Soroush', *Time*, 18 April 2005, http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1972656_1972712_1974251,00.html.
- 8 'Intellectuals—the Results | Prospect Magazine', <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/100-top-public-intellectuals>.
- 9 For an excellent book about Shari'ati's life and thought, see Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati* (London, 2000).
- 10 Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran, 1953–2000: From Bazargan to Soroush* (Leiden, 2001), p. 140.
- 11 Kristian P. Alexander, 'Soroush, Abdolkarim (1945–)', in Michael R. Fischbach, ed., *Biographical Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa* (New York, 2008), vol. II, p. 777.
- 12 Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, ed. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (Oxford, 2000), p. 25.

- 13 Muḥammad Husayn Ṭabāṭabā'i and Murtaḍā Muṭahhari, *Uṣūl-i falsafa wa rawish-i ri'ālism* (Tehran, n.d.).
- 14 Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, p. 27.
- 15 Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran, 1953–2000*, p. 143.
- 16 Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, p. 10.
- 17 Ibid., pp. 15–17.
- 18 Abdolkarim Soroush, *Nahād-i nā-ārām-i jahān* (Tehran, 1379 Sh./2000). It was read and praised by great and influential scholars such as Ṭabāṭabā'i, Muṭahhari and Khomeini.
- 19 Abdolkarim Soroush, *Naqdī wa dar-āmādī bar taḍādd-i diyālīktīkī: Bi ḍamīma: Naqdī bar rawish-i shinākht* (Tehran, 1357 Sh./1978).
- 20 See Vali Nasr and Ali Gheissari, *Democracy in Iran: History and the Quest for Liberty* (Oxford, 2006), p. 18: 'In the 1960s and 1970s, a Marxist notion of liberation paraded as demand for freedom, a movement that defined the objective spirit of the Islamic revolution of 1979.'
- 21 Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran, 1953–2000*, p. 144.
- 22 Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (Oxford, 2009), p. 183.
- 23 Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, p. 35.
- 24 It is worth mentioning that Soroush has more recently suggested a slightly different theory of revelation. Due to the limitations of space, I shall completely confine myself to the early version of his theory here. For the later version of his theory of revelation, see his recent sequential articles that begin with this essay: Abdolkarim Soroush, 'Muḥammad Rāwī-yi Ru'yā-hā-yi Rasūlāna' [Muhammad as the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams], 2013, <http://www.rahesabz.net/story/71738/>.
- 25 Abdolkarim Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, tr. Nilou Mobasser (Leiden, 2009), p. 272.
- 26 Ibid., p. 329.
- 27 Nevertheless, an apophatic theology is woven into a cataphatic theology in Islam, and that is rooted in the Qur'an itself. Ian Richard Netton articulates this point in this way: 'the Qur'an conceives of God in both an apophatic and cataphatic or positive sense, a transcendent and an immanent way: on the one hand, it proclaims that there is nothing and no one like Him; on the other, God tells mankind that he is closer to man than his own jugular vein'. Ian Richard Netton, *Islam, Christianity and the Mystic Journey: A Comparative Exploration* (Edinburgh, 2011), p. 58.
- 28 For a typical Ash'ari rejection of the attribution of corporeality to God, see 'Abd Allāh Baydāwī and Maḥmūd Iṣfahānī, *Nature, Man and God in Medieval Islam: 'Abd Allāh Baydāwī's Text, Tawālī' al-Anwar min Matalī' al-Anzar, along with Mahmud Iṣfahani's Commentary, Matalī' al-Anzar, Shark Tawālī' al-Anwar*, tr. Edwin Elliott Calverley and James W. Pollock (Leiden, 2002), vol. II, pp. 755–61.
- 29 Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 338.
- 30 For Ibn Sīnā's formulation of this principle and his defence of it, see Abū 'Alī Ibn Sīnā, *al-Najāt fi'l-manṭiq wa'l-ilāhiyyāt* [The Book of Salvation on Logic

- and Theology], ed. 'Abd al-Rahmān 'Umayara (Beirut, 1992), vol. II, pp. 71–3. For Mullā Ṣadrā's formulation and defence of this principle, see Mullā Ṣadrā, *al-Hikmat al-muta'aliyya fi'l-asfār al-'aqliyya al-arba'a* [The Transcendent Theosophy in the Four Journeys of the Intellect], annotated by Muḥammad Ḥusayn Ṭabāṭabā'i (Beirut, 1990), vol. III, pp. 49–56.
- 31 Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, pp. 3–23.
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- 38 Abdolkarim Soroush, 'Islam, Revelation and Prophethood: An Interview with Abdolkarim Soroush about the Expansion of Prophetic Experience', 2008, <http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-Islam,%20Revelation%20and%20Prophethood.html>.
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- 41 Veselin Kesich, 'Via Negativa', in Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York, 2005), p. 9587.
- 42 Jan Van Ess, 'Dirār b. 'Amr', *EI²*, vol. XII, p. 226.
- 43 Abū'l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī describes the Mu'tazili apophatic position as follows: 'The Mu'tazilites are unanimous that God is unlike anything else and that He hears and sees and is neither body, ghost, corpse, form, flesh, blood, substance, nor accident and that He is devoid of color, taste, smell, tactual traits, heat, cold, moistness, dryness, height, width, or depth . . . and that He is indivisible . . . and is not circumscribed by place or subject to time . . . and that none of the attributes of the creature which involve contingency can be applied to Him . . . and that He cannot be perceived by the senses or assimilated to mankind at all', quoted in Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy*, 3rd edn (New York, 2004), p. 58.

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- 45 Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, MA, 1976), pp. 240–41.
- 46 Ibid., p. 268.
- 47 Ibid., p. 275.
- 48 Matin Ghaffarian, 'I'm a Neo-Mu'tazilite: An Interview with Abdolkarim Soroush', 2008, http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-Neo-Mutazilite_July2008.html.
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- 50 Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, p. 276.
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- 53 Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, pp. 235–80.
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- 63 John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2nd edn (New Haven, CT, 2004), p. 350.
- 64 Abdolkarim Soroush and John Hick, 'Šūrat bar bī-šūratī: Guft-u-gūy-i Jān Hik wa 'Abd al-Karīm Surūsh' [A Form upon Formless: A Dialogue between John Hick and Abdolkarim Soroush], 2005, <http://www.dr.soroush.com/Persian/Interviews/P-INT-138409-John&Soroush.html>.
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- 68 Ibid., p. 39.
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