

Do Soroush's competing predilections render his Essentials and Accidentals in Religion 'unwise'?

Abstract

Abdolkarim Soroush's (b.1945) theory of 'Essentials and Accidentals of Religion', from his 2009 publication, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*¹, has facilitated global recognition and fierce contention in equal measure². This essay explores the background and resulting juxtaposing dynamics of the ideology behind Soroush's theory, one that he believes incorporates the empirical and the mystical-philosophical. Leaning on the latter's demarcations of wisdom (i.e. 'what is wise') as a combination of 'theory and practice' and arguing the validity of holding Soroush to such standards, it asserts that whilst Soroush's theoretical development owes much to his rational and scientific predilections, its practical application fails. Demonstrating that his attempts to pull so many conflicting strands of thought leave his 'accidentals' with a scientific theory without reasoned application, it risks being bereft of any hermeneutic, or other, pragmatism. Moreover, when considered alongside his desires for modernising reform in Islam, and his spiritual emphasis on 'God and mini-prophethood'³ as a phenomenal-ontological position, it can engender extremes that conflict with both aims. If it is accepted, Islam is reduced to such an extent that it becomes indistinguishable from any other religion and difficult to follow, (and thus cannot deliver its 'essential' religious experience), whereas if it is rebutted it results in a literalist fundamentalist Islam with believers being required to support not just particular moral or ethical positions that whilst contentious will always remain open to subjective argument, but clearly objective scientific inaccuracies⁴. Whilst impracticality *per se* is not a new argument, that his taxonomy cannot be considered 'wise' by the parameters of theory and practice within the Islamic intellectual tradition it is intended to expand is an extension to the debate.

¹ Abdolkarim Soroush, Chapter 4, 'Essentials and Accidentals in Religion', *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience, Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, Leiden, Brill (2009) pp63-91

² See e.g. Ali Akbar, Abdolkarim Soroush's Approach to 'Experience' as a Basis for His Reform Project, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 28, No. 3 pp313-331 (2017) esp. P315

³ Soroush's ontology effectively reduces to 'God and Prophet', whereby each of us are able to achieve mini-revelatory experiences, that may be minor and 'mission-less' unlike Muhammad's, but are part of the same spectrum of experience. Cf. Ali Akbar, Abdolkarim Soroush's Theory of Revelation. From Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge to Prophetic Dreams, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 33, 1 (2022)

⁴ Examples of the former would include mandatory punishments of *Hudud*, the latter would include geocentrism

Introduction

The question “Do Soroush’s conflicting predilections render his Essentials and Accidentals in Religion ‘unwise’?” owes more than a circumspect inspirational nod to the historian Will Durant’s (d.1981) infamous statement, made in reference to Immanuel Kant’s (d.1804) transcendental philosophy, that “science is organised knowledge, wisdom is organised life”⁵.

Organising knowledge can be considered a hallmark of Iranian scholar Abdolkarim Souroush’s works. A self-acknowledged empiricist revering Locke (d.1704), Hume (d.1776) *et al.*, and frequently crediting Occam⁶ (d.1347) for his minimalist approach⁷, this *weltanschauung* is evident not just in his epistemology, but his hermeneutics, ontology and even his politics⁸. Yet Soroush exhibits a stubborn refusal that can be such a thing as ‘religious science’⁹ whilst conversely is an equally strong advocate that the study of religion *is* one that can be undertaken according to scientific principles and critical evaluation. Religious knowledge co-exists with all other forms of knowledge, including the sciences, and benefits or adapts from an interconnectedness and interdependence between disciplines¹⁰. Equally relevant is Soroush’s recognised and self-professed Neo-Mu’tazilism¹¹, which emphasises rationality, and yet he also declares differences with Mu’tazilites, and lauds the Ash’arites’ empiricism¹², ultimately fostering an approach that respects both a priori and a posteriori reasoning¹³. Additionally the title of ‘Essentials and Accidentals’ itself belies a nominalist ontological stance¹⁴ that shares little with

⁵ Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy* (2nd Ed), Garden City, (1933) pp295-6 viewed on <https://archive.org/details/TheStoryOfPhilosophyWillDurant>. The quote is often wrongly attributed to Kant personally, as any google search will readily confirm.

⁶ Amir Hossein Khodaparast, An interview with Dr. Abdolkarim Soroush, *From Islam as an Identity to Secular Politics* (2006) <http://drsoroush.com/en/from-islam-as-an-identity-to-secular-politics/>

⁷ Muhammad Hashas, Abdolkarim Soroush. The Neo-Mu’tazilite that Buries Classical Islamic Political Theology in Defence of Religious Democracy Pluralism, *Studia Islamica*, 109, 1 (2014) p153, pp160-1

⁸ Kemal Yildirim, *Soroush's political theory in line with the modern tradition: Modern tradition from Locke to the framers of the American constitution*, Lambert, (2020)

⁹ Muhammad Zamzami, Abdullah Hosseinienskandian & Ala, Abd, On the Intersection of Science and Religion: A Critical Analysis of Abdolkarim Soroush’s Thought, *Religió Jurnal Studi Agama-agama*, 12, (2022)

¹⁰ Ali Akbar, Abdolkarim Souroush, The Prophets Revelatory Experiences, *Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation and Quranic Hermeneutics*, Edinburgh University Press (2020) p81. Cf. objections in Abdullah Zamzami, Ala Mukhammad & Abd Hosseinienskandian, On the Intersection of Science and Religion: A Critical Analysis of Abdolkarim Soroush’s Thought, *Religió Jurnal Studi Agama-agama*, 12, 2 (2022) pp233-260

¹¹ Cf. Muhammad Hashas, Abdolkarim Soroush. The Neo-Mu’tazilite that Buries Classical Islamic Political Theology in Defence of Religious Democracy Pluralism, *Studia Islamica*, 109, 1 (2014)

¹² For excellent explanation of key theological and philosophical differences and brief historical overview cf. Neal Robinson, Ash’ariyya and Mu’tazila, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Taylor and Francis (1998)

¹³ In Matin Ghaffarian, ‘I’m a Neo-Mu’tazilite, An interview with Abdolkarim Soroush’, July 2008 http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-Neo-Mutazilite_July2008.html Souroush states, “I think the Ash’arites are stronger than the Mu’tazilites when it comes to empiricism... [but]... doesn’t mean that we derive everything from evident, a priori rationality; basing things on experience is rational too”

¹⁴ Cf. Hossein Dabbagh and Soroush Dabbagh, Ontological Nominalisation and Analytic Philosophy: On the Possibility of Philosophizing whilst Dispensing with Universals, *Philosophy Study*, 5, 2 (2015)

Aristotelian distinctions of essence¹⁵, and much with the transposing of scientific theories, notably, I will suggest, the epistemological doctrine of Imre Lakatos' 'Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes'¹⁶. Thus whilst one can surmise that whilst Soroush might not disagree with "science is organised knowledge", and, one would be hard pushed to find anything, anywhere in Soroush's oeuvre that contradicts the notion that organising knowledge is scientific, he would not be satisfied with a substitution that stated "religion is organised knowledge".

I thus continued my contemplation, can the Essentials and Accidentals contribute to "organised life" or wisdom? To deny that Soroush's intentions include 'organised life' would be futile on two grounds - his pre-eminent role in religious reform¹⁷, and his perspective of the purpose of religion as the means for transformational individual religious experience¹⁸. How then, to assess such wisdom objectively? To assume that the 'wise' of this discourse could rest upon any a broad universal would be, of course, naïve in the extreme¹⁹, and despite the musings begun by Durant's quote and whilst it is true that Kant's transcendental philosophy is never far away from the elucidation of Soroushian principles²⁰, transcendental idealism or the philosophy of religion *per se* is not considered within the scope here of defining wisdom.

The answer lies in Soroush's own intellectual heritage. His other 'heroes'²¹, besides the empiricists, are Al Ghazzali (d.1111), Rumi (d.1273) and Mulla Sadra (d.1641), i.e. those who combine philosophy and mysticism (to varying proportion). Together they represent three of the most significant contributors to *irfan*, the body of theoretical gnostic knowledge that has persistently flourished in Iran, alongside Mu'tazilite rationalism, in the Shi'i environment, considerably immediately post-revolution due to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's ardent dedication to it²². Whilst acknowledging that "Modern Islamic philosophy is thus quite diverse,

¹⁵ Abdulkarim Soroush, Chapter 4, 'Essentials and Accidentals in Religion', n1, this article, p.90

¹⁶ Cf. Alan Musgrave and Charles Pigden, "Imre Lakatos", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman(ed.s)<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/lakatos>

¹⁷ Farhad Khosrokhavar and Mohsen Mottaghi, 'The Neo-Mutazilites in Contemporary Iran Two Generations of Muslim Intellectuals.' Jahanbegloo (ed.) *Mapping the Role of Intellectuals in Iranian Modern and Contemporary History*, Lexington Books (2020) p297

¹⁸ Cf. Kathleen Foody, Interiorizing Islam: Religious Experience and State Oversight in the Islamic Republic of Iran, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 83, 3, (2015) pp 599–623,

¹⁹ Not to mention the undertaking of millenia of *philosophia*

²⁰ Although Kant does gain additional mention. For interesting comparison of similarities of awareness of the limitation of reason between Kant and Islamic Thought as far back as Al-Ghazali (d.1111) see Azam Ghasemi, The Tension Between Faith and Reason in Islamic Tradition: A Case Study of Imam Muhammad Ghazali, *Pizhūhish'hā-Yi Falsafī-Kalāmī : Faṣḥnāmāh-'i Dānishgāh-i Qum*, 24(1), 67–88.

<https://doi.org/10.22091/jptr.2022.7659.2646> (2022)

²¹ When speaking, Soroush uses the term 'heroes' to describe them! See e.g. a talk at *The American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting*, Sunday, November 20, 2011, CA, https://youtu.be/riwmwcgo6_o?si=ff1wKKuWR_3IHV0j

²² Alexander Knysh, 'Irfan Revisited. Khomeini and the Legacy of Islamic Mystical Philosophy.' *Middle East Journal*, 46. 4 (1992) Irfan is Islamic Mysticism but, despite benefiting from Sufi contributors is not Sufism, and antinomian Sufi practices are vehemently revoked

employing a wide variety of techniques and approaches to its subject"²³, the raw basics of *hikma* (wisdom)²⁴ developed within this body of knowledge so as to limit the appropriate criteria of 'what is wise' to 'theory *and* practice'²⁵ apply²⁶. If it appears from the title question alone that I am suggesting that Soroush's predilection is not this, that would be erroneous, the problem is more that Soroush has a predilection for *irfan* and empiricism, *and* rationalism, *and* so forth.

All these facets and influences, interlinked with the many other streams of thoughts that dominate Soroush and lead to the ultimate manifestation of his 'Essentials and Accidentals of Religion' are the 'predilections' of the title question. Exploring first the foundations and motivations, the content, the roles of science, mysticism *et al.* represents a deconstruction of the 'predilections' behind his theory, and what that means in practice. This summary leads to the conclusion that Soroush's empiricism, rationalism and religion as a form of knowledge 'just like any other' subject to scientific analysis, are the basis for an overarching theory that he intends will prove that his goals of Islamic reform and individual spiritual development are within Islam's grasp - but have actually left them gasping for breath. The impracticality of Soroush's Essentials and Accidentals is not a wholly new observation²⁷, and I indicate these counter-arguments and objections on this basis simultaneously to his theory. However, to argue that his taxonomy cannot be considered 'wise' very specifically by the parameters of the Islamic intellectual tradition in which it is grounded is, to the best of my knowledge, a new angle of argument.

Soroush and the foundations of the Essentials and Accidentals of Religion

A prolific author of over thirty books, his major theoretical contributions, can be found in *The Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge*²⁸ ("arguably one of the most controversial

²³ Parviz Morewedge and Oliver Leaman, Islamic philosophy, modern, Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Taylor and Francis, (1998) doi:10.4324/9780415249126-H008-1

²⁴ Cf. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, The Meaning and Concept of Philosophy in Islam, Leaman Nasr (ed.s) *History of Islamic Philosophy*, Routledge (2007)

²⁵ Cf. Muhammad Azadpur, Is Islamic Philosophy Islamic, Azadpur, Cornell Safi (ed.s) *Voices of Islam* (vol. v.). Praeger (2007) who counters Nasr's view that "philosophy in the Islamic tradition becomes Islamic when it overcomes peripatetic pressure" but not that it does not include "theory and practice, truth and spiritual exercises", simply that they were pre-existing and adopted, but adds the element of Prophetology. In either scenario, it can be considered as providing parameters for wisdom, moreover these very straightforward definitions can be found in the works of Al-Ghazali, Mulla Sadra and direct religious experience is central to Soroush.

²⁶ It is not without irony that my question as to whether Soroush is driven by 'conflicting predilections' is creatively borrowed from Sayyed Hossein Nasr's observation that philosophy is "a predilection for *hikmah*" Seyyed Hossein Nasr, n23, this article p22

²⁷ Katajumi Amirpur, The Expansion of the Prophetic Experience Abdolkarim Soroush's New Approach to Qurānic Revelation, *Die Welt Des Islams* 51, 3-4 409-437 (2011) pp438-434

²⁸ Abdolkarim Soroush, 1996, *Qabz va Bast-i Ti'urik-i Shari'at, Nazariyya-yi Takamul-i Ma'rifat-i Dini [The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge]*, Sirat (1996)

theories of religion in post-revolutionary Iran”²⁹, first published in 1996), *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, (2009) containing the ‘Essentials and Accidentals’, and more recently, perhaps as a result of the Rasha Ali Akbar’s (b.1955) *Ibtina*³⁰ theory’s (2009) criticism that Soroush’s approach to religious knowledge concentrates on its interpretative evolution rather than the genesis of knowledge, *The Word of Muhammad, The Dream of Muhammad* (2018) often colloquially referred to as ‘the expansion of Prophetic Dreams’. It can be considered that both the preceding and proceeding works inform on *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*³¹, which opens with “Abdolkarim Soroush is one of the most eminent, influential and controversial intellectual figures of contemporary Iran”³². On the one hand he has been labelled, “the philosopher [who] is the leading intellectual force behind the Islamic republic's pro-democracy movement” in U.S.’ *Time*³³ and the 7th of the top world intellectuals by U.K.’s *Prospect*³⁴. On the other he has faced widespread criticism and not just from the Iranian leadership, traditional clergy and jurists, that ultimately resulted in his exile from the Islamic Republic of Iran after his initial support of and favour by Khomeini, but his modern contemporaries e.g. Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari (b.1936), Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi (b.1967), Mohsen Kadivar (b.1951) and Sayyed Hossein Nasr (b.1933)³⁵.

The fact that he manages to inspire and antagonise quite so many from so many different quarters is unsurprising, as Muhammad Hashas observes, Soroush delivers an “encyclopaedic overture to physics, philosophy of science, epistemology, hermeneutics, Islamic *fiqh* and Sufism”³⁶, a list which is by no means exhaustive. Educated in both Iran and the UK in pharmacology, philosophy of science, philosophy, mysticism, history, *inter alia*, (teaching many of these globally) and disgruntled by a regime he originally supported but was subsequently ostracised from³⁷, his quest

²⁹ Hossein Dabbagh, Epistemology of religion and phenomenology of revelation in post-revolutionary Iran: The case of Abdolkarim Soroush, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (2023) 49, 10 pp 1244–1261

³⁰ This remains untranslated, despite international recognition and presents theories of knowledge formation, arguing that hermeneutics is solely concerned with interpretative evolution, see further for English summation: <https://www.magiran.com/paper/696914/the-theory-of-ibtina>

³¹ Ali Akbar, Abdolkarim Soroush’s Theory of Revelation. From Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge to Prophetic Dreams, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 33, 1 (2022)

³² Abdolkarim Soroush, Chapter 4, ‘Essentials and Accidentals in Religion’, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience, Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, Leiden, Brill (2009) as n1 this article

³³ *Time* (magazine) NY, USA (2005) content available at:

https://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1972656_1972712_1974251,00.html

³⁴ *Prospect* (magazine) London, UK (2008), content remains available online at:

<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/world/united-states/david-petreaus/52457/intellectualsthe-results>. In the previous poll of 2005 he was 15th. The poll has changed its name over time and Soroush has not made more recent lists.

³⁵ See further n48, this article, and ‘Science’ this article

³⁶ Muhammad Hashas, Abdolkarim Soroush. The Neo-Mu‘tazilite that Buries Classical Islamic Political Theology in Defence of Religious Democracy Pluralism, *Studia Islamica*, 109, 1 (2014) p151

³⁷ As Katajumi Amirpur writes so eloquently, “an impressive change from establishment ideologist to its most prominent dissident”, in ‘The Expansion of the Prophetic Experience Abdolkarim Soroush’s New Approach to Qurānic Revelation.’ *Die Welt Des Islams* 51, 3-4 (2011) p.409

began as a challenge to what he saw as legal, ethical and scientific failings in the new Islamic Republic of Iran.

Seeking interpretative and hermeneutical methodologies to align Islam and modernity is the reformist tradition that can be traced through the Islamic modernists from the turn of the twentieth century³⁸. As one might expect by this point his thought reflects many of these e.g. the beginnings of Neo-Mu'tazilism seen in Muhammad Abduh (d.1905)³⁹, the notion of *ijtihad* extended from a legal perspective to an individual spiritual goal of Muhammad Iqbal (d.1938)⁴⁰ and the hermeneutics of Fazlur Rahman (d.1971)⁴¹. But it is not just the modernists; as Soroush himself notes "Many of my views are rooted in medieval Islamic thought. The idea that prophethood is something very general that can be found in different degrees in all people is common in both Shi'i Islam and mysticism"⁴².

Perhaps unique to Soroush is the extent to which each of these synthesised strands in his theory of the Essentials and Accidentals have each been taken to their extreme minimalist conclusion. Like a man grappling with William James' "an empirical philosophy that is not religious enough and a religious philosophy that is not empirical enough..."⁴³, he takes the Mu'tazilite createdness and Rahman's "double movement"⁴⁴ and historicity of the Qur'an to a position where Mohammad is the creator, not God⁴⁵. He extends Iqbal's spirituality⁴⁶ and the experiences of the mystics to a point where religious experience is the goal of all and religion itself⁴⁷. It is little wonder that his detractors decry, 'what is left?'⁴⁸.

³⁸ Charles Kurzman, (Ed.), *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940: A Sourcebook*, OUP (2002)

³⁹ Although this was very much 'under the radar' at the time due to the hostile reception of Mu'tazalism in Abduh's era in Egypt cf. Samira Haj, 'An Islamic Reconfiguration of Colonial Modernity - Muhammad 'Abduh, *Reconfiguring Islamic Tradition. Reform, Rationality, and Modernity*. Stanford University Press (2009)

⁴⁰ Ebrahim Moosa, *The Human Person in Iqbal's Thought*, Hillier and Koshul (ed.s) *Muhammad Iqbal. Essays on the Reconstruction of Modern Muslim Thought*. EUP (2015) "the practice of *ijtihad* encourages - forms of living whereby people become deeply (i.e., spiritually) concerned about their own, perhaps unwarranted practices. Introspection and a commitment towards identifying their deficiencies would become enabling practices to enhance human co-belonging and recognition.. a profound recognition of *ijtihadi* proportions"

⁴¹ Ali Akbar, Fazlur Rahman. *Revelation Historicised, Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation and Quranic Hermeneutics*, EUP (2020)

⁴² Michel Hoebink, *An interview with Abdolkarim Soroush, The Word of Mohammad*, (2007)

<http://drsoroush.com/en/the-word-of-mohammad/>

⁴³ William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, (1975) p15

⁴⁴ Fazlur Rahman, Introduction, *Islam and Modernity*, Chicago University of Chicago Press (1982) pp5-11

⁴⁵ "For Soroush, the Qur'anic revelation is literally taken to be the word of Muhammad himself and only metaphorically the word of God" Yaser Mirdamadi, *Soroush's Theory of Quranic Revelation A Historical-Philosophical Appraisal*. Cancian (ed.), *Approaches to the Quran in Contemporary Iran*, OUP (2019) p165 and "the idea of God plays no substantial role in the Soroushian theory of Quranic revelation" p175

⁴⁶ Nuran Davids and Yusef Waghid, *Muhammad Iqbal's Conception of Ijtihad and Its Implications for Democratic Education*. In: *Democratic Education and Muslim Philosophy*. Palgrave Pivot, (2009)

⁴⁷ Ali Akbar, Abdolkarim Soroush's Approach to 'Experience' as a Basis for His Reform Project. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 28, 3,(2017) pp313-331

⁴⁸ Katajum Amirpur, notes that Mohsen Kadivar (see n. is "afraid that is Sorūš's thoughts are carried to their logical conclusion, nothing will be left of religion" in 'The Expansion of the Prophetic Experience Abdolkarīm

Content

Albeit that Soroush believes his theory can apply to any religion⁴⁹, he identifies eight, Islam-specific 'accidentals' which are;

‘the Arabic language,
the Arab culture,
terms, concepts and propositions used by the Prophet,
historical events of the Quran and Sunna,
questions posed by believers and opponents during the Quran's revelation,
precepts of *fiqh* and *Sharia*, (law)
inventions and distortions introduced by opponents
the ability of the people addressed by the religion’⁵⁰.

Soroush often explains his Essentials and Accidentals metaphorically, arguing that essences are always ‘clothed’ by “outer garments”⁵¹ - the accidentals, akin to the “kernel” and “shell”⁵². This apparent simplicity is somewhat misleading. Stating, “Religion does not have an Aristotelian essence or nature”⁵³, which of course begs an unanswered question as to why such terms (particularly being a hermeneuticist) were deemed appropriate, he no longer enforces the segregation between religion and religious knowledge made so clearly in *Contraction and Expansion*⁵⁴. This purports a *prima facie* shift from an epistemic focus to an ontological one, moreover one based in the phenomenon of revelation (later expanded in *Dreams*).

How then, if Aristotle is not the key, is this to be approached? Soroush writes, confirming his ontological turn, “we are talking about religion itself not about religious knowledge” and of “nominal religion (religion in itself) that can serve as a presupposition for the comprehension of phenomenal religion (religion in relation to us)” and defines the accidental as something that

Soroush's New Approach to Qurānic Revelation.’ *Die Welt Des Islams* 51, 3-4 (2011) p434, and cf. Forough Jahanbakhsh, Introduction, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience, Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, Leiden, Brill (2009) “According to Shabestari, therefore, while the words of the Qur'an are the Prophet's, its source, so to speak, is divine”

⁴⁹ Abdulkarim Soroush, Chapter 4, ‘Essentials and Accidentals in Religion’, p63, n1, this article

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.64, paraphrased from Soroush's list

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., p65

⁵³ Ibid., p90

⁵⁴ Yaser Mirdamadi in Soroush's Theory of Quranic Revelation A Historical-Philosophical Appraisal, Cancian (ed.) *Approaches to the Quran in Contemporary Iran*, OUP (2019) sets out the distinction between religion and religious knowledge as a “major principle” of *Contraction* raises the same issue p153, albeit in a different manner, cf. also Hossein Dabbagh, n29, this article

“could have been other than it is”⁵⁵. These obvious Kantian intimations have led many scholars to assume such a basis⁵⁶. Is Soroush making the point that any essence of religion is unknowable, which would place religion *per se* firmly in the noumenal realm? Hossein Dabbagh and Soroush Dabbagh, whilst not mentioning Soroush directly, delve into the relationships between analytical philosophy within the human sciences in an Islamic framework, notably the nominalist-ontological approach, that “adopts an empirical-posteriori approach to discover, bit by bit, the different characteristics of a phenomenon, without ever claiming full knowledge of it (epistemologically-speaking)”⁵⁷, which matches absolutely Soroush's statement that, “searching for the accidentals is a much more fruitful task than seeking to unearth essentials”⁵⁸

Whilst it is undeniable that Soroush demonstrates a propensity towards apophaticism⁵⁹, elsewhere Soroush has argued that, “the prophethood of the Prophet, and the *Kitab*, and the *Sunna*: these are the unchangeable, the essential”⁶⁰. Conversely, within ‘The Essentials and Accidentals’ such conformist statements are lacking, indeed he argues that the religion's essentials are “the Prophet's goals”⁶¹. These of course are evidenced in the *Kitab* (lit.book) i.e. the Qur'an and Sunna, yet there is a distinction that Soroush seems unaware of making. How then can the Arabic language and the stories, metaphors and rules contained therein be accidental? What would be left without them? This leap from epistemic to ontological whilst remaining hermeneutical continues to cause conflict.

Revelation, Mysticism and Spiritual Experience

Soroush's most radical movement toward the prominence of the thoughts, feeling, attitudes and controversially human limitations⁶² of the Prophet in the Qur'an's development has earned Soroush accusations of ‘Westernisation’. Accused of purported adoption of the views of orientalist Montgomery Watt⁶³ (d. 2006) in relation to the Prophet⁶⁴ and John Hick's (d.2019) ideas of pluralism based on spiritual experience, which by default, must occur from a single

⁵⁵ Abdulkarim Soroush, p63, n1, this article

⁵⁶ Hossein Dabbagh, n29, this article

⁵⁷ Hossein Dabbagh and Soroush Dabbagh, Ontological Nominalisation and Analytic Philosophy: On the Possibility of Philosophizing whilst Dispensing with Universals, *Philosophy Study*, 5, 2 (2015)

⁵⁸ Abdulkarim Soroush, Chapter 4, ‘Essentials and Accidentals in Religion’, p69, n1, this article p69

⁵⁹ Yaser Mirdamadi in Soroush's Theory of Quranic Revelation A Historical-Philosophical Appraisal, Cancian (ed.) *Approaches to the Quran in Contemporary Iran*, OUP (2019) p162

⁶⁰ Abdulkarim Soroush, The Changeable and the Unchangeable, *New Directions in Islamic Thought, Exploring Reform and Muslim Tradition*, Kari Vogt, Lena Larson and Christian Moe (ed.s), IBTauris (2009) p15

⁶¹ Abdulkarim Soroush, n1, this article, p. 90

⁶² Yaser Mirdamadi p162, n59, this article

⁶³ Ali Akbar and Abdullah Saeed, Abdolkarim Soroush. *Contemporary Approaches to the Quran and its Interpretation in Iran*. Routledge (2020) p71 and Ali Akbar, *ibid.*, p318

⁶⁴ W.Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad, Prophet and Statesman*, OUP (1961)

source (God)⁶⁵. Soroush's hermeneutical explanations of the role of Muhammad's own personality, can clearly be seen to relate to those of Rahman and Shah Wali Allah (d.1762), and the mystics. Revelation is not unique to Muhammad, it was simply his de facto spiritual experience, revealed onto and through his heart (qalb), and is something open to all⁶⁶. Being convinced of his minimalist religion, that provides the answers of religion, he is equally adamant that individual spiritual responsibility, freedoms and experience are the message of Islam. Whilst not including these in the *Essentials and Accidentals*, he does indeed take this much further in *Dreams*⁶⁷, and it is here that he suggests his own ontology, which is that of God, and 'mini-prophets', nothing else⁶⁸, the essentials of religion, if there are any, seem further from reach. As Soroush's favoured mystic Rumi expressed, "he temporal cannot know the Eternal, so to the extent that the Sufi contemplates God in his heart, God Himself is the contemplator: Ultimately, the Witness, the Witnesser, and the Witnessing are all one"⁶⁹. When examining what essential is left, once again Soroush has, oddly, in refusing to uphold his earlier demarcation between religion and religious knowledge has further implied that 'religion' is nominal rather than phenomenal; which leaves it bereft of practical application whilst at the same time positioning an experience of the nominal as the endgame.

Science

At the mention of mysticism and earlier acknowledgement of Hick, one may be tempted to draw immediate parallels with perennialism, but placing Soroush under this banner would be inaccurate. Indeed he has been heavily criticised by leading Islamic perennialist Sayyed Hossein Nasr, whereas Soroush rejects religious science but addresses religious knowledge alongside other sciences, the perennialist view is one of 'scientia sacra' underlying all sciences⁷⁰. The *Contraction and Expansion* clearly outlined Soroush's equality of religious knowledge with all other forms of scientific knowledge, asserting that it is simply another form of knowledge⁷¹ (but not that it is another form of science).

⁶⁵ Ali Akbar, *ibid.*, p322. Cf. John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*, 2d. ed. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004 (1989).

⁶⁶ Ali Akbar, Abdolkarim Soroush, *The Prophets Revelatory Experiences, Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation and Quranic Hermeneutics*, Edinburgh University Press (2020) p73

⁶⁷ Akbar, A. (2021). Abdolkarim Soroush's Theory of Revelation: From Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge to Prophetic Dreams. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 33(1), 19–42 (2021)

⁶⁸ https://youtu.be/riwmwco6_o?si=fflwKKuWR_3IHV0j *The American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting*, recorded in San Francisco CA, (2011)

⁶⁹ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, Suny Islam, (1983) p288

⁷⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr in Conversation with Muzaffar Iqbal, *Islam & Science*, Vol. 1 (2003) No. 1 https://cis-ca.org/_media/pdf/2003/1/A_isam.pdf

⁷¹ Ali Akbar, Abdolkarim Soroush. *The Prophets Revelatory Experiences. Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation and Quranic Hermeneutics*, Edinburgh University Press (2020) p81

This last point demonstrates perhaps the strongest twist yet. Taking his love of science, which is not in doubt (it is just not that of the perennialists), and his minimalism to another level I suggest he is using Lakatosian epistemology MSRP⁷² as the basis for his Essentials and Accidentals. I first saw this suggested by Hossein Dabbagh⁷³, and although unsubstantiated there, being familiar with Lakatos, I was in little doubt as to the plausibility and consequently was able to validate it from an interview given to *The Iranian* in 1999, where Soroush confirmed that "I remember that the ideas of Karl Popper, Paul Feyerabend, and Imre Lakatos (whose death coincided with the first year of my studies) dominated class discussions"⁷⁴. In effect, Lakatosian epistemology, designed for scientific research, emphasises an inner "hard core" of the aims of knowledge representing the central idea, with a perpetually changing outer "soft belt". The ultimate conclusion of Imre Lakatos was that even the "hard core" changes over time and pressure from the "soft belt", so in effect there is no immutability, even at the core⁷⁵. I shall return to this but, if one were to assume that Soroush has indeed overlain this to his "essentials" and "accidentals" of religion, then there is potentially no essence of religion at all⁷⁶. Even allowing that a nominalist-ontological approach could stretch to this, I am not suggesting it represents a turn toward a Wittgenstein (d. 1951) conceptual-ontology, which Soroush rejects⁷⁷, but it is close, and can be shown as such practically.

Theorising the accidentals into practice

To begin, I am going to take Soroush's commitment to Ockham-esque reduction of variables to my own next level, and outright dismiss Arabic as an accidental *or* an essential of Islam, when according to Soroush it is either one or the other. Soroush argues that Islam would still be Islam, an Arabic word. But clearly it wouldn't, if it had been delivered in London in English it might be called 'submission' or 'surrender' (a literal translation). Clearly therefore for Soroush, Islam is not the word but the concept.

⁷² Cf n16, this article

⁷³ Hossein Dabbagh, Epistemology of religion and phenomenology of revelation in post-revolutionary Iran: The case of Abdolkarim Soroush, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (2023) 49, 10

⁷⁴ *The Iranian*, (1999) <https://iranian.com/BTW/1999/May/Soroush/index3.html>

⁷⁵ A question beyond the scope here but one that is prevalent in Lakatos's disciple Cf. Andrew Bennett, A Lakatosian Reading of Lakatos: What Can We Salvage from the Hard Core?, (Colin Elman, Miriam Fendius Elman, Ed.s) *Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field*, 2003

⁷⁶ Cf n.48, this article

⁷⁷ Abdolkarim Soroush, Chapter 4, 'Essentials and Accidentals in Religion', n1, this article, p.68

AP1. The Arabic language is accidental to Islam (Soroush),

AP2. Islam (an Arabic word) would still be Islam in any other language (Soroush).

AC1. Therefore Islam is a concept, not a word.

AP3. A concept is a theoretical abstraction,

AC2. Therefore Islam is a theoretical abstraction.

This creates an immediate problem for Soroush because, according to him, religion is not purely theoretical, and has a practical result.

BP1. Islam is a religion (Soroush),

BP2. The purpose of religion is an experience of God (Soroush),

BC1. Therefore the purpose of Islam is an experience of God.

BP3. An experience is a practical occurrence,

BC2. Therefore Islam is a practical occurrence.

His problems due to the conclusion of (A) now being irreconcilable with (B) are tiny in comparison to what happens if his premises are amended;

CP1. The Arabic language is essential to Islam,

CP2. The purpose of Islam is an experience of God,

CC1. Therefore God must be experienced in the Arabic language,

CC2. Therefore people who do not know the Arabic language cannot know God,

CC3. Therefore God is only available to people who speak the Arabic language.

This is an illustrative argument rather than a detailed robust one, however it is sound enough to begin to present the idea that extreme conclusions are liable to be drawn in testing Soroush's theory. Furthermore whilst such arguments can equally be applied to each of the accidentals, e.g. if there is no culture, there can be no metaphorical guidance, if there is no metaphorical guidance, there can be no reform (individual or societal). This continues to a lesser or greater degree, and although the positive application results in different results each time due to their variable nature, the negative application always results in strict adherence to a literalist fundamental position. Neither creates a suitable outcome for a theory designed to promote personal *ijtihad* and modern reform.

Conclusion: holding Soroush to *irfan* principles of wisdom

I have made no direct attempt to resolve whether Soroush is a philosopher or not⁷⁸ and instead I assume that Soroush can be treated as a philosopher on very simple reason of it being how he classes himself⁷⁹. I have also very swiftly expressed *hikma* (wisdom) as broadly encompassing both theory and practice, and I have no wish to do a disservice to the extensive thought that sits behind my simplicity, however perhaps the most detailed synthesis of *hikma* can be found in Mulla Sadra's *al-Asfār al-'āqliyyah*⁸⁰, and it certainly represents the earlier thought of Al-Ghazali to whom Soroush credits in the *Essentials and Accidentals*. Both these issues of Soroush's role as philosopher and most certainly the definitions of *hikma* found throughout *irfan* could be lengthy discourses in their own right, and particularly in respect of the enormity of the latter I place a very respectful appreciation. However, that simplicity allowed me not just to rest on the musings of my own mind bringing me an historian's quote (Durant's), but buttress the validity of stating that it is not enough that the *Essentials and Accidentals* be a theory, and conjunctively it would also not be enough for them to be considered practical, when answering the question as to whether they are unwise. On that note I make no apology for selecting the term 'unwise' as opposed to 'wise', the former having a lower burden of proof than the latter hence my simplistic justification. One of the outstanding observations that one can make of *irfan* is its contribution to the theoretical nature of elevating speculation beyond its usual rational limits, that is the experience of revelatory inspiration. Neither am I suggesting that by holding Soroush's *Essentials and Accidentals* against these principles that I was assessing his feasibility as a modern contribution to *irfan*, I was not, but when Soroush spoke of his intellectual gratitude to the mediaeval philosophers, it was these whom he recognised.

I appreciate Soroush's aims, and, despite the content above and my forthcoming conclusion I believe that he genuinely wishes to create an environment of religious pluralism and transformative individual experience through religion. Yet I must conclude that the *Essentials and Accidentals in Religion* is not the way to do it. I believe that the 'sharp turn' he took from *Contraction and Expansion* to *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience* to provide not just a hermeneutical/epistemological platform but a phenomenal/ontological position failed him. In this

⁷⁸ Variouslly described as a philosopher, religious reformer, thinker, academic, intellectual, moderniser *et alii*

⁷⁹ Soroush's own website: <http://drsoroush.com/en/biography/> and further Roy Jackson's *In search of Islamic Philosophy*, Routledge (2014) p73 - approved by Soroush on his website which introduces him as 'The Iranian philosopher'. Accordingly, *onus probandi actori incumbit*, it is up to Soroush to prove he is a philosopher, and as my argument is not that he is not one, I have nothing to prove.

⁸⁰ Mulla Sadra, 'On definition of the soul' p172-177 in Sayed Hossein Nasr & Mullā Ṣadrā, 'Mullā Ṣadrā', Nasr & Aminrazavi (ed.s), *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia. vol. v. From the School of Shiraz to the Twentieth Century*, I.B. Tauris (2015)

essay I have demonstrated the confusion that turn created, and moreover that his strong motivation to combine the empirical and rational led him to adopt a scientific theory that is designed for concepts and try to apply it to a religion. I think Dabbagh's association of Imre Lakatos' work with Soroush Accidentals and Incidentals is a very strong argument, and am grateful to have taken a part step towards supporting it. However, and this is what must be the sucker punch to assessing whether Soroush's Essentials and Accidentals are wise, I argue that the variables produced by all other 'accidentals' than Arabic are so great that the theory would not even wholly withstand a Popperian test of falsifiability, and that reactive albeit rational conclusion of their rebuttal can only lead to greater entrenchment in literalist fundamentalism and is therefore wholly self-defeating. On the surface it is easy to understand what Soroush is trying to achieve, but irrespective of whether one agrees with him or not, this attempt simply does not hold up stack up in theory or practice, indeed could produce the opposite of its desired effect, and is, therefore, for the purposes here, unwise.

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