

2 Abdolkarim Soroush

Prior to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945) did his graduate studies in London in the fields of analytical chemistry and the philosophy of science. He also showed a deep interest in Persian poetry, religious studies and Qur'ānic exegesis. Returning to Iran a few months after the Revolution, Soroush began to engage in intellectual activities such as writing books and articles, giving lectures in mosques and universities, teaching at various universities in Iran and translating a number of Western philosophical books.¹ In the post-Revolutionary environment, Soroush gradually gained popularity among university students and educated Iranians. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, he had become an influential religious reformer. As Von Schwerin pointed out, “in the late 1980s and 1990s, no other intellectual had as profound an influence on the discourse of [religious studies] as Soroush” in Iran.² From 2000–2004, Soroush was employed as a visiting scholar in the area of Islamic studies – first at Harvard University, then later at Princeton University.³ During the past decade or so, Soroush has been living in exile.⁴ He often travels within the United States and Europe to deliver lectures on subjects related to Islam, Iran and the modern world.

Soroush's hermeneutic approach to the Qur'ān is based on his ideas about the historical contingency of the Prophet's revelatory experience and its impact on the nature and content of the revelation. Soroush rejects the traditional Islamic conception of revelation, in which the Prophet is viewed as a passive transmitter of God's message, with no role in shaping the content or wording of the Qur'ān. Breaking with traditional Islamic theories of revelation, which do not deal with revelation as part of a larger discussion of Prophet Muhammad's personality, Soroush places the Prophet's personality at the very centre of the revelatory process, arguing that it played an active role in shaping the content of the revelation: “The Prophet's personality is the core; it is everything that God has granted to the Muslim community. Religion is woven through and through with this personality”.⁵ In the case of Islam's emergence, Soroush believes that God only sent a “teacher”, and the rest revolved around the “experiences” of this “teacher”.⁶ It is in this sense that the Prophet's “personality was both the receptacle and the generator, both the subject and the object of his revelatory experiences”.⁷ For

this reason, “religion cannot be viewed in such a way as to marginalize the personality of the Prophet or to render it unnecessary”.⁸ In this way, Soroush emphasises that the Qur’ān has not only a divine nature but also a human one. This idea is clear in his works: “Does everything that occurs in nature not have natural causes? So, why should the revelation received by the Prophet be an exception to this rule? Why does nature have to be bypassed and revelation attributed directly [and only] to the supernatural?”⁹ Soroush’s hermeneutical approach is based on his emphasis on the human dimension of the Qur’ān.

In his most recent works, Soroush has argued that Prophet Muhammad experienced revelation (*wahy*) in the form of visions and images, leading the scholar to conclude that the Prophet played a key role in the production of the Qur’ān. Soroush is more explicit in attributing human influence to the Qur’ānic text than many other Iranian religious reformers. He stated:

Muhammad is a narrator. That is, he is not [simply] addressed by voices that he hears in his inner ear, which ask him to transfer their message to humanity. Muhammad conveys his experiences as an observer of the visions he has seen [in the process of revelation]; there is a huge distinction between an observer and a [passive] recipient of a message. Muhammad is not asked to tell people that God is One, but he himself has experienced God as a unity and has informed us about his experiences in his own words He has not been told that everything glorifies God, but he has experienced everything as glorifying God. . . . Indeed, one fascinating revelatory experience of the Prophet was that he saw everything on Earth and in the heavens and their shadows prostrating themselves before God day and night. (Q 13:15)¹⁰

Soroush continued, “Instead of stating that God speaks in the Qur’ān and the Prophet hears God’s speech, we should state that Muhammad (pbhu) is an observer [*nāzer*] and a narrator [*rāwī*]”.¹¹ Soroush believes that *wahy* has a strong visual aspect and that the Qur’ān is the product of the Prophet’s visual experiences, worded by Muhammad himself. According to Soroush, “when the Qur’ān speaks of the descendance of the angels and the Spirit (Q 97:4), when it speaks of angels smiting the faces and backs of unbelievers while taking their souls (Q 47:27) . . . when it speaks of the prostration of angels before Adam (Q 2:34) . . . and when it speaks of the sun setting in a spring of dark mud (Q 18:86)”, it records a series of events that the Prophet visualised in the process of revelation.¹² Soroush applies the same idea to the Qur’ānic descriptions of the Day of Resurrection and the afterlife. In his revelatory experiences, Soroush argues, Muhammad visualised the punishments inflicted upon unbelievers and the rewards given to believers. This means that when the Qur’ān speaks of punishments and rewards, Muhammad visualised them and then described what he saw in his own language (Arabic). Along similar lines, when the Qur’ān speaks of the horn (*al-ṣur*)

that is blown on the Day of Judgment,¹³ the Prophet is narrating or reporting what he saw.¹⁴ According to this theory, rather than hearing voices, the Prophet was a *nāzer* of the event of revelation, meaning that *waḥy* has a visual dimension. Thus, the Qur'ān is the product of Prophet Muhammad's articulation of his revelatory visual experiences.¹⁵ Soroush therefore believes that the Qur'ān is not God's Word as such but Muhammad's record of his own divine experiences.¹⁶

In his theory of the expansion of prophetic experience, which he first presented in the mid-2000s, Soroush links the Prophet's personality and revelatory experiences: "As his [the Prophet's] personality expanded, so too did his experiences and vice versa".¹⁷ For Soroush, "the Prophet's historical personality hinges on his spiritual personality, and his spiritual personality, in turn, hinges on his religious experience and his revelational experience".¹⁸ Soroush argues that the nature of prophecy is evolutionary. Over the course of Muhammad's prophetic mission, he became more accustomed to that mission and his role as God's Prophet: "The Prophet grew steadily more learned, more certain, more resolute, more experienced; in a word more of a prophet".¹⁹ Soroush cited similar views from the well-known Muslim historian and thinker of the fourteenth century Ibn Khaldun (d. 808/1406): "The Prophet's endurance for revelation gradually grew. Initially, when the verses of the Qur'ān were being revealed to him, his endurance would rapidly expire".²⁰ He also cited Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari's (d. 310/923) statement that, after the revelation of the initial verses of the *sura al-'Alaq*, which is traditionally considered the first chapter of the Qur'ān revealed to Muhammad, the Prophet took fright and could not grasp what had been revealed to him, though he gradually became accustomed to it. Soroush concluded from Ibn Khaldun's and al-Tabari's accounts that the Prophet's ability to bear his revelatory experiences grew gradually over time. In other words, the Prophet's inward religious experience was subject to expansion and evolution; it did not emerge instantly.²¹ Soroush's emphasis on the evolutionary nature of prophecy and his idea that Prophet Muhammad became gradually accustomed to his position as God's Prophet demonstrate the human side of revelation. Indeed, Soroush wrote:

With every passing day, he [the Prophet] would become better acquainted with and more discerning about his position, his mission and his ultimate aims; more determined and resilient in the performance of his duties; better prepared and better equipped for achieving his aims; more prosperous and triumphant in his work; and more confident and increasingly certain of success.²²

Elsewhere, he wrote:

His experiences grow and his vision becomes sharpened and [thus he] becomes sturdier in the pursuit of meaning and knowledge. He becomes

more familiar with God. . . . His understanding of resurrection and of metaphysical realms becomes [gradually] deeper, and to resolve the social issues of his society, he [gradually] brings forth new approaches.²³

Soroush, therefore, places prophecy on the same level as other human experiences, although revelation is described in his works as a special form of experience rooted in the divine. Indeed, in the same way that “a poet becomes more of a poet by writing poetry” and “a speaker becomes more of a speaker by delivering speeches”, the Prophet’s experiences, too, gradually “gain[ed] in excellence”.²⁴ Insofar as the outcomes of these human experiences are concerned, there is a crucial difference between the Prophet’s religious experience and other human experiences – such as poetic or mystical experiences – because the former has an element of mission, characterised by a resolute conviction to transform the world by following divine inspiration.²⁵ However, both religious and other human experiences are gradual, evolutionary and subject to further progression.

According to Soroush, when the Qur’ān states, “My God, increase me in knowledge” (Q 20:114), the Prophet is asking God to make him “more of a prophet”.²⁶ By ascribing an active role in the revelation to the Prophet, Soroush identifies the Qur’ān’s evolutionary (*tadrījī*), humanistic and contextual nature. He believes that the message of the revelation changed as the Prophet’s personality developed and the circumstances and events that the Prophet experienced evolved. The Qur’ān “did not descend upon the Prophet instantaneously, but had a gradual genesis”.²⁷ Indeed, Soroush emphasises the historical genesis of the Qur’ān, in “keeping with the [contemporaneous] historical circumstances”.²⁸ From this perspective, “the Qur’ān is a constant, multi-sided dialogue with God and the earthly, natural and historical world in which Muhammad was living”.²⁹

Soroush further argues that the Qur’ān has a dialogical nature because many verses of the text came into being as responses to questions posed to the Prophet by his community. In a dialogue, Soroush asserts, answers are born as responses to a set of questions. If Muhammad’s community had not asked him these questions, the answers would not have emerged in the text: “And what is said [or responded] is essentially of the nature of an answer, not of the nature of a unilateral inculcation”.³⁰ Accordingly, the Qur’ān’s text was shaped as “an answer to the questions and quandaries of the time”.³¹ Soroush stated:

Some would go to the Prophet and ask him a question. Someone would insult the Prophet’s wife. Someone would set alight the flames of war. Some would accuse the Prophet of being insane. Some would spread rumors about the Prophet marrying Zayd’s wife. Some would overlook their duties during the sacred months. They would kill their sons and daughters for fear of poverty. They would take two sisters as wives. They would observe superstitious rituals over slit-ear she-camels and

twin-birth sheep (considering them sacred and refusing to use their milk or meat). And all of this would find an echo in the Qur'ān and the Prophet's words. The Jews would do something. The Christians would do another thing. If they had not accused A'isha of having an adulterous relationship, would we have the verses at the beginning of the al-Nour Sura (Chapter 24)? If the war of the confederate tribes had never occurred, would we have the al-Ahzab Sura (Chapter 33)? If there had been no Abulahab or if he and his wife had not displayed enmity towards the Prophet, would we have the al-Masad Sura (Chapter 111)? These were all contingent events in history whose occurrence or non-occurrence would have been much the same. But, having occurred, we now find traces of them in the Qur'an.³²

Soroush also referred to Qur'ānic phrases such as "They ask you about the spirit; they ask you about the crescent; they ask you about fighting during the sacred months; they ask you about the two-horned".³³ When someone asked the Prophet a question about such issues, "divine verses would be devoted to the subject. If some other questions had been asked, we would find some other answer in the Qur'ān".³⁴

Soroush believes that since the Qur'ān is linked to the Prophet's personality and religious experience, and since Muhammad's experience was evolutionary – subject to further expansion – and dialogical – having taken shape by means of dialectical interaction with society – the Qur'ān has a strong human side. It addresses largely the matters that occurred in Arabia and its surrounding environment, and reflects the issues that were familiar to the Prophet and the Arabs of his time. For instance, the Qur'ān does not allude to the Iranian prophet Zoroaster by name simply because the Prophet was unfamiliar with him. All the prophets mentioned in the Qur'ān were more or less familiar to the Prophet and the people of seventh-century Arabian society.³⁵ Soroush suggests that if the Prophet had lived longer and faced more events during his prophetic mission, he would have had the opportunity to experience more and react in other ways. Therefore, "the Qur'ān could have been much more than it is; even perhaps could have had a second volume".³⁶ The core of Soroush's argument is that, through the mind of the Prophet, the revelation and the Qur'ān adapted to their historical context. For Soroush, "Islam is not a book or an aggregate of words; it is a historical movement and the history-incarnate of a mission. It is the historical extension of a gradually-realized prophetic experience".³⁷

Soroush further argues that even though the era of prophethood has ended, the opportunity "remains for the expansion of the prophetic experience, both spiritually as well as socially".³⁸ Indeed, if Muslims wish to maintain their relevance to revelation, they should expand and enrich prophetic experience. In the same way that Muhammad's experience was shaped by his sociohistorical context, Muslims should develop the prophetic experience in light of contemporary knowledge. In other words, "religious

experience today must interact and engage with the actions of the actors of this age”.³⁹ Soroush, thus, emphasises the necessity of approaching Islam with contemporary needs and context in mind.

Based on his contextualist approach, Soroush distinguishes between the essential – constant – and the accidental – mutable – features of the Qur’ān. As he himself has noted, “A human view of the Qur’ān makes it possible to distinguish between the essential and the accidental aspects of religion”.⁴⁰ The essential features of the Qur’ān include its integral and fundamental elements – those that remain constant, fixed and eternal – whereas the accidental features include those aspects that are specifically related to the context of revelation and thus “could have been other than [they are] and [could have] appeared in some other forms”.⁴¹ Among the essential, Soroush counts the principle of the unity of God, belief in the resurrection and the prophecy of Prophet Muhammad, and values such as justice. He considers all other norms and principles that came into being as a result of the social and cultural situation in which the revelation emerged to be accidental. Those passages of the Qur’ān that concern these issues were the product of the cultural and intellectual context of the era of revelation and, therefore, could be replaced by contemporary injunctions. In *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, Soroush stated:

Some parts of religion are historically and culturally determined and no longer relevant today. That is the case, for instance, with the corporal punishments prescribed in the Qur’ān. If the Prophet had lived in another cultural environment, those punishments would probably not have been part of his message. The task of Muslims today is to translate the essential message of the Qur’ān over time.⁴²

Soroush identifies nine accidental features of religion in his writings:

Islam’s first accidental trait is the Arabic language, which could have been replaced by another language. The second accidental [trait] is the Arabs’ culture. The third accidental [trait] consists of the terms, concepts, theories and propositions used by the Prophet. The fourth accidental [trait] consists of the historical events that entered into the Qur’an and the Sunna. The questions posed by believers and [their] opponents and the answers to them form the fifth accidental [trait]. The sixth [trait] embraces the precepts of *fiqh* and Islamic law. The seventh accidental [trait] consists of the fabrications, inventions and distortions introduced into the religion by its opponents. The eighth accidental [trait] consists of the abilities and understandings of the people addressed by religion. Finally, conclusions are drawn and it is suggested in brief that Islam (and any other religion for that matter) is a religion by virtue of its essentials, not its accidental [elements].⁴³

Among those scholars whose ideas are discussed in Part II of this book, with the exception of Malekian, Soroush has made the most radical departure from orthodox views in his approach to revelation and the nature of the Qur'ān and the Sharī'a. This is why some of his critics – such as Kadivar, who himself has been one of the most influential Iranian religious intellectuals during the 1990s–2010s – are afraid that “if Soroush’s thoughts are carried to their logical consequence, nothing will be left of religion”.⁴⁴ Along similar line of thinking, Katajun Amirpur believes that Soroush has gone to “an ideological extreme” that could end up “creating more problems [in Iran] than it solves”.⁴⁵ He wrote: “Scholars of Religious Studies may understand the line of argumentation Soroush follows, and mystics may be able to relate to the gist of it, but what about ordinary believers?”⁴⁶

For Soroush, the Sharī'a and *fiqh*, taken together, are contingent. The mutability of religious precepts and regulations, therefore, is not confined to the sociopolitical arena; it extends to matters of worship, religious rites, customs and rituals. These are all part of the contingent dimension of religion. Matters of worship and other precepts mentioned in the Qur'ān and the Sunna are, thus, only valid insofar as they preserve the aims and intentions of the religion. Soroush wrote:

The precepts of Shari'ah, religious customs, the form and appearance of rites of worship and other rites, and the regulations pertaining to individual and social behavior – not aims and intentions and the expediencies of laws, which are among religion's essentials, are originally ordained on the basis of the lives and characteristics and the spiritual, social, geographical and historical circumstances of a particular people, such that, had these circumstances been different, the customs, precepts and regulations would also have taken on a different form and shape . . . if the Prophet had appeared in the midst of some other people, who had had different customs, rites and conventions, while the aims of his faith (that is, the preservation of religion, reason, life, the progeny and property) would have remained the same, the physiognomy of many of his precepts would have changed . . . there can be no doubt that the underlying contention is that most of the precepts of *fiqh* and even its basic tenets are accidentals. Even prayers and fasting have been made proportionate to what people can endure on average. If their endurance was much greater, the obligations may well have been more severe.⁴⁷

This passage indicates that Soroush does not disregard the importance of rituals; however, he does not see them as an essential part of Islam. What is also significant about Soroush's approach is that he makes a distinction between Qur'ānic precepts, especially in the sociolegal realm, and the aims, intentions and expediencies of these precepts – that is, the reasons why such precepts and regulations came into being – often identified as *maqāsid*.

While the Qur'ānic precepts related to sociolegal matters are among the accidentals of the text – at least in their literal form – their *maqāṣid* are among the essentials of the Qur'ān. This distinction has not been emphasised in Soroush's hermeneutical approach in detail, but it has been advanced by other Iranian contextualist scholars like Kadivar, Eshkevari and Fanaei, whose ideas and interpretative methods will be discussed in later chapters.

Role of interpreters' preconceptions in approaches to interpretation

Soroush's view that an interpreter of the Qur'ān may bring his or her own prior knowledge and interests to the task of exegesis is emphasised in his theory of *Qabz va Bast-e Te'orik-e Sharī'at* (the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge) – a theory that, according to Yadullah Shahibzadeh, “made Soroush not only the most influential Muslim intellectual in Iran but also one of the most persuasive intellectuals in Iranian modern history”.⁴⁸ Soroush's essays on the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge, which were published later as a book with the same title, are oriented around his approach to knowledge and its nature, epistemology and his criticism of applying traditional Islamic epistemological schemes to our modern context. Soroush's theory is an epistemological one since it is not mainly concerned with providing a new interpretation of the Qur'ān, but rather retelling the history of Qur'ānic interpretation and its reception. He aims to explain the evolution of religious knowledge during the course of Islamic history. As we discuss in Part III of the book, Soroush's theory has a wide range of implications for approaching various Qur'ānic themes in the present context.

Soroush's theory of *Qabz va Bast-e Te'orik-e Sharī'at* has three parts. The basic point of departure is that we should distinguish between revealed religion (*dīn*) and religious knowledge (*ma'refat-e dīnī*) – a term Soroush uses to refer to human understanding of religion. For Soroush, while religion is sacred, our understanding of religion is fallible. Religion is unchangeable and flawless because it comes from the divine, whereas our understanding of religion is changeable and temporary. Because human understanding is not error-free, it can never be a pure reflection of the divine: “Religion is the work of God, but religious knowledge is our work. Religion is divine, but its understanding is human. In the same way as nature is God's creation, natural sciences such as physics and mathematics are human creations and products”.⁴⁹ Soroush uses this idea to argue that religious knowledge – including all areas of religious science such as *tafsīr*, *kalām*, *taṣawwuf* – mysticism – and *fiqh* – should be open to criticism and reconsideration. Indeed, for him, critiques should be applied equally to all forms of knowledge, including religious knowledge, since from an epistemological perspective there is nothing that distinguishes religious knowledge from other branches of knowledge. In other words, Soroush places religious knowledge on the

same epistemological level as other modes of human knowledge and scientific discipline. Soroush wrote:

It has often been falsely assumed that the divine and exalted religion is tantamount to human understanding of the religion . . . Religion, from the view of the believers, is divine and perfect [and] has a godly basis, and there is no error or contradiction in it. It is fixed and eternal and is not derived from the human mind and knowledge . . . However, our understanding of religion – i.e., the disciplines of *fiqh*, *tafsīr*, ethics and *kalām* – do not have these qualities . . . Understanding of religion is neither perfect nor fixed; it is neither free of error and fault, nor is it independent of other modes of human knowledge. It does not have a divine and godly origin. It is neither free from alteration and misunderstanding, nor is it eternal and everlasting. The sciences of *fiqh* and *tafsīr* fall into the category of human sciences and are subject to a human mindset. How can one claim that *fiqh* is perfect and independent of other human modes of knowledge? All human modes of knowledge, be they religious or non-religious, are imperfect and in great need of one another. They aid one another in their development, and each one plays a role in refining and completing the other . . . human knowledge is similar to a body whose organs grow consistently and compatibly. No single organ can stop the other organs' development by its own growth. Divine religion is not in need of reconstruction; it has been formed by God the Wise. However, [human] understanding of religion requires continued revival and reconstruction. Various elements of religious knowledge must be subject to re-examination or must become compatible and consistent with the growing features of non-religious knowledge.⁵⁰

Elsewhere, in *Qabz va Bast*, Soroush wrote:

Religious knowledge is historical knowledge with a collective identity; it is non-sacred, incomplete and full of error. . . . [As such,] religious knowledge is human knowledge in the sense that it has been subjected to human norms, and it is a posteriori knowledge, [at least] from the perspective of second-order epistemology. . . . Human knowledge has an observable quality – namely, that knowledge which is constructed by human hands is found in the realm of humanity. There are also other qualities associated with human knowledge. When we claim that knowledge is human knowledge, it implies that many elements found in the human realm have entered that knowledge. . . . [Therefore,] our claim is that human knowledge is not limited to the intellectual norms of humans, but that other elements of humanity also influence that knowledge. That is to say, if we are social beings governed by language, greed, envy and so on, and are involved in a variety of social relationships, then all of these matters influence our scientific knowledge, in the same

way that they have an impact on our knowledge in the areas of art and industry. Human products mirror humans' existence, originating from the human realm and inevitably reflective of human characteristics.⁵¹

This leads to the second aspect of Soroush's theory, that all modes of knowledge are inter-related. He explained: "Different modes of knowledge, including human sciences, natural science, philosophy and religious science are all related and interconnected".⁵² Knowledge, according to Soroush, is always in a state of transformation, and each area of knowledge inevitably influences others. Evolution in other fields of knowledge can cause changes to or the transformation of religious knowledge. Indeed, by distinguishing between religion and religious knowledge – as established in the first part of his theory – and placing religious knowledge among other types of human knowledge, Soroush is able to argue that religious knowledge evolves, along with other branches of human knowledge. In the same way, Qur'ānic interpretation is not immune to change and transformation, which means that no interpretation or exegesis of the Qur'ān is ever final or everlasting: "The last religion is already here, but the last understanding of religion has not yet arrived".⁵³ Accordingly, new interpretations of the Qur'ān will emerge as the Qur'ānic text and history continue to interact. Soroush wrote in *Qabz va Bast-e Te'orik-e Shari'at*:

All elements of human knowledge are closely related and have an intimate relationship with one another. If a new principle or theory emerges in the realm of science, it influences the realms of epistemology and philosophy. A transformation in our philosophical understanding impacts our understanding of our existence and the world, and when humans and the world reveal another aspect of themselves, religious knowledge, too, will take on a new meaning [for people].⁵⁴

Elsewhere, in the same book, he wrote:

Religious knowledge is relative. The relativeness [*nesbī*] of religious knowledge is similar to the relativeness of a conclusion in an inductive argument. The conclusion of an inductive argument is related to its premise. That is, it is influenced by its premise and every change in its premise results in a change in its conclusion. The fixedness of a conclusion is also dependent upon the fixedness of a premise. If the premise of an inductive argument remains unchanged, its conclusion, too, remains unchanged, and if the premise changes, the conclusion also changes. . . . Religious knowledge is inevitably influenced by our epistemological, anthropological and linguistic knowledge, and is inevitably consistent with the philosophical and scientific products of every historical era. . . . If these change, then our understanding of religion changes, and if they remain unchanged, our understanding of religion remains unchanged.⁵⁵

He continued:

Human understanding of religion, like our understanding of nature, is subject to flow and change. And although the silent Sharī'a and nature are fixed and free of contradictions, our understanding of these two [phenomena] can be flowing and contradictory. Such contradictions will aid both sides to refine each other. From this, the discipline of religion grew and flourished, and man came to appreciate the important point that all non-religious modes of knowledge have an inevitable influence on religious knowledge. Change in our epistemic knowledge in one area will lead to change in our understanding and knowledge in another. Therefore, examining other modes of knowledge is an inevitable precondition for refining religious knowledge and its perfection. It is not possible to characterise an inherently changing phenomenon as having a fixed and constant nature.⁵⁶

The final point of Soroush's theory is that all understandings and interpretations of religion and sacred scriptures reflect human knowledge and are shaped by interpreters' presuppositions. Religious knowledge is not only influenced by cultural context and other modes of human knowledge, but also marked by people's personal interests, prior knowledge and predilections. This means that the discipline of interpretation is not void of interpreters' *a priori* human knowledge, which in turn is inevitably influenced by other branches of knowledge. Therefore, for Soroush, the legal and ethical norms that pre-modern Muslim scholars inferred from the Qur'ān evolved from a pre-modern Weltanschauung.

Our prior knowledge, understanding and prejudices all play a role in posing new questions when approaching a text, including the Qur'ān. Indeed, the task of interpretation does not take place with an empty mind. This is a natural process, Soroush suggests, with all modes of human knowledge:

The world does not say what secrets it has. It is we that make it speak. The world is silent and voiceless in itself and when we question it, it answers our questions. These questions and answers shape the foundations of knowledge. There are no questions without a theory, and without a theory, it is not possible to understand the given answers.⁵⁷

In the same vein, the Qur'ān is silent, but its interpreters make it speak through the questions they pose to it.⁵⁸ In *Qabz va Bast*, Soroush stated:

Development of the natural sciences, which will [inevitably] create new questions in the human mind, will guide religious knowledge towards its completion [*kamāl*]. And since in no period of history is it possible to speak about the ultimate completeness of knowledge of the natural sciences, it is not possible to speak about the ultimate completeness of

religious knowledge either. Both of these are to the same extent selective, developing and reconstructive human phenomena. Galileo said that every experience contains a question that we place before nature and seek answers from. It must be added to this [statement] that those questions are dependent upon theories and presumptions that are already in our mind, and those answers create a particular perspective of nature.

Religion, too, is sitting silently, waiting for us to question it. And we will become familiar with it in connection with the answers it gives us. Imagine a scientist who is silent and does not speak. It is our questions and his answers that gradually reveal his character to us. His character is continuously and constantly subject to revision. The person who merely asks him philosophical questions (since he himself is familiar with philosophy) recognises him as a philosopher, and the person who merely asks him literary questions and hears literary answers puts on him a literary cloak. But when there are many questioners posing various questions to him in connection with their particular knowledge and presumptions, they pay attention to particular answers and do not pay attention to the answers given to other questions. They also understand answers in light of their own knowledge and theories. As they find some contradictions in his answers to the sciences of their time, their images about his character will be reconstructed and will move towards completion, and [thus] their knowledge in relation to him will increase quantitatively and qualitatively and their previous incomplete images will reveal their deficiencies and become a ladder for ascension to a higher roof.

Questions [that are posed to a given text] are the products of our knowledge and responses and are understandable in light of our existing knowledge. The condition of receiving an appropriate response from the Shari'a [religion] is to have an appropriate and deep understanding of the question [that we pose to it], and this is not possible unless we gain a deep understanding of . . . contemporary knowledge and open the way of making a connection between religious knowledge and other modes of human knowledge.⁵⁹

For Soroush, every mode of knowledge depends on the context in which it emerges:

The norms and values of every era should be placed within their own context [of appearance], and we should not judge people of past generations by today's values and standards. . . . The previous generation's understanding of historical events was never the best and most perfect understanding. . . . [Accordingly,] the understanding of the previous generation of people of religion was compatible and consistent with the knowledge of their era and may be inconsistent with the knowledge of our era.⁶⁰

One of the ways Soroush highlights the influence of interpreters' pre-conceptions in their approach to interpreting the Qur'ān is through the question of the human expectations of religion (*entezār-e bashar az dīn*). For Soroush, the question of why people need prophets may be a point of departure for an interpreter, and his answer to this question will, in turn, have a profound impact on his interpretative approach. As an example, one expectation of religion is that "religions . . . [should] advise people not only on how to purify their souls and worship their creator, but also how to . . . rule the country". This expectation inevitably induces a person "to search the text carefully and meticulously" to discover methods of governance in holy scriptures.⁶¹ Soroush, therefore, noted that all interpretations of the Qur'ān are shaped by interpreters' presuppositions. He stated, "Do not believe that the person who uses the concept of causality to argue for the existence of God understands the Qur'ān in a way that contradicts the concept of causality".⁶² For Soroush, even the great *muffasirs* brought their preconceived ideas to their interpretation of the Qur'ān. For example, the late Shī'ī scholar Allameh Tabataba'i's defence of the philosophical concept of casualty and his philosophical orientation in general played a role in his interpretative method.⁶³ Certainly, a philosopher takes a different approach to the Qur'ān than does a jurist or a mystic because the philosopher poses different questions to the text and seeks different answers from it.

Implications of Soroush's approach

Soroush's theory historicises all areas of religious knowledge, especially the interpretative corpus (*tafsīr* literature), relegating it to knowledge of a temporary nature. It inevitably denies the divinity of the Sharī'a, seeing it as nothing more than a human interpretation of the primary sources of Islam. For Soroush, in the field of religious knowledge – just as in any other field of human knowledge – no conception is sacred or beyond questioning. Religious knowledge is entirely human and temporary; therefore, no interpretation of a given text, including the Qur'ān, is final or free from reconsideration. This view provides an inevitably pluralistic approach to interpreting the Qur'ān. As Soroush pointed out,

We are all immersed in an ocean of interpretations To capture the true intention of the Revelator is an ideal toward which all of us approach . . . but in the end we may discover that the true intention of the Revelator was nothing but the collective endeavor of mankind itself.⁶⁴

Soroush's theory of the expansion and contraction of religious knowledge also accepts the inevitability of change in human understanding and, thus, in interpretation of the Qur'ān, implying that interpretation of the text can be adapted to the norms and values of the modern world. In fact,

accepting the idea that religious knowledge is incomplete, impure and culturally bound allows believers to reconstruct their own understanding of religion based on the necessities of their specific time and place. That is, this approach puts forward the notion of flexibility of religious knowledge. As Soroush argues, this flexibility enables believers to rehabilitate religious thought, correct misreadings and redirect religion towards its essence.⁶⁵ For Soroush, acquiring knowledge from areas such as anthropology and epistemology inevitably changes the views of scholars towards the Sharī'a and *fiqh*, and provides them with a new understanding of these disciplines.⁶⁶

Another implication of Soroush's theory is that neither the *tafsīr* literature nor the *fuqahā*'s (sing. *faqīh*⁶⁷) religious convictions are sacrosanct.⁶⁸ The *fuqahā* were also influenced by their own interests, preconceptions and understandings when they approached the Qur'ān: "No *faqīh* can approach religious texts with an empty mind (*zehn-e khālī*) and without preconception and presumption. . . . Interpretation and understanding of texts are not possible without prior knowledge and assumption".⁶⁹ As such, Soroush stated:

If one considers the fatwas of the *fuqahā* and at the same time pays specific attention to their personal characteristics and their general knowledge, then one would realise how the intellectual background and extra-religious knowledge of a *faqīh* have a great impact on his fatwas. The fatwa of an Arab takes on the hue of Arab culture, and the fatwa of a Persian takes on the hue of Persian culture. The fatwa of a village dweller takes on the hue and odor of a village, and the fatwa of a town inhabitant takes on the taste of his town.⁷⁰

Since there is no way we can put aside our presumptions, interests and prior knowledge before approaching the Qur'ān, we must always think about them carefully. Moreover, "it is not stated anywhere in the Qur'ān that God taught His Prophet everything about every field of learning, nor did the noble prophet ever make such a claim himself, ranging from theology and divinities to medicine, mathematics, music and astronomy".⁷¹ Therefore, we should not expect the text to answer all of our questions.

Soroush uses his contextualist approach to dismiss the so-called scientific interpretations of the Qur'ān (*tafsīr-e 'ilmī*) that are still prevalent in traditionalist circles in Iran and other Muslim-majority countries. He warns his readers not to approach the Qur'ānic term '*aql* (reason) from a modern perspective, arguing that this word and its derivatives should not be taken out of their historical context (*bastar-e tarīkhī*). The historical meaning of the word '*ilm* (science) and its derivatives differed from the contemporary understanding. As such, Islamic sources, including the Qur'ān, do not reflect today's understanding of scientific norms. Soroush concluded that believers should not approach scientific knowledge through religious scriptures or consider religious texts to be a source of scientific knowledge. Although the Qur'ān refers to a number of cosmological concepts, including the nature

and structure of the physical universe,⁷² Soroush argues that their appearance in the text is only accidental. Accordingly, these concepts may be replaced by modern scientific theories.⁷³

Possible influence of orientalist's discourse

At this point, it is useful to compare Soroush's theory of revelation with the theories of revelation developed by some Western scholars of the twentieth century. Although there is no direct evidence that Soroush was influenced by such accounts, the similarities between his and orientalist's theories of revelation suggest that he might have been inspired by them. Soroush's theory is very close to Montgomery Watt's idea of revelation. Watt considered the revelation that Muhammad received during his prophetic mission to be a "human experience",⁷⁴ but much like Soroush, distinguished it from other forms of human experience by asserting that "it is God who takes the initiative in revelation [and thus] . . . the form of words in the consciousness of the prophet contains truth from God".⁷⁵ Like Soroush, Watt placed an emphasis on the Prophet's personality and how it shaped his revelatory experiences. He held that the Prophet required a special form of personality to "fit him to be a recipient of revelation".⁷⁶ Muhammad's temperament, according to Watt, affected "the imaginal form of the revelation", and thus, there was a dual relationship between the Prophet's personality and the content of his revelatory experiences.⁷⁷ Furthermore, like Soroush, Watt believed that the Prophet had a central role in wording his revelatory experiences: "The general content of the utterance was perhaps 'revealed' from without, but it was left to Muhammad to find the precise words in which to speak".⁷⁸

Watt's account is very close to Soroush's in that he held that the revelatory experience of the Prophet was subject to expansion and development. As new circumstances arose and his experience developed, the Prophet's understanding of revelation would have become deeper and, thus, his revelatory experience would have grown. For example, Watt stated that the concept of the "Messenger of God" (*rasūl Allah*) grew in Prophet Muhammad's mind along with the changing circumstances: "Just as the pagan Meccans could not have understood Allah in an Islamic sense, so Muhammad at the beginning of his activity as prophet could not have understood the full implications of 'messenger of God'".⁷⁹ The Prophet's mission was first described as a "warner" (*nadhīr*) and "reminder". As his followers in Mecca multiplied, the Qur'ānic conception of the *rasūl* changed (Q 72:23). After Muhammad's migration to Medina, the Prophet is described in the Qur'ān not only as the one who should be obeyed by the community, but also as a judge, since some cases were brought before him for judgment (Q 24:47–52, 4:59). In the last years of Muhammad's prophetic mission, especially after the conquest of Mecca, the *rasūl* had many responsibilities other than conveying God's messages. This suggests that Prophet Muhammad's conception of the *rasūl* grew as his circumstances changed.⁸⁰

Watt believed that revelation was influenced by “the intellectual and cultural outlook of the community to which it is addressed, and in which the prophet shares”.⁸¹ This idea is similar to Soroush’s view that “the people were never mere observers, even in the loftiest aspect of religiosity, such as revelation itself”.⁸² Like Soroush, Watt argued that Muhammad’s understanding of his mission became steadier as his community grew, concluding that revelation was subject to change and expansion over time: “As this community grew and met opposition, it required further guidance; and this came in the fresh revelations received by Muhammad from time to time”.⁸³ Furthermore, Watt stated:

The community is in some sense a part of the revelation – an embodiment of it, through which the revelation continues to act so that future generations are faced with the decision to respond or not to respond. Neither the Qur’ān nor any other scripture is likely to be effective except when it is associated with a community.⁸⁴

Both Soroush and Watt held that the character of revelation is at once divine and human because, although the ultimate source of revelation was God, revelation evolved and developed through the Prophet’s experiences and within the broader cultural and intellectual horizons of his community and audience.

Notes

- 1 Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran*, 144–6.
- 2 Schwerin, *The Dissident Mullah*, 142.
- 3 Sasan Tavassoli, *Christian Encounters With Iran: Engaging Muslim Thinkers After the Revolution* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2011), 136.
- 4 Tavassoli explains why Soroush lived in exile: “After years of facing . . . death threats, censorship and restrictions on public speaking and traveling, Soroush was eventually banned from his university teaching post” (Ibid.) It should be added that Soroush has been highly critical of the Islamic Republic in the past decade or so.
- 5 Abdolkarim Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, trans. Nilou Mobasser (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 16.
- 6 Ibid., 338.
- 7 Ibid., 11–2.
- 8 Ibid., 197.
- 9 Ibid., 325.
- 10 Abdolkarim Soroush, “Muhammad: The Narrator of Prophetic Visions [Dreams]”, accessed 20 February 2017, <http://drsoroush.com/fa/>
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 See for example Q 39:68–74, 78:18–20.
- 14 Soroush, “Muhammad”.
- 15 Ibid.

- 16 In this context, Soroush went on to state that “the Word of God has no particular form”. Abdolkarim Soroush, “Masih dar Eslām” [“Jesus in Islam”], accessed 15 December 2016, www.drsoroush.com/Persian/By_DrSoroush/P-NWS-13880901-MasihDarIslam.html.
- 17 Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 12.
- 18 Ibid., 199.
- 19 Ibid., 10.
- 20 Ibid., 10. Ibn Khaldun stated “revelation causes pain, since it means that an essence leaves its own essence and exchanges its own stage for the ultimate stage . . . gradual habituation to the process of revelation brings some relief”. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, abridged and edited by N.J. Dawood (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 78.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid., 11.
- 23 Soroush, “Muhammad”.
- 24 Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 11.
- 25 Ibid., 5–6.
- 26 Ibid., 9.
- 27 Ibid., 13.
- 28 Ibid., 18.
- 29 Ibid., 328.
- 30 Ibid., 17.
- 31 Ibid., 328.
- 32 Ibid., 16–7.
- 33 Ibid., 18.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid., 16.
- 36 Ibid., 17.
- 37 Ibid., 16.
- 38 Ibid., 22.
- 39 Ibid., 23.
- 40 Ibid., 275.
- 41 Ibid., 67.
- 42 Ibid., 275.
- 43 Ibid., 63.
- 44 Katajun Amirpur, “The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Abdolkarim Sorūš’s New Approach to Qur’ānic Revelation”, *Die Welt des Islams* 51, nos. 3–4 (2011): 434.
- 45 Ibid., 436.
- 46 Ibid., 432.
- 47 Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 88–9.
- 48 Shahibzadeh, *Islamism and Post-Islamism in Iran*, 136.
- 49 Abdolkarim Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Te’orik-e Shari’at* [*The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of the Shari’at*] (Tehran: Sirat Publication, 1995), 112.
- 50 Ibid., 248–9.
- 51 Ibid., 106–7.
- 52 Ibid., 187.
- 53 Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, ed. and trans. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 37.
- 54 Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Te’orik-e Shari’at*, 165.
- 55 Ibid., 485–6.
- 56 Ibid., 167.

- 57 Ibid., 138.
- 58 Ibid., 270.
- 59 Ibid., 264–5.
- 60 Ibid., 260–2.
- 61 Abdolkarim Soroush, “The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge”, in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, ed. Charles Kurzman (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998), 249.
- 62 Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Te’orik-e Sharī’at*, 357.
- 63 Ibid., 359.
- 64 Soroush, “Evolution and Devolution”, 251.
- 65 Soroush, *Reason, Freedom*, 86.
- 66 Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Te’orik-e Sharī’at*, 244. According to Bayat, this theory has also been adopted by other religious intellectuals in Iran. For example, Aya-tollah Abdullah Nouri stated that “relativity of truth is one thing, and episte-mological error is something else”. As far as Islam is concerned, “except God, there is nothing absolute”. Indeed, “the idea of religion is complete, truthful and sacred, but our perception of it is not. The idea of religion is not subject to change, but our perception of it is”. Bayat, “The Making of Post-Islamist Iran”, 51.
- 67 *Faqīh* is an expert in Islamic jurisprudence.
- 68 Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Te’orik-e Sharī’at*, 442.
- 69 Ibid., 487.
- 70 Ibid., 244.
- 71 Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 297.
- 72 See Q 21:30, 41:9–11, 2:29, 7:54, 11:7, 36:38, 36:40, 72:8 and 16:15.
- 73 For the details of this idea, see Ali Akbar, “Islam-Science Relation from the Per-spective of Post-Revolutionary Iranian Religious Intellectuals”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no.1 (2019): 104–22.
- 74 William Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Revelation in the Modern World* (Edin-burgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969), 15, 108.
- 75 Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today*, 59.
- 76 Ibid., 66.
- 77 Ibid. Similar to our observations, Oddbjørn Leirvik stated, “In the writings of orientalist scholars, the Islamic idea of revelation is normally dealt with as part of a larger discussion of Muhammad’s personality and the development of his prophetic career”. Oddbjørn Leirvik, “Wahy and Tanzīl: Modern Islamic Approaches to Divine Inspiration, Progressive Revelation and Human Text”, *Studia Theologica* 69, no. 2 (2015): 107.
- 78 William Montgomery Watt and Richard Bell, *Introduction to the Qur’ān* (Edin-burgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), 22.
- 79 Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today*, 68.
- 80 Ibid., 68–9; Watt, *Islamic Revelation*, 46.
- 81 Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today*, 66.
- 82 Soroush, *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 19.
- 83 Watt, *Islamic Revelation*, 20.
- 84 Ibid., 108.

Contemporary Approaches to the Qur'ān and Its Interpretation in Iran

Ali Akbar and Abdullah Saeed

First published 2020
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2020 Ali Akbar and Abdullah Saeed

The right of Ali Akbar and Abdullah Saeed to be identified as authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 9780367272036 (hbk)

ISBN: 9780367272067 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon
by Apex CoVantage, LLC