



‘Abdolkarim Soroush’s Approach to ‘Experience’ as a Basis for His Reform Project

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ABSTRACT

During the past few decades, many Muslim scholars and reformers have established new principles of reform through various hermeneutical approaches towards primary sources of Islam. Thus, Islamic thought, like any other religious tradition, has undergone a process of development in the modern period and will surely continue to do so in the future. ‘Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945) is undoubtedly one of the most influential religious reformers in contemporary Iran and he has gained an international reputation. One of the central ideas that consistently appear throughout Soroush’s writings is that religion can be linked to a type of human ‘experience’, a theme that has long been the concern of Western scholars of religion. This article argues that the theme of experience became the fundamental element in two aspects of Soroush’s reform project, namely his approach to qur’anic rulings and his philosophy of religious pluralism. Indeed, the article shows that Soroush’s conception of revelation as a religious experience of the Prophet Muhammad is not only confined to a theological depiction of God’s relation to humanity, but also has legal and social implications for approaching Islam in the context of the present time.

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Introduction: the theme of ‘experience’ in the West

Since the nineteenth century, the notion of ‘religious experience’ has been used by many Western scholars of religion. It is often argued that the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (d. 1834) was the earliest scholar to use such a term within Western religious scholarship for the purpose of freeing religious doctrines and practices from dependence on metaphysical beliefs and ecclesiastical institutions (Proudfoot 1985, xiii). The concept of religious experience as applied by Schleiermacher provided new grounds for defending religion against secular and scientific critiques (Sarf 1998, 98). It also gave priority to individualistic religious feeling in preference to doctrinal religions since, for Schleiermacher, ‘not some body of divinely revealed information but the experience of the believers is the subject matter and criterion for theology’ (Grenz and Oslon 1992, 46). After Schleiermacher, the hermeneutic of experience was adopted by a number of scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such as William James (d. 1910), Rudolf Otto (d. 1937) and Ninian Smart (d. 2001).¹ For Smart (1969, 28), ‘a religious experience involves some kind of “perception” of the invisible world, or involves a

perception that some visible person or thing is a manifestation of the invisible world'. According to him, this experience is fundamental in shaping the great religions of the world:

The factor of religious experience is even more crucial when we consider the events and the human lives from which the great religions have stemmed ... we have records of the inaugural visions of some of the Old Testament prophets, of the experiences that told them something profoundly important about God and that spurred them on to teach men in his name. It was through such experiences that Muhammad began to preach the unity of Allah – a preaching that had an explosive impact upon the world from Central Asia to Spain. (22)

John Hick (d. 2012), the celebrated scholar of religion in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has also applied the notion of religious experience in his writings in a way almost similar to Smart's. Like Smart, Hick (1989, 104) maintains that religious experience plays an important role in the foundation of all great religions of the world: 'on the basis of their own form of religious experience the Hebrew prophets thought of God as standing in a special covenant relationship with the people of Israel'. Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad, Hick continues, 'on the basis of his own experience, thought of God as the Qur'anic Revealer whose definite revelation was addressed to the people of seventh-century Arabia' (104). According to this account, revelation is considered tantamount to the 'religious experience' of founders of religious traditions. In addition, by focusing on the subjective dimension of religious experience, Hick attempts to make a link between religions and the historical environments of their emergence, as will be discussed later.²

While many modern Christian scholars of religion have adopted the term 'religious experience' in their approach to religiosity, this notion has received little attention in contemporary Islamic scholarship. In fact, there have been few contemporary Muslim scholars who have incorporated such a term when referring to religion or revelation.³ Among modern Muslim scholars who have adhered to the concept of religious experience, one may point to 'Abdolkarim Soroush, whose ideas have been the subject of numerous articles. Aspects of his contribution to modern Islamic thought have been explored by Forough Jahanbakhsh (2009) and Mohammed Hashas (2014). Various features of his political ideas (Vakili 1996; Jahanbakhsh 2001; Ghamari-Tabrizi 2008; Akbar 2016a, 398–401) as well as specific aspects of his religious thought (Vahdat 2003; Fletcher 2005; Saeed 2014, 54–55) have been examined, and significant political repercussions of his approach to religious experience have also been discussed (Foody 2015). This article provides new insight into Soroush's reform project by arguing that his views on qur'anic rulings and religious pluralism have their foundation in his understanding of revelation. It argues in particular that considering revelation as the religious experience of the Prophet is the point of departure for Soroush to approach qur'anic rulings and religious pluralism. Throughout the article, Soroush's ideas are occasionally compared with Muhammad Iqbal's and John Hick's, not to discuss their influence on him, but rather to show that an emphasis on the notion of 'experience' in approaches to revelation and religiosity has also led other Muslim and non-Muslim scholars to reformulate a number of traditional doctrines.

Brief biography of Soroush

Prior to the Islamic revolution that took place in Iran in 1979, 'Abdolkarim Soroush did his graduate studies in analytical chemistry and philosophy of science in London. There,

besides his studies, Soroush showed his deep interest in Persian poetry and qur'anic exegesis. As a member of the Muslim Youth Association, Soroush also engaged in political activities during his stay in England. Having returned to Iran a few months after the Islamic revolution, Soroush began to engage in a variety of 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 (Jahanbakhsh 2001, 144–146). In the post-revolutionary environment, Soroush gradually gained popularity among university students and educated Iranians. As Jahanbakhsh (2001, 146) notes, 'Soroush is a very prolific thinker whose published works as well as the audio and video cassette recordings of his numerous lectures have found an increasing audience among young, educated Iranians'.⁴ During the 1990s, Soroush developed two controversial theories in relation to Islamic thought, namely the 'expansion and contraction of religious thought' (Soroush 1995) and the 'expansion of Prophetic experience' (Soroush 2009a),⁵ both of which came under severe attack from traditional religious scholars in Iran. From 2000 to 2004, Soroush was a visiting scholar in the area of Islamic studies first at Harvard and later at Princeton University (Tavassoli 2011, 136). In the past decade or so, Soroush has been living in exile. He often travels within the US and Europe to deliver lectures on subjects related to Islam, Iran and the modern world.

Soroush on the nature of revelation

Soroush clearly distances himself from the traditional understanding of revelation (*wahy*), according to which the Prophet Muhammad received God's revelation in an unconscious state through the involvement of the angel Gabriel and then passed it on verbatim to his audiences. This understanding of revelation, according to Soroush (2009a, 329), reduces the Prophet to a mere tool for transmitting of God's Word, offering 'a Sultan-peasant image of God-human relationship'.⁶ He asserts:

Gabriel's movement between God and the Prophet, carrying messages back and forth, and receiving a specific verse for every specific event and bringing it down to earth is absolutely not in keeping with the metaphysics of Muslim philosophers and theologians, and it is in no way reasonable or justifiable. (339)

Contrary to the account proposed by traditional scholars, Soroush's fundamental assumption in his account of revelation is the idea that revelation in its very nature is the same as the 'religious experience' of prophets (4). This idea is valid for all prophets of God since 'prophethood was (essentially) a kind of experience' (9): 'religious experience is exactly that which, in the case of the prophets, is known as "reception of revelation"' (199). In other words, revelation as a fundamental aspect of religion is essentially linked to a form of human experience. Soroush says that all prophets have undergone inward religious experiences through which they became prepared 'for performing their awesome task in the world' (5). Having undergone such experiences, prophets became new persons and gained new personalities. Having relied on Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī's *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (Deliverance from Error) (1980), Soroush (2009a, 6–7) argues that religious experience is the most important signifier of a prophet, making a case that prophets must be recognized from their religious experiences, and not merely through performing miracles. As a number of scholars such as Frank Griffel (2004)

argue, al-Ghazālī had clearly distanced himself from the classical Ashʿari view that prophecy could only be verified through miracles.⁷ For Soroush, the prophecy of Muhammad, like that of other prophets, is essentially a matter of individual experience. In fact, the revelations that Muhammad received during his prophetic mission were similar to his religious experiences. It is worthy of note that what distinguishes al-Ghazālī from Soroush is that the former's discussion of experience was not oriented around developing specific methods to approaching the Qur'an, but rather remained confined to a defence of prophecy as such. As will be fully discussed later, unlike al-Ghazālī, Soroush's perspective on experience became a basis for developing various hermeneutic methods to approaching the Qur'an.

For Soroush, the Prophet did not simply hear the Word of God during the process of revelation, but had an inner experience of divinity through which Islam came into existence as a new religion. Like Hick, Soroush (1998a, 9, 2009a, 125) maintains that it was the inner experience of founders of religious traditions that shaped those religions. In the case of Islam's emergence, Soroush (2009a, 338) holds that God only sent a 'teacher', and the rest revolved around the 'experiences' of this 'teacher'. In this respect, Soroush's theory implies that the Prophet's personality played a far greater role in the formation of Islam and the Qur'an than the traditional accounts of Muslim scholars acknowledge. Indeed, his understanding of the term 'experience' is intimately related to the active role that the Prophet's personality played in the event of revelation. It is worth pointing here to another thinker, namely the South African reformist Muslim scholar Farid Esack (b. 1959), who has views close to Soroush's concerning the role of Muhammad's personality in *wahy*. Esack (2002, 43) writes:⁸

The Qur'an is the product of some part of Muhammad's personality other than his conscious mind ... it is the work of the divine ... but produced through the personality of Muhammad in such a way that certain features of the Qur'an are to be ascribed primarily to the humanity of Muhammad.

Soroush does not explain in great detail what Muhammad's religious experience consisted of. He asserts that revelation is a 'formless phenomenon' because it is a form of 'experience' that is unexplainable in human words, and confines himself to maintaining that revelation included the Prophet's 'reveries, insights and illuminations' (Soroush 2009a, 19). In this sense, his theory maintains that *wahy* did not only have an auditory dimension, but also contained visual aspects that its recipient, namely Muhammad, experienced within the revelation process. In other words, an ultimate emphasis on experiential features of revelation necessitates for Soroush that the Prophet was conscious in the process of revelation and was able, through his strong imaginative faculty, to see autonomous forms, visions and images.⁹

Revelation: from an experience to an historical event

Soroush's conception of revelation as an individual experience of the Prophet Muhammad is a point of departure for his argument about both the historical, this-worldly dimensions of revelation and its gradual expansion. If revelation is a form of experience, then that experience, like any form of experience, is subject to expansion, evolution and enrichment. This is due to the fact that, when humans experience something, there is always a

possibility that the experience may grow and deepen in quality. Like other forms of experience, prophetic experiences did not mature all of a sudden, but grew gradually. In other words, the experience of a prophet expands in much the same way as other experiences grow: ‘a poet becomes more of a poet by writing poetry. A speaker becomes more of a speaker by delivering speeches. This can be said of any experience ... as the experience endures, so, too, will it gain in excellence’ (Soroush 2009a, 11). According to Soroush (11), the Qur’an confirms that the Prophet Moses was at first frightened when the cane was transformed into a serpent, but he gradually became accustomed to his revelatory experiences, his divinely given missions and his miracles. Similarly, the Prophet Muhammad became gradually acquainted with his ultimate aims. He became more confident, resilient and steadier in the performance of his duties: ‘the blessing of revelation rained down upon him constantly, giving him ever greater strength and flourishing. Hence, the Prophet grew steadily more learned, more certain, more resolute, more experienced; in a word, more of a prophet’ (10). In this sense, Soroush’s conceptualization of the term ‘experience’ becomes clearer as he attaches it to the Prophet’s personality. For him, as the Prophet’s experiences grew and expanded, so too did his personality and vice versa (14). By placing a great value on the personality of the Prophet, Soroush emphasizes Muhammad’s human character and the human side of revelation.

Soroush uses a number of sources in order to support his thesis on the gradual expansion of prophetic experience. For him, Q 20.114: ‘O my Lord, increase me in knowledge’, confirms the gradual development of prophetic experience (9). He also relies on the writings of two celebrated mediaeval Muslim scholars, al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) and Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406). Soroush (10) cites Ibn Khaldūn as saying, ‘the Prophet’s endurance for revelation gradually grew. Initially, when the verses of the Qur’an were being revealed to him, his endurance would rapidly expire’. To cite a short passage from Ibn Khaldūn (1987, 78), ‘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’. Soroush (2009a, 10–11) takes Ibn Khaldūn’s idea as an adequate reason for the fact that the Meccan suras and verses of the Qur’an are short whereas the Medinan ones are longer. In this sense, drawing on Ibn Khaldūn, Soroush sees revelation as a psychological phenomenon with an experiential nature (for details on Ibn Khaldūn’s idea on revelation, see: Ibn Khaldūn 1987, 70–78). It is worthy of note that Ibn Khaldūn, unlike Soroush, does not, in general, challenge the traditional understanding of revelation because he believes there is a huge gap between the human sphere and the divine realm, considering the Prophet’s mind as passive during the revelation process. In fact, although Ibn Khaldūn initially attempts to approach the Qur’an by questioning how revelation took place in Muhammad’s psyche, he fails to establish a link between the Prophet’s revelatory experience and its immediate context, a theme that is recurrent in Soroush’s writings. Soroush (2009a, 10–11) also cites al-Ṭabarī, stating that, after the revelation of the initial verses of *Sūrat al-‘alaq*, which is traditionally considered the first chapter revealed to Muhammad, the Prophet took fright and could not grasp what had been revealed to him, but he gradually became accustomed to it. Soroush concludes from Ibn Khaldūn’s and al-Ṭabarī’s accounts that the Prophet’s ability to bear his revelatory experiences grew gradually to an increasing endurance. In other words, these accounts show that the Prophet’s inward religious experience was subject to expansion and evolution, and did not emerge instantly.

The external circumstances that affect the Prophet's experience: the context of *wahy*

For Soroush, the revelatory experiences of the Prophet did not take shape in vacuum. Like any other experiences, such as mystical ones, Muhammad's revelatory experience did not develop on its own, but required a contextual framework. In this respect, Soroush rejects the British philosopher Walter T. Stace's (d. 1967) central thesis that mystical experiences are unmediated and ineffable by asserting that there is no pure or context-free experience (see Soroush 1998a, 11, 166–167). Here, his idea echoes aspects of Wayne Proudfoot's, Hans H. Penner's and Steven Katz's approach to mystical experiences. To quote Katz (1978, 26), 'there are no pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated'. For Katz, 'a proper evaluation' of mystical experiences includes 'acknowledging that the experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his experience' (26). In other words, Katz argues that mystical experience, like any other religious experience, is shaped by the subject's cognitive conditions as well as his cultural environment, religious training and historical circumstances. In a similar vein, Soroush (1998a, 167) asserts that the nature of mystical experiences is shaped in a socially constructed context. From this premise, he attempts to explain why there exist various mystical experiences, rejecting Stace's view that 'all mystical experiences are the same and doctrine is later interpreted into the experience' (for details, see Dahlen 2006, 428, 444). It is in this context that Soroush believes that 'the Prophet did not adapt abstract experiences to reality' (Soroush 2009a, 22); instead, the actual existing world of the Prophet's time played a crucial role in the shaping and development of the Prophet's revelatory experiences. Muhammad encountered various circumstances during his prophetic mission. He encountered great enmity and great friendship; sometimes he was drawn into war and sometimes into peace. As these circumstances altered, Muhammad's experiences and personality evolved. In fact, Soroush (13) makes a case here that the Prophet's external experiences affected his inward revelatory experiences: 'the Prophet's interaction with the outer world undoubtedly allowed his mission and prophetic experience to expand and flourish'. In other words, Muhammad's outward experiences contributed to the expansion of robustness of his inward experiences and his teachings. This shows that Soroush sees prophecy as an entirely natural phenomenon with its roots in history.

At this stage, it is useful to compare Soroush's theory of revelation with those developed by some Orientalists and Western scholars of Islam, as well as that proposed by Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), the well-known Pakistani poet and philosopher. Tor Andrea (1936, 66) approaches revelation from a psychological viewpoint, arguing that Muhammad's relation to revelations became more 'stylized' and 'objectivized' in the course of his Prophetic mission (see also Graham 1977, 17). This reflects Soroush's idea that Muhammad's religious experience had a historical basis and was subject to evolution and expansion. In a similar vein, the French scholar of Islamic Studies Maxime Rodinson (1961, 74–81) discusses Muhammad within the context of mystical experience and draws comparisons between the Prophet's experience and that of other mystics. In my view, however, Soroush's theory is closest to Montgomery Watt's idea of revelation. Watt (1969, 15, 108) considers the revelation that Muhammad received during his Prophetic mission as a 'human

experience'. Like Soroush, Watt places an emphasis on the Prophet's personality in his revelatory experiences. He holds that the Prophet required a special form of personality to 'fit him to be a recipient of revelation'. In this sense, Muhammad's temperament affects 'the imaginal form of the revelation', and thus he was not a passive recipient of revelation (Watt 1983, 66). Like Soroush, Watt is of the view that revelation was influenced by 'the intellectual and cultural outlook of the community to which it is addressed, and in which the prophet shares' (66). Like Soroush, Watt had argued that Muhammad's understanding of his mission becomes steadier as his community grows, 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' (Watt 1969, 20).¹⁰ That is to say, for both Soroush and Watt, the character of revelation is both divine and human because, although the ultimate source of revelation was God, it was evolved and developed through experiences of the Prophet and within broader cultural and intellectual horizons of his community and first audiences.

Soroush's understanding of revelation also corresponds to various aspects of that presented by Muhammad Iqbal, one of the few Muslim scholars who have viewed revelation, and by its extension religiosity, as an 'experience'. Like Soroush, Iqbal (1958, 125) likens divine revelations to mystical inspirations, the recipients of both of which go through an experiential stage: 'a prophet may be defined as a type of mystic consciousness in which "unitary experience" tends to overflow its boundaries and seeks opportunities of redirecting or refashioning the forces of collective life'. For Iqbal, mysticism contained the same sense of prophetic consciousness. The most significant contribution of the Prophet is that he enabled humanity to experience the divine, and thus his personality should not be reduced to that of a mere politician or philosopher. In this sense, like Soroush, who sees religious experience as 'both the cause and reason for faith' (Soroush 2009a, 228), Iqbal links religion to a form of 'intuition' that exists above the realm of thought, thus viewing religiosity as the highest form of human experience (Iqbal 1958, 127; for details, see Ahmed 2013, 84–86; Moosa 2015, 27–28).

In order to discuss further how Muhammad's outward experiences affected his internal religious experiences and to conclude that prophecy should not be seen as a phenomenon outside history but within history, Soroush likens the Prophet to a lecturer. For Soroush, the relationship between a lecturer and his students is similar to that of the Prophet and his audiences. This relation, in both cases, is that of an 'interaction or dialogue' (Soroush 2009a, 14). The relation between a teacher and his students is not a 'unilateral process of inculcation. It is not as if the teacher only speaks and the students only listen' (15). The lecturer encounters unexpected questions that must be answered, and thus he does not exactly know what will take place in the classroom. Indeed, the students are not passive in the classroom because they are able to divert the teacher from his intended subject. A clever teacher also encourages his students to 'take their turn into center stage, so that they may all advance together' (15). According to Soroush, the Prophet of Islam was in a similar position among his audiences, namely the residents of Mecca and Medina. Muhammad's audiences and the circumstances he constantly encountered during his prophetic mission had an impact on his revelatory experiences. This notion of the 'dialogical nature of Prophetic experience' is intimately close to the evolutionary feature of prophethood. Soroush writes (16–17):

Someone 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. Someone would accuse the Prophet of being insane. Someone would spread rumors about the Prophet marrying Zayd's wife. Someone would overlook their duties during the sacred months. All of this would find an echo in the Qur'an and the Prophet's words.

This is why the Qur'an, which is the product of the Prophet's revelatory experiences, has a dialectic rather than monolithic nature. In a dialogue, the answer is in line with the question. The answers are indeed born as responses to a set of questions: 'And what is said is essentially of the nature of an answer, not of the nature of a unilateral inculcation' (17). It is interesting to note that this idea echoes aspects of Ebrahim Moosa's approach to revelation and the Qur'an. Moosa (2003, 124) states: 'the Qur'an as revelation requires an audience of listeners and speakers. In other words, a community is integral to it being a revelation. ... This audience is not a passive audience, but an interactive audience that engages with a performative revelation'. In a similar vein, Soroush (2009a, 19) asserts: 'the people were never mere observers, even in the loftiest aspect of religiosity, such as revelation itself'. In order to show the intimate relation between revelation and its audience, Soroush says (17):

If they had not accused of Aisha 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 Abulhab 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.

An important corollary of this discussion is that day-to-day events played a central role in shaping Muhammad's internal religious experiences and accordingly in the formation of the Qur'an. By making a connection between the revelation on the one hand and the biography and life of the Prophet on the other, Soroush intends to bring to light the historicity of the Qur'an and the contingencies of its verses. This is to say, the Qur'an emerged as a result of the Prophet's interaction with his society and people. By this approach to the revelation, Soroush, in line with the mediaeval Mu'tazili thinkers, pointed to the *createdness* of the Qur'an, although the latter did not emphasize the theme of experience in their writings. Since the Qur'an is the product of Muhammad's revelatory experiences, it is created and non-eternal.¹¹ In sum, in Soroush's account, the Prophet had an intimate link with his immediate society, as a result of which his revelatory experiences as well as the product of such experiences, namely the Qur'an, were shaped. This idea leads Soroush (17) to assert that 'if the Prophet had lived longer and encountered more events, his reactions and responses would inevitably have grown as well'.

The implications of Soroush's conception of revelation as 'experience'

The purpose in bringing attention to Soroush's conception of revelation as religious experience is to highlight areas where it is applied for the purpose of developing new hermeneutics when approaching the text of the Qur'an. It has been shown so far that there is an intimate link in Soroush's theory between the 'experimental' and 'evolutionary' aspects of revelation. In fact, by considering revelation as an experience, Soroush gives the Qur'an

a historical nature that came into existence during a gradual process and in specific socio-historical circumstances. For Soroush (2009a, 16), ‘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’. Indeed, ‘the Qur’an was revealed and realized gradually; in other words, it had a historical genesis’ (16). The immediate corollary of this idea is that the Qur’an is created, non-eternal and culturally-historically specific. Soroush goes on to say that, since many aspects of qur’anic revelations are shaped within a specific historical and cultural environment, they must be referred to as accidental, contingent and mutable. Accidental (*‘aradī*) aspects of Islam include ‘something that could have been other than it is and appeared in some other form’ while ‘the essential [*dhātī*] in religion is consequently that which is not accidental; anything without which religion would cease to be religion and the alteration of which would be a negation of religion itself’ (67). The essential aspects of religion include the statements that are related to the foundations of belief, such as the unity of God, the prophecy of Muhammad and belief in life after death, and thus they are valid for all times and places (Soroush 1999, 80, 2009b, 10). Essentials also include the ethical scope of religious experience (Soroush 2009a, 104). The accidentals, in contrast to the essentials, functioned only within the specific ‘cultural, social and historical environment of the delivery of the main message’ (Soroush 1998b, 250), and thus they are not valid for all times and places. These accidental aspects of religion, as already stated, played an important role in the Prophet’s religious experiences. This is why, as Soroush (2009a, 71) points out, ‘had the beloved and great Prophet of Islam received his mission in a different environment, the book of revelation’ ... ‘would have taken on an altogether different hue’. In other words, if the Prophet had lived in another society, his religious experience and consequently its product, that is the Qur’an, would have been different, while the essence of his message would have remained the same. This is why, as Saeed (2014, 55) notes, for Soroush, any responsible hermeneutics or interpretation of the Qur’an must take into consideration the history, culture and context of the Hijaz in the time of revelation.¹²

The first implication: Soroush’s approach to qur’anic rulings

The immediate implication of this discussion is that, if the Prophet had lived in another society, the majority of qur’anic rulings (which later became the basis of the growth of Sharia laws), such as the percepts of blood money, ritual cleanness, men’s and women’s clothing, the rights of men and women, slaves and non-slaves, would have taken on different forms, while the essential message of Islam would still have remained the same (Soroush 2009a, 89). Soroush emphasizes the contingency of qur’anic rulings, arguing that they must be seen as shaped by the cultural and intellectual context in which they emerged. Soroush goes on to suggest that many of these rulings lack relevance to the condition of modern humanity and thus must undergo substantial revision. The Sharia, in general, for Soroush, is ‘precisely equivalent to the natural sources of the past’ (see Dahlen 2001, 235; also Soroush 2000, 62). In this respect, it is important to note that Soroush’s approach to qur’anic rulings provides a new insight that challenges the literalist understanding of the Qur’an. As Ahmad Sadri (2005) notes, the lesson that one could draw from Soroush’s writings is to ‘seek the spirit of the religion rather than its literal content’. That is to say, Muslims should not get tied up in legalistic details derived

from the Qur'an because many verses of the Qur'an dealing with such issues are to a large extent the direct result of the accidents of the Prophet's life. I should add to Sadri's observation that Soroush's approach allows another implication: what Muhammad did during his prophetic mission should not be exactly imitated. His actions are only a source that later generation of Muslims can refer to for establishing new principles of ethics and values for their own particular eras.¹³ That is to say, it is the Prophet's spiritual experiences that are to be reproduced, rather than his actions. For Soroush (2009a, 8), the condition for following the Prophet is not confined to doing what he enjoined and abstaining from what he proscribed. A true disciple of the Prophet must reproduce his spiritual experiences.

Soroush's emphasis on experiential religiosity leads him to emphasize the ethical aspects, which are considered to be one of the essentials of religion. In this sense, he clearly distances himself from the religiosity of the *faqīhs* and the emphasis of jurists on Sharia. In contrast to the legalistic interpretation of religion, which has no potential for expansion, 'the world of experience is a pluralistic one' (20). The idea that religion should be seen as an experience leads Soroush (23) to make a close link between the prophetic era and the present time: 'just as the Prophet's religious experience interacted and engaged with the actions of the actors of his age, so religious experience today must interact and engage with the actions of the actors of this age'. The actions of the Prophet as well as the legal pronouncements of the Qur'an are 'fixed', but if religion is seen as an experience, one is able to provide a strong basis for a flexible interpretation of those actions and pronouncements in the present context: 'religion must be seen as an experience that is nascent, that interacts, that engages, instead of being a closed and finished ideology' (22). As Safdar Ahmad (2013, 89) notes, unlike legalistic readings of Islam, Soroush's emphasis on religious experience promotes 'openness and change' especially in relation to matters concerning jurisprudence, and thus 'foster[s] a spirit of engagement'.¹⁴ This provides a strong basis for the ever-changing reality of religious faith, opening the way to the idea that religion has the capability to be reformed and reinterpreted, and to adapt itself to the conditions and needs of every era. It is significant to note that this understanding of religious rulings shows deep affinities with John Hick (1997, 16), who, in a similar vein, acknowledges the contingency of theological doctrines: 'theological doctrines are not infallible or unchangeable, but on the contrary require to be rethought in each new cultural epoch'. Soroush and Hick are also close to each other in that they both believe that the epistemic validity of a religious tradition can only be a matter of hermeneutical effort, which is ultimately related to individual experiences of believers. Hick (1994, 21) writes:

All human thoughts, beliefs, theories, conceptions, are generated by particular men and women, or group of men and women, living at a particular time and within a particular culture, with its particular presuppositions and modes of thought and its particular social and economic basis; and to say that thought is relative to those circumstances is simply to acknowledge that it takes different forms within different contexts.¹⁵

I also acknowledge here that Muhammad Iqbal, who emphasized the theme of experience in his writings, had come to a similar conclusion. By claiming that religiosity is built on experience, Iqbal suggests that Muslims can be masters of their own spiritual development and thus are able to make their own interpretation of the Qur'an. This gives the legal precepts of the Qur'an a contingent nature, asking believers to reject considering the Qur'an as a compendium of legalistic rules. The purpose of the Qur'an, Iqbal (1958, 165) notes, 'is

to awaken in man the higher consciousness of his manifold relations with God and the universe' and it is thus 'not a legal code'.¹⁶ For Iqbal, since the fundamental feature of religion is its experiential elements and thus religiosity is highly individualistic and subjective, believers can reinterpret the Qur'an in every age based on their own experience of a new era. According to Iqbal (90), this experiential approach to religion provides a practical mode for seekers of religious faith in the modern period not only because it results in bridging the gap between Islam and modernity but also because the 'modern mind' essentially 'demands a concrete living experience of God'. Therefore, by focusing on the experiential aspect of religiosity, Soroush and Iqbal see religion in minimalist terms, especially in relation to jurisprudence. In Soroush's (2009a, 115) words, 'a maximalist religion undermines religion itself'. To him, even 'the guidance offered by religion is minimalist guidance ... and not maximalist' (112). Soroush believes that, since religiosity rests on the religious experience of individuals and their direct relation with God, religious rulings and legal provisions of Holy Scriptures cannot be universally applied. In this sense, the emphasis on the objectivity of the legal precepts of Islam and the focus on the essential role that these provisions may play in shaping social structures undermine the very heart of religiosity, namely its experiential aspects. This proposition poses a fundamental challenge to the widely accepted jurisprudential discourse that social provisions of religion constitute the most significant part of religiosity; indeed, these provisions were not essential to religion even during the period of revelation, let alone in the context of the modern world.

The second implication: Soroush's philosophy of religious pluralism

Soroush's notion of experience has another fundamental consequence, which appears throughout his writings. This section argues that Soroush's philosophy of religious pluralism has its foundation in his conception of faith as religious experience. Before exploring this issue, let it be said that, following a number of scholars (Eck 2001, 70–71; Said and Funk 2003, 21–22), the term 'religious pluralism' is used in the sense of an active engagement to arrive at mutual 'understanding' and is not simply confined to 'tolerance' of others. 'Religious pluralism calls for active engagement with the religious other not merely to tolerate, but to understand. Toleration does not require active engagement with the other. It makes no inroads on mutual ignorance' (Sachedina 2001, 35). The issue of religious pluralism is of crucial importance, as Sachedina (35) asserts, in the present context 'in which religious differences ... have been manipulated to burn bridges between communities'. That is to say, the significance of religious pluralism lies in the fact that it 'is a fundamental recourse that can be tapped by humankind to establish peace and justice in any contemporary society' (11; for a report on the urgent need for religious pluralism, see Hussain 2003, 264–267). Indeed, the emphasis upon religious pluralism results in the entrance into dialogue with one another, creating a paradigm for developing a democratic social order.

As discussed earlier, the starting point of Soroush's investigation into the nature of religion is the idea that revelation is tantamount to the Prophet's experience of divinity. In this respect, Soroush considers religiousness and religiosity in their nature and 'their continued endurance to hinge on religious experience' (2009a, 203). It is in this context that he prioritizes experiential religiosity (*tajribat-andish*) over other forms of religiosity, namely

instrumental or pragmatic religiosity and discursive or reflective religiosity. While pragmatic religiosity is based on 'heredity', 'emulation' and 'obedience' (183), discursive religiosity is identified by 'a lack of dogma or by a sense of rational wonder' (186). Experiential religiosity, or what the Prophet experienced within the revelation process and ultimately resulted in the Noble Qur'an, is placed in the highest order of religiousness. Although the era of prophetic mission is over (22), the opportunity remains for the expansion of prophetic experiences and thus the Prophet could be considered as a 'model of successful religious experience' (190). That is, the most desired form of religiosity is the form created by the Prophet. It is 'passionate, revelatory' and 'individualistic, deterministic, quintessential, reconciliatory, ecstatic, intimate, visual and saintly' (190).

For Soroush, since religion in its nature is formed on the basis of inner experience of divinity, it is inherently plural. Soroush does not consider religious faith as a category of collective knowledge; rather, he defines it as 'the exclusive experience and private property of the individual' and thus 'while there might be collective rituals, there are no collective faiths' (see Dahlen 2001, 218). In this sense, religious faith gives 'one's heart to someone along with trust and reliance to that one and to identify that one as good and to love that one' (Dabbagh 2004, 124). This type of faith is to be considered as a part of an interior and individualistic form of religiosity and is distanced from faith as traditionally understood because it can increase or decrease as love can also increase or decrease. Indeed, considering religiosity as a kind of experience leads Soroush to avoid inserting 'certainty' as an element of faith (Tavassoli 2011, 145). The important corollary of this viewpoint is to consider faith as a reliance rather than absolute certainty, opening the way for religious pluralism. In fact, to silence the notion of 'religious truth' is fundamental to Soroush's theory; religiosity does not contain any objective nature since it is intimately related to our experience of the divine, shaped within a specific cultural paradigm. This coheres with the idea that even the Prophet Muhammad experienced divinity with his subjective faculties and within the specific socio-cultural paradigms of his era. As Ghamari-Tabrizi (2008, 232) asserts, faith, achieved through religious experience 'is always fluid and conditioned by one's life circumstances; it is therefore practically conducive to pluralism'. Like Soroush, Muhammad Mojtahed Shabestari, another leading scholar in the field of Islamic hermeneutics in Iran, argues that religious pluralism must be understood in the context of religious experience. For him, the emphasis upon the notion of religious experience is a prerequisite for religious pluralism: 'those who ... consider religiosity as the product of humankind's experiential encounter with the Ultimate Truth, and regard those experiences as the source of their knowledge, would inevitably believe in religious pluralism' (Shabestari 2002, 383; see also Soroush 2009a, 133; for details of Shabestari's approach to revelation and qur'anic hermeneutics, see Akbar 2016b). As a result, for both Soroush and Shabestari, religiosities based on 'experience' inescapably give rise to pluralism.

Soroush goes on to state that the existence of various religious traditions is consistent with the divine will, and not contrary to God's will. The reason behind this is that the plurality of religions is the mere manifestation and embodiment of different responses to the Divine, experienced in human beings' various historical and cultural contexts (Soroush 1994, 194). Since the outward socio-historical conditions of prophets played a substantial role in shaping their gradual religious experiences, various religions inevitably generated different contingencies and localities. This is why the languages, juridical pronouncements

and teachings of everyday life found in various Sacred Scriptures are inevitably different from one another. In this sense, like Islam, other religions are comprised of the essential (*dhātī*) and accidental (*ʿaradī*) aspects. Accordingly, for Soroush, while the essential dimensions of religions include similar principles, they differ in their contingent aspects. The main conclusion that the pluralist must draw from this premise is the need to promote the common principles found at the core of various religious traditions and to move beyond the differences that accidental aspects of religions have brought about. In an interview with Sasan Tavassoli, Soroush asserts ‘the essence of religion is for man to put down his own self and arrogance, and bow in worship to God. I love worship and I love to see that in church or mosque’ (Tavassoli 2011, 144).

As a result, the plurality of religious traditions does not only mean that there are various ways to God, as the classical Sufis asserted, but that this plurality should also be seen as a reflection of different historical as well as cultural circumstances within which different religions emerged and evolved. This is to say, one should not only choose an a priori approach to religions, but should also opt for an a posteriori method, taking their histories and broader contextual framework into consideration (Soroush 2009a, 132). Accordingly, the intention of Soroush’s approach is not simply to establish the truth of one religion and the falsehood of others. His approach serves to fulfil the ultimate goal of religious pluralism, which, as discussed, encourages believers to arrive at mutual understanding rather than simply tolerating each other. The pluralist should take into consideration the different historical environments in which religions came into existence. With such an understanding, no one considers his/her belief as the chosen one and those of others as falsehood, leading one to consider the Truth as a shared asset. In other words, since Soroush’s method dismisses any significance of the particularities and localities of religious traditions and attaches them to the contingent context in which they appeared, it provides great impetus to the denial of any form of inherent superiority of one religion over another. Soroush emphasizes that this idea by no means implies that rituals and beliefs of religions must be left aside in order to promote pluralism: ‘this is not to say that the followers of all sects and religions should needlessly abandon their own practices, rituals and beliefs, and turn into a uniform mass’ (142). This is again due to the fact that worshipping provisions of religion such as ‘the form and appearance of rites of worship and other rites’ are considered contingent and accidental (88). Therefore, while followers of various religious traditions are not expected to abandon their worshipping practices and rituals, they are expected to understand the diversity of religious rites and practices from historical perspectives and in light of the contingent nature of their emergence. Religious experience entails that believers highlight the importance of the individual–God relation without tending to consider a particular form of practice as superior to others.

One may ask at this stage how Soroush, as a defender of religious pluralism, treats the qur’anic charges against Christians (such as that which includes Mary in the Godhead according to Q 5,119–120). This is an example in which Soroush’s idea of the dialectic nature of the Qur’an and the intimate relation between the text and its environment are applied. Soroush argues that the qur’anic charges against Christians were directed to the Christian communities present in Arabia at the time of the Prophet (Tavassoli 2011, 139). He points out that these qur’anic materials are historically conditioned and are considered as accidental aspects of revelation, and thus are not applicable for all

times and should not be viewed as directed against all Christians. Indeed, these qur'anic materials only reflect the socio-historical circumstances that the Prophet encountered during his prophetic mission. It is in this context that any commentator on the Qur'an should question whether a contextually appropriate qur'anic observation for the seventh century should be applied as a rule in the twenty-first.

It is worthy of note here that religious pluralism, for Soroush, is also based on the plurality of the interpretation of religious scriptures. If encounter with the transcendent can take place in a variety of ways and if everyone is able to conceptualize divinity with his/her subjective faculties, then there is contraction and expansion in our understanding and interpretation of religious texts. That is, the interpretation of religious scriptures 'is subject to expansion and contraction according to the assumptions preceding them and/or the questions enquiring them' (Soroush 1998b, 245, 2000, 30–38). This idea allows for multiple interpretations of a given religious text, thereby justifying religious pluralism within a particular tradition. The broader contextual framework in which a sacred text such as the Qur'an is being interpreted plays a key role in the act of interpretation and thus, as time and context change, it is absolutely natural that countless interpretive texts that differ from each other come into existence: 'religious texts and experiences naturally admit of a multitude of interpretations' (Soroush 2009a, 137).

Although, in establishing the principle of religious pluralism, Soroush draws on the tradition of mediaeval Islamic mysticism, especially Rumi (d. 1273), it must be emphasized that he borrows heavily from John Hick (for Soroush's reference to Hick, see Soroush 1998a, 19–24, 2009a, 131–134). As Ghamari-Tabrizi (2008, 225) and Dahlen (2006, 429–433) also observe, Soroush's philosophy of religious pluralism is close to Hick's. Both Soroush's and Hick's point of departure in their philosophy of religious pluralism is the notion of 'experience', and both make a close connection between religious experiences of prophets and the emergence of associated religions (Hick 1989, 104; Soroush 2009a, 125). For Hick, an 'Ultimate Reality' or 'the Real' is the actual ground for all religious experiences. Like Soroush, Hick (1989, 376) asserts 'the great world traditions constitute different conceptions and perceptions of, and responses to, the Real from within the different cultural ways of being human'. For Hick, the nature of ultimate Reality is beyond our human concepts and thus, whatever we conceive from it is inescapably 'humanly thought and experienced' (1994, 21). That is, the concept of religious truth is contextual and relational because no individual has direct access to the Real. Both Soroush and Hick believe that the contingent elements of religious traditions are inevitable responses to the entrance of the Divinity into the domains of human culture and subjectivity, experienced by our humanly limited mind. This is to say, Soroush and Hick distance themselves from traditional circles by claiming that the human mind, due to its limitedness, is unable to determine the superiority of one religious tradition or a particular belief over other religious traditions or beliefs. The corollary of this view is that different religions must be seen as 'related kin', instead of 'rival strangers', working 'toward the same goal of human transformation in mutually complementary ways' (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2008, 225).

Conclusion

The notion of religious experience as a representation for revelation and religiosity has not in general been welcomed by Muslim scholars during the course of Islamic history and

only a few pre-modern Muslim thinkers, such as al-Ghazālī, have emphasized this concept. Even al-Ghazālī's discussion of experience, as briefly alluded to above, was not mainly oriented around a development of a particular approach to the Qur'an and Islam. It must be noted that, even during the modern period, most Muslim scholars maintain that the concept of religious experience does not represent the phenomenon of *wahy* and prophethood in Islam (see, e.g. Aslan 2003) and only a few scholars, such as Iqbal and Shabestari, have considered *wahy* and consequently religiosity as an experience of God.

This article has highlighted Soroush's emphasis on the notion of 'experience' in order to underscore the potential values it holds. It stands in line with Jahanbakhsh's (2009, xxiii) observation that Soroush's project of reform begins 'with a rereading at the deepest levels [of religion] in order to build a cohesive and systematic intellectual edifice more suited to modern times'. Soroush's reform project also falls within the scope of Muhammad Arkoun's (d. 2010) idea that the traditional concept of revelation (or what he places in the realm of the 'unthought') should be subject to re-examination, re-reading and re-interpretation (Arkoun 2002, 73). Soroush, as shown, has recognized the need for the importance of new theological approaches towards revelation and religion. Such new theological approaches do not remain confined in theoretical discourses, and have some significant repercussions that can affect contemporary Islamic practices. This article has argued that Soroush's conception of religion as 'experience' is a point of departure for his approach towards rethinking qur'anic laws as well as his philosophy of religious pluralism, two issues that are necessary for approaching Islam in the present context. Revelation, for Soroush, means that the Prophet had an inner experience of divinity. Since Muhammad was a human being, his religious experience was human, and thus had a historical and this-worldly basis. In fact, when revelation descends from heaven, it becomes a worldly experience and thus becomes subject to natural laws. In other words, when the revelation enters into the realm of history, it becomes subject to the laws of society, and inevitably becomes particular, and culturally-historically specific. This idea allows Soroush to distinguish between essential and accidental aspects of Islam, and to argue for the contingency of qur'anic rules. Soroush's theory of prophetic experience also results in a pluralist perspective on religions since, for him, the existence of various religious traditions is simply an inevitable manifestation of the various socio-historical conditions within which different religions emerged. This is to say, his emphasis on the human side of revelation and its experiential character leads him to defend a deontological theory of religious truth.

This article has also shown that other Muslim and non-Muslim scholars such as Iqbal and Hick, who have frequently focused on the theme of experience throughout their writings, found an independent content for religion by emphasizing its ethical dimensions, and thus frequently favoured the contingency of religious laws. In addition, their emphasis upon the notion of experience as the basis for religious belief opens the door for a genuine religious pluralism because different religions, from this perspective, are inevitable embodiments of various conceptions of the divine within different cultural paradigms. This coheres very well with what Raimon Panikkar (1996, 253) identifies as 'true pluralism', the notion that challenges 'absolutism not by an (equally absolute) anti-absolutism, but by relativizing all absolutisms by means of searching for their contextuality'. In this sense, it is my contention that the emphasis on the theme of experience in approaching religion can be considered as a strong basis for pluralism in today's world.

Notes

1. William James's (1968, 41) aim in applying the term 'religious experience' was, similarly, to defend religion in an age when so much hope had already been invested in science.
2. It is also worthy of note that, in the West, some philosophers used the concept of 'religious experience' to justify belief in God. Scholars like Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (1983, 16–91) argue that belief in God does not require the support of propositional evidence in order to be rational. That is, belief in God and divinity should be grounded on genuine experiences rather than on other forms of logical argumentations.
3. Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), the north Indian Muslim poet and philosopher, is the one who pioneered this approach in the twentieth century, as discussed later in this article. It must be noted that there are even some contemporary Muslim scholars who argue that it is unacceptable to speak about 'an experience of God' within the context of Islam (see, e.g. Aslan 2003).
4. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (2000, ix) identify Soroush as an 'iconic intellectual'. According to them, 'iconic intellectuals' are those who 'are the producers as well as embodiments of ideas and ideals and as such they are held in semireligious veneration'.
5. This book includes a collection of Soroush's articles.
6. It is due to his break from the traditional understanding of revelation that some scholars place him 'on the edge of a razor blade between faith and heresy' (Ghamari-Tabrizi 2008, 226).
7. In the Islamic philosophical tradition, in particular in the ideas proposed by al-Fārābī and Ibn Sinā, there is a tendency to explain prophecy and revelation in terms of psychology. Theories of revelation proposed by al-Fārābī and Ibn Sinā are reflected in aspects of Soroush's understanding of revelation. For them, the Prophet had to be prepared enough before gaining knowledge from the active intelligence. This is to say, the process of revelation is divine but is also conditioned by the preparation of the human intellect. In addition, a prophet's human mind is not in the stage of unconsciousness, but rather actively participates in the process of gaining knowledge from active intellect, which is to say that the Prophet played a key role not only in preparing himself to become the recipient of revelation, but also during the revelation process itself. For some references, see Walbridge (2011, 78–85); Whittingham (2011, 52–54); Griffel (2010).
8. Soroush's and Esack's idea of revelation is normally dealt with in the context of discussion of the Prophet's personality and the expansion of his prophetic mission. This emphasis on the Prophet's personality is absent in traditional accounts of revelation. The so-called 'liberal' contemporary scholars, in a similar vein, often neglect to establish a link between the Prophet's personality and the revelations he received. For example, for the liberal scholar Malik Bennabi, revelations took place 'according to definite measures and in varying time intervals in such a way that was clearly indifferent to the personal state of the person who was receiving them' (El-Mesawi 2006, 223).
9. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine in detail Soroush's ideas about auditory or visual aspects of revelation. For recent lectures by Soroush (in Persian) concerning his ideas about visual dimensions of revelation, see Soroush (2015a, 2015b).
10. Oddbjørn Leirvik (2015, 107) writes: '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'.
11. This idea differs from the approach of the Ash'aris to the Qur'an. To Ash'aris, the Qur'an was uncreated and eternal (*qadīm*). To quote the medieval theologian al-Nasafi (d. 1114), 'the Qur'an is God's speaking, which is one of His attributes. Now God in all of His attributes is One, and with all His attributes is eternal and not contingent' (quoted in Saeed 2006, 38). The Mu'tazilis, on the other hand, identified the Qur'an as the created speech of God, often arguing that believing in the eternity of the Qur'an would lead to idolatry. They distinguished between God's essence and his attributes. For details, see Campanini (2012, 41).
12. It must be noted that there is a significant difference between the science of 'occasion of revelation' and Soroush's contextual approach to the Qur'an. The broad meaning of 'context' as

proposed by contemporary contextualist scholars such as Soroush refers to the socio-historical context in which revelation and the Qur'an came into existence. This often sheds light on determining which aspects of revelation are universal and which aspects are merely particular to the context of revelation. However, the science of 'occasion of revelation' as proposed by traditional scholars only reduced the 'event-ness' of the text to the story telling because, according to the generally accepted idea, the Qur'an was a 'timeless' text. In the classical Islamic disciplines such as the science of occasion of revelation, as Farid Esack (1997, 61) notes, 'the hermeneutical problem was always experienced and actively pursued rather than thematically posed'.

13. Soroush here becomes close to Muhammad Shahrur, a leading Syrian scholar of Islam, who explicitly acknowledges the exemplary life of the Prophet Muhammad. According to Shahrur (1997, 8), Muhammad provided a model for Muslims of following generations, but this does not mean that 'we must make the same choices that he made'.
14. Ahmed (2013, 89) cites this statement by Soroush: 'A person who has religious experience is like a sculptor who is never satisfied with the figure he sculpts. He is constantly chipping away at it, remoulding it and shaping it into a new form'. Ahmed concludes from Soroush's description of 'one who is never satisfied' that religious faith has an ever-changing characteristic. This coheres very well with the idea that religious faith based on experience is inherently plural.
15. In a similar vein, Soroush (2000, 35) writes 'interpretation without personal opinion is utterly impossible'.
16. In a similar vein, Fazlur Rahman (1982, 20) argues that the Qur'an is primarily a book of ethics and guidance, rather than a book of law.

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