

INTRODUCTION

Abdulkarim Soroush's Neo-Rationalist Approach to Islam

For over two centuries Muslim societies have been experiencing the challenges of modernity and modernization. During this time their response in terms of thought and practice has swung like a pendulum between premature or even “radical” secularization (in the name of modernity) and the extreme reactionary trends of religious revivalism and fanaticism (in the name of religion). Now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, it is only natural to expect that this pendulum should begin to find its balance. It is at this balance point that gradually, but surely, the pieces of a reformed Islam are coming together. The Islam that is emerging draws upon a rich religious, ethical and intellectual heritage and is responsive, in a positive and serious sense, to the imperatives of modern human values.

This book offers its readers an overview of certain substantially important dimensions of this reformed Islam, which I would call “Neo-Rationalist Islam.” In order to explain the features of Neo-Rationalist Islam, it seems necessary to situate it first in the broader context of Muslim responses to modernity. Much has been written on the latter subject, and several categorizations and taxonomies applied in an attempt to differentiate the types of Muslim responses to modernity. One commonly used model is the bipolar category of fundamentalist/militant/political/ideological Islam versus a moderate/non-militant/modernist/liberal Islam. If we broadly accept this notion of fundamentalist vs. liberal poles as indicators of the two ends of a very wide and heterogeneous spectrum, Neo-Rationalist Islam certainly does sit on the liberal side of the divide inasmuch as it is a reaction to the opposite pole and departs from traditional orthodoxy on a number of points as well. Nevertheless, it also differs from its other siblings under the overall umbrella of reform/liberal Islam. Among the features of a liberal presentation of Islam there are: a call for the rereading of religious texts, rejuvenation of the Islamic intellectual and ethical traditions, a greater role for reason, social and legal improvements (particularly for women), public participation in politics and reopening the gates of *ijtihad*. Surely almost all representatives of liberal Islam have called for at least one or a combination of a few of these themes. Therefore, it can be said that

there have been as many liberal Islams as the number of individual reformists who have supported one or more of the above issues. This is not to suggest that anything is wrong with this diversity of focuses and different degrees of emphasis; indeed, it may reveal an existing dynamism for change among Muslims. However, a crucial question inevitably imposes itself: Why is it that, despite all these attempts at religious reform and modernization, no fundamental or comprehensive change has yet occurred that could take root and grow systematically from that soil? Some might provide social and political explanations that could partially, I think, account for the situation. Nevertheless, it would be somehow misleading to place all the blame on the unfavourable political and economic conditions of Muslim societies.

From an intellectual perspective, at least, the question invites a critical examination of all these disjointed efforts on a grander scale to discover possible shortcomings. Have these efforts fallen short of bringing about substantial changes in Muslim thought and societies because they engage with the wrong questions in the first place? Have they misperceived the nature and depth of the challenges posed by modernity? Have they addressed the “effects,” so to speak, and not the “root causes,” thus improvising provisional and incomplete solutions? Or, has it been so because of a lack of theoretical depth, harmony and/or a matrix? Fortunately, it seems that the modern Muslim intellectual trajectory is entering a stage of self-examination that will allow it to overcome its past shortcomings and where its discourse will soon leave behind its habit of addressing disparate and circumstantial issues. It is at this critical stage of intellectual maturity that Neo-Rationalist Islam presently stands, calling for systematic approach to reform through rethinking the underpinnings of the tradition.

Islamic thought, like any other intellectual tradition, has gone through a period of development and will surely continue to do so. Contemporary Muslim intellectuals, along with their societies and regardless of ethnic, linguistic and sectarian differences, have come a long way and have learned some hard and often costly lessons to reach this point. Whatever the achievement of the next phase of this evolving intellectual maturity, it will undoubtedly be the result of their cumulative and collective endeavours. To cite but a single example, the contributions of Iranian religious intellectuals in this regard have been substantial. One practical reason (among others) for this has been their experience of the politicization and ideologization of Islam during the 1970s and 1980s

that culminated in the establishment of an Islamic regime. Islamic rule posed for them tremendous first hand challenges, and yet, in the last twenty years or so, a few outstanding reformist thinkers have emerged in Iran, each contributing to one dimension or another—depending on their areas of specialty and training—in shaping a non-political, Neo-Rationalist reformed Islam. The very eminent and one of the most influential figures among them has been Abdulkarim Soroush, whose consequential ideas have set in motion new religious discourse and intellectual trends in contemporary Iran. It would indeed be no exaggeration to say that this point of religious reform might never have been reached so soon without the contribution of Abdulkarim Soroush. He is undoubtedly one of the most systematic architects of the Neo-Rationalist Islam, and one whose ideas have introduced a paradigm shift in Muslim religious thought.

Towards a New Theology

The systematic and comprehensive nature of Soroush's approach to religious reform is mirrored in his own intellectual trajectory. In the course of his intellectual development, Soroush has dealt with issues related to the three interrelated realms of "religion," the "interpretation of religion/text" and the "practical application" thereof. Since the late-1980s he has proposed two ground-breaking theories.¹ The first of these was his seminal hermeneutical and epistemological theory known as the "Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge" (1987–1989), which deals with the "interpretation/understanding" of religion. The second was his theory of "Expansion of Prophetic Experience," a theory about "religion" that he presented between 1997 and 1999. Since then, drawing upon these two grand theories, he has been addressing some of the most pertinent practical issues in Muslim societies—issues such as religion and democracy, religious pluralism and religion and human rights. In his earlier phase, which began with the "Theory of Contraction

¹ For an account of his other public activities and a very comprehensive intellectual autobiography of Soroush see his book: *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, trans. and ed. Mahmoud Sadri, Ahmad Sadri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Introduction and Chapter One. Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran (1953–2000): From Bazargan to Soroush* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), Chapter Five.

and Expansion of Religious Knowledge,” he dealt mainly with the historical evolutions and devolutions that occur in the “understanding of religion,” offering a hermeneutical and epistemological theory to explain this phenomenon.² Later on, without essentially departing from that path, Soroush moved on to a more challenging venture: that of analysing the contraction and expansion of “religion” itself due to the role of human agency and historical contexts. In his theory of “The Expansion of Prophetic Experience,”³ a hallmark of this new phase, Soroush lays the foundations of an Islamic reformed theology. In the process he explores and explains, among other things, issues such as the historical and human nature of religion, religious experience, revelation, the role and place of the Prophet in the prophetic mission, the position of scripture and the interrelation of all these. In doing this, Soroush deploys a host of supporting arguments and ideas drawn from classical Islamic theology, philosophy and mysticism while at the same time adopting analytical rational approaches from outside the domain of religion. This represents an attempt to actualize what he has long been calling for, namely, a new rational theology. Soroush is convinced that a viable and meaningful Islamic reform in modern times is not possible unless it begins systematically at the foundational and theoretical levels, particularly in the realms of ethics and theology. He argues that modernizing Islamic thought and its empowerment does not simply mean posing new/modern questions to an outdated frame of references and working out their solutions by using old concepts. Modernity consists, more than anything else, of new concepts and frames of reference of which rationality is the most substantial. Theology is the realm where fundamental concepts such as God, humanity, revelation, prophethood, etc., can be revised and redefined. Soroush’s training in analytical philosophy does not allow him to be content with unsystematic, piecemeal adjustments and changes. His erudition in

² Abdulkarim Soroush, *Qabd wa Bast-e Te’urik-e Shari’at: Nazariyah-e Takamul-e Ma’rifat-e Dini* [The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Religion: The Theory of Evolution of Religious Knowledge], 3rd ed. (Tehran: Sirat, 1373/1994). English readers may find the core arguments of this theory in his book *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam* (Chapter 5) and in his article: “The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge,” in Charles Kurzman (ed.), *Liberal Islam* (Oxford University Press, 1998). An English translation of the book is underway while its Arabic translation is now available under the title *Al-Qabd wa al-Bast fi al-shari’ah*, trans. Dalal ‘Abbas (Beirut: Dar al-Jadid, 2002).

³ This volume presents his essential writings related to this theory (see the Preface for details).

traditional Islamic theology and philosophy, on the other hand, helps him to understand and discern points of both weakness and strength to see what can be built upon and what should be left behind.

Main Features of Neo-Rationalist Islam

Abdulkarim Soroush's Neo-Rationalist project puts forward one of the most comprehensive, systematic, and balanced presentations of a reformed Islam thus far presented by an individual thinker. It is comprehensive in that it deals simultaneously with all three aforementioned aspects of religion: "religion", the "interpretation/understanding" of religion/text and the "practical application" thereof. Unlike other reform projects that usually focus on certain practical issues of modern Muslim life and call for change and reinterpretation in relation only to these matters, Soroush's Neo-Rationalist project takes a more comprehensive approach. This manifests itself in its recognition of the historicity of all three of these realms and in its consequent acknowledgement of the role of reason in them all. As such, this foundational and comprehensive scheme bypasses the typical theoretical problems that usually emerge as a result of only partially rationalized interpretations of religious tradition—problems such as incongruities between proposed solutions and the so-called fixed and ahistorical Qura'nic pronouncements that have so often impeded reform. One of the best examples of such problems is women's rights issues. Regardless of the overall will, public pressure and numerous scholarly attempts at proposing legal improvements in this respect through readjusting shari'ah laws to suit modern conditions, problems persist due to the apparent incompatibility of these efforts with explicit scriptural pronouncements regarding women.

Soroush's Neo-Rationalist reform project is systematic in two senses. It is systematic in itself because it has recognized and defined problems posed by the challenges of modernity at the foundational level, where their root causes are organically connected. That is to say, it does not address disparate or singular problems in a diffused and segmented manner, but rather deals with why and how these problems are generated. It looks into the interaction of theoretical underpinnings of ethical, theological, legal, social and political problems and tries to resolve them at their root. Besides, Soroush's theories about religion and the understanding of it provide a cohesive matrix and frame of reference that allow for working out systematic, logically harmonious

and rationally defensible solutions for these problems—as is manifested in his own writings.

The third characteristic of Soroush's Neo-Rationalism is its balanced nature. Faced with the swing of Muslim thought between the two extremes of radical/strong secularization and a maximalist/strongly radical understanding of religion, it successfully creates a zone at the center where a measured secularism and minimalist understanding of religion meet in harmony. It involves secularism by recognizing the role of human agency—that is history and human reason—in the three aforementioned aspects of religion. It is ready to desacralize two of them completely, that is, (a) the understanding/interpretation of religion and (b) the practical application of the latter in the socio-political and legal affairs of a religious society by relinquishing them to reason independent of revelation. However, it upholds the sacredness of “religious experience,” the essence of religion, to the extent that it involves encountering the Transcendent, albeit insisting that religious experience itself is influenced by historical and cognitive conditions of the subject as well.⁴ The understanding of religion, according to Soroush, is an age-bound and context-bound human endeavour nourished by other fields of human knowledge that are not religious. Similarly, the governance and administration of the practical aspects of life in a religious society are rational in nature and decided by the collective will of its members. The main function of religion is not to offer practical plans for the everyday affairs of the society. Indeed, if anything at all is found in religion of that nature, it is, at best, marginal or even accidental. In other words, religion deserves a very minimal role in the public sphere.

Moreover, ethics in Soroush's view is independent of and prior to religion. If secularism means administering society by the rule of reason independent from revelation, Neo-Rationalist Islam advocates legitimizing reason as the base-foundation and life blood of the social, political and ethical institutions and norms in a community of believers, while at the same time allowing for their expression of religious sentiments. This latter point, however, is subject to an important condition, namely, that it not run contrary to or negate the human rights and values derived *a priori* from reason independent of revelation. In other words, unlike

⁴ Soroush rejects the typical dichotomy of secular/non-secular and insists that we have secularisms. Allusions to this position can be found in Chapter Eight in this book.

maximal/strong secularism, which rejects outright anything religious in the public sphere, the minimal secularism of the Neo-Rationalist project allows it an examined and rationally measured role in a religious society. By minimal religion (a notion elaborated below in detail in Chapter Five) is meant the desacralizing of everything temporal (like politics), which in fact possesses no transcendental nature and has been wrongly linked with religious faith. Or, to put it differently, it involves minimizing expectations of religion in matters related to public spheres of life. Soroush emphasises “religious experience,” which is private by nature though influenced by external circumstance, as the core of religion and religiosity vis à vis the outward practices of one’s faith.

A brief exposition of some other distinguishing features of Neo-rationalist Islam is in order here. Neo-rationalist Islam has its roots in the intellectual tradition of the Mu‘tazilah, the rationalist theological and semi-philosophical school of thought influential in the 2nd Islamic century (9th century CE). As such it is not an alien construct, being possessed of some indigenous continuity. Soroush’s Neo-Rationalism is, in a sense, a reinvention of Mu‘tazilite rationalism. Nevertheless, it differs from the rationalist tradition of the Mu‘tazilah in that the latter was based on an intellectual world-view of its own time, dictated by the philosophy and science of the 9th century CE. Neo-rationalist Islam, on the other hand, has evolved within the intellectual framework of the modern age and benefits from its philosophical and scientific rationality. The prefix “Neo” points to this difference. However, inasmuch as their rationalism is based on and recognizes a “Reason” independent of “Revelation,” they are effectively the same. This recognition, of course, entails some unorthodox theories regarding prophecy, the nature of revelation, the interpretation of scripture, the underlying assumptions of law/shari‘ah and, most importantly, ethical beliefs.

The Neo-Rationalist theory of rational ethics is based on the assumption that ethical right and wrong can be ascertained by natural reason independent of the teachings of revelation. This, of course, has a wide range of implications for people’s rights, duties, choices and responsibilities, since primary ethical values such as freedom, equality and justice are notions independent of and prior to religion. In other words, this creates a paradigm shift in the traditional orthodox view of the role of religion in both the private and, more significantly, the public sphere. There have been some contemporary Muslim reformers who have moved in this direction, though not always in a comprehensive or

systematic manner. Yet while the demand for a greater role for reason has been a recurrent theme in Muslim modernist/liberal literature, at least from the late nineteenth century onward, in almost all cases this role has been conceived of as subordinate to revelation and its exercise still circumscribed by the boundaries of tradition. Consequently, reason has, at best, been restricted in the legal domain to the exercise of traditional *ijtihad*, whose underlying premises in themselves beg independent rational evaluation and critique in the light of modernity.

By contrast, Neo-Rationalist Islam is rationalist not so much in the traditional sense of putting forward a rational defence of religion, but mostly because it is chiefly concerned with the dialectic of faith and reason. It does not apologize for the elements of doubt or questioning since these are inherent components of any critical rational exercise. It welcomes critical rationalism, for this will, in the final analysis, enhance and empower one's faith and render religion and religiosity ever-expandable notions. This of course has implications for notions of belief and disbelief as well, which can sometimes be dramatically at odds with orthodox notions, not the least being recognition of plurality in understanding religion and types of religiosity.

Neo-Rationalist Islam also departs from some other reformist expressions in its approach to the interpretation of scripture. It employs modern "hermeneutical" methods that incorporate rational and historical assumptions and favours critical analysis of texts. This may be compared with some other liberal presentations of Islam in which the treatment of scripture is still mostly subordinate to the "exegetical" standards and parameters set by classical methods. These "exegetical" methods in turn rely heavily on traditional approaches and materials from within the religious tradition, such as *hadith*, biographical literature and classical *tafsirs*.

In a broader sense, one can say that Neo-Rationalist Islam distinguishes itself from other reformist/liberal projects as far as the latter's treatment of "tradition" is concerned. It seems that other liberal presentations have mostly embraced inherited "tradition" and its components—the scripture, history, institutions and ethical system of Islam—in their entirety and have not always been ready to step away from them and analyse this heritage critically from the outside. In other words, their embrace of the tradition leads to limited and often insubstantial criticism. Their fervent desire for reform and modernization is more in the nature of reshuffling the furniture in the house of tradi-

tion rather than renovating the structure itself. It is thus with a much more creative attitude that Neo-Rationalism approaches the repository of religious knowledge and the traditional intellectual heritage. In the hierarchy of all religious sciences and doctrines, it assigns priority to foundational ones and begins reform with a rereading at the deepest levels in order to build a cohesive and systematic intellectual edifice more suited to modern times. That is why in the Neo-Rationalist project creating a new theology and new ethical theory is given precedence over legal and jurisprudential reforms. For in the end, the latter without the former will produce only piecemeal and provisional solutions.

However, Neo-Rationalism's treatment of the tradition is neither a total rejection of the old in favour of the new nor a total and an uncritical embrace in the name of "preserving the legacy." Rather, it is a critical adoption of selected elements of this legacy based on a foundational epistemological principle, namely, recognizing the historicity and historical expansion of religion and religious knowledge. In short, it acknowledges the endless possibility for change and creativity even in this domain. Neo-Rationalist Islam interacts with the historical development of religion inasmuch as and in the same critical manner that it engages in dialogue with and borrows from rational achievements outside the tradition. Accordingly, it can reject with authority certain outdated elements and paradigms or create new ones. Thus, for instance, it critically and prudently benefits from the Muslim mystical tradition (of course in the context of discovery and not in that of justification), while at the same time selectively adopting certain western philosophical and rational frames of reference. In sum, one can argue that, if al-Ghazali's *Revival of the Religious Sciences* and Muhammad Iqbal's *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* have been the iconic moments of past scholarship, Soroush's Neo-Rationalist project is that of the present.

With regard to its treatment of 'modernity,' Neo-rationalist Islam also stands apart from some other liberal reformist projects. Unlike the latter, it is very much cognizant of the epistemological ruptures produced by modernity. It is attentive to the philosophical and conceptual underpinnings of modernity and does not confuse them with its outward products—modernization, so to speak. Rather, it tries to institutionalize, as much as possible, these conceptual underpinnings by weaving them into the very foundation of its new rational theology and rational system of ethics. It has often been due to such negligence or

misunderstanding of modernity that Muslim reformers have contented themselves with drawing superficial parallels between the achievements of modernity and various obscure and underdeveloped notions existing in the tradition. This lack of depth is perhaps best revealed in their prevailing discourse on democracy where, for instance, the traditional notions of *shura*, *bay'ah* and *ijma'* have been over-emphatically equated with the principles of democracy. This is done, of course, at the expense of any substantial discussion of *a priori* human rights such as freedom, equality or sovereignty and by confusing the notions of "rights" and "duties." Another focus of the contemporary Muslim reform project has been legal reform, i.e., modernization of the shari'ah, which has similarly been carried out in an expedient and piecemeal manner (such as in matters related to women's rights). Evidently, only superficial changes can be made to a legal system like the shari'ah as long as its philosophical and ethical underpinnings have not undergone substantial revision and harmonious restructuring.

Principles and Presuppositions

As a basis for a much-needed reformed theology, this book offers a Neo-rationalist theory about religion and its study. It looks at the historicity, humanness and thus expandability of religion/revelation. It rests on certain premises and offers some broad presuppositions useful for understanding religion and interpreting religious texts as well. In doing so:

- a. it emphasises a distinction between the internals and externals of the religion (intra-religious and extra-religious elements);
- b. it explains the relationship between the two;
- c. it clarifies ways in which the externals impact on the internals and vice-versa.

Soroush's aim is to introduce a balance into Muslims' perception of the Prophet, the nature of the revelation and the role of the Qur'an—thus, equilibrium with respect to expectations of religion in general. This balance, Soroush believes, has been lost due to the mystics' emphasis on the celestial, supra-human and spiritual figure of the Prophet on the one hand and the ahistorical dogmatism of orthodoxy on the other, which has reduced the Prophet's role in revelation to nothing more

than that of a meta-historical instrument or a mere receiving agent of revelation. This existing imbalance has clouded Muslims' judgment and understanding of their religion, Soroush says, and continues to impair any new interpretation of scripture (especially of the Qur'an), consequently preventing any creative representation of Islam. It also seriously impedes engagement in novel and viable *ijtihad* or reinterpretations of the Shari'ah, to give just one practical example. Soroush cannot emphasise enough, as is evident throughout this book, that contemporary Muslims should be aware of and sensitive toward the existing distinction between those elements in their religion that are "essentially religious" and those that are "accidentally religious" and associated with the essentials in one way or another. He is not claiming that there exists such a thing as "purely religious" by itself, any more than there can exist a pure race or a pure language. He is aware that religions neither take shape nor operate in a vacuum and, more importantly, that there is not even such thing as an "un-interpreted" religious experience. He believes in and explains the inevitability of such a mix when the transcendent comes down to earth and has no choice but to submit to temporal parameters—naturalization of the supernatural, so to speak. What he describes and prescribes is that we distinguish the two domains of the essential and accidental in order to give them their due status and levels of significance when interpreting religious texts or when implementing and practicing religious injunctions.

In order to elaborate the mechanism of the dialogue (to use Soroush's own phrasing) between the inside of the religion and the outside, he propounds certain broad presuppositions/theses. These theses, which are fully elaborated and carefully reasoned, are to be found mostly in Part One of this book. They may be summarized as follows:

1. Revelation is the same as the "religious experience" of the Prophet;
2. Prophetic experience expands as the Prophet's personality expands;
3. The Prophet's personality expands both internally (as his intellectual and spiritual capabilities evolve) and externally (as his societal life and conditions change);
4. Revelation is subordinate to the Prophet's personality and not vice-versa;
5. While the Prophet's message, the formulation of his religious experience, is final (i.e., he is the Seal of prophets according to the Qur'an), it can be infinitely expanded and enriched through the religious experiences of other believers;

6. Religion/scripture includes essentials as well as accidentals, i.e., not everything in the scripture is necessarily religious;
7. Religion/scripture provides the “necessary minimum” guidance for salvation and not the “maximum possible”;
8. What is known as the perfection of religion is a minimal and not a maximal perfection;
9. Expectations from religion must be minimal;
10. External, rational, historical presuppositions are everywhere at work either to shape the formless “experience” or afterwards to facilitate the understanding and/or interpreting religion and scripture.

It is in accordance with these presuppositions/theses that Soroush believes contemporary Muslims should try to understand, interpret and, more importantly, adjust their expectations of religion. Soroush’s aim is to accentuate the historicity and humanness, the natural side, of the religion by showing the interactive relationship of the Prophet’s experience with his community and societal milieu on the one hand—what he calls “external expansion”—and the dialogical relationship of revelation with the Prophet’s inner developing personality and intellectual capacities—“internal expansion”—on the other. “In the encounter between all these human elements,” Soroush says, “a human religion is gradually born which is in keeping with human beings and an answer to their real circumstances” (Chapter One).

What follows here is to highlight some major points of Soroush’s arguments presented in this book, which is divided into two parts. Part One includes subjects mostly related to Soroush’s theories on religion (revelation, scripture and prophecy), while the chapters in Part Two include discussions that reflect some practical implications of these theories, particularly in relation to what it means to “be religious.”

Part One *Prophetic Experience and the Text*

In Chapter One, without negating the divine sanctity and authenticity of the spirit of Islam, Soroush places emphasis on its gradual, historical and experiential genesis. He contends that “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-realised prophetic experience.” He also puts this in clearer terms, stating that

“the Prophet did not adapt abstract experiences to reality.” Rather, the actually existing world of his time, with all its problems, questions and intellectual and cultural resources, played a substantial role in the gradual process of a dialogue between heaven and earth. Similarly, the Prophet’s gradually burgeoning personality affected the evolutionary process of his inward spiritual experience. The Prophet’s personality, Soroush argues, “was both the receptacle and the generator, both the subject and the object of his religious revelatory experiences.” Therefore, “[Islam] is nothing other than the condensed sum and substance of his individual and social experiences.” What could be some implicit corollaries of these statements are made explicit by Soroush in his further pivotal statement that “revelation was under his [Prophet] sway, not he under the sway of revelation.” In fact, he claims that “if the Prophet had lived longer and encountered more events, his reactions and responses would inevitably have grown as well . . . [and] the Qur’an could have been much more than it is.” It would, perhaps, have had a second volume, as he says elsewhere.

These statements place Soroush’s views in sharp contrast to the traditional position of Muslim orthodoxy with regard to the Prophet, revelation and the Qur’an. Although Muslim orthodoxy (in compliance with the Qur’anic position) reiterates the humanity of Muhammad, it has always rejected the idea of any influence on his part on the revelatory message. In traditional Muslim religious literature, Muhammad’s role in the process of revelation and production of the scripture is reduced to that of being a mere agent of God’s Word. Moreover, the insistence of mainstream orthodoxy on Muhammad being unlettered (*ummi*) relates more than anything else to the supremely significant doctrine that the Qur’an *is*, literally speaking, the Word of God. It is an affirmation that the Prophet’s personality, mind, and language had no influence whatsoever on God’s message. His mind was a pure vessel for the revelation that he simply received and passed on to humanity. Hence, the message, the Qur’an, was not contaminated by any human influence. According to this understanding, the process of revelation, or the Prophet’s encounter with the divine, was simply a mechanical one. Absent from this traditional account, however, is any analysis of the role of the person of the Prophet, the only non-divine or human element involved in the process. Likewise, an analysis is missing of the impact on the content of revelation of the society and culture that Muhammad was addressing. And when traditional *tafsirs* (commentary literature) do treat certain episodes in Muhammad’s life, or references

in the Qur'an to events and personalities in his community, their function is simply to account for the "occasion of revelation" of the specific verses in question.

Nevertheless, there have been some scholars who have tried to explain the mechanism of revelation. They have speculated and expounded on questions such as the nature of revelation, the *kalam-e Bari* (Divine Speech), the angel of revelation, the question of whether the Qur'an was sent down from the *lauh al-mahfuz* (the Heavenly Preserved Tablet) to the Prophet's heart/or mind all at once or in piecemeal, etc.⁵ Also, there have been many traditional literary and philological studies of the Qur'an that discern, among other things, the existence of non-Arabic vocabulary in its text, or that explain the etymology of certain ancient Arabic words, etc. Nevertheless, these studies are not concerned with the implications of such occurrences for revelation.⁶

Some Other Contemporary Views on Revelation and the Text

Among other contemporary Muslim scholars who have seriously proposed somewhat non-traditional explanations of the nature of revelation and/or engaged in contextualization of the scripture, one may point to the late Fazlur Rahman (Pakistan, d. 1988) and to the contemporary thinkers Muhammad Arkoun (Algeria, b. 1928), Nasr Hamed Abu Zayd (Egypt, b. 1943) and Muhammad Murtazavi Shabestari (Iran, b. 1924). In what follows the aim is not to compare and contrast the ideas of these scholars in any detail (such a study would require separate treatment), but to show the range of efforts made to explain the historical aspect of the revelation and its understanding that entails and enhances the revival of the Islamic rational tradition in the modern era. It will also help to situate Soroush's ideas in this continuum of efforts. Although there are considerable differences among these individuals in terms of their approaches and conclusions, there are many similarities too.

⁵ There had been some earlier philosophical speculation on this subject by medieval philosophers like Ibn Sina, Al-Farabi and al-Ghazali, whose ideas were not welcomed by the mainstream orthodoxy. For an exposition of this subject see: Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*, 2nd Ed., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

⁶ For a classical approach to these questions see, for instance, the works of Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (1445–1507); for a modern work see, for instance, Arthur Jeffrey's *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Baroda, India: Oriental Institute, 1938).

Fazlur Rahman, both as a scholar and as a Muslim intellectual reformist, was concerned about the modern relevance of the Islamic norms and values embedded in the Qur'an. It was this aim, i.e., reformation of Islamic thought and Muslim society, which engaged his interest in literary, philosophical, sociological and hermeneutical discussion of the Qur'an and not vice-versa.

Criticizing orthodoxy and medieval thinkers for their lack of "the intellectual capacity to say both that the Qur'an is entirely the Word of God and, in an ordinary sense, also entirely the word of Muhammad,"⁷ Fazlur Rahman developed his theory of "feeling-idea-word" about the nature of revelation. He connected Divine Word to Muhammad's word through first establishing that "the basic *élan* of the Qur'an is moral," and that "the moral law and religious values are God's command."⁸ Second, he stated that:

When Muhammad's moral intuitive perception rose to the highest point and became identified with the moral law itself..., the Word was given with the inspiration itself. The Qur'an is thus pure Divine Word, but of course, it is equally intimately related to the inmost personality of the Prophet Muhammad whose relationship to it cannot be mechanically conceived like that of a record.⁹

Here, Fazlur Rahman is closer than ever to Soroush, who explicitly maintains that the Divine Speech (*kalam-e Bari*) is the same as the Prophet's speech (*kalam-e Payambar*), although he takes a different route to prove it (as we shall see below). Nevertheless, both of them depart from the supernaturalism of dogmatic theology with regard to revelation and emphasise its natural, human aspect. However, Fazlur Rahman's theory of revelation, i.e., that divinely revealed "idea-words" were transformed into the Prophet's "sound-words," remains primarily, if not exclusively, a means of explaining the inner, psychological process of technical revelation—something more or less of the same nature that characterized medieval philosophical and theological debates over the nature of *kalam-e Bari*. Perhaps because recognizing a role for the Prophet in revelation could have tremendous implications for the latter's possible impact on the content of the Qur'an, Fazlur Rahman did not directly link the two in his theory of revelation. Nor did

⁷ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*. 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 31.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

he pursue it any further in his later work. Nevertheless recognizing the circumstantiality of revelation, he devoted his attempt to develop a theory of Qur'an interpretation known as the "double movement" theory, consisting of two aims: first to decipher the original meaning of revelation within the socio-moral context of the Prophetic era at both the micro (Arabia) and macro (world) levels; and second, to go back to the Qur'an and reread it applying these derived original values and principles to the contemporary context. This hermeneutical method, if applied in its ideal format, can effectively improve legal *ijtihad* since those legal injunctions will be re-interpreted in the light of what Fazlur Rahman called the unified *Weltanschauung* of the whole Qur'an. Fazlur Rahman's interpretive model remains one of the most interesting and cohesive attempts to make the Qur'anic imperatives relevant to the modern world.¹⁰

While Fazlur Rahman's hermeneutical theory deals with the understanding and interpretation of the content of the Qur'an, Soroush's theory of "The Expansion of Prophetic Experience" searches deeper by examining "how" and "why" certain things would have inevitably found their way into the content of the revelation in the first place. It seems that, while other reformers move from Qur'an's own content to its outside context in order to reconstruct and analyse the history of revelation and the value system behind some of its teachings (inevitably limiting thereby the scope of their investigation), Soroush moves in the opposite direction. He proceeds from the world of externals to the internals of the religion and scripture, since for him, the externals and their impact are much greater both quantitatively and qualitatively. The subjective role in revelation that Soroush's theory ascribes to the Prophet and his societal milieu in general lead him to theorize a "created" nature of the Qur'an far beyond even Mu'tazilite doctrine. It is a position that he confirmed to this author when he said that "yes, the Divine Speech (*Kalam-e Bari*) was created in its very inception and conception in the Prophet's mind." Soroush could not have emphasised the historicity of the revelation more than that. Yet, of course being guided by his religious impulse and his devotion to and love of Prophet Muhammad, he confirms and reiterates that the Prophet's personality

¹⁰ It is merited to note that Amina Wadud, the renowned female Muslim scholar and activist, has developed a feminist interpretation of the Qur'an based on Fazlur Rahman's interpretative methodology. See her book, *Qur'an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

was an extraordinary one. His was a blessed and divinely inspired and authorized personality (*mu'ayyad*). Thus, his revelatory "experience" and his message became divinely authentic, authoritatively binding for others and eternal.

The two other contemporary Muslim scholars of the Qur'an mentioned above, i.e., Muhammad Arkoun and Nasr Hamed Abu Zayd, pursue their investigation of the human aspect of the Qur'an primarily through linguistic analysis.

Muhammad Arkoun is, for instance, interested in the historicity of the Qur'an in terms of its transformation from an initially oral form (what he calls Qur'anic *discourse*), into a text which finally achieved the status of a "Closed Official Corpus," the Holy Book. Regardless of the theological status of the first enunciation of the message, its passage into a text and its fixation in writing left believers with no choice but to interpret the text, Arkoun contends. This emphasis on the distinction between speech and text is central to his conviction that "the understanding of revelation as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon" through "the pursuit of a modern theory of religious discourse" is necessary prior to the construction of "any theology liberated from traditional dogmas."¹¹ Beyond these linguistic and literary analyses, Arkoun as a social scientist advocates application of multidisciplinary methodologies derived from the historical sciences, sociology, psychology, anthropology and semiotics in order to understand the theological and historical genesis of "orthodox" dogmas regarding the Qur'an and all other literature derived from it—what he calls "societies of the Book." The aim is to reveal their ideological and psychological functions, their semantic and anthropological limits and their inadequacies. This process of deconstruction, demystification and demythologization of the phenomenon of the Book will, according to Arkoun, reveal the cultural conditions that enfolded the original message of the revelation, "the novel meaning," and froze it in denotations belonging to the system of signs, symbols, metaphors and myths of that time. Furthermore, it will reveal the triple solidarity that emerged linking the written word (the Book), the state (political power) and the religious orthodoxy (the jurists-theologians), each of which in turn contributed to perpetuating of the others' sacralized, mystified, and transcendentalized positions.

¹¹ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam*. trans. and ed., Robert D. Lee (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1994), pp. 30–39.

It is through the deconstruction of all these complex webs, Arkoun hopes, that the true “meaning” or message will emerge and be differentiated from text and its interpretations.

Hamed Abu Zayd’s interest in the historical status of the Qur’an is connected primarily to his educational training in the fields of literary criticism, modern linguistic theories and conceptual analysis. Without entering into a debate about the nature and mechanism of revelation or the original metaphysical status of the Qur’an as the divine speech (*kalam-e bari*), which he apparently leaves to whatever information the Text itself provides, he addresses issues related to the textuality of the Qur’an after its revelation. In his view, any text, religious or otherwise, is a historical and linguistic phenomenon. He argues that “when God revealed the Qur’an to the Messenger, He chose the specific linguistic system of the first recipient, i.e., the Prophet.”¹² Thus, linguistic and cultural influences began at this very first stage once the revelation, from the moment of its entrance into history, became humanized and the “divine text” (*nass ilahi*) was made a “human text” (*nass insani*). Hence, by its connection to the Prophet’s human intellect, the divine text changed from revelation to interpretation.¹³ Abu Zayd’s main concern, however, is with the prevailing concept of the Qur’an as a fixed religious text. He addresses the problem that, in his opinion, resulted from the historical transformation of the notion of Qur’an as “discourse” into Qur’an as “text”.

Like Arkoun with his linguistic and discourse analysis of the Qur’an, Abu Zayd has also developed a theoretical communication model to explain the existence of a communicative relationship between the Qur’an as a message system and its readers/addressees. This relationship, he states, was very much alive at the time of the Prophet and the first addressees of the message and continued for some time before Qur’an was canonized as a written text. This living communicative relationship allowed the first generation of Muslims to interpret the message and understand its meaning according to their own intellectual horizons and cultural milieu. Abu Zayd aims to revive this pre-text living relationship with the Qur’an, which he thinks lost its flexibility when the

¹² Abu Zayd, *Mafhum al-nass: dirasa fi ‘ulum al-Qur’an* (Cairo: al-hay’ah al-misriya al-‘amah al-kitab, 1990), p. 27.

¹³ Abu Zayd: *Naqd al-Khitab al-dini*, 3rd ed. (Cairo: Madbuli), p. 193.

proponents of the prevailing theology began to promote the idea that the Qur'an, as a fixed text, conveyed only one meaning.

Abu Zayd criticizes this rigid attitude for having, in reality, suppressed the "interpretational diversity" that exists within the Islamic tradition and for having limited contemporary interpreters to merely narrating the interpretations of previous generations. It is imperative, in his hermeneutical model, to make a distinction between the concept of Qur'an as the *mushaf*, which is a silent text, and the phenomenon of the Qur'an as a living "discourse" which can move forward in time, producing numerous meanings. It is only then, he states, that Muslims can "re-connect the question of the meaning of the Qur'an to the question of the meaning of life."¹⁴

While Abu Zayd and Arkoun concentrate their efforts on analysing the historical genesis of the Qur'anic text from linguistic and cultural perspectives and its implications for developing new hermeneutics, Soroush focuses on the historical genesis of the revelation itself at a stage prior even to its early enunciation by the Prophet, a stage that may correspond to the "novel meaning" in Arkoun's language or the "idea" suggested by Fazlur Rahman. Soroush has undertaken this remarkably daring endeavour without any apparent fear of the political or psychological consequences. Perhaps he lost his fear of political repercussions earlier on in the late-1980s when he challenged, through his theory of "Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge," the religious and political establishment of the Islamic regime of Iran. At that time he rejected the exclusivist claims of the ulama to interpretation of religious truth and all the prerogatives that this entailed. Despite the resulting pressure and even severe "punishments," he extended his critical analysis from the realm of interpretation of religion and its scriptures to the very sense and essence of religion and revelation. Intellectually uncompromising as a reformer, he wants to get to the bottom of what he thinks has impeded the progress of much needed intellectual reform in Islam.

Soroush has also handled with apparent ease the psychological challenge of questioning the nature of what Muslim consciousness has long come to believe to be the "Word of God." Given the fact that he is a very devout and observant Muslim, perhaps he derives his courage to do so

¹⁴ Abu Zayd, *Rethinking the Qur'an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics* (Utrecht: Humanistics University Press, 2004), p. 11.

from his infinite love and inviolable respect for the Prophet Muhammad. This is something that might be better understood in the light of his own “experiential” religiosity, a description of which comes later in Chapter Eight. His boldness in critical analysis can also be explained by the fact that his erudition in the classical Islamic religious sciences allows him to draw easily upon and benefit from the great philosophers, theologians and mystics. It is with such figures as al-Ghazali, Shah Wali Allah of Delhi, Sadr al-din Shirazi (Mulla Sadra), Ibn Arabi and Rumi that Soroush identifies both intellectually and spiritually. These iconic predecessors were courageous enough to speculate on such sensitive subjects and articulate various daring, unorthodox views. In his own unique style, Soroush—throughout this book—covers simultaneously the two terrains of critical rational analysis and the traditional Muslim intellectual heritage without confusing the borders of the two. Something about the nature of the subject under discussion warrants this approach and makes it more of a strength than a methodological weakness.¹⁵ Without compromising the external/rational position that he takes vis-à-vis religion and without damaging the rational conclusions that he intends to draw from his discussions, he borrows from these early thinkers whenever necessary. This association is more than a cautious, tactical move to reduce the risk of charges of heresy and blasphemy-accusations from which Soroush has never been completely immune anyway.¹⁶

¹⁵ Soroush respects methodological integrity and he himself is critical to those who confuse rational and non-rational discussions (*‘aqli* and *naqli*). Look for instance at his magnum opus, “The Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge”, where he is entirely into a rational debate, given the nature of the subject, and thus avoids such intermix.

¹⁶ Surprisingly, in spite of the fact that Soroush first published his theory of “The Expansion of Prophetic Experience” about a decade ago in Iran, no actual controversy (barring some mild criticism) came to surround it until quite recently. It was not until the fall of 2007 that a Persian translation of Soroush’s interview with Michel Hoebink (from Radio Netherlands), after being posted on a Persian-language website, drew the attention of opponents. Politically motivated polemics, charges of religious innovation and blasphemy, verbal assaults and death threats against Soroush highlighted on-line discussions on certain websites. These were not, however, the only responses provided. Many authors and scholars from various backgrounds, both academics and seminarians and friends and opponents, published articles expressing surprise, admonishment, advice and criticism, but all defending the orthodox notions of revelation and the scripture. Among the more serious respondents were a couple of important ayatollahs, including the grand ayatollahs Sobhani and Montazeri. Initially, Soroush responded to critics by writing a short exposé clarifying some of the points of misunderstanding in his interview. Later on, he welcomed the opportunity of engaging the grand ayatollahs in

Soroush values the intellectual legacy of the past, despite being critical of it. More importantly, he believes that the intellectual achievements of his predecessors—in terms of understanding of religion—have altogether enriched and expanded the collective religious experience of believers in subsequent generations, leading to the historical expansion of religion.

Indeed far from dismissing all traditional intellectual achievements as mere social and historical constructs irrelevant to modern times, Soroush insists that there are valuable teachings in that repository that can shed light on the question of the relationship between the natural and the supernatural. In particular, he relies more on mystical explanations of revelatory experience that somehow equate the human inner self with revelation. Soroush considers mystics to be the closest to prophets since their religious experience is of the same spiritual and revelatory nature, yet points out that, historically, they were more outspoken and could freely describe their experiences due to the fact of their being free from the restrictions of a mission, whereas prophets had to remain silent on this issue. Therefore, the mystical articulations and formulations of their high calibre spiritual experiences still serve as instructive, first-hand testimonies that can better disclose to us the essentially “formless” prophetic experience (*wahy*). Soroush believes that, although the modern critical methodologies of the social sciences and humanities are absolutely useful and necessary tools for solving complicated religious issues, some old debates and intellectual speculations are equally beneficial and necessary to create a comprehensive and workable solution to those complex matters. After all, he says, the world of knowledge and galaxies of thought are full of interrelated complexities with various ramifications. Language, history, spirituality, law, reason, society, politics, etc., are all active participants in these domains and cannot and should not be ignored.

Like Soroush, Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari, the Iranian reformist cleric, began with hermeneutical discussions about understanding and interpreting religious texts in the 1990s. He likewise came to a similar

a theological and hermeneutical dialogue. The result, just as this book goes into print, has been a few public communiqués between Soroush and these ayatollahs that contain not only interesting theological exchanges and further elaborations of Soroush's theory, but also offer a glimpse of the current religious, social and political situation in Iran. The appendices to this volume present these communiqués, which should be read along with the first chapter.

conclusion that the human understanding of religion is context-bound and that as a result there exists no one final understanding of the Qur'an and the Tradition but, rather, a plurality. However, unlike Soroush, Shabestari did not develop a theory extending the claim of the historicity and humanness of understanding the scriptures to the revealed text itself. Although indications could be found in his earlier writings that he would eventually move in this direction, he had not specifically dealt with the issue until very recently in summer 2007.¹⁷ He had sometimes talked about the "anthropological nature of the revealed words (*kalam-e wahy*)," making it synonymous with *kalam-e insani-e payambar* (the Prophet's human words).¹⁸ In his latest interview/essay to emerge since his most recent psychological and intellectual shift, culminating in his self-defrocking of the clerical attire, he presents his more recent views regarding revelation and the Qur'an. While re-emphasizing his argument that the language of the Qur'an is the Prophet's human language, he expounds on what then makes it "divine" and special.

For Shabestari, the Qur'an as a text is *kalam-e insani-e payambar* (the Prophet's human speech) that he could utter only when empowered by God. He argues that the Qur'an is neither a text authored by Muhammad nor is it a word for word revelation—as Muslim orthodoxy has come to believe. Rather, it is the end-product of revelation, namely, the Prophet's expression of his revelatory experience. That is, he was empowered and enabled to speak the words of the Qur'an as a result of what he experienced, though articulated in his human Arabic words. But, what *is* the revelatory experience according to Shabestari? He believes that what Muhammad received during the revelation was nothing but a "*Blick*," as he uses this German term.¹⁹ Thus, the *Blick* [an attitude/outlook] is the content of the revelation, while prophethood is the experience of the *Blick*, and the prophetic mission is to articulate this experience in human language. Explaining what he means by the *Blick*, he insists that the content of the revelatory experience was neither a body of knowledge given to the Prophet nor a secret disclosed to him and certainly not a series of falsifiable propositions that he was asked

¹⁷ See the latest issue of the journal *Madreseh* published in Tehran July 2007. *Madreseh* (Vol. 2, No. 6, 2007).

¹⁸ See, for example, his book: *Ta'amulati dar Qara'at-e Insani az Din* [Reflections on Human Interpretation of Religion], (Tehran: Tarh-e Nou, 2004), pp. 83–86; 160–167.

¹⁹ M. M. Shabestari, "*Hermenutiks va Tafsir-e Dini as Jahan*" [Hermeneutics and Religious Interpretation of the World] Interview with *Madreseh* (Vol. 2, No. 6, 2007), p. 87.

to convey to the people. Rather, the *Blick* is an attitude, an outlook on existence—a monotheistic interpretation of existence given to the Prophet by God. Hence, revelation, and by extension its by-product, the Qur'an, are not of an epistemological nature but are, rather, "interpretive."²⁰ The Prophet was given an interpretation of existence that may be described as a monotheistic outlook. This *Blick*, which is sacred to the Prophet, is what he offered to his audience, asking them to listen and understand existence through its lenses and to behave accordingly. Therefore, the religious text itself, the Qur'an, is an interpretation of the greater text (in its generic sense) of existence, presented to us by the Prophet and expressed in human words. If anything at all is sacred about it, it is only that he received this *Blick* initially from God and that God chose him, commanded him, and divinely empowered him to articulate his experience in words. According to Shabestari, therefore, while the words of the Qur'an are the Prophet's, its source, so to speak, is divine. Shabestari draws extensively on references from the Qur'an to show that the traditional notion of considering the Qur'anic "*ayat*" (verses) as having been "sent down from heaven" to the Prophet is not acceptable. Instead, he accepts a more theosophical/mystical meaning of the term *ayat*, i.e., God's signs/phenomena. Hence, the content and function of this *Blick* was "sent down" to awaken the Prophet to God's signs. The core message of the *Blick* is that all natural events, as well as all developments in human history and fate, are "phenomena" indicating One Foundational Reality—God—who cannot be understood or known directly but are continuously active in the universe.²¹ Consequently, the purpose of the prophetic mission, and accordingly, the message that his Book conveys, is to draw his audience's attention to the existence of One Active Creator God and His involvement in the cosmos and history; hence, to invite human submission to Him. In this vein, it is interesting to note that Shabestari emphatically repeats that the Qur'anic statements are not assertive propositions capable of being verified or falsified. They are simply intended to inform people about what the Prophet saw through the lenses of that *Blick*.

Whatever the theological implications to religious reform this approach may have shown, perhaps the most interesting is Shabestari's

²⁰ Ibid., p. 88.

²¹ M. M. Shabestari, "*Qara'at-e Nabavi az Jahan*" [The Prophet's Reading of the Universe]. *Madreseh* (Vol. 2, No. 6, 2007), pp. 92–96.

claim that the Qur'anic laws (*ahkam*) were merely solutions proposed by the Prophet to the religious, social, and moral problems of his day. In other words, as he observed—thanks to his revelatory *Blick* experience—that the moral and social life of his people were contradictory to the active and ongoing will of the One God, he began to invite them to change their lifestyle so as to bring them into harmony with the monotheistic pulse of existence. Hence, he issued laws that would reform or remove these existential incongruities. Shabestari clearly asserts that *ahkam* in and of themselves did not have any direct significance to the Prophet.²² Thus, all Qur'anic rulings regarding worship and social interactions were pertinent primarily to the religious and social realities of Arabian society in the Prophet's time. As such, "these rulings [as stated in the Qur'an] are by no means applicable to all times and all societies."²³ At the same time, the monotheistic *Blick* and the awareness of the ever present will of God in existence, which was a part of the prophetic experience, should be retained as a frame of reference.

Although Shabestari's view of the applicability of religious laws might be provocative to traditional conservatives, his *Blick* theory of revelation has much validity from the perspective of arguments from within the tradition and might be found very convincing. It seems that he is trying to find a balance between what mainline Muslim opinion is willing to accept and what is necessary to opening a legitimate path towards annulling the application of Qur'anic injunctions. However, theoretical contradictions and weaknesses of logic²⁴ in his *Blick* theory prevent it from becoming a much needed solid rational theological foundation for legal reform. His theory is, at best, a mystical explanation of revelation. Its mystical qualities are seen not only in the understanding that the prophet Muhammad's was a very subjective experience, but also in that the content of the 'revelation' amounts essentially to a lens through which acts of monotheism that are everywhere at work became evident to him. Muslim mystics have arrived at similar theories, even

²² Ibid., p. 90.

²³ Ibid., p. 97. Shabestari has repeatedly stated this opinion about laws. See, for instance, his previous writings: *Hermenutiks, Ketab va Sunat* [Hermenutics, Book and Tradition], *Naqdi bar Qara'at-e Rasmi az Din* [A Critique of the Official Interpretation of Religion], *T'amulati dar Qara'at-e Insani az Din* [Reflections on a Human Interpretation of Religion].

²⁴ For a critique of Shabestari in these respects see three articles in the same volume of *Madreseh* by Arash Naraqi (pp. 63–66), Reza Alijani (pp. 67–73) and Soroush Dabagh (pp. 76–79).

on a more comprehensive scale, explaining existence through God's *tawhid-e dhāti, tawhid-e sefati and tawhid- af'ali*.

Moreover, although in saying that in the process of revelation the Prophet was not given the Book but a *Blick*, Shabestari might sound unorthodox; yet, his theory remains solidly orthodox as far as the place and role of the Prophet as a passive recipient is concerned. The *Blick* theory limits the role of human agency in the process of revelation only to the level of articulation of the experience. It does not allow for any human role in the experience itself. Nor does it specify to what extent, if at all, Muhammad's personal, intellectual, and societal conditions and capacities could have affected his experience and interpretation of what—according to Shabestari—constitutes the Qur'an. "[If] the content of the text [Qur'an] is an interpretive content",²⁵ is it not then subject to contingencies of the interpreter, that is, to the Prophet? This runs significantly contrary at least to what Shabestari has always insisted on in his previous hermeneutical discussions. Further, the *Blik* theory does not account for any gradualness in the process of revelation. In Shabestari's presentation, this spontaneously given-*Blik* is total and fixed. There is no gradation, increasing or decreasing sequence, or any explanation of Muhammad's capabilities and readiness as a human recipient of this experience. Furthermore, it seems that in order to reconcile the external qualities of the religion with its internal composition, that is to say, resolving the problematic challenges of religion, philosophy, and science, Shabestari takes refuge in a position of antirealism by insisting that the text does not contain assertive propositions capable of being verified or falsified; nor were any such propositions given to the Prophet in the revelation.

What Soroush is trying to achieve in his discussion of prophetic experience is far more than adding further speculation about the technicalities of the nature of revelation. As both an insider and a believer, he adopts an approach from without the religion to examine the impact of the "outside" on the very "inside" of the faith, i.e., the "formless" prophetic experience. The "outside," that which imposes form(s) on the formless, includes: the Prophet's personal psychological and intellectual capacities; his personal private and professional life experiences; his audience; his friends and foes and their capabilities and needs alike; and the broader societal milieu of his times with all its opportunities

²⁵ *Madreseh*, p. 91.

and limitations. Chapter One, The Expansion of Prophetic Experience, reveals not only the dialogical nature of the encounter between heaven and earth and the subjective role of the Prophet in this reciprocal process, but also seeks to prove that religion, by nature, is not a fixed and predetermined phenomenon. History and the humanity of the Prophet, with all its weaknesses and strengths, gave shape to the unformed core essence of the religion, i.e., religious experience. Therefore, there are many elements in the religion, and in its scripture in particular, that are not essentially “religious.” This very unorthodox view, with its strong emphasis on fluidity and flexibility in religion, runs also very contrary to the ahistorical view of Islam held by contemporary Islamists/fundamentalists. In its ideological understanding and presentation of Islam, the latter trend abhors history and context. It not only rejects the fact that the totality of Islam as a religio-civilizational tradition is something that has unfolded in history, it presents a perfect, frozen and eternalized image of the Prophet, his message and his time as if everything happened in an utopia outside history. If there is any motive behind this trend of recalling the Prophet and his life, it is to universalize that frozen image of the Medinan period, which is perceived to have been the perfect Islamic society and state besides. References to scripture are cited by them without reference to context or the cultural and historical contingencies related to them. In this monolithic eternalized picture there is no room for interpretation, let alone diversity. It is against this current tradition and the rigid shari‘ah-centered tradition of the *fuqaha* that Soroush argues:

In fact, essentially and fundamentally, to follow the Prophet is to follow his spiritual experiences and not just to obey his commands by doing what he enjoined and abstaining from what he proscribed. (Chapter One)

When he highlights “spiritual experience” as the core of religion and emphasises the historicity of the Prophet and his revelation, he means nothing less than that Islam *is* capable of growth and *can* be improved. He maintains that: “a religion that has a gradual genesis will also undergo gradual movement and development in its subsequent existence” (Chapter One). This “gradual genesis” corresponds to Soroush’s usage of the word “expansion” in describing the Prophet’s revelatory experience. As for development in its “subsequent existence,” however, a further clarification is in order. Besides the historical development of the Islamic disciplines of law, theology, mysticism, exegesis, etc., all of which testify to the gradual growth and enrichment of Islamic tradition, Soroush ventures a more theologically subtle intention. Another

connotation of “expansion” in his discourse is that the possibility for undergoing such revelatory experience may be extended to other individuals to varying degrees depending on their abilities. But does this mean that he is challenging the very Islamic doctrine of the finality of Muhammad’s prophethood? The answer is both yes and no, depending on what is meant by “finality” and “prophethood.”

Finality: Religious Experience or Prophetic Mission?

In Chapters Two and Three, Soroush elaborates that this expandability and extendibility of the prophetic experience after the Prophet does not negate the doctrine of finality in one sense. Granted, its consideration entails flexibility in understanding and interpreting the religion and the acknowledgment of diversity in forms of religiosity. He insists that occurrences of esoteric/revelatory experiences did not cease after the demise of the Prophet Muhammad, the Seal of prophethood according to the Qur’an, and may be repeated at any time, as has been manifested in the saintly religious experiences of great mystics or other learned individuals of the past. The more learned and spiritually apt the person, the richer and deeper will be his/her experience and closer to that of the Prophet. Using a mystical language that recalls the thought of Ibn Arabi, Soroush confirms that some of these individuals can even be ranked higher than prophets on the basis of the intensity and richness of their spiritual raptures and their encounters with the divine. Nevertheless, he does perceive fundamental difference between these individuals and the Prophet: the former do not have a “mission” and their experiences will not generate binding results, certainly not legally binding, for others. All the same, their experiences will give them a special perspective in their understanding and interpretation of religion, the articulation of which will enhance, empower, enrich and expand the religious tradition in its ongoing course. Hence, for example, the post-Ghazali, post-Ibn Arabi, and post-Rumi Islam is certainly richer and of a different flavour in that it now opens out onto previously inconceivable horizons.

It is indeed not the first time that a contemporary Muslim reformer has felt it necessary to explain the meaning of the finality of prophethood. For instance, Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) argues for the closure of revelation due to the fact that humankind, having supposedly reached a more mature intellectual stage, no longer requires it. Others, like Mortaza Motahhari (d. 1979), have related it to the perfection and completeness of the last Message, as they see it. Soroush discusses the

issue from a different angle. Believing that what is essentially “religious” in prophecy is the “experience”, he sees no finality to it. Indeed, if there is any finality, he explains, this rests in the distinctive nature of a prophet’s religious experience that generates mission and grants legislative authority to him, a unique kind of authority assumed by a prophet in terms of his “charismatic personality” as prophet *per se* (in the Weberian sense of the word). In other words, Soroush separates the mission and non-mission aspects of a revelatory experience. Therefore, from a Muslim’s point of view, no one else will claim legislative authority over others merely on the basis of his divinely “authorized and commissioned” personality. Nevertheless, Soroush is aware and acknowledges that any discussion on the finality of prophethood is knowledge of a second order and a discussion from within the religion.

Expectations of Religion

Chapter Four sketches a theory for discerning “the essentials” and “the accidentals” in religion. It provides a theoretical framework that not only sheds more light on the discussion of the expansion of prophetic experience and the nature of religion (preparing the ground for a new theology), but likewise opens many new paths to the interpretation of the Qur’an thereby laying the foundations for a radically new paradigm of *fiqh* and *ijtihad*. Here, again, Soroush’s theory of the essentials and accidentals of the religion and the Text stands distinct from some other modernist conceptions by being neither apologetic nor polemic. The novelty of this theory, as reflected in its rather provocative title, lies in its systematically coherent and rationally convincing arguments and in its potential to promote legal change without being pinned down to narrow historical, cultural or grammatical justifications for certain existing Qur’anic injunctions. Nor does it reject them outright as irrelevant, which would be equivalent to antirealism or, from the perspective of believers, to questioning the divine wisdom.

Soroush’s theory about the essence of religion consists of these main principles: 1) the Qur’an includes essentials and accidentals; 2) the essentials are the same as “the Prophet’s goals” (*maqased-e share’*) while “being a Muslim entails believing in and acting upon the essentials...”; and 3) the essentials, like a precious kernel, are covered in and protected by the thick shell of the accidentals. In order to uncover the essence, the accidentals should be identified and peeled away. The latter is obviously

what Soroush attempts here. Inspired by both the mystical classification of *lubb* (the kernel) and *qeshr* (the husk) and I. Lakatos' notion of the protective belt in the philosophy of science, Soroush deals with some major "accidentals" in this chapter. All are products of the "historical, human, evolutionary, interlocutory and dynamic" nature of religion, whose discernment necessitates a "deconstruction of religion's historical body," he says. The chief distinctive characteristic of the accidentals is that they "have local and temporal- not universal and meta-historical- authenticity." Therefore, they "could have been other than they are, unlike the essentials." Among the major accidentals, is one that may sound very shocking to many, namely, "the Arabic language of the Qur'an," and another that generated much criticism from jurists in particular, i.e., "the precepts of *fiqh* and *shari'ah*." Also directly related to the previous discussion on the expansion of the prophetic experience is another category of accidentals, viz., the many questions, stories and events mentioned in the Qur'an that have no part in the essentials of Islam. As these have no impact on Islam's message, their absence would be no loss to the religion nor would they lead to weakness in the Scripture. In other words, Soroush maintains: "the Qur'an could have been shorter or longer than it is and still have been the Qur'an, because it is the Qur'an by virtue of its essentials, not its accidentals." Acknowledging that the essences never occur without accidentals, Soroush insists that "confusing the rules that govern them leads to a host of fallacies; therefore, their theoretical distinctions from accidentals is an absolute rational imperative." This is imperative not only for contemporary scholars in religious studies, but even more so for the jurists who are involved in *ijtihad*. *Ijtihad*, for Soroush, is not limited to legal *ijtihad* or even to the sort of juridical manoeuvre (within the confines of already set principles) that will bring about only limited, unsubstantial, piecemeal changes. *Ijtihad* for him is "synonymous with the cultural translation" of all accidentals. In other words, *ijtihad* should "transcend" the existing accidentals in the Qur'an and the *sun-nah* by translating them into the accidentals of different cultures and time and "conveying the religion's goals not in form, but in spirit and meaning." This, of course, would be a continuous process of "discovering and expounding" accidentals that would not only make *ijtihad* a living process, but would "herald a new order and a new paradigm in the discipline of *fiqh*."

The contextuality of Qur'anic laws and the pressing need for *ijtihad* have also drawn the attention of other reformist Muslim scholars,

although their approaches in resolving the issue are not necessarily hermeneutical or theological. Among those who should be mentioned are Mahmoud Muhammad Taha from Sudan (d.1985), Khaled Abo El Fadl (b. 1963, Kuwait), and Mohsen Kadivar (b. 1959, Iran).

Mahmoud Taha's concern for human rights issues led him to develop a whole new method of interpretation in his book, *The Second Message of Islam*. While restructuring the classical Islamic doctrines regarding the abrogating and abrogated verses in the Qur'an, Mahmoud Taha established an interpretive model of the Qur'an as legal source so as to generate a fresh ethical foundation for a new kind of jurisprudence. According to his interpretive methodology, the Meccan chapters and verses of scripture that include a more universal and generalized moral message should be given precedence—as the foundation of the new jurisprudence—over the Medinan chapters that pertain to specific conditions and contexts of the Prophet's time.²⁶

Working from within the Islamic legal tradition, Khaled Abo El Fadl and Mohsen Kadivar—both trained in the classical legal tradition—believe in the relevance and desirability of the Islamic juristic tradition in the present time. Arguing that the divinely ordained laws have been misinterpreted by Muslim jurists, they have set out to overcome what they see as the prevalent methodological shortcomings in contemporary Muslim legal discourse. While cognizant of the need for a new theology and modern hermeneutics, they have not themselves dealt with these subjects. Nor have they opined on the nature of revelation and the prophetic experience. Furthermore, although certain that presuppositions and context are of consequence to interpretation of the Text and convinced that historical circumstances related to certain Qur'anic verses should be taken into consideration, they do not debate the theological implications of the circumstantialities of the revealed verses. They might even disagree with what others like Soroush or Shabestari and Arkoun are saying in this regard. At the same time, they welcome new insights into the analysis of scripture and other doctrinal sources. When one considers the level of engagement and range of reciprocal influence that characterize these contemporary Muslim thinkers and scholars, one can only conclude that theirs is indeed a wholly

²⁶ Theoretical applications of Taha's interpretive model to a wide range of human rights issues are best achieved by his accomplished disciple, M. Abdullahi An-Na'im. See, for instance, his book: *Toward An Islamic Reformation* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990).

new intellectual trend in the making. Hermeneutical and theological ideas put forward, for instance, by Soroush, Shabestari, Arkoun, et al., provide—welcome or unwelcome—useful theoretical and conceptual frameworks for those involved in constructing a highly technical legal discourse. This is precisely where different, yet complementary components of Neo-Rationalist Islam come together. If Soroush, for example, urges a rational ethics, this should not remain confined to theoretical discourse; it should also be applied in the legal realm, so that changes can be effected to contemporary Islamic practices. Due to their expertise, this is a task that only jurists and scholars of Islamic law can undertake, and there are indeed some who are doing so.²⁷

Both Abo El Fadl and Kadivar have been active in investigating and restructuring several authoritative sources of the Islamic legal past in order to deal with a wide range of issues and problems in the modern world. Abo El Fadl in particular has dealt extensively in his writings with the problem of the “abuse of authority in Islamic law.” Criticizing puritanical interpretations of Islam more specifically, he has addressed a wide range of critical issues from women’s rights to the problem of terrorism and contemporary jihad.²⁸ Mohsen Kadivar, on the other hand, while engaged in some of the same topics related to human rights, has been trying primarily to expose the abuse or misuse of authority in Islamic law with regard to politics. His re-readings of some doctrinal sources produced by certain authoritative Shi’i jurists of the past has led him to take a position against the religio-political theory of *wilayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurists) that remains authoritative in Iran.²⁹

²⁷ It seems that Iranian religious intellectuals are in a unique position in the sense that proponents of different elements of a Neo-Rationalist reformed Islam (modern hermeneutics, rational theology and new jurisprudence) are engaging in fruitful dialogue, as can be seen in the case of its three most prominent representatives: Soroush, Shabestari and Kadivar. Although each respects the others’ differences, they all nourish and stimulate each other intellectually.

²⁸ See his books: *Conference of the Books* (University Press of America, 2001); *Rebellion and Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001); *Place of Tolerance in Islam* (Beacon Press, 2002); *Speaking in God’s Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women* (One World, 2001); *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam From the Extremists* (Harper, 2005).

²⁹ See his books: *Nazariyehay-e Doulat dar Fiqh-e Shi’ah* [Theories of Government in the Shi’i Fiqh] (Tehran: Nashr-e Ney, 1376); *Hokumat-e Vela’i* [Political Guardianship of the Jurists] (Tehran: Nashr-e Ney, 1377); *Daghdaghehay-e Hokumat-e Dini* [Concerns of a Religious Government] (Tehran: Nashr-e Ney, 1379).

Chapter Five deals with another imperative for Soroush, namely, recognition of the intertwined principles of what religion offers and what its believers should expect from it. In the last century or so the opinion that “Islam is the solution” has become prevalent among Muslims. This has become even more popular due to the contemporary ideologized presentation of Islam. According to this view, all “necessary and sufficient” instructions and guidance for every aspect of life and for all times and conditions are provided by Islam. It particularly emphasizes the perfection and comprehensiveness of Islamic law, or the shari‘ah, and does not recognize the need for any other source for achieving prosperity and salvation in this world or the next. This Soroush calls “the maximalist understanding of religion” and/or “the maximalist expectation of religion.” In Chapter Five, he identifies this perception of religion as a “maximal source and reservoir,” despite its minimal precepts, as “the root cause of serious theoretical and practical problems” in Muslim societies. Here, he analyses almost every possible aspect of the religion—ethics, theology, jurisprudence, etc.—to prove that the guidance offered by the religion is the “necessary minimum” and not the “maximum possible.” Nor is it all-inclusive with regard to human needs. He also clarifies some of the confusion and misunderstanding surrounding the Qur’anic notion of the perfection and completeness of the religion. He concludes that if religion is perfect, “its perfection is minimalist and in itself (*maqam-e thubut*), not maximalist and for us (*maqam-e ithbat*).” In other words, “religion is complete in relation to the purpose it was designed for, which is to offer necessary minimal guidance. But it cannot be complete in relation to our every possible and imaginable expectation.” Emphasising that placing “excessive burden on religion gradually robs religion of its standing and legitimacy,” Soroush explains that it is only through a minimalist approach to religion that one can prevent it from being used as “an instrument of injustice and tyranny, a meal ticket, or a source of superstition and conflict.” On the contrary, “in order to be eternal and final,” he maintains, “a religion must per force present a central thread and core that is appropriate to every human being in every age and era, and forego certain secondary principles, peripheral issues and unique stances for unique occasions”—what he calls “accidentals” elsewhere.

Religious Pluralism

Chapters Six and Seven present some of Soroush's ideas regarding religious pluralism. As for pluralism in the realm of interpretation of religious texts/scriptures, he had already established his position through his theory of "Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge." There he argued for an inevitable plurality in understanding and interpreting religion and religious texts. The main upshot of his argument—so disturbing to many in the religious establishment—was that there is no "final and official" interpretation and thus no "official" class of interpreters. In Chapter Six he tries to explain the existing plurality of religions; here he is mainly concerned with plurality in interpretation of the "religious experience." He contends that there are two ways to explain religious pluralism: negative pluralism and positive pluralism, as he dubs them. Negative pluralism is based on an *a priori* notion of a unity among religions and is mostly an approach from within religions. Positive pluralism holds an *a posteriori* view of reality and its diversity. Negative pluralism—which in its best form amounts to inclusivism—acknowledges the existence of different paths but still allows one religion to deem itself the perfect, complete, and absolute holder of truth and sole provider of felicity and salvation, and other religions as lacking some of these qualities, being incomplete and less perfect. Critical of those who "unjustifiably" try to "crush pluralities and resolve them into a unity," Soroush insists that "plurality is the norm in this world." In this light and in the wake of his *a posteriori* outlook of positive pluralism, Soroush describes religious pluralism as based on a multiplicity of interpretations/formulations of different religious experiences by prophets/founders that indeed harks back to their different personalities and conditions. Moreover, this multiplicity is also partly due to the multifaceted nature of the experienced Reality itself. His point of departure from others is that, in true nominalist fashion, he subscribes to the idea that prophets'/founders' religious experiences are of a different "species" with only family resemblances. They cannot assume superiority or inferiority in rank or degree, nor should their diversity be subsumed under one alleged whimsical unity. This is a natural diversity reflecting the singularity of each prophet/founder and consequently his experience of the transcendence. Therefore, each religion is in itself unique (*sui generis*) and for its followers the truth, complete, perfect and guide to salvation. This philosophical/theological nominalism is, indeed, the root of Soroush's irreducible pluralism. Being

a radical pluralist, he contends that the discussion of religious pluralism is first and foremost an epistemological and extra-religious discussion that can find affinity and support only with and from certain types of religiosity. While a “pragmatic/instrumental” religiosity does not give rise to pluralism, “discursive” and “experiential” religiosities that are based on “reason” and “experience” are by nature pluralistic.³⁰

Part Two
Reason, Love and Religiosity

The second part of this book, unlike the first, tends on the whole to avoid presuppositions for the theoretical study of religion and its interpretation. Chapters Eight to Twelve contain mostly a discussion of the sociology of religion, elaborating on the meaning and role of religion and “being religious” in the modern world. Although the chapters in this part have more in common with each other, they are not without some relevance to Part One. Some of them (Chapters Nine, Ten and Eleven) exemplify the practical relevance of some of the theoretical discussion presented earlier in the book. Chapter Eight (“Types of Religiosity”) in fact constitutes a borderline discussion, for it provides a typology of religiosity that is a very useful frame of reference for developing both theories about religion, as well as for social and historical studies of religion. “Types of Religiosity” is indeed one of the most interesting of Soroush’s innovations and extremely useful for disentangling some of the most complex and complicated subjects pertaining to religion, like pluralism and secularism. In Chapters Six and Seven, he partly demonstrates the application of this typology to the issue of pluralism to show what types of religiosity do or do not allow pluralism. In some of his other theoretical discussions elsewhere he has applied it to the paradoxical issues of secularism and what has been called the decline of religion in modern society. He argues that, when talking about secularism, we should not speak of the decline of “religion” (as an undifferentiated and monolithic notion) but rather of the decline of certain types of religiosity. For Soroush, starting one’s analysis with religiosity reveals that, depending on the type of the latter, secularism of some kind can coexist. In this way the difficulties of making sweeping

³⁰ For more on different types of religiosity see Chapter Eight.

judgments about whether we have “secular” or “religious” societies can be prevented in a learned and careful manner. As for social and historical studies of religion, “Types of Religiosity,” by categorizing three different religiosities, reveals a kind of pluralism existing within all religious traditions, Islamic or otherwise. In this chapter, Soroush elaborates on the salient features of “pragmatic/instrumental”, “discursive/reflective” and “experiential” religiosities and their different implications for some notions fundamental to religion such as God, the prophets, sin, obedience, etc. He also compares and contrasts the relation of each type to passion, reason, ideology, spiritual enlightenment, exclusivism, pluralism, etc. This differentiation between different layers of religiosity is also extremely helpful for believers too, in that it helps them understand where they stand with regard to their faith. For in the modern era in particular, people feel caught between their inclination toward rational investigation of certain elements of their faith, leading to doubt, questions and uncertainty on the one hand, and, on the other, to the existing dogmatic, emulatory presentations of religion that do not satisfy their spiritual expectations.

Chapter Eight also determines the framework of analysis for topics in the subsequent chapters of this part, such as Chapters Nine and Ten, which elaborate on, among other things, the practical meaning of some of the points already made in Chapters One to Three. They reiterate that what constitutes the core essence of religion and religiousness is nothing but the prophetic-like experience of transcendence, and that the continuity and “perpetuation of religion demands the perpetuation of this prophetic experience.” Otherwise, “the disintegration and secularization of religion will be certain” (Chapter Nine). After all, in the final analysis, all other ethical, philosophical, social aspects of a religion belong to their respective disciplines outside religion. Those who take the essence of religion to lie in its outward aspects—which are indeed the historical and civilizational achievements of the believers—are non-secular secularists whose efforts neither help to preserve religion nor guarantee the continuing presence of the Prophet. Throughout these chapters Soroush emphasizes that following the Prophet and reviving religion/Islam consist ultimately in following and reviving the Prophet’s revelatory experience. He also examines the meaning, possibility and impossibility of such a thing within each of the three aforementioned types of religiosities.

Chapter Eleven (“Faith and Hope”) explains the relationship between “religious experience”, “faith”, “belief” and “practice,” all of which fluctuate and vary depending on their operational meaning in different templates of religiosity. The last chapter (Chapter Twelve), “Spiritual Guardianship, Political Guardianship,” although having a clear overtone of the Shi‘ite doctrine of Imamate and its politicization, sends a fundamental and clear message to all contemporary Muslim shari‘ah-oriented revivalists. It warns them against reducing religion and religiosity to fiqh and the legal injunctions of the shari‘ah that demand “unquestioning obedience” of the jurists as heirs to the Prophet and his teachings—a fallacy resulting from transferring certain mystical imperatives (such as the master-disciple relationship) into the legal domain for mundane and ideological purposes. All this comes at the expense of neglecting the esoteric and spiritual guardianship of the Prophet—a guardianship over believers’ hearts (rather than their bodies) and one that espouses obedience and practice out of the compulsion of love, best manifested in the “experiential” type of religiosity.

Materials in the Appendices were added in the Spring of 2008. Aya-tollah Sobhani’s letters outline the position of Muslim orthodoxy on issues of revelation and the Qur’an. Soroush’s responses are equally important as they put forward an accommodating defence of a Neo-Rationalist Muslim reformer’s unorthodox views expressed largely in the language of orthodoxy and the Islamic intellectual tradition. In a broader sense, these four letters are certain to enjoy a lively position in the history of contemporary Islamic thought. They document a critical debate on perhaps the most sensitive issue in the challenge between tradition and modernity.

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The Expansion of Prophetic Experience

Essays on Historicity, Contingency and
Plurality in Religion

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