

The Expansion of the Prophetic Experience: 'Abdolkarīm Sorūš's New Approach to Qur'ānic Revelation

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Abstract

Indubitably, Iranian thinker 'Abdolkarīm Sorūš (b. 1945) in the course of the Islamic Republic's history has undergone an impressive change from establishment ideologist to its most prominent dissident. From 1980 on, he was a member of the Council of the Cultural Revolution, an organisation that dismissed oppositional, i.e. secular minded professors from their university posts, and he often appeared on TV as the Islamic Republic's apologist denouncing the left wing's ideology. But in the late 1980s, Sorūš published his epistemological theory of the evolution of religious knowledge in *Keyhān-e Farhangī* magazine. Controversies between the magazine's state-appointed publisher and the two journalists who had accepted Sorūš's articles for publication inspired the latter to found *Kīyān* magazine, which was Sorūš's mouthpiece as much as it became the most important platform of the religious newthinkers, and the religious reform's backbone until its proscription in 2001. Sorūš's transition to a post-Islamist thinker began with his theory of what he chose to call theoretical contraction and expansion of the *šarī'a* and it continued with his theory of religious-democratic government. In all of his later essays, he spoke out against the monopolization of exegesis by one single social class and against tendencies of taking *fatwās* for religion itself. In 1997, he published his probably most radical theory, which however was not widely noted until 2007, when the English translation of the essay in question was about to be published and Sorūš spoke of it in an interview. In what did finally appear in English under the title "The Expansion of Prophetic Experience" in 2009, he argued that "like a poet, the Prophet transmits the divine inspiration into the language he knows, the styles and images he masters, and the knowledge he possesses".¹ And this human view of the Qur'ān makes it possible

¹) 'Abdolkarīm Sorūš: "The Word of Muhammad". Interview with Michel Hoebink, in: *ZemZem* 3/3 (2007). URL: <http://www.zemzem.org/zemzem/?q=node/21> (last checked 8 September 2011).

to distinguish between what he calls the ‘essential’ and the ‘accidental’ aspects of religion. Some parts of religion are historically and culturally determined and no longer relevant today. At this epistemological revolution, some of Sorūš’s critics accused him of having left his faith for good; others see in it a chance to bring about Islam’s *aggiornamento*.

Keywords

‘Abdolkarīm Sorūš, Iran, post-Islamist thinking, Islamic Newthinking, *velāyat-e faqīh*, *Baṣṭ-e tağrobe-ye nabavī*, Qur’ān

Introduction

‘Abdolkarīm Sorūš (b. 1945) is an enigmatic personality. In the course of the Islamic Republic’s history, he has evolved from one of the regime’s most well-known supporters to one of its most famous dissidents. The publication of his thoughts and work on *Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of the Šarī‘a* in the late 1980s marked the beginning of his transition towards post-Islamist thinking.² It continued in his writings on the concept of ‘religio-democratic government’ and his rejection of the attempt to ideologize religion. In each and all essays written after this, he has argued against the monopolization in religious interpretations by one particular social class and insisted that religion and men’s knowledge of religion are not synonymous. In 1997, Sorūš formulated a major new thesis which did, however, escape broad attention until 2007 when a translation into English of the essay in question was being prepared and Sorūš talked about the ideas expressed in it in an interview. In the new publication, Sorūš argues that “like a poet, the Prophet transmits the inspiration in the language he knows, the styles he masters and the images and knowledge he possesses”. This human view of the Qur’ān is the point of departure that allows him to distinguish between the ‘essential’ and the ‘accidental’ aspects of religion: some parts of religion are determined by historical and cultural circumstances and no longer relevant today. His critics accuse him of having apostatized by holding this opinion; others see in this epistemological turning point a chance for Islam’s *aggiornamento*.

² In this, I follow Asef Bayat’s definition of the term ‘Post-Islamism’. Asef Bayat: *Making Islam Democratic. Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn*, Stanford, CA, 2007, 12.

Sorūš is the subject of numerous articles³ and—to date—two monographs.⁴ Several of his essays have been translated.⁵ He is a much-respected public personality: his portrait appears in a book aiming to present the *Fifty Key Figures in Islam*,⁶ and John L. Esposito numbers him among the nine “makers of contemporary Islam”.⁷ Western journalists have even labeled him “Islam’s Luther”.⁸ In Iran admirers see

³ Sorūš’s political thinking is the subject of: Valla Vakili: *Debating Religion and Politics in Iran: The Political Thought of ‘Abdolkarim Soroush*, Washington 1996; Robin Wright: “Islam and Liberal Democracy: Two Visions of Reformation”, in: *Journal of Democracy* 2 (1996), 64-75; Katajun Amirpur: “Ein iranischer Luther? Abdolkarim Sorūšs Kritik an der schiitischen Geistlichkeit”, in: *Orient* 37 (1996), 465-481; Foroukh Jahanbakhsh: *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran (1953-2000). From Bazargan to Sorūš*, Leiden 2001, 140-171. His contribution to modern Islamic discourse is discussed in: Mehrzad Boroujerdi: *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism*, Syracuse 1996, 158ff.; Afshin Matin-asgari: “‘Abdolkarim Soroush and the Secularization of Islamic Thought in Iran”, in: *Iranian Studies* 30 (1997), 95-115; John Cooper: “The Limits of the Sacred: The Epistemology of ‘Abd al-Karim Sorūš”, in: John Cooper, Ronald Nettle & Mohamed Mahmoud (eds.): *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, London 1998, 38-56; Ashk Dahlén: *Islamic Law, Epistemology and Modernity: Legal Philosophy in Contemporary Iran*, New York 2003, 187ff. A very critical look at Sorūš is taken by: Hamid Dabashi: “Blindness and Insight: The Predicament of a Muslim Intellectual”, in: Ramin Jahanbegloo: *Iran. Between Tradition and Modernity*, Oxford 2004, 95-116. A reprint of this essay can be found in: Hamid Dabashi: *Islamic Liberation Theology: Resisting the Empire*, London 2008, 99-142. Sorūš himself has collected articles, essays, and books on him on his homepage: <http://www.dr.soroush.com/On-DrSoroush-E.htm> (last checked 8 September 2011), which also contains a complete bibliography of his own works, many of his essays and articles, a list of his academic work, and a short biography.

⁴ Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi: *Islam and Dissent in Post-Revolutionary Iran. Abdolkarim Soroush, Religious Politics and Democratic Reform*, London 2008; Katajun Amirpur: *Die Entpolitisierung des Islams. ‘Abdolkarim Sorūšs Denken und Wirkung in der Islamischen Republik Iran*, Würzburg 2002.

⁵ *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam. Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, translated, edited and with a critical introduction by Mahmoud Sadri & Ahmad Sadri, Oxford, New York 2000. Abdolkarim Soroush: *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, Leiden 2009. Another essay by Sorūš can be found in an anthology of primary sources edited by Charles Kurzman: Abdolkarim Sorūš: “The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge”, in: Charles Kurzman (ed.): *Liberal Islam. A Sourcebook*, New York, Oxford 1998, 244-251.

⁶ Roy Jackson: *Fifty Key Figures in Islam*, London 2006, 236f.

⁷ Valla Vakili: “Abdolkarim Soroush and Critical Discourse in Iran”, in: John L. Esposito & John O. Voll: *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, Oxford 2001, 150-176.

⁸ Robin Wright: “An Iranian Luther shakes the foundations of Islam”, *The Guardian*, 1 February 1995. Mahmoud and Ahmad Sadri, who translated three of his most influential

him as an innovative thinker who, in the Iranian theocracy's context, provides needed ideological direction while the clerical establishment ranks him as an *enfant terrible*. Sorūš's approach is together with the one of Moḥsen Kadivar, Moḥammad Moḡtāhed Šābestārī and Ḥasan Yūsefī Eškevarī nowadays labeled as religious or Islamic Newthinking (*nouandiši-ye dīnī / eslāmī*) in Iran. In this paper I will focus on Sorūš's main ideas: the theoretical contraction and expansion of religion and the nature of the Qur'ān.

On his Life

‘Abdolkarīm Sorūš comes from a religious family background and was raised with traditional values. He received his formal secondary education in the ‘Alaviye school, an institution that was founded in the 1950s by pious bazaris as an alternative to both the state's secular educational system and the traditional theological academies. After graduating, he took classes in pharmacology at Tehran University. Equipped with a degree in pharmacology, he moved to England in 1973 and began studying for an MA in analytical chemistry at the University of London; at the same time, he also studied philosophy of science at the Chelsea College's Faculty of History and Philosophy. Sorūš stayed in England for five and a half years.

He returned to Iran in 1979 after the outset of the revolution and taught at Tehran University's Teachers' Training College. At that time, Sorūš also became the Islamic Republic's most prominent thinker, publicly denouncing the Left opposition's ideology.⁹

His book *Idīūlūžī-ye šeyṭānī* (Satanic Ideology) grew out of these articles and interviews. In 1981, he transferred to the Society for Philosophy (*Anḡoman-e Ḥekmat va Falsafe*), an institution dedicated to the study of Western philosophy. He also became a member of the newly

texts into English, have commented on this sobriquet in: *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, ed. Sadri & Sadri, xv–xvi.

⁹ See: Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, 95–105. In this context, an interesting piece of evidence is a television program from 1980 in which Sorūš defends the universities' islamization. URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tXVLDxigioI&feature=related> (last checked 12 September 2011).

founded Advisory Board on Cultural Revolution. Members of Iran's opposition have repeatedly criticized Sorūš for his long-lasting participation in the Advisory Board,¹⁰ a body which removed dissenting, secular-minded professors from their university posts. Sorūš argues in his own defense that he tried to work towards a re-opening of the universities. They were closed in 1980 due to the revolution. During the time the universities were closed, the social sciences were also coming under severe attack. That was a turning point for Sorūš. He began defending the Social Sciences and published sixteen articles for this purpose in the monthly journal *Sorūš* (no relation to his last name). They were later collected and published in a book entitled: *Tafarroğ-e šon'* (Lectures on Ethics and Human Sciences).

Since 1984, Sorūš has not held any political posts or appointments but has concentrated on teaching, research and writing instead. Sorūš taught at Tehran University, held visiting professorships at several private universities, and even held seminars for students of religious studies. His teaching and research focused on mysticism, religious philosophy, epistemology, comparative philosophy, and philosophy of science. His lectures on mysticism were aired on television, making this speaker well-known to a large audience. Sorūš is an extraordinarily good speaker, being comfortable speaking in public in places as varied as mosques, universities, or international symposia.

After criticizing the Shi'ite clergy of Iran in 1996, Sorūš fell into disgrace.¹¹ Since this time, and after receiving several threats to his person, he has repeatedly spent longer periods of time abroad. For about the last ten years, he has been living in exile continuously, teaching at diverse Western universities and conducting his research at institutions as renowned as the Institute for Advanced Study in Berlin (*Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin*), ISIM (Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World) situated in the Dutch city of Leiden, and Harvard, Columbia, Princeton, Yale, George Washington and Georgetown Universities.

¹⁰⁾ Ibid., 105-118.

¹¹⁾ See: Amirpur: "Ein iranischer Luther?".

Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Religion

In order to understand the evolution of Sorūš's thought, it is necessary to first take a look at the stages of his transformation from the Islamic Republic's staunchest supporter to one of its most prominent dissenters. Analysis will show that initially, he aimed to determine a new formula for the distinction between the changeable and the eternal parts of religion while today, his perception of and approach towards the Qur'ān is fundamentally different and wholly original.

At the end of the 1980s, Sorūš published for the first time his epistemological hypothesis of "the changeability of religious knowledge" in the magazine *Keyhān-e Farhangī*: as human knowledge *per se* is changeable, such is human knowledge of religion, since knowledge, generally speaking, is dependent on the historic moment as well as on the state of science. In the course of time, Sorūš finds, ever new interpretations of belief appear, adapted to the interpreters' personal circumstances. Believers hold that religion is a complete and infallible whole. But religious knowledge is fallible, he says, it is inconsistent and it can grow.

Sorūš's point of departure, then, is that knowledge is both potentially limitless and at the same time never more than an approximation in character. According to him, human beings can never really know what God expects of them. Humans can never comprehend the purpose of God's law since God's intentions are unfathomable. The one thing humans can understand is God's ultimate aim, and this ultimate aim of religion in turn can in no way stand in opposition to human concepts. Since humans cannot ever comprehend God's will in its entirety, it is indispensable that diverse views of religion be accepted and that ideas that do not work be discarded regardless of who has expressed them. This hypothesis sharply delimits elite knowledge. Sorūš undermines the ruling *valī-ye faqīh* 'Alī Ḥāmene'ī's (b. 1939) authority and Ḥāmene'ī's claim to obedience through his argumentation that even the *valī-ye faqīh*'s religious knowledge is merely a human—and thus fallible—interpretation of religion. Sorūš writes: "A clique seeing itself as the guardian of one sole reading of religion and taking this as the base of its political power and material privileges is to be rejected."¹²

¹²) 'Abdolkarīm Sorūš: "Saqf-e ma'īṣat bar sotūn-e šarī'at" (Basing one's Livelihood on Religion), in: *Kīyān* 5 (1995) 26, 25–31 (25).

The reason why, in Sorūš's eyes, there can never be a unanimous knowledge of religion or a monopoly on the interpretation of religion is that the Qur'ānic text as any other text is an open one, inviting interpretations. He sees the inflexible interpretation of belief as a modern phenomenon: prior to the age of modernity, the changeability of religious knowledge had been a given, and this changeability had created the space for new interpretations. Being himself a hermeneutic and a scholar of Qur'ān, Sorūš is well aware of the Qur'ān's possibilities for multiple layers and options of interpretation.

It was inevitable that Sorūš's ideas would get him into trouble in an Iran where the public discourse is still dominated by the state founder Ḥomeinī's point of view, in whose concept of humans and God there is only one party with rights—God. Humans, on the other hand, have no rights, and certainly not any rights based on the mere fact that they are human beings. It is possible that God, or his representative on earth, the *valī-ye faqīh*, concedes certain rights to humans, but as they are not intrinsic rights, God may take them away again whenever it pleases God or his representative on earth. In addition to that, Ḥomeinī stated that all humans have to submit to the greater (i.e., the *umma*'s) good, and thus have no individual rights of liberty vis-à-vis the state. Ḥāmene'ī avails himself of the arguments. The Western claim to human rights' universal validity is countered with the statement that Muslims, due to the historical and social developments of Islamic culture, wish to respect God's rights instead of human rights, whereas the West has arranged its world order anthropocentrically.

Sorūš rejects this cultural relativism as well as positions looking for a possible concordance of Islam and human rights, or an origin of human rights in Islam. His attitude, differing from that of many Muslim apologists, is that human rights simply are an imperative of human rationality. As such, they cannot be contrary to religion, since nothing irrational could be God's will. Thus, he does not let the fact that human rights were created in what may be seen as an extra-religious frame of reference deter him from holding their realization in an Islamic system to be both possible and necessary. Human rights were invented by human beings, true, but since they are not contrary to religion, God's rights are maintained intact. Human and religious values thus are in

perfect harmony.¹³ By taking this stand, Sorūš adopts a position that usually is employed exclusively by secularists since, like them, he assumes that humans do have intrinsic extra-religious rights based solely on the fact that they are human.

Sorūš's line of argument is the first step towards secular hermeneutics, and one of the consequences is that a number of laws need no longer be applied; a telling example are the *ḥadd* punishments. In order to support his argument that not all Islamic laws have to be followed to the dots on the letter of the law, he distinguishes between primary and secondary values. Secondary values only apply to rules on circumstantial details of belief, thus differing from one religion to another. Primary values such as justice and human dignity are the ones of real importance, and this is why all of the different religions as well as human rationality are in accord on them. Details like Islamic penal law or the dress code are of minor importance. They are but the skin (*pūste*) keeping religion in shape on the outside, but they are not of the religion's essence.¹⁴

On the basis of this proposition, Sorūš aims to develop a political system that is both Islamic and democratic, which leads him to his second pertinent hypothesis, the idea of a religio-democratic government.¹⁵ What makes his arguments relevant to religious people longing for reform is that they are without exception based on a religious motive. It is because his faith is personally important that Sorūš, after his experiences with 'real life Islamism', has come to the conclusion that religion and state need to be separated. More and more people turn away from Islam because in today's Iran, abuse of power, censorship, restrictions, corruption, and nepotism reign supreme. Many blame all of this on Islam—not surprisingly since the powers that be invoke it as the basis of their authority. This is why Sorūš argues that of all possible forms of government, democracy is the one which best serves religion, in that democracy protects religion from being abused by self-appointed Men

¹³ 'Abdolkarīm Sorūš: "Taḥlīl-e maḥm-e ḥokūmat-e dīnī" (An Analysis of the Term 'Religious Government'), in: *Kīyān* 6 (1996) 32, 2–13 (7).

¹⁴ 'Abdolkarīm Sorūš: "Zātī va 'arāzī dar dīn" (The Essential and the Accidental in Religion), in: *Kīyān* 8 (1998) 42, 4–19.

¹⁵ 'Abdolkarīm Sorūš: "Ḥokūmat-e demūkrātīk-e dīnī" (Religio-Democratic Government), in: *Kīyān* 3 (1993) 11, 12–15.

of God for purposes contrary to God's will.¹⁶ In this aspect, Sorūš's ideal government is not only democratic—it is also religious.

In the period between the late 1980s and the mid-1990s, he tried to present the concept of Islam with a more human face, since he sees the *velāyat-e faqīh* as an attempt that has failed. As a 'government of Islamic law' (*ḥokūmat-e feqhī*), it has not been able to solve society's problems. He does not by any means want this to be taken to mean that "faith is of no use in everyday life",¹⁷ but neither does it mean, he states, that "religion from its very inception on has been sent down for this particular world, and for living in this particular world".¹⁸ His opinion that not all answers can be found in religion puts a wide distance between his thought and the universalistic approach of fundamentalist groups whose political strategy is "Islam is the solution" (*al-islām huwa l-ḥall*). This can be taken as one of several indicators that Sorūš has gone through the so-called 'post-Islamist turn' and must be considered a post-Islamist thinker.

That *velāyat-e faqīh* has failed is yet another argument for democracy as its alternative. He also sees democracy as conducive to a more pious society, since—to him—it is the form of government that goes hand in hand with a liberal system of economics, and "a hungry stomach knows no religion".¹⁹ The religious aspect of a religio-democratic government, then, is that it makes it possible for the faithful to lead a religious life, while the democratic aspect is found in its form and the way power is wielded, making a religio-democratic government (*ḥokūmat-e dīnī*) much more religious than a 'government of Islamic law' (*ḥokūmat-e feqhī*). *Ḥokūmat-e feqhī*, in Sorūš's eyes, 'merely' establishes *šarī'a* rules in society. But he doubts that a society based on the *šarī'a* alone really is religious in the way the Creator intended it. By applying *šarī'a* rules, one cannot establish a religious society but only one abiding by Islamic law. Outward appearances are no real indicator of how deeply a community is rooted in belief; for example, Christians

¹⁶ 'Abdolkarīm Sorūš: "Ḥadamāt va ḥasanāt-e dīn" (Religion's Function and Benefits), in: *Kīyān* 5 (1995) 27, 2-17 (10).

¹⁷ Sorūš: "Ḥadamāt va ḥasanāt-e dīn", 12.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

might want to adopt Islamic law since they are in favor of veiling, wish to prohibit alcohol, and agree that hacking off hands is a valid way of preventing thievery. For him, it is more important that a religious act is inspired by a pious motive than establishing Islamic law, and this piety, he states, cannot be forced.

It is not the consumption of alcohol nor gambling that are the graver sins—it is hypocrisy and mendacity. But from the jurisprudential point of view (*bīneš-e feqhi*), the external act is more important than the heart's appropriation. The difference in both principles becomes clear in the moment both governments take up their rule. When the jurisprudential principle comes to reign, the first efforts of government will be to shape the society according to religious rules. It will start meting out *ḥadd* punishments, collect blood money, insist on veiling, etc. In contrast, the principle based on belief does not start there but keeps these things [i.e., introducing Islamic law K.A.] until last, making people pious by wisdom, teachings, and discussions.²⁰

In other words, for Sorūš, the most important thing is that the heart and soul of government is religious, and the proof of this lies in it fulfilling God's will. His argument runs as follows: it is not the society ruled by religious law that is religious but the one in which people out of their own free will profess their faith. One is based on Islamic law, the other on faith.²¹ Sorūš's ideal may thus be described as a religious state in which the spirit of faith reigns supreme—not as a legislative or political institution but as society's spirit and conscience.

This is why religious government does not have one single, predetermined structure, but appears in a different guise in each epoch. While Iran's clerical establishment states that the structure of government is predetermined *en détail* by God, he maintains that it is not, and that any government fulfilling religion's aims must be considered religious. Thus, there is no formal difference between 'his' religio-democratic and a 'normal' democratic government.

In fact, one needs not expect that a religious government is fundamentally different from a secular one—one does not expect the rational people of this world to walk on their feet and the religious ones on their heads, either. What

²⁰) Sorūš: "Taḥlīl-e mafhūm-e ḥokūmat-e dīnī", 3.

²¹) Sorūš: "Ḥadamāt va ḥasanāt-e dīn", 12.

is so bad about finding that other nations' people have accepted the same methods in questions of government which we have developed through our definition of religious government?²²

Still, the democratic state as Sorūš envisions it does show a small but significant difference to its Western counterparts even if they are formally almost totally alike: his state is not indifferent to religion—as most Islamists blame Western democracies to be—but has a religious aim. The religio-democratic government does, indeed, have a different goal than the democratic one: its *raison d'être* is creating the perfect *umma*. And here it is that freedom comes in. In Sorūš's utopia of the Islamic state, freedom is a necessary, divine prerequisite for religiosity to be chosen freely, and therefore an argument for the democratic order's superiority. True religiosity can only exist in a democracy since faith is based on free will; forced religiosity is not what the Creator intended.²³ This is also how the prophets understood their calling: "The prophets came to win the hearts of the people with the magic of their words, not to rule their bodies."²⁴ Since freedom for him has inherent value, it should not be sacrificed, even for spreading or protecting the Qur'ānic truth.

"Humankind has made more mistakes and suffered greater damage in a system which tried to force-feed it truth than in a system which allows for human fallibility."²⁵ Freedom thus is more important than compliance with Islamic rules: "Free societies, whether religious or a-religious, are in accordance with God's will (*elāhī*) and humane (*ensānī*); in totalitarian societies, neither humanity nor God remains."²⁶

Renouncing Religion's Ideologization

Another major development in Sorūš's thought occurred in the early Nineties when he renounced the so-called 'ideologization of religion', which in Iran can be traced back to the work of 'Alī Šarī'atī

²² Sorūš: "Taḥlīl-e maḥmūd-e ḥokūmat-e dīnī", 11.

²³ 'Abdolkarīm Sorūš: "'Aql va āzādī" (Reason and Freedom), in: *Kīyān* 1 (1992) 5, 13-25 (20).

²⁴ Lecture in London, 17 November 1996.

²⁵ Sorūš: "'Aql va āzādī", 15.

²⁶ Ibid., 24.

(1933–1977). However, Sorūš—who acknowledges Šarī‘atī’s merits in strengthening religious thought and even sees himself as a follower of Šarī‘atī’s tradition—does not dispute the initial importance of religion’s ideologization in regard to the revolution. Šarī‘atī’s work, in his eyes, at the time was valuable for the revolution.

But Sorūš writes under the influence of having lived in a society governed by ideologized religion and clearly states that today, he wants to de-ideologize it. His main argument is that religion cannot be ideologized because of several characteristics inherent to it. His understanding of religion is: the pursuit of justice, fighting the oppressor, etc. For him, a religion is always more—more complex, more diverse, more abundant than an ideology (*farbehtar* is his word for this)—and once religion is ideologized, it is inevitably reduced and tied down to a single interpretation.

One of Sorūš’s arguments why Islam cannot be ideologized is that the Qur’ān is a profound book with multiple layers of meaning, whereas an ideology is the exact opposite of that; it is one-dimensional, simple: “This is why religion has not been sent down in the shape of ideology.”²⁷ To him, religion is a mystery and a phenomenon that inspires a positive sense of wonderment (this is known as the numinous quality of the religious experience). In this, too, it stands in stark contrast to the precision an ideology demands. All of the mysterious interpretations are reduced to a single one when Islam is ideologized: “It’s like translating a poem into prose.”²⁸ Moreover, an ideology is adapted for a specific society, a remedy for a particular invalid, which automatically limits its period of validity. Religions, on the other hand, are eternal. Another aspect of ideologized societies Sorūš criticizes is their propensity for violence. As they assume that the end justifies the means, they view violence as an acceptable means to enforce their goals. In addition, an ideologized society forces its own point of view onto everything and uses everything to further its own causes. Yet another of its evils is its foundation in hate: adherents of an ideology adore it so much they inevitably end up hating all dissenters. Ideologized societies are incapable of tolerating a plurality of opinions, instead offering one specific,

²⁷) Sorūš: “Ḥokūmat-e demūkrātik-e dīnī”, 10.

²⁸) Ibid.

predetermined answer to any question. Such societies claim a state of perfection and don't allow anything except itself—least of all rationality: “Letting in ideology means locking out thinking.”²⁹ Action governed by reason comes to an end in societies such as these where instead of the law, humans reign who are put on a pedestal and credited with superhuman capabilities. Supporters of ideologies suppose that humans are there to serve them, whereas Sorūš maintains that religions are for humans.

Is it right, then, that the ideology towers above humans and that they cannot reach it? Or that humans are crushed under its feet, impoverished, humiliated, helpless, and enslaved? Is it possible that an ideology is so holy that no analysis and no examination may make a subject of it?³⁰

According to Sorūš, a religion turns into an ideology whenever one single interpretation of religion is declared to be the official one and adopted by a specific class as the one true interpretation. Right there and then, the religion automatically adopts all of an ideology's inherent weaknesses. The ideologized religion thrusts aside religion; it becomes secularized through ideologization.³¹

Sorūš puts the blame squarely on Šarī'atī's doorstep: it was his intent to ideologize Islam that has given rise to an entire class of the ideology's official interpreters. Inevitably, they have all of the faults Šarī'atī had tried to avoid: through them religion becomes institutionalized and is not revolutionary any more.³² Sorūš accuses Šarī'atī of having paved the clergy's way through his book *Ommat va emāmat*³³ and complains that he should have anticipated the risk that the clergy immediately would claim the role of ideologue for themselves. The religious society envisioned by Sorūš is, to him, the exact opposite:

²⁹) Ibid., 14.

³⁰) Ibid., 16.

³¹) Ibid., 16.

³²) Sorūš: “Ḥorriyat va rūhāniyat” (Freedom and Clergy), in: *Kiān* 5 (1995) 24, 2-11.

³³) The exact date of this book's first publication is difficult to determine; what can be said with some certainty is that the text is based on a series of lectures which Šarī'atī gave in Tehran in 1968.

But the ideal religious society, in which religion is the judge, is in no way comparable to such an ideologized society. In the ideologized society, government ideologizes society whereas in a religious society, society makes government religious. In an ideologized society, the official interpretation of ideology reigns, but in a religious society, there are several interpretations, not one single official interpretation of religion. In an ideologized society, ideology is left to the ideologues, whereas in a religious society, the relevance of religion (*amr-e dīn*) is much too great to be left to the official interpreters only. In a religious society, there is no person, no legal opinion that is above dispute, and no single knowledge of religion is thought to be the best and the final say. Religion takes on the shades of diverse societies, but this does not result in giving religion a specific shade.³⁴

Sorūš, who is of the opinion that only a certain part of religion, i.e. the *šarī'a*, lends itself to being ideologized, tries to use the connection to mysticism in order to re-establish religion's supremacy over a rigid ideology which only serves the ruling class' interests. He states that Islam is more than just *šarī'a*, but that it is made up of *ḥaqīqat* (truth) und *ṭarīqat* (mysticism, gnosis, theosophy) as well,³⁵ neither one of which can be ideologized. And since ideologized religion to him presents nothing but the ugly face of religion, for post-Islamist Sorūš, mystic Islam becomes the counterweight of juridical Islam.

The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: *Baṣṭ-e tağrobe-ye nabavī*

In 2007, Sorūš faced accusations of being a godless apostate.³⁶ The bone of contention was an interview he had given to the Dutch magazine *ZemZem*. The interview announced the English translation of a book that had already been published in Iran eight years earlier under the title of *Baṣṭ-e tağrobe-ye nabavī* ('The Expansion of Prophetic Experience').³⁷ The interview was not well-received in Iran, which in part may have been due to the interview's title: 'The Word of Muhammad'. In the incriminating interview, Sorūš said that:

³⁴) Sorūš: "Ḥokūmat-e demūkrātik-e dīnī", 20.

³⁵) Ibid., 11.

³⁶) <http://www.dralaee.blogfa.com/post-17.aspx> (last checked 3 October 2011).

³⁷) 'Abdolkarīm Sorūš: *Baṣṭ-e tağrobe-ye nabavī* ('The Expansion of Prophetic Experience'), Tehran 1999.

But the Prophet is also the creator of the revelation in another way. What he receives from God is the content of the revelation. This content, however, cannot be offered to the people as such, because it is beyond their understanding and even beyond words. It is formless and the activity of the person of the Prophet is to form the formless, so as to make it accessible. Like a poet again, the Prophet transmits the inspiration in the language he knows, the styles he masters and the images and knowledge he possesses.³⁸

Most notably, he found very clear words for the consequences that, to him, result from the crucial role the Prophet Muḥammad had played in the text's formation:

A human view of the Qur'ān makes it possible to distinguish between the essential and the accidental aspects of religion. Some parts of religion are historically and culturally determined and no longer relevant today. That is the case, for instance, with the corporal punishments prescribed in the Qur'ān. If the Prophet had lived in another cultural environment, those punishments would probably not have been part of his message.³⁹

Of course, the question must be posed why Sorūš's statements were suddenly met with such an outcry, since the publication of the Persian original in 1999 had not caused anything nearly comparable to the uproar of 2007. Next to the interview's title, one reason may have been that socio-political circumstances in 2007/2008's Iran were much more restrictive than they had been in 1999. Another reason may have been that Sorūš's thoughts were now known to a wider audience until the interview was spread on 3 February 2008 through *Āftāb*-News, a website registered in Iran, and thus was widely read—among others, by Qom-based Ayatollah Ġa'far Šobḥānī, who was very upset by it and issued a response.⁴⁰ Added to that, there is the fact that in the interview, Sorūš expressed himself in much clearer words than he had in the essay published earlier on, especially in regard to the above mentioned consequences of his statements.

³⁸) Sorūš: "The Word of Muhammad".

³⁹) Ibid. The English translation of the interview can also be found in the appendix to Sorūš: *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 271–275.

⁴⁰) http://www.dr.soroush.com/Persian/On_DrSoroush/P-CMO-Sobhani.html (last checked 4 October 2011).

In the essay itself, which I have made the base of my present observations on Sorūš's ideas, he is much less direct and much more keeping things vague; thus, his statements in the text were most likely comprehensible to insiders only. *Baṣṭ-e tağroḡe-ye nabavī* is his repudiation of the traditionally held Islamic opinion which sees the Prophet Muḥammad as the messenger who received the revelation from God and who passed it on with the exact same meaning and in the exact same words. Sorūš argues that this assumption degrades the Prophet's personality to a tool without a will of his own. In his opinion, Muḥammad received the divine message, processed it, and revealed it in his own words. What makes Muḥammad special is that he was chosen and appointed by God.

Sorūš points out that it was the many-talented Ibn Ḥaldūn who has left us with a very charming and apt observation on the nature of revelation and prophetic experience. He wrote that the Prophet's endurance for revelation gradually grew (*be taḡrīḡ taḥamol-e bīštārī nesbat be vaḡy peydā kard*).⁴¹ When the verses of the Qur'ān first were being revealed to him, he would tire out quickly, so to speak; this is why the Medinan chapters and verses are longer than the Meccan ones.

Sorūš proposes that, over the course of time, the revelation's context changed in accordance with the historical context. The Prophet's role changed, and with it, the message. In Mecca, he was the bearer of a divine message nobody was yet familiar with; he had to break taboos, break people of old habits and beliefs and jolt them awake. His message was conveyed through emphatic, penetrating sermons and authoritative ideological stances. After moving to Medina, he took on a new role and new responsibilities: now, the time had come to lay the foundation of a new order, to give the mission a definite shape, and consolidate its teachings, and thus the shape of the message changed to rules and regulations, legislation, detailed and elaborate explanations, and a dialogue with believers and enemies alike. In a way, Sorūš proposes, one could say that the Prophet had to get used to the prophetic experience by degrees; his capability for bearing it had to grow gradually, and with this increasing endurance, the form and content of the message also changed.⁴²

⁴¹⁾ Sorūš: *Baṣṭ-e tağroḡe-ye nabavī*, 11.

⁴²⁾ Ibid., 13.

Whenever humans experience something, Sorūš argues, this experience can grow and deepen in quality, and whenever they become experienced, this implies the possibility of becoming even more experienced. A poet becomes 'more of a poet' by writing more poetry (*šā'er bā šā'erī šā'ertar mišavad*);⁴³ an orator becomes 'more of an orator' by delivering more speeches. All experiences offer this possibility. And, while the essence of the experience is not changed by this, its inherent truth not watered down nor its validity touched, it is also true that while the experience continues, it will gain in depth, becoming itself ever more outstanding.

What the Prophet himself experienced followed this rule of evolution through expanding and deepening at the same time. Every day taught him more about his mission and his ultimate aims; every day he became more familiar with his duties and learned how to perform them ever better, how to achieve his goals more efficiently. He also became more confident of his own role in his mission as he gained increasing outward and internal success; he learned, so to speak, the experience of being successful as a prophet.

Sorūš places great value in the Prophet's personality, saying that it, indeed, was his greatest asset (*hame-ye sarmāye-aš šaḥṣīyataš būd*),⁴⁴ as it was at the same time the receptacle and the generator, the subject as much as the object of his religious revelatory experiences. As the Prophet's personality grew, so too did his experiences expand, which in turn inspired new growth in his personality. It may be said that the revelation followed where he led, not the other way around. In terms developed by the mystics, one could say that the Prophet's varied experience in closeness to God brought him to a level in which God dwelled in his sight.

Sorūš follows this line of thought down some interesting roads: he speculates, for example, that the Qur'ān could have been much longer than it is now; it might even have run to two volumes, had the Prophet lived longer and thus had a chance to experience more things and react to them in ever evolving ways. Here are some examples Sorūš cites: the opening verses of Sūrat al-Nūr—would they have existed if the Proph-

⁴³) Ibid.

⁴⁴) Ibid.

et's wife ʿĀʾiṣā had not been accused of adultery? Would we have Sūrat al-Aḥzāb if the confederate tribes had not gone to war? What about Sūrat al-Masad—would it have come into being without Abū Lahab, his wife Umm Ġamīl and their conflict with the Prophet? These were, in essence, coincidental historical events which would not have had great impact had they happened one way or another; but since they occurred, Sorūš says, we now can find references to these incidents in the Qurʾān.⁴⁵

Sorūš draws a comparison between these passages and the way teachers react to students in the classroom: bent on mischief, the students force the teacher to divert from the intended subject and exert discipline by admonishing a student here, chastising another there.⁴⁶ What has happened is that these admonitions and chastisements have found their way into written religion. It's passages like these that lead Sorūš to the conclusion that religion is human, historical, and gradual in development.

And it's passages like these that lead him to state that Islam was born in the context of these interactions and conflicts. The Prophet had no fixed message to give to his people; he could not just hand over some statements, asking everybody else to interpret them and act upon their own conclusions. The Qurʾān was revealed gradually and in accordance with people's reactions. The essence, the spirit of the message remained unchanged, but the shape changed in response to historical events. Sorūš characterizes the Prophet's interaction with his people as a dialogue: he would talk, listen, and then talk again reacting to what he had heard. What this comes down to is that yes, everyday events in the Prophet's life and times played a part in shaping Islam's origin; had different events taken place, the history of Islam's origin might have been different.⁴⁷

Sorūš cites passages from the text itself to support his hypothesis; there are numerous phrases in the Qurʾān the likes of "they ask you about the spirit", "they ask you about the crescent", "they ask you about fighting in sacred months". Say a question was asked about a specific

⁴⁵⁾ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁶⁾ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁷⁾ Ibid., 16, 21.

subject like ‘the two-horned one’ (‘the two-horned one’, as mentioned in Qur’ān 18:82)—it is only logical that the divine verses of the answer refer to the subject in question. Had the question been about something else, a different answer would be found in the Qur’ān. For Sorūš, that is what an origin shaped by historical circumstances and fixed in time entails.⁴⁸

As I stated earlier—the first publication of his ideas in book form in 1999 went almost unnoticed. But the interview given in 2007 did not. That might be due to the fact that in the interview, Sorūš talked at length about the Prophet’s flaws and limitations. In the interview, Sorūš’s appreciation of the Prophet himself is a very critical one: he states that even though he was the chosen one, he was still a human being and thus subject to all the limitations arising from the time and the place in which he lived. What made Muḥammad a prophet was that he was chosen to mediate the revelation, in essence beyond human comprehension, to humans. He was to make humans comprehend the incomprehensible, to fathom the unfathomable, to grasp the infinite. He could perforce deliver himself of this mission in nothing but his own words and through his own reason, both of which are determined by historical conditions and fraught with limitations and flaws.

This state of facts also explains in Sorūš’s eyes the mistakes and contradictions that can be found in the Qur’ān. From the Qur’ānic text, the Prophet’s educational background and the degree of his knowledge and understanding can be deduced. While these may be the cause of mistakes, the Qur’ān also contains statements that are related to the foundations of belief and thus by necessity must be flawless and valid for eternity. Among those, according to him, are statements on the attributes of God, on life after death, and on the rules concerning prayer; these parts of the Qur’ān he sees as identical with God’s word. Mistakes and contradictions, however, become apparent in the statements, rules and regulations concerning historical events, other religions, and most notably life on earth and everyday life in human society. Passages concerning these things are to be seen as determined by the cultural and intellectual level of development of the time, and

⁴⁸) Ibid., 23.

now that they have shown themselves to be false or outdated, they have to be replaced by more modern findings.

In summary, in the book as well as in the interview, Sorūš attaches great importance to the basically dialogical nature of the prophetic experience and emphasizes that the revelation that happened to Muḥammad is comparable to that of the poet, stressing the importance of the Prophet's role in the Qur'ān's formation. One cannot understand the Qur'ān without understanding the Prophet⁴⁹ since: "It was revelation that followed the Prophet, not the Prophet who followed revelation."⁵⁰

It is not only traditional or conservative clerics who consider these ideas radical. Both Ayatollah Ġa'far Ṣobḥānī—a conservative cleric who has nevertheless delved deeply into Sorūš's thought and written several elaborate refutations—and Moḥsen Kadīvar, who is certainly above any suspicion to be part of the Iranian clerical establishment, come to similar conclusions. And researchers also support this point of view: Islamic Studies scholar Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi also calls *Bast-e tağrobe-ye nabavī* Sorūš's most radical book, which places him "on the edge of a razor blade between faith and heresy".⁵¹

Ṣobḥānī's response to Sorūš's theories is serious and free from party rhetoric. For one, he reproaches him for contradicting himself in his argumentation: on the one hand he claims that Muḥammad was capable of directly conveying the revelation insofar as it concerned life after death or the attributes of God, and expressing them as imparted by God. On the other hand, Sorūš states that Muḥammad made mistakes and contradicted himself in those parts concerning life on earth due to his historically limited state of knowledge. Why, then, was he capable of delivering the one thing correctly, and the other not?⁵²

⁴⁹) Ibid., 19.

⁵⁰) Ibid., 13.

⁵¹) Ghamari-Tabrizi: *Islam and Dissent in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, 226.

⁵²) The English translation of the written dialogue between Sorūš and Ṣobḥānī occasioned by the text can be found in: http://www.dr.soroush.com/Persian/On_Dr.Soroush/P-CMO-Sobhani.html (last checked 4 October 2011). Ṣobḥānī's two letters to Sorūš in the Persian original were published by Farsnews and Fardanews: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8612070740> (last checked 26 October 2011). And: <http://www.fardanews.com/falpages/?cid=48265> (last checked 26 October 2011). Sorūš's first answer to Ṣobḥānī:

That is, in fact, an argument well worth considering. In addition, Şobhānī points to numerous passages in the Qur'ān which expressly state that it is God's word and that Muḥammad is the bearer of the revelation.⁵³ In this, Şobhānī bases his argumentation on the Qur'ān itself, since it does indeed state time and time again that it is God's word. The question is, though, if Sorūš has ever actually denied this. In order to answer this question and to position Sorūš's thought in the context of Shi'ite tradition, a closer look first has to be taken at the way Islamic and specifically Shi'ite theologians have discussed verbal inspiration.

Josef van Ess has shown that, on the one hand, Islamic theologians—in contrast to Christian ones—saw no need to philosophize on the question of verbal inspiration since it can be deduced from the text itself through unmistakable statements and without the shadow of a doubt that it is God who speaks in the Qur'ān.⁵⁴

On the other hand, the history of Islamic theology contains various and contradictory views on what exactly is to be understood by “God speaks in the Qur'ān”. Some scholars take this literally: the Ash'arites hold the view that God has attributes like knowledge and speech, so that through the attribute of knowledge, he knows, and through the attribute of speech, he speaks.⁵⁵ The Mu'tazilites too do not deny that “God speaks in the Qur'ān”, but in their eyes the difference between human and divine language was that God—being almighty—needs no instruments to produce speech. God does not have speech in the human sense since this kind of speech is a human attribute. In order to be able to differentiate between the two categories used here, the Mu'tazilites distinguished between essential attributes or character traits and active attributes (*ṣefat-e fe'liye*) or characteristics of action.

http://www.dr.sorush.com/Persian/By_DrSorush/P-NWS-BasharVaBashir.html (last checked 4 October 2011). The second one: http://www.dr.sorush.com/Persian/By_DrSorush/P-NWS-13870200TootiVaZan-boor.html (last checked 4 October 2011).

⁵³) <http://www.fardanews.com/jfa/pages/?cid=48265>.

⁵⁴) Josef van Ess: “Verbal Inspiration? Language and revelation in classical Islamic theology”, in: Stefan Wild (ed.): *The Qur'ān as Text*, Leiden 1996, 177-194 (189f., 192).

⁵⁵) Montgomery W. Watt & Michael Marmura: *Der Islam II. Politische Entwicklungen und theologische Konzepte*, Stuttgart et al. 1985, 317.

While a similar distinction can be found in the Ash‘arite teachings, they believed that God’s word is one of his essential attributes and thus uncreated in the same way he is, i.e. *azalī* and *abadī*, without beginning or end, whereas the Mu‘tazilites maintained that God’s speech is among his active attributes, which leads them to deduce that the Qur’ān is not eternal and thus has been created. Following the Mu‘tazilites’ line of reasoning, the Shi‘ites likewise see God’s speech (*takallom-e elāhī*) as “part of his active attributes” (*az şefat-e fe‘liye-üst*).⁵⁶

The concept of verbal inspiration is closely related to the concept of the Qur’ān’s uncreatedness. As Rotraud Wielandt has put it, from the time (during the second half of the 9th century) that Sunni mainstream accepted as a dogma the idea of the Qur’ān’s uncreatedness, two ideas were no longer thinkable and as assumptions excluded: the first was that the Qur’ān in form and content was shaped by the historical figure of the Prophet. The second was that “God in him spoke *in* a specific historical situation and not only *for them* [the people K.A.]”.⁵⁷ Wielandt goes on to state that the theologians never saw eye to eye with, much less found a solution to, the metaphysical problem of how a pre-existent, eternal text, part of God’s essence, could be subject to abrogations, that is—changes (she by this refers to the abrogated and abrogating verses), and thus, nothing could shake them in the assurance of hearing God’s eternal word in the Qur’ān.

The Shi‘ites adopted the Mu‘tazilites’ doctrine of the Qur’ān’s createdness, which means that for them, the assumption that the Qur’ān in form and content was shaped by the historical figure of the Prophet is admissible. It is important in this context to note that for Shi‘ites, the question of the Qur’ān’s createdness or uncreatedness belongs neither to the principles of faith (*oşul*) nor to the *derivatives* (*forū*).⁵⁸

While it is true that there are different ideas about who was the one to formulate or verbalize—God, the angels, or Muḥammad himself—Muslim scholars in the history of Islam have never doubted that in the

⁵⁶ Bahā’ od-Dīn Ḥorramšāhī: *Dānešnāme-ye qor’ān va qor’ānpažūhī* (Encyclopaedia of the Qur’ān and Research on the Qur’ān), 1. vol., Tehran 1998, 918.

⁵⁷ Rotraud Wielandt: *Offenbarung und Geschichte im Denken moderner Muslime*, Wiesbaden 1971, 43. Emphasis in the original.

⁵⁸ Ḥorramšāhī: *Dānešnāme-ye qor’ān va qor’ānpažūhī*, 918.

final instance, the speaker is God. And even an innovative thinker such as the recently deceased Naṣr Abū Zaid, who has gone far beyond the traditional Sunnite position, maintains the view, that even if Muḥammad was the creator of the verbal expression, the wording itself was predetermined by God.⁵⁹ This concurs with the mainstream Shi'ite point of view that one may distinguish between form and content, but while the form may well be human, it is imperative that the content is divine.⁶⁰

The question is if Sorūš's argumentation goes beyond or stays inside the framework of more or less well-established Shi'ite positions. When the scandal erupted in February 2008, Sorūš granted an interview to the Iranian magazine *Kārgozārān* in which the question was put to him directly if he had in fact denied that "the Qur'ān was revealed by God" and stated that it is "the earthly word of Muḥammad".

Question:

Some newspapers and websites have been saying recently that Sorūš has officially denied that the Qur'ān was revealed by God and has said that it is the earthly word of Muḥammad. Is this true?

Answer:

Maybe they are joking or, God forbid, they have political or personal motives. [...] Hopefully, they are well-intentioned and have simply misunderstood things. Otherwise, anyone who is acquainted with the Divinity's universal dominion and with the closeness of God's apostles to Him—and knows about their experience of union with Him—would not speak in this disbelieving manner. God's apostles are so close to God and they so lose themselves in God that their word is the same as the word of God, and their commands and prohibitions and their likes and dislikes are the same as God's commands and prohibitions and likes and dislikes. The beloved Prophet of Islam was a human being and he acknowledged and was conscious of his humanity, but this human being had, at the same time acquired such a divine hue and quality—and the intermediaries (even Gabriel) had so fallen away from between him and God—that whatever he said was both earthly and divine; these two things were inseparable.⁶¹

⁵⁹) In an interview with the Iranian magazine *Kīyān* Abū Zaid in my opinion went further the ideas he had formulated years before in his books *Maḥbūm an-naṣṣ*. Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zaid (Interview): "Ta'vīl, ḥaqīqat va naṣṣ" (Interpretation, Truth, and Text), in: *Kīyān* 54 (2000), 2-17.

⁶⁰) Ḥorramšāhī: *Dānešnāme-ye qor'ān va qor'ānpažūhī*, 918.

⁶¹) As quoted in: Sorūš: *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 289.

That is definite in one way; in another, it is not. The Qur'ān is both human and divine. The classification that Sorūš draws upon here is a mystic one. Sorūš has made a name for himself as political philosopher, but in Iran he is also famous as one of today's most eminent specialists in Persian mysticism.⁶² On top of that, he has written poems and masters the *sağ*-style, rhymed prose, especially when writing the open letters for which he became famous too. Only people very much versed in classical Persian Literature are nowadays capable of mastering *sağ*-style and this is why he in Iran earned his reputation as today's most eminent master of Persian language.

Mysticism and poetry then, is the theoretical background of his argumentation and the light in which he sees the Qur'ān when he compares the Prophet's inspiration to that of a poet and develops his mystical approach to revelation.⁶³ But is it really reasonable to believe that the Qur'ān is God's word and to assume at the same time the revelation received by Muḥammad to be an inspiration comparable to a poet's? Is this a viable explanation for believers—particularly those not so well versed in mysticism—which will allow them to keep the faith? Scholars of Religious Studies may understand the line of argumentation Sorūš follows, and mystics may be able to relate to the gist of it, but what about ordinary believers?

Is it not, considering this, more useful to look for different solutions that would allow the discontinuation of the imposition of *ḥadd* punishments and other laws that are in the modern world considered as not defensible? Orthodox Shi'a, that has taken a back seat after the Islamic revolution, states for example that in the period of the Major Occultation the *ṣarī'a* is suspended anyway; one could make good use of that as an argument in favor of secular law instead of taking things as far as

⁶² He has, for example, edited and published *Maṣnavī* (including comments and introduction): Ġalāl od-Dīn Rūmī: *Maṣnavī-ye mā'navī*, 2 vols., Tehran 1996. His book *Qeṣṣe-ye arbāb-e mā'refat* (History of the Masters of Knowledge) contains essays on Rūmī, Ḥāfiz, Ġazzālī and Šarī'atī (Tehran 1993). His interpretations of Rūmī's thought are subject of another of his books titled: *Qomār-e āšeḡāne* (Amorous Game), Tehran 2000.

⁶³ Regarding the mystical aspect of Sorūš's thought, see: John von Heyking: "Mysticism in Contemporary Islamic Political Thought: Orhan Pamuk and Abdolkarim Soroush", in: *Humanitas* XIX (2006), 71–96.

Sorūš does. In Sorūš's thought, the Qur'ān's content is not absolutely divine, but only indirectly in that the Prophet, as a divine creation, can but speak the divine. This—simply speaking—is very complicated reasoning.

But in order to see the reaction Sorūš met in Iran in the right light, it is necessary to take another factor into consideration: in the years following the revolution, Iran's clerical establishment has become increasingly more—let's say—'Ash'arite', more 'Sunnite', or even more 'Salafite'. What once had been postulated by the Shi'a itself—that reason commands primacy over the text itself—seems to be fading fast in Iran's Shi'ite establishment of today; instead, the scope of interpretation is increasingly restricted and the Qur'ānic wording becomes ever more important. This has led to a *ḥokūmat-e feqhī*, which—as Sorūš rightly has shown—is the exact opposite of the *ḥokūmat dīnī* that he prefers. He might well have struck a nerve by giving that interview in 2007 to *ZemZem* magazine in which he talked about a human view of the Qur'ānic revelation and pointed out what logical consequences could be drawn from it; for example that some parts of religion are historically and culturally determined and no longer relevant today. A case in question are the corporal punishments as they have been prescribed in the Qur'ān: had the Prophet lived in a different cultural environment, those punishments might easily never have been part of his message.

Sorūš wants to get rid of what—in his eyes—goes against our modern understanding of human rights. He is in favor of giving Islam a more human face and against the literal interpretation of the Qur'ān currently dominant in Iran, since it has led to a variant of Islam which he has long characterized as not in harmony with reason and thus indubitably not in harmony with the will of the Creator.

This line of thought has its consequences, some of which Sorūš himself might not have thought through in all of their implications and ramifications, and which may even go beyond what he himself intended. What is certain is that they go well beyond what the establishment is capable of tolerating. It appears that the clerical establishment has no other weapon against the man who has been defying it for years now, who has become one of the Iranian oppositional Green Movement's

masterminds, and who today criticizes the regime in words as frank as in this Open Letter published in May 2010:

The springtime of rule by the people and the autumn of arbitrary rule are our historical dispositions, and, tomorrow, when the people's Judgment Day is entrenched, when the post-theocratic state arrives in full splendour, when the sun of rule by the people rises, when the crowns fall from the heads of the wicked, when we rejoice the crumbling of religious tyranny, when the victims of rot and tyranny place the chains on the feet of the chain-makers and expose the collusion between the piety peddlers and the proponents of theocratic guardianship, as well as the complicity between the triangle of the truncheon, lucre and the worry bead, then, the arbitrary rulers and their lackeys will hang their heads in shame.⁶⁴

But it is not only the religious establishment that views Sorūš's ideas with bewilderment. Grand Ayatollah Ḥosein 'Alī Montazerī has challenged them, and Moḥsen Kadīvar says that he cannot concur with Sorūš's thinking.⁶⁵ Kadīvar, another innovative religious thinker who in many points agrees with Sorūš, voices his concern that Sorūš's approach to the Qur'ān will end in the disintegration of religious New-thinking (*enḫelāl-e roušanfekrī-ye dīnī*), the intellectual movement the two of them belong to. He is afraid that if Sorūš's thoughts are carried to their logical consequence, nothing will be left of religion. Sorūš's metaphor that "the Prophet was like a bee who produces honey itself, even though the mechanism for making the honey is placed in him by God", as one of his students quotes him saying,⁶⁶ is not enough incentive for some people to find a path to faith.

I myself recall how in the mid-Nineties, the late Naṣr Abū Zaid—a thinker who can hardly be accused of narrow-mindedness—shook his head in amazement when Sorūš said at a convention at Berlin's 'Haus der Kulturen der Welt' (House of the World Cultures) that the Arabic

⁶⁴ http://www.dr.sorush.com/English/By_DrSorush/E-CMB-20100500-WhyDontYouEmigrate.html (last checked 8 September 2011).

⁶⁵ <http://www.rahesabz.net/story/8029/> (last checked 4 October 2011). Interview 10 October 2010. See also: <http://kadivar.com/?p=2995> (last checked 4 October 2011).

⁶⁶ Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabāar: "Who Wrote the Koran?", *New York Times*, 5 December 2008. URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/07/magazine/07wwln-essay-t.html> (last checked 8 September 2011).

language is a mere accident of the Islamic religion, and that the Qur'ān might well have had more pages had the Prophet lived longer. Sorūš touches upon the heart and soul of the matter here—even if, from a neutral or a scientific point of view, what he says is true, the Qur'ān actually contains only what the Prophet knew and nothing beyond that.

A thinker who has tested the limits in a way comparable to Sorūš is Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988).⁶⁷ In his book *Islam* published in 1966 in English, Rahman characterizes the Qur'ānic revelation as follows: "A voice [...] crying from the very depths of life and impinging forcefully on the Prophet's mind in order to make itself explicit at the level of consciousness."⁶⁸

Rahman shows a similar appreciation of the Prophet's role, seeing him as much more than an instrument and describing him as a personality who wanted to struggle against the state of things prevalent on the Arabic peninsula at the time by establishing a new religio-ethical order in Mecca and Medina. That earlier generations took the Qur'ān to be the word of God Rahman takes to be the result of their intellectual inability to imagine anything different:

But Orthodoxy (indeed, all medieval thought) lacked the necessary intellectual tools to combine in its formulation of the dogma the otherness and verbal character of the Revelation on the one hand, and its intimate connection with the work and the religious personality of the Prophet on the other, i.e., it lacked the intellectual capacity to say both that the Qur'ān is entirely the Word of God and, in an ordinary sense, also entirely the word of Muhammad.⁶⁹

We can see here that Rahman and Sorūš arrived at similar conclusions. But the former held no illusions about the incalculable consequences even this cautious introduction of a historical perception could have.

⁶⁷ A summary of his ideas can be found at: Tamara Sonn: "Fazlur Rahman's Islamic Methodology", in: *The Muslim World* 81 (1991), 212-230; Rotraud Wielandt: "Exegesis of the Qur'ān: Early Modern and Contemporary", *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, Brill, 2010, Brill Online; Stefan Wild: *Mensch, Prophet und Gott im Koran. Muslimische Exegeten des 20. Jahrhundert und das Menschenbild der Moderne*, Münster 2001, 35.

⁶⁸ Fazlur Rahman: *Islam*, Chicago 1979 (2nd edition), 30.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

Fazlur Rahman, well known in the Islamic world as a controversial thinker,⁷⁰ thus has never really put his exegetical approach into practice.⁷¹

Moreover, it is understandable that Sorūš wants to prove that those Qur'ānic regulations not compatible with human rights are only conditionally permanent. But Sorūš does not necessarily have to go to such an ideological extreme in order to accomplish the compatibility of Qur'ānic regulations and human rights. Isn't it easily imaginable that God intentionally sent down some regulations whose validity is limited in time, as it is easily imaginable that Qur'ānic regulations are eternal in character regardless of the Qur'ān being the Prophet's formulation or not. And then the Qur'ān can remain God's word in the traditional way. It almost seems as if the constant denial of the adherents of *ḥokūmat-e feqhī* who insist that the Qur'ānic wording must be taken literally as the Qur'ān is God's word has pushed Sorūš towards a new concept of this "being God's word" in order to free himself of some of the Qur'ān's contents.

But one cannot help but think that this new turn in Sorūš's thought—or rather, the unflinching continuation of his thoughts first developed in the Nineties—ends up creating more problems than it solves. It is not true that Sorūš denies the central dogma of Islam as his enemies accuse him of doing, but his re-interpretation is so convoluted as to remain incomprehensible to ordinary believers. This is all the more lamentable since the express intent of this argumentation was to offer a better solution than earlier attempts by Sorūš and others which had not met with success. These earlier attempts can be summed up as an effort to distinguish between the changeable and eternal parts of religion.

Recent Shi'ite intellectual history knows of numerous attempts in this direction: among others, some thinkers have tried to establish a dynamic jurisprudence (*feqh-e pūyā*) as an alternative to the traditional one, while others have tried to distinguish between the 'accidental' and the 'essential' parts of religion. It has also been argued that regarding the regulations, there ought to be an extensive *iğtihād* (*eğtehād dar*

⁷⁰ Frederick Mathewson Denny: "Fazlur Rahman: Muslim Intellectual", in: *The Muslim World* 79 (1989), 91–101 (101).

⁷¹ Wild: *Mensch, Prophet und Gott im Koran*, 43.

aḥkām). Others have proposed distinguishing between religion and *šarīʿa*, and a “minimum and maximum Islam” (*eslām-e ḥadd-e akṣar va eslām-e ḥadd-e aqall*), and attention has been drawn to the possibility of establishing state regulations (*ḥokm-e ḥokūmatī*) which may contradict the wording of the Qurʾān in the strict sense.⁷²

All of these suggestions were attempts to help religious people find a way of fulfilling their faith in the modern world. But the division between the changeable and the eternal parts of religion cannot but remain controversial because there is deep disagreement on where the line should be drawn: what is essential and what is accidental in Islamic faith? Defining which parts are changeable and which are eternal will always remain arbitrary and difficult to delineate. There is, in addition, no consensus in the Islamic world as to this division, nor about the question of who would be entitled to establish state regulations, which may contradict the strict sense of the Qurʾān's wording. This is why in recent Shiʿite history thinkers from Ṭabāṭabāʾī on to Moṭahharī and up all the way to Šarīʿatī, Sorūš, and Šabestārī have been inspired to present proposals on this division. But today, many reformers are of the opinion that hermeneutics or similar strategies have not been successful. To compensate for this, Iran's four most influential reformers have each developed an alternative line of thought which they deem more conducive to solving the problem of harmonizing several of the Islamic regulations with human rights and democracy. In Sorūš's case, this is his argument that the Qurʾān originates in an inspiration comparable to the poet's; Eškevarī propagates his theory of the changeability of Islam's socially relevant regulations,⁷³ Kadīvar sees the greatest chance in a spiritual Islam (*eslām-e maʿnavī*),⁷⁴ and Šabestārī advocates the idea that the Qurʾān is a prophetic reading of the world. Which of these proposals will be the one to appeal most to others remains to be seen.

⁷²) Hasan Yüsefi Eškevarī gives a concise overview of these attempts in: Hasan Eshkevari: “Die Menschenrechte und die gesellschaftsrelevanten Bestimmungen des Islam”, in: Katajun Amirpur (ed.): *Unterwegs zu einem anderen Islam. Texte iranischer Denker*, translated from the Persian by Katajun Amirpur, Freiburg 2009, 149-180.

⁷³) Ibid., 169-180.

⁷⁴) Mohsen Kadivar: “Vom historischen Islam zum spirituellen Islam”, in: Amirpur: *Unterwegs zu einem anderen Islam*, 80-105 (104f.).