

Abdolkarim Soroush: The Prophet's Revelatory Experiences

This chapter examines Abdolkarim Soroush's theory of revelation and its influence on his approach to Qur'ānic exegesis. It first explores Soroush's theory of revelation in order to examine how he understands the role of the Prophet in the process of revelation, and secondly, the way in which he emphasises human aspects of the Qur'ān. It then examines the extent to which his account of revelation is rooted in either pre-modern Muslim philosophical teachings or in modern Western scholarship. The remainder of this chapter addresses Soroush's approaches to Qur'ānic exegesis and its applications to certain Qur'ānic passages or themes. In order to show how Soroush's theory of revelation and his hermeneutics function in practice, I focus on three themes that appear in his work, namely religious pluralism, discourses of women's rights and the relation between state and religion.

Soroush's theory of revelation

This section focuses on Soroush's understanding of the nature of revelation, and the way he links the Qur'ānic revelation to the circumstances that Muhammad confronted during his prophetic mission. In particular, it examines how Soroush emphasises the human dimension of revelation by arguing that there are two levels of historicisation of the concept of revelation in his theory.

Soroush on the nature of revelation

Soroush's fundamental assumption in his theory of revelation is the idea that revelation is, in its very nature, the same as the 'religious experience' of prophets.¹ This idea is valid for all the prophets of God since 'prophethood was [essentially] a kind of [human] experience'.² 'Religious experience is exactly that which, in the case of the prophets, is known as reception of revelation.'³ In other words, revelation, as a fundamental aspect of religion, is essentially linked to a form of human experience. Soroush states that all prophets have undergone inward religious experiences through which they became prepared 'for performing their awesome task

in the world'.⁴ One source Soroush draws on to make this argument is Abu Hamid al-Ghazali's *Deliverance from Error*, a well-known spiritual autobiography written in the eleventh century of the Common Era.⁵ Having relied on this source, Soroush argues that religious experience is the most important and defining aspect of a prophetic mission; that is, he makes the case that prophets must be recognised from their religious experiences, and not – as most thinkers of classical Islam hold – merely on the basis of their ability to perform miracles.⁶ As Frank Griffel argues, Ghazali had clearly distanced himself from the classical Ash'ari view that prophecy could only be verified through miracles.⁷ For Soroush, the prophecy of Muhammad, like that of other prophets, is essentially a matter of individual human experience. What distinguishes Ghazali from Soroush, however, is that the former's discussion of religious experience was not oriented around developing specific methods to approaching the Qur'ān, but rather remained confined to a defence of prophecy as such. As will be discussed, Soroush's perspective, unlike Ghazali's, on the theme of experience became a basis for developing various hermeneutical approaches to interpreting the Qur'ān.

For Soroush, the Prophet did not simply hear the Word of God during the process of revelation, but had an inner experience of the divine through which the Qur'ān came into being. The Prophet's 'experience' of the divine did not simply consist of hearing physical and acoustic words, as traditionally understood, but rather included 'reveries, insights and illuminations'.⁸ Soroush distances himself from the traditional account of revelation, which 'has almost univocally described the phenomenon [of revelation] as auditory' (as Madigan noted⁹), but rather focuses on visual aspects of revelation in his theory. In fact, Soroush's emphasis on experiential features of revelation leads him to argue that the Prophet was semi-conscious in the process of revelation, and was able to see autonomous forms, visions and images through his strong imaginative faculty. The idea that Muhammad experienced revelation in the sense that *wahy* contained visual aspects – in the form of visions and images – is more strongly emphasised in Soroush's most recent works. For example, when referring to the Qur'ānic verse, 'And to God prostrates whoever is within the heavens and the earth' (Q 13:15), Soroush states that 'Muhammad was not told that everything glorifies God, but he himself experienced everything as glorifying God', and makes the case that 'one fascinating revelatory experience of the Prophet was that he saw everything in the earth and the heaven and their shadows prostrating to God day and night'.¹⁰ Soroush writes:

Muhammad is a narrator [*rāwī*]. That is, he is not [simply] addressed by voices that he hears in his inner ear, which ask him to transfer their message to humanity. Muhammad conveys his experiences as an observer of the visions he himself has seen [in the process of revelation].¹¹

In order to explain the nature of revelation in detail, Soroush, like Rahman, likens the revelatory experiences of prophets to those of poets and mystics:

‘To understand the unfamiliar phenomenon of revelation we can use the more familiar phenomenon of the creation of poetry and artistic creativity in general.’¹² From Soroush’s writings one can conclude that there are three similarities between prophecy and poetry. First, like poets who feel that they receive inspiration from a source external to them, prophets, too, receive inspiration or revelation from an external source. Second, poetry and divine revelation are both related to the possession of a kind of talent. Soroush argues that poets and prophets possess extraordinary talents, including those of articulation and imagination.¹³ Third, like a prophet, a poet ‘can open new horizons for people; he can make them view the world in a different way’.¹⁴ Despite these similarities, Soroush distinguishes prophecy from poetry (or mysticism). He acknowledges that religious experience in itself does not make one a prophet. Even the mere sight of an angel does not instil one with a prophetic mission. For example, the Qur’ān speaks about the story of Mary’s encounter with the angel, and about how the sight of the angel frightened her, but Mary did not become a prophet.¹⁵ Therefore, religious experience is a necessary condition for a person to become a prophet, but is not a sufficient one. Further, there is an element of mission which distinguishes the prophetic experience from the experience of mystics and poets: ‘The difference between prophets and other people who undergo similar experiences is that they do not remain confined within this personal experience.’¹⁶ Another difference between the revelatory experiences of prophets and similar types of experiences is that the former are of a divine essence, while the latter do not have roots in a divine source. Therefore, in an approach not dissimilar to that of Fazlur Rahman, Soroush argues that mystics, poets and prophets experience similar incidents only insofar as the psychological processes of revelation are concerned, and their revelatory experiences are different in terms of their ultimate sources. Soroush concludes that the revelatory experience of the prophet excels that of poets and mystics: ‘Revelation is higher poetry.’¹⁷

The first level of historicisation of revelation: the Prophet’s role in revelation

Strongly related to Soroush’s notion of religious experience is the idea that the Prophet was not a mere passive receiver of revelation, but rather played an active role in his revelatory experiences: ‘In the process of revelation, the Prophet is an active agent, not a passive means.’¹⁸ Soroush rejects the traditional account of revelation according to which the Prophet is reduced to a channel for the transmission of God’s Word. In what follows, I argue that there are three themes in Soroush’s theory which are associated with the Prophet’s role in revelation: (1) the Prophet’s heart and mind are two faculties that were actively involved in the revelation process; (2) the Prophet’s personality played a central role in revelation; and (3) the Angel Gabriel was part of Muhammad, or appeared in his imaginative faculty, and thus was not an external being vis-à-vis the Prophet.

The role of the Prophet's heart and mind in revelation

Like Rahman, Soroush makes a case that the process of revelation was internal. One of the main problems with the traditional account of revelation, according to Soroush, is that it reduces to zero the involvement of Muhammad's heart and mind in revelation. Soroush places an emphasis on the role of the Prophet's heart in the process of revelation and believes that the Qur'ān descended onto the Prophet's heart, not onto his tongue (Q 26:193–4).¹⁹ In addition, as will be explained later, following some Muslim philosophers, Soroush states that the Prophet's power of intellect and imagination also played an important role in the process of revelation.²⁰ That is, it was impossible for the Prophet to receive revelation without the involvement of his intellectual and imaginative faculties. Revelation, for Soroush, 'was the effervescence within Muhammad's mind and the tumult within his heart'.²¹

The role of the Prophet's personality

As stated, Soroush maintains that it was the inner experience of founders of religious traditions that shaped those religions. Strongly related to Soroush's theme of 'experience' is the idea that the Prophet's personality played a far greater role in the formation of the Qur'ān than the traditional accounts of revelation acknowledge. Much like Rahman, who saw Muhammad's personality as much more than an instrument in the event of revelation, Soroush places the Prophet's personality at the very centre of revelation and shows a similar appreciation of it: 'The Prophet's personality is the core; it is everything that God has granted to the Muslim community. Religion is woven through and through with this personality.'²² The Prophet's moods, ranging from his joy to his sadness, played a pivotal role in the revelations he received. In one of his interviews, Soroush says that Muhammad's personal history, 'his father, his mother, his childhood and even his moods', played a significant role in shaping the text.²³ The Prophet was sometimes jubilant and highly eloquent while at other times he was bored: 'All those things have left their imprint on the text of the Qur'ān. That is the purely human side of revelation.'²⁴ Although Soroush argues that Muhammad's personality and feelings played a central role in the process of revelation, he consistently makes the case that the Prophet's personality was exceptional, since it was 'divinely sanctioned', and thus Muhammad had the potential to receive revelation.²⁵ Such an approach is reminiscent of Rahman's idea that the Prophet Muhammad had 'the potential Revelation in him'.²⁶

The role of the angelic figure in revelation

In regard to the role of the angelic figure in revelation, Soroush distances himself from the ideas proposed by traditional Muslim scholars, as he rejects the total otherness and the externality of the angelic figure vis-à-vis the Prophet. Soroush makes the case that the angelic figure was internal to the Prophet, having only

appeared in Muhammad's faculty of intellect.²⁷ In keeping with Rahman's theory of revelation, Soroush considers the angel of revelation to be a part of the Prophet, and not a physical and external being vis-à-vis the Prophet.²⁸ When the traditional account speaks of the winged angels, Soroush interprets this as meaning that 'angels are not corporeal beings that can have wings . . . it is . . . in the Prophet's imagination [that] angels appeared to have wings', and thus concludes that 'the angel's arrival, the delivery of revelation and the like are events that occur within the Prophet's being'.²⁹ In line with his approach, which involves considering the phenomenon of revelation within the framework of the Prophet's personality, Soroush states that 'Gabriel is lost in Muhammad's grandeur'³⁰ and that 'it was not he [Muhammad] who was under Gabriel's sway, but Gabriel who was under his sway'.³¹

The Prophet's role in releasing God's Words

Soroush argues that revelation was a 'formless phenomenon' whose content was not understandable to others.³² This is due to the fact that revelation was a form of 'experience' that did not merely consist of verbal words. As such, the Prophet had to 'explain' or 'interpret' his revelatory experiences in a human language that would be understandable to his audiences. In other words, God gave a non-verbal inspiration to His Prophet and it was left upon him to 'translate' it for others:

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 . . . the Prophet transmits the inspiration in the language he knows, the styles he masters and the images and knowledge he possesses.³³

Soroush likens again revelation to mystical inspirations in order to highlight the significance of the Prophet's role in articulating his revelatory experiences. After receiving or experiencing a mystical inspiration, the mystic must interpret it for others, meaning that he should clothe his experience in human words. For Soroush, 'putting the experiences into words and describing them, using concepts, is itself an interpretation [of a mystical experience]'.³⁴ In a similar vein, prophets must express their revelatory experiences in the language that they and their audiences understand. Indeed, one of the special skills that all prophets, including Muhammad, possessed was to give a 'form' or 'face' to 'formless' or 'faceless' truths.³⁵ That is, Soroush distinguishes the nature of revelation from the words of the Qur'ān by arguing that the formless meaning is from God and the form belongs to Muhammad, or that 'the breath is from God and the reed-pipe is from Muhammad; the water is from God and the jug is from Muhammad'.³⁶ The Qur'ān is indeed Muhammad's words and expression of his revelatory experiences. As Soroush puts it, 'God wrote Muhammad and Muhammad wrote the Qur'ān'.³⁷

The second level of historicisation of revelation: revelation from experience to a historical event

As shown so far, Soroush attempts to historicise the notion of revelation – an approach which emphasises that revelation was the product of Muhammad's human experiences and is intimately related to his personality. Soroush takes one step further than Rahman in historicising the notion of revelation. His conception of revelation as an individual experience of the Prophet Muhammad is another point of departure for his argument about both the historical and this-worldly dimensions of revelation and its gradual expansion.

If revelation is a form of experience, then that experience, like any form of experience, is subject to expansion, evolution and enrichment. When humans experience something, there is always a possibility that the experience may grow and deepen in quality. Like other forms of human experiences, prophetic experiences do not mature all of a sudden, but grow gradually: 'A poet becomes more of a poet by writing poetry. A speaker becomes more of a speaker by delivering speeches. This can be said of any experience . . . as the experience endures, so, too, will it gain in excellence.'³⁸ In this respect, 'just as anyone who gains any experience can become more skilled and more experienced, a prophet, too, can gradually become more of a prophet'.³⁹ According to Soroush, the Qur'ān confirms that the Prophet Moses was at first frightened when the cane was transformed into a serpent, but he gradually became accustomed to his revelatory experiences and miracles.⁴⁰ Similarly, Muhammad became gradually acquainted with his prophetic mission and his role as God's prophet. He became more confident, resilient and steadier in the performance of his duties: '[T]he blessing of revelation rained down upon him constantly, giving him ever greater strength and flourishing. Hence the Prophet grew steadily more learned, more certain, more resolute, more experienced; in a word, more of a prophet.'⁴¹ Soroush's conceptualisation of the term 'experience' becomes clearer here as he attaches it to the Prophet's personality. For him, as the Prophet's experiences grew and expanded, so too did his personality, and vice versa.⁴² This emphasis on the evolutionary nature of Muhammad's prophecy confirms the human side of revelation, and the importance of Muhammad's human character in shaping it.

Soroush uses a number of sources to support his idea about the gradual expansion of prophetic experience. For him, Q 20:114, which states, 'O my Lord, increase me in knowledge', confirms the gradual development of prophetic experience.⁴³ He also relies on the writings of two celebrated medieval Muslim scholars, al-Tabari and Ibn Khaldun. Soroush cites Ibn Khaldun as saying, 'the Prophet's endurance for revelation gradually grew. Initially, when the verses of the Qur'ān were being revealed to him, his endurance would rapidly expire.'⁴⁴ To cite a short passage from Ibn Khaldun's *Introduction to History*, 'revelation causes pain, since it means that an essence leaves its own essence and exchanges its own stage for the ultimate stage . . . gradual habituation to the process of

revelation brings some relief'.⁴⁵ Soroush takes Ibn Khaldun's idea as an adequate reason for supporting the fact that the Meccan chapters and verses of the Qur'ān are short, whereas the Medinan ones are longer. Drawing on Ibn Khaldun, Soroush sees revelation as a psychological phenomenon with an experiential nature.⁴⁶ However, unlike Soroush, Ibn Khaldun does not, in general, challenge the traditional understanding of revelation because he believes there is a huge gap between the human sphere and the divine realm, considering the Prophet's mind passive during the revelation process. In fact, although Ibn Khaldun initially attempts to approach the Qur'ān by questioning how revelation took place in Muhammad's psyche, he does not establish a systematic link between the Prophet's revelatory experience and its immediate context – a theme that is recurrent in Soroush's writings. Soroush also cites al-Tabari, stating that, after the revelation of the initial verses of *sūrah al-‘alaq*, which is traditionally considered the first chapter of the Qur'ān revealed to Muhammad, the Prophet was frightened and could not grasp what had been revealed to him, but gradually became accustomed to his revelatory experiences.⁴⁷ Soroush concludes from Ibn Khaldun's and Tabari's accounts that the Prophet's ability to bear his revelatory experiences increased gradually. These accounts show that the Prophet's inward religious experience was subject to expansion, and did not emerge instantly.

For Soroush, the revelatory experiences of the Prophet did not take shape in a vacuum. Like any other experiences, such as mystical ones, Muhammad's revelatory experiences did not develop on their own, but in a particular context. Soroush rejects the British philosopher Walter T. Stace's (d. 1967) idea that mystical experiences are unmediated and ineffable by asserting that there is no pure or context-free experience.⁴⁸ Soroush's idea echoes aspects of the American philosopher Steven Katz's contextualist approach to mystical experiences. To quote Katz, 'There are no pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated.'⁴⁹ For Katz, a proper evaluation of mystical experiences includes 'acknowledging that the experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his experience'.⁵⁰ In other words, according to Katz, mystical experience, like any other religious experience, is shaped by the subject's cognitive conditions as well as his cultural environment, religious training and historical circumstances. In a similar vein, Soroush asserts that the nature of mystical experiences is shaped in a socially constructed context.⁵¹ From this premise, he explains why there exist various mystical experiences, rejecting Stace's view that 'all mystical experiences are the same and doctrine is later interpreted into the experience'.⁵² Soroush believes that 'the Prophet did not adapt abstract experiences to reality';⁵³ instead, the actual existing world of the Prophet's time played a crucial role in shaping, and in the development of, his revelatory experiences. Muhammad encountered various circumstances during his prophetic mission. As these circumstances altered, Muhammad's experiences and his personality evolved.

Soroush makes the case here that the Prophet's external experiences affected his inward revelatory experiences: 'The Prophet's interaction with the outer world undoubtedly allowed his mission and prophetic experience to expand and flourish.'⁵⁴ Indeed, as the Prophet's external situation, namely his societal life and conditions, changed, his internal experiences, namely his intellectual and spiritual capabilities, evolved and expanded. This shows that Soroush sees prophecy as a natural phenomenon with its roots in history.

By developing this discussion, Soroush gives the Qur'ān a historical nature and sees it as having come into being within specific socio-historical circumstances. In order to discuss further how Muhammad's outward experiences affected his internal religious experiences, and to conclude that prophecy should not be seen as a phenomenon outside but rather within history, Soroush likens the Prophet to a lecturer. The relationship between a lecturer and his students is similar to that of the Prophet and his audiences. This relation in both cases is that of an 'interaction or dialogue'.⁵⁵ The relation between a teacher and his students is not a 'unilateral process of inculcation. It is not as if the teacher only speaks and the students only listen.'⁵⁶ The lecturer encounters unexpected questions that must be answered, and thus he does not exactly know what will occur in the classroom. Indeed, the students are not passive in the classroom because they are able to divert the teacher from his intended subject. A clever teacher also encourages his students to 'take their turn center stage, so that they may all advance together'.⁵⁷ According to Soroush, the Prophet of Islam was in a similar position among his audiences, i.e. the residents of Mecca and Medina. Muhammad's audiences, and the circumstances he constantly encountered during his prophetic mission, had an impact on his revelatory experiences. This notion of the 'dialogical nature of prophetic experience' is intimately close to the evolutionary feature of prophet-hood. Soroush writes:

Someone would go to the Prophet and ask him a question. Someone would insult the Prophet's wife. Someone would set alight the flames of war. Someone would accuse the Prophet of being insane. Someone would spread rumors about the Prophet marrying Zayd's wife. Someone would overlook their duties during the sacred months . . . All of this would find an echo in the Qur'ān and the Prophet's words.⁵⁸

The Qur'ān, which is the product of the Prophet's revelatory experiences, has a dialogical nature since many verses of the text came into being as responses to the questions posed to the Prophet by his community.⁵⁹ This idea echoes aspects of Ebrahim Moosa's approach to revelation and the Qur'ān. Moosa states that 'the Qur'ān as revelation requires an audience of listeners and speakers. In other words, a community is integral to it being a revelation . . . This audience is not a passive audience, but an interactive audience that engages with a performative revelation.'⁶⁰ In order to show the intimate relation between revelation and its audience, Soroush says:

If they had not accused Aisha of having an adulterous relationship, would we have the verses at the beginning of the al-Nour Sura (Chapter 24)? If the war of the confederate tribes had never occurred, would we have the al-Ahzab Sura (Chapter 33)? If there had been no Abūlahab or if he and his wife had not displayed enmity towards the Prophet, would we have the al-Masad Sura (Chapter 111)? These were all contingent events in history whose occurrence or non-occurrence would have been much the same. But, having occurred, we now find traces of them in the Qur'ān.⁶¹

An important corollary of this discussion is that day-to-day events played a central role in shaping Muhammad's internal religious experiences, and accordingly in the formation of the Qur'ān. By making a connection between the revelation on the one hand, and the biography and life of the Prophet on the other hand, Soroush intends to bring to light the historicity of the Qur'ān and the contingencies of its verses. The Qur'ān emerged as a result of the Prophet's interactions with his society and people, meaning that it was shaped in response to specific historical events occurring within his society. This conclusion is very close to Rahman's, although Soroush takes a different route to prove it.

From what has been discussed so far, we can conclude that Soroush's theory of revelation is even more 'humanistic' and 'historicized' compared to Rahman's. Soroush, unlike Rahman, focuses on the idea that revelation in its essential nature can be linked to a type of human experience. Further, for Soroush, in addition to the role of the Prophet's personality and feelings in shaping the content of revelation, the Prophet played a key role in articulating his revelatory experiences. While in Rahman's theory the extent to which the Prophet played a role in articulating the revelation in Arabic words remains somehow unclear, in Soroush's theory, the Prophet had an absolute role in wording his revelatory experiences in the Arabic language to his community. The Qur'ān, for Soroush, is not only the product of the Prophet's extraordinary personality, but is also the result of the Prophet's utterance of his revelatory experiences in human language (Arabic). Therefore, for both Rahman and Soroush, the Qur'ān has both divine and human aspects; however, Soroush emphasises the human dimension of the Qur'ān to an even higher degree than Rahman.

Soroush's theory of continuity of revelation

The last theme in Soroush's theory is the doctrine of continuity of revelation, which plays an important role in Soroush's hermeneutic. One of the central elements in Soroush's account of revelation is the idea that the Prophet's religious experience is capable of being expanded and evolved not only over his lifetime, but also in the course of history by other Muslims.⁶² The doctrine of the continuity of revelation is developed in Soroush's paper entitled 'The Last Prophet', which was published in two parts. Soroush here argues that the notion of the finality of prophethood means that no other founder of a religion will appear to propagate a new faith. The finality

of prophethood refers to the idea that the responsibility of a prophetic mission will never be placed on anyone's shoulders again, and thus there would be no prophetic mission after the Prophet's death.⁶³ Having placed an emphasis on the importance of the Prophet's personality, Soroush asserts:

Muhammad, as the Seal of the prophets, had a particular personal characteristic that rendered him worthy of being the last: it was that he had scaled all the necessary and possible stations of vision and revelation, such that there was nothing left to be unveiled.⁶⁴

However, since prophetic experiences are expandable to other human beings (especially mystics and poets, as shown), people of following generations are able to experience revelation, though to a lesser degree. Soroush again bases his argument here on al-Ghazali's idea that regular Muslims might 'possess a token of' the prophetic state in their dreams.⁶⁵ However, al-Ghazali's discussion of dreams, unlike Soroush's argument, was not oriented around the notion of an individual's relation to the divine, but rather confined to a defence of prophecy, as already pointed out. In contrast to al-Ghazali, however, Soroush argues that the doctrine of the finality of prophethood does not imply that 'personal prophetic experiences will cease to occur'.⁶⁶ An important corollary of this idea is that the path to the Prophet's religious experience is open to all of his followers. Indeed, Soroush emphasises Muhammad's human subjectivity in the process of revelation in order to argue that the door to prophetic experience is equally open to individual Muslims.

In the theory of the expansion of prophetic experience, as discussed, Soroush argues that the message of the revelation changed on a par with the development of the Prophet's personality and with the change in circumstances and events that the Prophet and his community encountered. Therefore, people played a role in the gradual genesis and formation of Islam. Just as Muslims in the time of the Prophet played a role in shaping Muhammad's revelatory experiences, and thus formation of the Qur'ān, Muslims during the post-prophetic period should also play a key role in expanding and enriching the religion.⁶⁷ In the same way that Muhammad's experience was shaped in line with his socio-historical context, today's Muslims should develop the prophetic experience in light of contemporary knowledge. In today's context, religious experience 'must interact and engage with the actions of the actors of this age'.⁶⁸ This is how Soroush establishes a link between the Prophet's time and the history of the following generations, up to the present-day context. In his book entitled *Loftier than Ideology*, Soroush asserts that 'revelation continuously descends upon us, in the same way that it hailed Arabs [during the time of the Prophet], as if the Prophet were chosen today'.⁶⁹ For him, 'we are in the same position that the companions of the Prophet were placed'.⁷⁰ It follows that 'in the absence of the Prophet, the inward and outward prophetic experiences must expand and grow, thereby enriching and strengthening religion'.⁷¹ A religion that emerged through interactions and conflicts of its time will continue to exist and develop

through new interactions and conflicts, thereby adding to the wealth of previous experiences. Soroush concludes that ‘the era of prophetic mission is over, but the opportunity remains for the expansion of the prophetic experience, both spiritually as well as socially’.⁷² Muslims should develop and enrich the prophetic experience by engaging with the realities of their time, as the Prophet himself expanded his religious experiences within his historical setting and in the light of his contemporary realities.

The sources of Soroush’s ideas about revelation

Soroush’s account, like Rahman’s theory, challenges the established traditional understanding of revelation. His theory reflects the Mu‘tazili’s position in regard to revelation only insofar as it emphasises the *createdness* of the Qur’ān and its historicity, since there is no main emphasis on the experiential features of revelation and the Prophet’s articulation of his revelatory experiences in the Mu‘tazili’s accounts of revelation.⁷³ Soroush (as he himself acknowledges) ‘takes one step further and says . . . that the Qur’ān is God’s creation means that the Qur’ān is the Prophet’s creation’.⁷⁴ I pose in this section the question about how various aspects of Soroush’s theory correspond to pre-modern and modern Muslim and non-Muslim scholars’ views on revelation. I specifically compare Soroush’s theory of revelation with the ideas proposed by certain Muslim philosophers and certain orientalist of the twentieth century, and also Shah Wali Allah’s account of revelation. The theme of ‘experience’ (which is central in Soroush’s theory) and its corresponding theories within Islamic and Western religious scholarship will be examined in the next chapter when I discuss Mujtahed Shabestari’s account of revelation.

The influence of Islamic philosophical tradition

Soroush’s view on the role of the Prophet’s heart and mind in the process of revelation is close to that of Rahman. Further, like Rahman, Soroush argues that revelation was deeply internal, and that the angel of revelation was a mere faculty or power developed inside the Prophet. Thus, one can make a case that Soroush, like Rahman, has been heavily influenced by some Muslim philosophers’ accounts of revelation. Soroush himself defends his theory of revelation as being consistent with those proposed by some medieval and early-modern Muslim philosophers. His idea that the Prophet himself played a significant role in shaping the content of revelation is grounded on some Islamic philosophical teachings, as he himself acknowledges that ‘Islamic philosophers, ranging from al-Farabi to Ibn Sina, from Nasir al-din Tusi to Sadr al-din Shirazi, have considered it impossible to grasp revelation without the involvement of his faculty of imagination’.⁷⁵ That is, reminiscent of the philosophical concepts of rational agency (*al-quwwa al-‘aqliyya*) and the power of imagination (*al-quwwa al-mutakhayyila*), Soroush’s theory places the greatest emphasis on the active role of the Prophet’s mind in the process of revelation.

As discussed in the previous chapter, according to the theories of revelation proposed by medieval philosophers (in particular al-Farabi, Ibn Sina and al-Kindi), the Prophet did not receive a verbal revelation, but rather received images, symbols and visions which were then transformed into verbal modes, thanks to the Prophet's strong imaginative faculty. Rahman's idea that the content of revelation consisted of 'idea-words', as argued in the previous chapter, implicitly suggests that what the Prophet received during the process of revelation included forms and images, and thus his account partially agrees with medieval philosophers' theories of revelation. Compared with Rahman, Soroush's idea that prophetic revelation included 'reveries, insights and illuminations' is even more in line with the views of medieval Muslim philosophers. However, the notion of likening revelation to poetry (or mysticism) in Soroush's writings is by and large similar to Rahman's view, and both seem to have strongly relied on the philosophical distinction between prophecy and philosophy. Soroush's idea that prophetic experience is expandable, though to a lesser degree, after the Prophet's death also reflects the significance of a key Islamic philosophical-mystical theme that 'while prophecy has ceased, Muhammad being the seal of the prophets, messages of divine origin can still be communicated through dreams, albeit on a smaller scale than prophecy'.⁷⁶

Soroush's views about the nature of the angel of revelation and his emphasis on the inner psychological processes of revelation have their foundations in some philosophical Islamic teachings. In addition to the ideas of some medieval Muslim philosophers, especially those of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, Soroush seems to have relied on the views of Sadr al-Din Shirazi (more commonly known as Mulla Sadra (d. 1571/1640), the well-known Shi'i philosopher of the seventeenth century of the Common Era) when developing his ideas about the angel of revelation. When challenged by Ayatollah Ja'far Sobhani, his most ardent critic in Iran, Soroush borrowed from Mulla Sadra to support his theory of revelation. He cited Sadra as saying:

Do not ever imagine that the Prophet heard the word of God from Gabriel in the same way that you hear the word of the Prophet. And do not ever imagine that the Prophet imitated Gabriel in the same way that Islamic nation imitates the Prophet.⁷⁷

Further analysis of Sadra's writings shows other similarities between Soroush's and Sadra's accounts of revelation. Like Soroush, Sadra rejects the idea of the physicality of the angel of revelation and his wholly-otherness or externality vis-à-vis the Prophet. For Sadra, through his extraordinary power of imagination, the Prophet makes contact with the Active Intellect, from whom he receives the divine knowledge. This knowledge then descends from the Prophet's intellect to his other faculties and enables him to 'see' and 'hear' the angel.⁷⁸ However, seeing and hearing the angel do not take place, in Sadra's account, through the Prophet's physical senses such as his eyes and ears.⁷⁹ Sadra's refutation of the existence of the angel in a material form is attested here:

In the vision of the angel and in the hearing of inspiration – a vision and a hearing that are pure and evident – the effusion comes down from the world of the Imperative to the soul, which thus acquires the vision of something from the Malakut in an immaterial fashion.⁸⁰

This suggests that revelation was an internal process in which the Prophet was able to see the angel of revelation and to hear his voice, but only within his faculty of imagination. More importantly, Soroush's idea that the Prophet's will is not subordinate to that of the Angel Gabriel is also rooted in Sadra's account of revelation. Sadra states that the Prophet does not simply follow the angel's words; he knows the mind of the angel due to his active contact with the intellective level of the angel.⁸¹ Sadra also grounds his argument on the idea that the Prophet has a 'reasoned' knowledge, not just an 'imitative' knowledge. Considering the Prophet as a mere follower of the Angel Gabriel is inconsistent with the idea that the Prophet possesses such reasoned knowledge and reduces the intellectual faculty of the Prophet to an imitative level. Sadra states that one should not think that 'the Prophet is a blind follower of Gabriel . . . Blind following can never constitute knowledge at all.'⁸²

The influence of Shah Wali Allah

Among the topics in which Rahman and Soroush have been clearly influenced by Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762),⁸³ we may point to the role of the Prophet's personality, feelings, heart and mind in the event of revelation. Both Soroush and Rahman found Shah Wali Allah's account of revelation interesting, and both have referred to it in some of their writings. Rahman published an essay in August 1968 in which he defended his idea of revelation as an extension of the ideas of a number of Muslim reformers such as Shah Wali Allah.⁸⁴ For his part, Soroush speaks about Shah Wali Allah's ideas concerning 'the causes of the revelation of religious laws' to support his theory of revelation.⁸⁵ Central to Shah Wali Allah's theory is the idea that the Prophet's personality and feelings played a role in the divine revelations he received: 'The Prophet's own intent, his eager and earnest quest for something, his supplications, craving and pleading for it is also a strong cause for the revelation of the Divine decree in that respect.'⁸⁶ This corresponds to Rahman's and Soroush's emphasis upon the role of the Prophet's personality in revelation.

One can also observe Shah Wali Allah's influence on Soroush and Rahman in regard to the role of the Prophet's heart in receiving the revelation. As discussed, to refute the traditional theories of revelation, both Rahman and Soroush argued that the Qur'ān descended onto the Prophet's heart (referring to Q 26:193–4). Shah Wali Allah uses the same Qur'ānic verse to argue that 'the divine blessings descended upon the heart of the Apostle'.⁸⁷ For him, 'revelation means the breathing into the heart through a dream or by creating the necessary knowledge in it at the time when man concentrates upon the Unseen'⁸⁸ – an idea which implies that the heart is the locus of revelation.

In regard to the relation between humans and God, Shah Wali Allah asserts that 'when man progresses and gains nearness to God, he may be endowed with a higher conception of God's Attributes'.⁸⁹ In this respect, one's religious perceptions grow 'more and more extensive according to his proximity to the Reality',⁹⁰ meaning that in the course of one's progress in the approach to God, a natural foundation for the formation of higher conceptions is developed. Shah Wali Allah argues that prophets are no exception to this general rule. In one of his books, Shah Wali Allah states that there was a constant progress in the Prophet's spiritual and moral ascension. That is, the religious dispensation granted by God to the Prophet was subject to evolution and growth, as a result of which the Prophet's personality grew and developed.⁹¹ Muhammad's revelatory experiences were not unvarying during his prophetic mission, but were rather subject to expansion and development in accordance with his external experiences. This shows the influence of Shah Wali Allah on Soroush's theory of expansion of prophetic experience. I will demonstrate this influence in greater detail later in this chapter.

Possible influences of orientalism

At this point, it is useful to compare Soroush's theory of revelation with the theories of revelation developed by some orientalist of the twentieth century. Although there is no direct evidence showing that Soroush has been influenced by such accounts, the similarities between Soroush's and orientalist's theories of revelation may give us some indications that he has been inspired by them. To begin with, Soroush's idea that Muhammad's religious experience had a historical basis and was subject to evolution and expansion reflects Tor Andrae's argument that Muhammad's relation to his revelatory experiences became more 'stylized' and 'objectivized' in the course of his prophetic mission.⁹² In a similar vein, in an approach not dissimilar to that of Soroush, Maxime Rodinson discussed Muhammad's revelation within the broader context of mystical experience, drawing comparisons between the Prophet's experience and that of other mystics.⁹³

Soroush's theory is closest to Montgomery Watt's idea of revelation. Watt considers the revelation that Muhammad received during his prophetic mission as a 'human experience',⁹⁴ but distinguishes it from other forms of human experience by asserting that 'it is God who takes the initiative in revelation [and thus] . . . the form of words in the consciousness of the prophet contains truth from God'.⁹⁵ Like Soroush, Watt places an emphasis on the Prophet's personality in shaping his revelatory experiences. He holds that the Prophet required a special form of personality to 'fit him to be a recipient of revelation'. Muhammad's temperament, according to Watt, affected 'the imaginal form of the revelation', and thus there was a close relation between the Prophet's personality and the content of his revelatory experiences.⁹⁶ Further, like Soroush, Watt believed that the Prophet had a central role in wording his revelatory experiences: 'The general content of the utterance was perhaps "revealed" from without, but it was left to Muhammad to find the precise words in which to speak.'⁹⁷

Watt's account comes very close to Soroush's when he holds that the revelatory experience of the Prophet is subject to expansion and development. For Watt, as new circumstances arose and his experience developed, the Prophet's understanding of revelation became deeper, and thus his revelatory experience grew.⁹⁸ Like Soroush, Watt is of the view that revelation was influenced by 'the intellectual and cultural outlook of the community to which it is addressed, and in which the prophet shares'.⁹⁹ This idea is similar to Soroush's view that 'people were never mere observers, even in the loftiest aspect of religiosity, such as revelation itself'.¹⁰⁰ Like Soroush, Watt had argued that Muhammad's understanding of his mission became steadier as his community grew, concluding that revelation was subject to change and expansion over time: 'As this community grew and met opposition, it required further guidance; and this came in the fresh revelations received by Muhammad from time to time.'¹⁰¹ These revelations were 'certainly the adaptation of the revealed message to the life of a growing community'.¹⁰²

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

Soroush's hermeneutics

It has been shown so far that by incorporating various ideas proposed by a number of classical and early-modern Muslims and orientalists, Soroush developed a theory in which revelation is historicised in two steps. First, he developed the notion that revelation is not a supernatural but rather a historical phenomenon, in the sense that the Prophet played an active role in shaping its content. In this context, Soroush tends to distance himself from describing the event of revelation in a way that relies heavily on metaphysical assumptions, instead considering the appearance of the angel of revelation as an internal phenomenon, or one that took place in the Prophet's psyche. Second, by considering revelation as an experience, Soroush established an intimate link between the experimental and evolutionary nature of revelation, meaning that the Qur'ān has a historical nature that came into being through a gradual process and under specific socio-historical circumstances. For Soroush, 'the Qur'ān was revealed and realized gradually; in other words, it had a historical genesis.'¹⁰³ This theory does not negate the meta-historical aspects of the revelation since, for Soroush, it is natural that when revelation enters the domain of history, it is suited to the natural law and becomes particular and culturally-historically specific: 'Everything that enters nature, including religion and revelation, bends to its ways. Everything that enters human society becomes social and human.'¹⁰⁴

The purpose in bringing attention to such an understanding of revelation in Soroush's writings is to highlight areas where it is applied for the purpose of developing new interpretive methods when approaching the text of the Qur'ān. As I discuss in this section, Soroush's theory of revelation has important consequences, especially in regard to opening up a more flexible space for the Qur'ān's interpretation.

Soroush's first hermeneutic

In his article 'The Prophet's Mission and Identity Crisis', Soroush's account of revelation is used to develop an approach to interpreting the Qur'ān. In the first part of the article, the historicity of the religious experience of the Prophet is stressed again:

When we look at the uprising of the dear prophet of Islam, we cannot overlook the historical background to his uprising. The prophet appeared in a certain place, among a special people and in a special cultural environment, consequently, some of his teachings were related to the factors that existed in the environment. The prophet had to announce his mission in a language that could be understood and comprehended by those around him. The people that he was addressing had a special intellectual outlook, culture, attitudes and customs. The prophet could not have begun from 'nowhere'. He could not have shot his arrow into darkness. He could not have talked to abstract and imaginary audiences.¹⁰⁵

According to this view, the socio-cultural circumstances of Arabian society at the time of the emergence of Islam affected Muhammad's religious experience and the formation of the Qur'ān. The Prophet was obliged to use the language of his people as a means of communication with them. The Qur'ān was worded by the Prophet and in doing so he had to deal with the historical limitations of the language, meaning that he could only use terms and concepts that would be familiar and understandable to his audiences. In addition, in order to address the people he was encountering, he had to conform to the cultural codes of his society. Therefore, in addition to the day-to-day events that he constantly encountered throughout his prophetic mission, his mission was also highly affected by the specific linguistic and cultural norms that were dominant in his society prior to the rise of Islam. 'One of the difficulties of the mission of all prophets', Soroush points out, is that 'they must declare a supra-historical message within a historical context . . . Today, if we wish to understand the meaning and the content of the prophet's message, we must put ourselves in that cultural context.'¹⁰⁶ The verses of the Qur'ān are in keeping with the Arab environment of the time, and thus any responsible hermeneutics has to first take into account the history, culture and context of Arabian society.

Soroush's theory of essentials and accidentals

Soroush's theory of the 'essentials and accidentals' of religion is rooted in this approach. According to this theory, since many aspects of the Qur'ānic revelations took shape within a specific historical and cultural environment, they must be referred to as accidental, contingent and mutable. The accidental (*arazī*) aspects of Islam include 'something that could have been other than it is and appeared in some other form', while the essential (*zātī*) aspect of religion is 'that which is

not accidental; anything without which religion would cease to be religion and the alteration of which would be a negation of religion itself'.¹⁰⁷ Accordingly, essential matters of religion cannot be deducted from its contingent elements.¹⁰⁸ The essential aspects of religion include the statements that are related to the foundations of belief, such as the unity of God, the prophecy of Muhammad and the belief in life after death, and thus they are valid for all times and places.¹⁰⁹ The essentials also include the ethical scope of religious experience.¹¹⁰ By contrast, the accidentals functioned only within the specific 'cultural, social and historical environment of the delivery of the main message',¹¹¹ and thus they are not valid for all times and places. According to Soroush, to be a Muslim 'demands belief and commitment to the essentials [of religion], [not to its accidentals]'.¹¹² There are five main domains in Soroush's writings that belong to the realm of accidentals, as discussed below.

(1) Soroush considers the Arabic language of the Qur'ān as an accidental aspect of religion. He says, 'it would have been enough for the Prophet of Islam to have been born an Iranian, an Indian or a Roman for his language to become Persian, Sanskrit or Latin'.¹¹³ This idea differs from the beliefs of many pre-modern Muslim scholars who regarded the Arabic language of the Qur'ān as an essential feature of the Qur'ānic text. Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), for instance, states that no other human language is comparable with Arabic, since it is the language in which God had decided to send down his last message to human beings.¹¹⁴ The emphasis on the absolute linguistic purity of the Qur'ānic text led some pre-modern Muslim scholars to argue against the validity of any translation. For example, the medieval Andalusian jurist and theologian Ibn Hazm (d. 456/1064) says, 'Non-Arabic isn't Arabic; so [the Qur'ān's] translation is not the Qur'ān.'¹¹⁵ Soroush, however, believes that the Qur'ān was worded by the Prophet, and thus that the language of the text is not God-given.

(2) The Arab culture in which Islam emerged is another accidental aspect of religion: 'Had the beloved and great Prophet of Islam received his mission in a different environment, the book of revelation', Soroush points out, would have 'taken on an altogether different hue.'¹¹⁶ In other words, if the Prophet had lived in another society, his religious experience, and consequently its product – that is, the Qur'ān – would have been different, while the essence of his message would have remained the same. This is due to the fact that revelation in its metaphysical sense is formless, but when it enters the domain of human beings it must take a form; culture provides the religion with a particular form.

(3) Soroush states that all the concepts, notions and theories that are used in the Qur'ān and were part of the Arab worldview at the time of the Prophet belong to the realm of accidentals.¹¹⁷ In this context, in his *Prophet's Mission and Identity Crisis* Soroush says that certain terms such as 'the path, the road, guidance, being lost, desert, provisions, straight path and many other similar terms' that are constantly used in the Qur'ān deal with a life based on caravans.¹¹⁸

(4) Another accidental aspect of religion consists of the historical events and stories (such as wars, protests, enmities, hypocrisies and objections) recorded in the Qur'ān and hadith literature. The questions posed to the Prophet by believers and their opponents and the answers given to these questions also belong to the realm of accidentals.¹¹⁹ The entry of these accidentals into the Qur'ān shows its 'dynamic, interlocutory nature'¹²⁰ because they demonstrate how the Qur'ān came into being alongside the Prophet's actual experiences and the issues or problems that the Prophet and the nascent Muslim community encountered.

(5) The entry of some scientific terms related to (for example) medicine and astronomy into the Qur'ān and other Islamic sources is another accidental aspect of religion: 'There are many *hadiths* . . . concerning treatment of diseases, but nobody really considers them essential to Islam because that is not what makes people needy of prophets.'¹²¹ In a similar vein, '[t]he Ptolemaic theory of the seven heavens is neither essential to Islam, nor the only way of depicting God's beneficence and power'.¹²² In facing the realities confronting believers in the modern period, these accidental dimensions of religion could be replaced by modern theories since they are not normative and absolute. Soroush goes on to state that believers should not expect to learn natural sciences such as physics, astronomy and cosmology from religious sources, since they are not among the essential features of religion: 'religion was neither intended for teaching us science nor do we have such an expectation of it'.¹²³ This idea also has its roots in Soroush's use of the term 'religious experience'. By focusing on the experiential character of religiosity, Soroush finds an independent realm for religion, securing it from a variety of worldly affairs such as scientific knowledge, and thus recognises science and religion as autonomous bodies of knowledge. As discussed, prophecy, for Soroush, is a matter of individual experience, and 'what the prophets introduced to us contained the products of their discoveries and experiences'.¹²⁴ It is in this sense that Soroush states, 'Religion is not identical with science, nor is it a progenitor, an arbiter, or a guide for it'.¹²⁵ Therefore, believers should neither approach scientific knowledge through religious scriptures, nor consider religious texts as a source of scientific knowledge.

The immediate implication of the aforementioned discussions is that if the Prophet had lived in another society, the majority of the Qur'ānic rulings (which later became the basis of the growth of the *shari'a* laws), such as the precepts of blood money, ritual cleanness, men's and women's clothing, as well as the rights of men, women, slaves and non-slaves, would have taken on different forms, while the essential message of Islam would still have remained the same.¹²⁶ The Prophet was even obliged to maintain many aspects of pre-Islamic rules. Such ideas echo Shah Wali Allah's approach to Qur'ānic rulings. Shah Wali Allah holds that the form and the substance of the Qur'ānic rulings have vital links with the culture and customs of pre-Islamic Arabia and thus regards many socio-legal precepts of Islam as an accidental element of Islam. Shah Wali Allah is of the view that the Prophet did not generally introduce new laws and institutions, but rather accepted the majority

of the existing regulations of the society, only introducing minor modifications to them. Indeed, instead of negating the entire customary law of Arabian society, the Prophet applied certain modifications which made those customs compatible with the essential tenets of his religion.¹²⁷ In a similar vein, Soroush, by contextualising the message of revelation, concludes that ‘most of the precepts of *fiqh* and even its basic tenets are accidentals’.¹²⁸

The fundamental aspect of what I identify as Soroush’s first hermeneutic is that it is crucial to distinguish the essentials of the Qur’ān from its accidental aspects: ‘The task of the modern-day religious scholars and students of Islam is to . . . identify a whole range of accidentals that penetrated to the very core of the essence of Islam and imposed their own nature and physiognomy on it.’¹²⁹ In this respect, the interpreter must be engaged in ‘culturally translating’ these accidentals in facing the realities of the modern world because the messages of prophets are ‘both local and time-bound, as well as being universal and eternal’.¹³⁰ Strongly related to Soroush’s first hermeneutic is the notion of mutability and immutability: while the accidental aspects of religion are historically and culturally specific and thus are not absolute and universal, the essentials are universally applicable and do not change under different circumstances. Soroush’s thesis argues for a rethinking of the traditional concept of revelation by accepting a humanistic view of the Qur’ān on the grounds that an interpreter today is able to propose a responsible hermeneutics when he/she determines which aspects of the revelation are relevant to Muslim life in the present day.

Soroush’s second hermeneutic

Soroush also bases his hermeneutics on the temporal contingencies of religious knowledge. He argues in his theory of the expansion and contraction of religious knowledge (*Qabz va Bast-e Te’orik-e Sharī‘at*) that one must distinguish between the content of revelation on the one hand, and the human interpretation of it on the other. For Soroush, revelation is divine and perfect since it is initiated by God, whereas any human understanding of revelation is contingent and fallible. Indeed, central to Soroush’s theory is the notion of the difference between the essence of religion and our understanding of religion (religious knowledge or *fahm-e dīnī*):¹³¹ ‘Religion is in no need of reconstruction and completeness. Religious knowledge and insight that is human and incomplete, however, is in constant need of reconstruction.’¹³² Soroush further asserts that ‘it is up to God to reveal a religion, but up to us to understand and realize it. It is at this point that religious knowledge is born, entirely human and subject to all the dictates of human knowledge.’¹³³ The influence of John Hick’s (d. 2012) use of a Kantian distinction between the noumena and the phenomenon in his discussion of the ultimate Real is evident here. In his *An Interpretation of Religion*, Hick had arrived at the conclusion that one must distinguish between ultimate reality in itself and ultimate reality as interpreted in human experience.¹³⁴ Soroush, in a similar vein, asserts, ‘Whatever

the reality may be [in itself], we are faced with complications and difficulties in terms of its verification [for us].¹³⁵ If we replace the concept of religion with that of reality, then Soroush's idea becomes clearer. In the same way that we should distinguish between reality and our interpretation of reality, we should distinguish between a given text such as the Qur'ān and our interpretation of it.

Before I explain what I identify as Soroush's second hermeneutic in greater detail, I emphasise that Soroush himself does not establish a link between his theory of the expansion of prophetic experience, developed in the late 1980s, and that of the expansion and contraction of religious knowledge, developed in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, the former inevitably entails the latter, though the latter does not necessarily lead to the former. The reason why there is no systematic relation between these two theories in Soroush's writings is that he was initially interested in epistemology and the relation between religious knowledge and other modes of human knowledge, whereas he later became increasingly concerned with developing new theories about revelation and the formation of the Qur'ān. While he first developed a theory based on the contingencies of religious knowledge, he later developed the theory of the expansion of prophetic experience that is based on the contingencies of the accidental aspects of religion and the human elements of revelation. I believe that the epistemological contingencies of religious knowledge can be understood within the context of the historical and cultural contingencies of revelation and divine scripture. In fact, Soroush's theory of the expansion and contraction of religious knowledge is an organic extension of his first hermeneutic and the theory of the continuity of revelation. If there was an interactive relation between revelation, the Prophet's subjective faculties and the context of the Qur'ān's emergence, and if revelation continuously descends upon us 'as if the Prophet were chosen today', then interpretation of the Qur'ān in today's context should differ from the Qur'ān's exegesis in previous eras, since it must inevitably take into consideration the socio-historical context of the present society. Not only is the discourse of religious experience but also that of religious knowledge and today's interpretive corpus dependent on their societal and historical contexts. This is due to the fact that by entering into the human domain, revelation became 'interpretive'. In Soroush's theory, the Qur'ān has a subjective-interpretive nature in the sense that it is already an interpretation of the Prophet, and is not the direct Word of God. Consequently, it is natural that an interpreter approaches the Qur'ān from his/her subjective position, which includes his/her presuppositions.

Soroush's theory of expansion and contraction of religious knowledge also coheres with his identification of religion as a human experience. Soroush states that 'a person who has religious experience is like a sculptor who is never satisfied with the figure he sculpts. He is constantly chipping away at it, remoulding it and shaping it into a new form.'¹³⁶ Soroush refers here to the ever-changing nature of religious experience, arguing that religious experience is always an incomplete project. Just as religious experience results in a feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction, and thus is always open to renewal and change, religious knowledge is imperfect and

incomplete, and thus must be open to criticism and revision. In other words, there is contraction and expansion in our experience and understanding of the sacred, meaning that every generation would inevitably experience and understand Islam's revelations anew. For Soroush, both religious experience and religious knowledge take shape within the broader context of their emergence, and thus are subject to change, progress and historical mutation.¹³⁷

Returning now to the theory of expansion and contraction of religious knowledge, religious knowledge, Soroush points out, is a mundane form of knowledge and depends on many variables (including when and where interpretation takes place) and thus is contingent to other human knowledge and sciences. Soroush indeed puts forward the concept of the dependency (*tābe īyyat*) of religious knowledge to other forms of human knowledge, arguing that religious knowledge theoretically contracts and expands by being in dialogue with other modes of knowledge.¹³⁸ Knowledge, according to Soroush, is always in a state of transformation and each area of knowledge inevitably influences other modes of knowledge: 'Different modes of knowledge including human sciences, natural science, philosophy and religious discipline are all related and interconnected.'¹³⁹ Religious knowledge is historically changeable, and how it changes is dependent on the evolution of our scientific understanding of the physical world: 'Human understanding of religion, like his understanding of nature, is subject to a flow and change.'¹⁴⁰ This implies that 'all non-religious modes of knowledge have an inevitable influence on religious knowledge, and change in our epistemic knowledge in one arena will lead to change in our understanding and knowledge in another realm'.¹⁴¹ The corollary of this approach is that in religious knowledge, as in any other field of human knowledge, no particular conception is sacred and beyond questioning and criticism: 'This is', Soroush points out, 'equally true in *fiqh* and exegesis as it is in chemistry, for example.'¹⁴²

Compared to Rahman, Soroush acknowledges the human epistemic limits associated with interpreting the Qur'ān in each generation. While Rahman believes that we are able to attribute to the text a certain objectivity which remains somehow unaffected by the interpreter, Soroush acknowledges our inability to discover an objective meaning within the Qur'ānic text. While Rahman ignores, by and large, the role of interpreters' biases in the act of interpretation, Soroush believes that the discipline of interpretation operates at a human epistemological level, and thus is by default subject to the interpreters' prior knowledge. The difference between the two scholars' hermeneutic approaches can be attributed to their different understandings of revelation. While in Soroush's theory of revelation the Prophet's subjectivity has been given a significant role in shaping the text, and thus the text is identified as having a subjective-interpretive nature, in Rahman's theory the Prophet's subjectivity is not considered to have played such a significant role that the Qur'ān comes to be viewed as the Prophet's own words.

Therefore, Soroush's hermeneutic is not only limited to considering the socio-historical context of revelation (such as the values, norms and context of the era of revelation) but is also oriented around the context in which the Qur'ān is being

interpreted (such as the values, norms and context of the specific times and places in which the text is being read), as well as the interpreters' prior knowledge, pre-understandings and prejudices. According to Soroush, even the questions that are posed to a text including the Qur'ān are the products of our prior knowledge, and our responses, too, are understandable in the light of our existing knowledge.¹⁴³ Soroush pays serious attention to the contextual nature of interpretation, concluding that the interpretation of the text is temporal and provisional, and inevitably influenced by other branches of knowledge. Soroush's second hermeneutic is oriented around what Safdar Ahmed identifies as 'a subject-centered notion of truth' – an idea which claims that 'truth' is 'not something that travels in a straight line from the text to the interpreting subject'.¹⁴⁴ Soroush even suggests that the Qur'ān is *hungry for* rather than *impregnated with* meaning and thus concludes that meaning is given to the text rather than extracted from it.¹⁴⁵ Therefore, Soroush's second hermeneutic coheres more with Gadamer's methodological approach (in contrast to Betti's hermeneutics), which claims that any interpretation of a given text depends on the interpreter's subjectivity.

The implications of Soroush's hermeneutics

In this section, I show how Soroush's account of revelation and hermeneutics function in practice, especially in relation to a number of themes such as religious pluralism, women's rights and political matters. The immediate implication of Soroush's theory of revelation – in an approach not dissimilar to that presented by Rahman – has to do with the contingency of Qur'ānic legal statements and rulings. This contingency is based on the idea that Qur'ānic rulings are shaped within the cultural and intellectual context in which they emerged, and thus they do not fall under the category of essentials, but rather belong to the realm of accidentals, as described above. Like Rahman, Soroush distances himself from a legal-oriented hermeneutics and provides a new insight that challenges the literalist understanding of the Qur'ān. As Sadri notes, the lesson that one could draw from Soroush's writings is to 'seek the spirit of the religion rather than its literal content'.¹⁴⁶ This implies that Muslims should not get tied up in legalistic details derived from the Qur'ān, because the Qur'ānic verses dealing with socio-legal issues are to a large extent the direct result of the accidents of the prophet's life.¹⁴⁷

Soroush's emphasis on the theme of experience also leads him to criticise the heavy reliance of Muslim jurists on legal statements of religion for establishing laws. For him, placing an emphasis on the objectivity of legal precepts of the Qur'ān, and a focus on the essential role that these provisions may play in shaping social structures, undermines the very heart of religion. Indeed, by focusing on the experiential features of religion, Soroush views religion in minimalist terms, especially in relation to legal matters and jurisprudence. In Soroush's words, 'a maximalist religion undermines religion itself'.¹⁴⁸ To him, even 'the guidance offered by religion is minimalist guidance . . . and not maximalist'.¹⁴⁹ He argues that following

the Prophet should not involve simply doing what he enjoined or abstaining from actions as he proscribed, but rather reproducing the Prophet's spiritual experiences. This position poses a fundamental challenge to the widely accepted jurisprudential discourse that legalistic provisions constitute the most significant part of religion. For Soroush, these provisions were not essential to religion, even during the period of revelation, let alone in the context of the modern world. Soroush here comes even closer to Rahman's idea that the Qur'ān is not a legal document. As Ahmed notes, unlike legal-oriented readings of Islam, Soroush's emphasis on religious experience promotes 'openness and change', especially in relation to matters concerning jurisprudence, and thus fosters 'a spirit of engagement'.¹⁵⁰ This provides a strong basis for the ever-changing reality of faith, opening the way to the idea that religion has the capability of being reinterpreted and of adapting itself to the conditions and needs of every era.

Religious pluralism

Soroush's theory of revelation – in particular his emphasis on the theme of experience – has a significant consequence that appears in his writings. This section argues that Soroush's philosophy of religious pluralism¹⁵¹ has its foundation in his conception of faith and revelation as forms of religious experience. Before exploring this issue, I indicate that, following a number of scholars such as Eck, Sachedina, Said and Funk, I use the term 'religious pluralism' in the sense of an active effort between followers of different religions to arrive at mutual 'understanding', rather than simply referring to a form of 'tolerance' towards others' religion.¹⁵² 'Religious pluralism calls for active engagement with the religious other not merely to tolerate, but to understand. Toleration does not require active engagement with the other. It makes no inroads on mutual ignorance.'¹⁵³ The issue of religious pluralism is of crucial importance, as Sachedina asserts, in the present context 'in which religious differences . . . have been manipulated to burn bridges between communities'.¹⁵⁴ That is, the significance of religious pluralism lies in the fact that it 'is a fundamental recourse that can be tapped by humankind to establish peace and justice in any contemporary society'.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, the emphasis upon religious pluralism results in the entrance into dialogue with one another, creating a paradigm for developing a democratic social order.

As discussed earlier, the starting point of Soroush's investigation into the nature of religion is the idea that revelation is tantamount to the Prophet's experience of divinity. Soroush considers 'religiousness and religiosity and their continued endurance to hinge on religious experience',¹⁵⁶ and regards the Prophet as the recipient of such experiences. It is in this context that Soroush prioritises experiential religiosity (*tajribat-andīsh*) over other forms of religiosity such as expedient or pragmatic religiosity (*maṣlahat-andīsh*) and gnostic or learned religiosity (*ma'rifat-andīsh*). While expedient religiosity is based on heredity, emulation and obedience,¹⁵⁷ learned religiosity is identified by 'a lack of dogma or by a sense of rational wonder'.¹⁵⁸

Experiential religiosity, or what the Prophet experienced within the process of revelation, and which ultimately resulted in the creation of the Qur'ān, is placed in the highest order of religiosity.¹⁵⁹ That is, the most desired form of religiosity is the form created by the Prophet himself, since it is 'passionate, revelatory . . . individualistic, deterministic, quintessential, reconciliatory, ecstatic, intimate, visual and saintly'.¹⁶⁰

For Soroush, since religion is, by its nature, formed on the basis of an inner experience of the divine, it is inherently plural. Soroush does not consider religious faith as merely a category of knowledge; rather, he defines it as 'the exclusive experience and private property of the individual', and thus 'while there might be collective rituals, there are no collective faiths'.¹⁶¹ Religious faith gives 'one's heart to someone along with trust and reliance to that one and to know that one as good and to love that one'.¹⁶² This type of faith is to be considered part of an interior and individualistic form of religiosity, and is distanced from faith as traditionally understood since it can increase or decrease as love can also increase or decrease. Considering religion as a kind of experience leads Soroush to avoid inserting 'certainty' as an element of faith, thereby opening the way for religious pluralism.¹⁶³ In fact, his downplaying of the notions of 'religious truth' or 'absolute truth' is a fundamental theme in Soroush's theory, since faith and religiosity are intimately related to our experience of the divine, and shaped within a specific cultural paradigm. This coheres very well with the idea that even the Prophet Muhammad experienced divinity with his subjective faculties and within the specific socio-cultural paradigms of his era. As Ghamari-Tabrizi asserts, central to Soroush's understanding of faith and religiosity is the idea that 'faith, achieved through religious experience, is always fluid and conditioned by one's life circumstances; it is therefore practically conducive to pluralism'.¹⁶⁴ In sum, for Soroush, religiosity based on experience inescapably gives rise to pluralism.

Soroush goes on to state that the existence of various religious traditions is consistent with, and not contrary to, the Divine Will. The plurality of religions should be regarded as the manifestation and embodiment of different responses to the Divine, experienced in humans' various historical and cultural contexts.¹⁶⁵ Since the outward socio-historical conditions of prophets played a substantial role in shaping their religious experiences, various religions inevitably generated different contingencies and localities. This is why the languages, juridical pronouncements and teachings of everyday life found in various Sacred Scriptures are inevitably different from one another. Like Islam, other religions are comprised of essential (*zāti*) and accidental (*arazi*) aspects. Accordingly, while the essential dimensions of religions include similar principles, they differ in their contingent aspects. The main conclusion that the pluralist should draw from this premise is the need to promote the common principles found at the core of various religious traditions and to move beyond the differences that accidental aspects of religions have brought about. In an interview with Sasan Tavassoli, Soroush asserts that 'the essence of religion is for man to put down his own self and arrogance, and bow in worship to God. I love worship and I love to see that in church or mosque'.¹⁶⁶

As a result, the plurality of religious traditions does not only mean that there are various ways to approach God, as the classical Sufis asserted, but that this plurality should also be seen as a reflection of different historical as well as cultural circumstances within which various religions emerged and evolved. Soroush's approach serves to fulfil the ultimate goal of religious pluralism, which, as discussed, encourages believers to arrive at mutual understanding rather than simply tolerating one another. The pluralist should take into consideration the different historical environments in which religions came into being. With such an understanding, no one considers his/her beliefs as the chosen ones, and those of others as falsehoods, leading one to consider the Truth as a shared asset. In other words, since Soroush's method involves viewing the particularities and localities of religious traditions as tied to the contingent context in which they appeared, it provides great impetus to the denial of any form of inherent superiority of one religion over another. Soroush emphasises that this idea by no means implies that rituals and beliefs of religions must be left aside in order to promote pluralism: 'This is not to say that the followers of all sects and religions should needlessly abandon their own practices, rituals and beliefs, and turn into a uniform mass.'¹⁶⁷ Therefore, while followers of various religious traditions are not expected to abandon their worshipping practices and rituals, they are expected to understand the diversity of religious rites and practices from historical perspectives and in the light of the contingent conditions of their emergence.

One may ask at this stage how Soroush, as a defender of religious pluralism, treats the Qur'ānic charges against Christians (such as that which includes Mary in the Godhead according to Q 5:119–20). This is an example where Soroush's ideas about a dialogical nature of the Qur'ān and the intimate relation between the text and its environment are applied. Soroush argues that the Qur'ānic charges against Christians were directed to the Christian communities present in Arabia at the time of the Prophet.¹⁶⁸ He points out that these Qur'ānic materials are historically conditioned and are considered accidental aspects of revelation. Accordingly, they are not applicable for all times and should not be viewed as directed against all Christians. These Qur'ānic materials only reflect the socio-historical circumstances that the Prophet encountered during his prophetic mission. It is in this context that any commentator on the Qur'ān should question whether a contextually appropriate Qur'ānic observation for the seventh century should be applied as a rule in the twenty-first century. Although Soroush does not deal in great detail with the issue of the Qur'ān's ostensibly hostile response to Christians and Jews, his approach can be used to read such verses as Q 9:5 as well as those which seem to have limited the salvific promise to Islam as the only true religion (such as Q 3:19; 3:85; 5:3) within their own historical context. Even the wars that raged between Muslims and non-Muslims during the Medinan phase of Muhammad's prophetic mission and the Qur'ānic verses that are related to them should be attributed to the inevitably hostile environment in which the new religion arose. Soroush's thesis, if appropriately put in practice, aptly considers religious pluralism as a modern phenomenon, and recognises that the Qur'ān's use of polemical language against the Jews and

Christians in some of its Medinan verses is related not only to the polemical environment within which Muhammad continued his prophetic mission; but this polemic should also be attributed to Muhammad's and the Qur'ān's concern for distinguishing the identity of the community of believers from other religious communities concurrent in Arabia.¹⁶⁹

Religious pluralism, for Soroush, is also based on the plurality of the interpretation of religious scriptures. If encounters with the transcendent can take place in a variety of ways, and if everyone is able to conceptualise the divine with his/her own subjective faculties, then various understandings and interpretations of religious texts will inevitably arise. Soroush's emphasis on our human epistemic limits in reading religious texts (indicated in his second hermeneutic) results in a diversity of interpretations, implying that the interpretation of religious scriptures 'is subject to expansion and contraction according to the assumptions preceding them and/or the questions enquiring them'.¹⁷⁰ This idea allows for multiple interpretations of a given religious text, thereby justifying religious pluralism within a particular religion. The broader context in which a sacred text such as the Qur'ān is being interpreted plays a key role in the act of interpretation, and thus, as the time and context change, it is absolutely natural that countless interpretive texts that differ from each other come into existence.¹⁷¹ This theme has also been emphasised by Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari, whose ideas will be examined in the next chapter.

Although in establishing the principle of religious pluralism, Soroush drew on the tradition of medieval Islamic mysticism – especially Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Balkhi, known commonly as Rumi (d. 672/1273) – he also borrowed heavily from the well-known Christian scholar of Religious Studies John Hick.¹⁷² As Ghamari-Tabrizi and Dahlen also observe,¹⁷³ Soroush's philosophy of religious pluralism is close to Hick's. Both Soroush's and Hick's point of departure in their philosophy of religious pluralism is the notion of 'experience', and both make a close connection between religious experiences of prophets and the emergence of associated religions.¹⁷⁴ Like Soroush, Hick asserts that 'the great world traditions constitute different conceptions and perceptions of, and responses to, the Real from within the different cultural ways of being human'.¹⁷⁵ For Hick, the nature of ultimate Reality is beyond our human concepts, and thus whatever we perceive of it is inescapably 'humanly thought and experienced'.¹⁷⁶ That is, the concept of religious truth is contextual and relational because no individual has direct access to the Real. Both Soroush and Hick believe that the contingent elements of religious traditions are inevitable responses to the entrance of the Divinity into the domains of human culture and subjectivity, experienced by our limited human mind. Soroush and Hick indeed distanced themselves from traditionalist circles by claiming that the human mind, due to its limitations, is unable to determine the superiority of one religious tradition or a particular belief over other religious traditions or beliefs. The implication of such an idea is that different religions must be seen as 'related kin' instead of 'rival strangers', working 'toward the same goal of human transformation in mutually complementary ways'.¹⁷⁷ This approach coheres very well with what Raimon

Panikkar identifies as ‘true pluralism’, a notion that challenges ‘absolutism not by an (equally absolute) anti-absolutism, but by relativizing all absolutisms by means of searching for their contextuality’,¹⁷⁸ which can be considered as a strong basis for pluralism in today’s world.

Discourses of women’s rights

Although Soroush has not dealt with the issue of women’s rights in a substantial way, he has explored some aspects of this topic. This section argues that Soroush’s hermeneutics are used in his discussion about the rights of women.

Soroush distances himself from the apologetic approaches adopted by many contemporary Muslim scholars about women’s rights in Islam. He accepts the idea that some Qur’ānic passages as well as some prophetic traditions give men more rights than they give to women: ‘It cannot be denied that there are many legal inequalities in Islam . . . including the inequality between the rights of men and women.’¹⁷⁹ Having analysed Imam Ali’s letter to his son, Soroush concludes that the Imam’s words are uncongenial to women.¹⁸⁰ Such problems, according to Soroush, ‘cannot be resolved by providing new justifications to defend an outmoded worldview, hoping women will be lured back into accepting them’.¹⁸¹ Not only do some Qur’ānic verses give men more authority than women, but also the majority of pre-modern Qur’ānic commentators interpreted the Qur’ānic verses dealing with women’s issues in a highly patriarchal way. In line with his idea that understandings of religious texts are contextual and take shape in dialogue with other modes of knowledge, Soroush argues that the inequality between men and women accepted by pre-modern Qur’ānic commentators was in line with the macro context of the pre-modern period. Soroush writes, ‘if Muslim scholars defined women’s status in a way we find unacceptable today, it is not because they wanted to humiliate women or undermine their status, but because that is how they understood and interpreted the religious texts’ based on their prior knowledge, which was compatible with the context in which they lived.¹⁸² This mirrors his epistemological theory that ‘the norms and values of every era should be placed within their context [of appearance] and we should not judge people of past generations by today’s values and standards’.¹⁸³ In the pre-modern period, Soroush states, women accepted such patriarchal norms ‘not because they were stupid or oppressed but because they had no problems with such understanding and interpretation’.¹⁸⁴ But ‘today women don’t accept or believe in such a position’.¹⁸⁵

In such approaches to unpacking the legal rights of women, both of Soroush’s hermeneutical approaches are applied. Soroush argues that the Qur’ānic verses dealing with women’s rights are only reflections of the socio-historical circumstances of the Arabian society at the time of revelation. For instance, since the Qur’ān came into existence in line with the patriarchal norms of the Arab society of the seventh century, many of the blessings promised in paradise – such as black-eyed perpetual virgins – appeal only to men.¹⁸⁶ In an interview on the subject of women’s rights

entitled 'Contraction and Expansion of Women's Rights', Soroush says 'we should not devise rights and duties [for women] that their historical, biological and psychological existence has declared impossible, undesirable or inappropriate'.¹⁸⁷ This is to say, the concept of women's rights, as we understand it today, could not have taken shape in the context of Arabian society in the seventh century. Therefore, the inequality that existed between men and women in the text does not belong to the essentials of Islam, but is part of its accidentals since it came into being as a result of the seventh-century socio-cultural norms of Arabian society.¹⁸⁸ In addition, by applying his theory of expansion and contraction of religious knowledge, Soroush concludes that pre-modern Muslim interpretations of some Qur'ānic passages were formed within the patriarchal context of pre-modern societies and thus are in great need of new interpretations in the modern period. He states:

In the past, this and many other issues were so much in line with popular culture that there was no need for thinking. In our time such [issues] have been dealt such devastating blows that no one finds it expedient to tackle them or to confront such a formidable torrent.¹⁸⁹

This is compatible with Soroush's idea that every interpretation of the text carries within itself the interpreter's epistemic understanding of the world and his/her preconceptions and prior knowledge. As such, since the context of societies today is different from that of the pre-modern era, there is a need for reinterpreting those Qur'ānic verses that were used in the pre-modern period to justify the inequality of women.

Unlike Rahman, Soroush does not examine in great detail issues relating to women's inheritance, testimony and polygamy. The main similarity between Soroush's and Rahman's approaches is that the Qur'ānic verses that give fewer rights to women than those given to men must be approached within their specific social context, and not within today's context. That is, if the Qur'ān had been revealed in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries, it would have approached this issue in a different way. Unlike Rahman, Soroush explains the main reason for the dominant patriarchal interpretation of the Qur'ān among pre-modern commentators. Drawing on his second hermeneutic, Soroush maintains that the pre-modern interpretations of Qur'ānic verses dealing with women's status were only reflective of the socio-political circumstances in which interpreters lived. Last but not least, Soroush's second hermeneutic manages to explain why discourses of equality between men and women among feminist exegetes such as Amina Wadud and Asma Barlas emerged during the contemporary era, but did not appear during pre-modern times among Muslim scholars.

Islamic democratic order

As demonstrated, Soroush's second hermeneutic makes substantial advances towards more pluralistic interpretations of the religion, and this has some significant political consequences. Soroush's project protects the natural plurality

of human understanding and interpretation of religion and considers the notion of religious absolutism hermeneutically naïve. He welcomes a variety of interpretations and sees any obstacle to this development as a hindrance to the growth of Islamic thought in this era because everyone approaches the holy scriptures with his/her own presuppositions. Perhaps the most significant consequence of Soroush's view on the contingent nature of religious knowledge is his argument against the 'official interpretation of religion' (*qerā'at-e rasmī az dīn*) by the state and by the clergy in Iran. If interpretations of religious scriptures vary according to an individual's episteme, then there can be no single fixed interpretation presented by the state. According to Soroush, 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 true interpretation. Any claim to the *truth of Islam* transforms religion into an ideology: 'Pluralist society is a non-ideological society; it has no official interpreters or commentators.'¹⁹⁰ For Soroush, the official interpretation of religion gives rise to shutting 'the gates of thought'.¹⁹¹ This type of interpretation is linked to the inflexible ideological understanding of the faith. Soroush writes:

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.¹⁹²

The doctrine of the relativity of interpretations results in the idea that nobody has the right to claim the primacy of one interpretation over another. The monopoly of those groups who view their own understanding of religion as the only true interpretation of Islam is fundamentally unacceptable because the *fuqahā*, too, are influenced by specific interests, preconceptions and pre-understandings when approaching the interpretation of the Qur'ān: 'No *faqīh* can approach religious texts with an empty mind (*zahn-e khālī*).'¹⁹³ Soroush's ideas concerning the construction of religious knowledge are of particular importance for discussions about the way religion is politicised in Iran and within the broader Muslim world. Recognising the multiplicity of meanings and the negation of any claim to a privileged access to the Word of God lays the foundation for a viable democratic Islamic politics. From one side, by submitting religious knowledge to the same reasoning which governs other areas of intellectual activity, Soroush makes the case that religion should participate in the civic sphere and thus should not be relegated solely to the private domain.¹⁹⁴ By applying his second hermeneutic, Soroush rejects secularism in its strict sense because, for him, it leads to the total elimination of religion from areas of society. From the other side, since the knowledge of religion is entirely human, no political party is authorised to speak or legislate on behalf of the Divine Will. 'Because

the content of religion is human and non-divine . . . it cannot accommodate the sense of finality that accompanies the theology of Islamism.¹⁹⁵ Indeed, any political body which claims to speak on behalf of the Divine Will would inevitably distort it. Soroush states that speaking on behalf of God transfers religion to a mere ideological device for organising a particular social order, meaning that he warns against any efforts that aim at politicisation of religion.¹⁹⁶ As a result, Soroush advocates a form of secularism in which religious values are protected within the social context, and thus religious discourses are not purged from the public sphere, but religion is freed from the ideological grip of the state and clerical elite – a notion distinct from the French *laïcité*, or more generally from the European experience of an absolute separation between church and state.

One main feature of Soroush's political theory which places him in sharp contrast to Rahman is that modern democratic norms such as human rights and democracy are extra-religious, meaning that they are not necessarily derivable from the Qur'ānic concept of *shūrā*.¹⁹⁷ We recall that Rahman equates democracy with *shūrā*, suggesting that modern democratic norms can be derived from primary sources of Islam, especially the Qur'ān. By contrast, Soroush argues that religion can only bolster individuals' moral sensitivities and that democracy cannot flourish without commitment to moral precepts. However, this does not mean that methods of governance in today's context as well as other modern political norms can be derived from the Qur'ān. Soroush states that the discourse of human rights 'is an extra-religious area of discourse . . . [and] lies outside of the domain of religion'.¹⁹⁸ Soroush avoids a projection of the present norms onto the past and makes a sharp distinction between *shūrā* and democracy. For him, it is important to move beyond the period in which some scholars have sought to extract democratic norms from the Qur'ān.¹⁹⁹ In Soroush's political thought, as Ghobadzadeh notes, 'governance is perceived in completely non-religious terms, which leaves subjects to determine their political system based on civic reasoning'.²⁰⁰

According to Soroush, modern democratic norms are the end products of modernity and the collective critical reasoning of humanity during the modern period, and thus could not have emerged in pre-modern societies due to the epistemological limitations of that era. The basic assumption behind this idea is that there is an ontological difference between pre-modern and modern societies. According to Soroush, humans in the modern world are rights-bearers whereas in the pre-modern era they were duty-bound subjects. By using the word *haqq* (literally meaning Right), Soroush states that 'one of the most decisive paradigmatic changes of the modern world is that most of its concepts and institutions are right-based, reflecting the shift in human self-perception from duty-bearing to right-bearing'.²⁰¹ Soroush's position here is consistent with his hermeneutic approach, which acknowledges that certain epistemic limits that existed during the pre-modern era played a significant role in shaping the text. That is, the Qur'ān came into being within a particular historical context and was shaped by the contingencies of the Prophet's situation

and the language that he used to articulate the text; and more importantly, it was affected by the limitations of the epistemological framework and worldview of Muhammad's audiences and society. As such, the concept of *shūrā* in the Qur'ānic worldview does not carry the same implications that are associated with our contemporary notion of democracy, since they belong to two different epistemological paradigms. Therefore, in his discussion about an ideal form of governance, Soroush does not refer to Islamic principles such as *shūrā*, considering governance a non-religious matter. His political idea, unlike Rahman's, acknowledges the necessity of extra-Qur'ānic grounding of democracy for governing a Muslim-majority society. Soroush's view represents a flexible approach to political governance insofar as it suggests that the governing frameworks of each period of history are to be derived from the ethical and intellectual norms of that era, and do not necessarily have to be developed by referring to religious sources.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Soroush's humanistic approach to revelation is used in his writings to interpret the Qur'ān in a way consistent with modern norms and standards. Soroush historicises the concept of revelation in two steps. He first revalorises revelation from being a mere metaphysical concept to a historical notion by highlighting the role of the Prophet in it and by emphasising its dialogical nature. Second, by considering revelation tantamount to the religious experience of the Prophet which is subject to change and expansion, Soroush establishes a link between revelation and the socio-historical context of the seventh-century Arabian society. This guides him to argue that an interpreter of the Qur'ān should distinguish between the essentials and accidentals of the text. He also argues that the discipline of Qur'ānic interpretation is not immune to change since knowledge of religion evolves along with other branches or modes of human knowledge. In this way, Soroush argues in favour of a flexible interpretation of the Qur'ān that is compatible with modern norms.

Soroush's hermeneutical approaches have led him to argue in favour of the contingent nature of the Qur'ān's socio-legal passages – an approach that distances him from a legal-oriented hermeneutic. I argued that Soroush's hermeneutical approaches function in three realms: the discourse of women's rights, religious pluralism and the influence of religion on methods of governance. In terms of the discourse of religious pluralism, Soroush's hermeneutics lead to both inter-religious and intra-religious pluralisms. As for the discourse of women's rights, although Soroush applied his epistemological theory to address why traditional interpretations of those Qur'ānic verses that seem to have given more rights to men than women should undergo substantial changes, he has not yet applied extensively his hermeneutics to issues such as women's inheritance and testimony. Compared to Rahman, Soroush's humanistic approach to revelation and his hermeneutics allow for more flexibility in developing a viable political theory within an Islamic context

by challenging the approach which incorporates a maximal role for government in terms of religious values, and by highlighting the importance of extra-religious areas of discourse in approaching some modern political concepts such as democracy and human rights.

Notes

1. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 4.
2. Ibid., p. 9.
3. Ibid., p. 199.
4. Ibid., p. 5. See also Soroush, *Şirāt-hāye Mostaqīm [The Straight Paths]*, p. 9.
5. al-Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*.
6. Ibid., pp. 6–7.
7. Griffel, 'Al-Ghazali's Concept of Prophecy', pp. 101–44.
8. Ibid., p. 19; Abdolkarim Soroush, 'Ta'abīr-e Ma'ād dar Ru'yā-hāye Rasūlāneh' [Interpretation of Resurrection in the theory of Prophetic Visions].
9. Madigan, *The Qur'ān's Self-Image*, p. 141.
10. Abdolkarim Soroush, 'Muhammad: Rāvi-e Ru'yā-hāye Rasūlāneh' [Muhammad: the Narrator of Prophetic Dreams].
11. Ibid.
12. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 292.
13. Abdolkarim Soroush, 'The Word of Muhammad'. See also Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 328.
14. Soroush, 'The Word of Muhammad'.
15. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 5.
16. Ibid.
17. Soroush, 'The Word of Muhammad'.
18. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 295.
19. Ibid., p. 294.
20. Ibid., p. 296.
21. Ibid., p. 328.
22. Ibid., p. 16.
23. Soroush, 'The Word of Muhammad'.
24. Ibid.
25. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 16.
26. See previous chapter.
27. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 331.
28. Ibid., p. 293.
29. Ibid., pp. 331–2.
30. Ibid., p. 293.
31. Ibid., p. 12.
32. Ibid., p. 19.
33. Soroush, 'The Word of Muhammad'.
34. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 125.
35. Ibid., p. 332.
36. Ibid., p. 295.
37. Ibid., p. 329.
38. Ibid., p. 11.
39. Ibid., p. 9.
40. Ibid., p. 11.
41. Ibid., p. 10.
42. Ibid., p. 14.

43. Ibid., p. 9.
44. Ibid., p. 10.
45. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, p. 78.
46. For details on Ibn Khaldun's idea on revelation, see Ibid., pp. 70–8.
47. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, pp. 10–11.
48. Soroush, *Şirât-hāye Mostaqīm*, pp. 11, 166–7.
49. Katz, 'Language, Epistemology and Mysticism', p. 26.
50. Ibid.
51. Soroush, *Şirât-hāye Mostaqīm*, p. 167.
52. For details, see Ashk Dahlen, 'Sirat al-mustaqīm – One or Many?', pp. 428, 444.
53. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 22.
54. Ibid., p. 13.
55. Ibid., p. 14.
56. Ibid., p. 15.
57. Ibid., p. 15.
58. Ibid., pp. 16–17.
59. Ibid., p. 17.
60. Moosa, 'The Debts and Burdens of Critical Islam', p. 124.
61. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 17.
62. For a discussion about this, see Soltani, 'Dīnshenāsī-e Abdolkarim Soroush' [Abdulkarim Soroush's Approach to Religious Studies], pp. 51–2.
63. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 27.
64. Ibid., p. 34.
65. For evaluation of this idea, see Ormsby, 'Poor Man's Prophecy: al-Ghazali on Dreams', p. 145.
66. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 27.
67. Ibid., p. 21.
68. Ibid., p. 23.
69. Soroush, *Farbeh-tar az Ideoloji* [Loftier than Ideology], p. 78.
70. Ibid., p. 77.
71. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 19.
72. Ibid., p. 22.
73. Soroush himself has advocated the Mu'tazili position on the temporal nature of revelation: Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, pp. 274–5.
74. Soroush, 'I am a Neo-Mu'tazilite'.
75. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 331. See also Ibid., p. 296.
76. Sviri, 'Dreaming Analysed and Recorded', p. 252. al-Kindi is one of the first philosophers to have emphasised this theme. He argues, 'while asleep, the psyche is liberated from the senses and the sensible, and has direct access to the "form-creating faculty"'. (See Edgar, *The Dream in Islam*, p. 8).
77. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, pp. 330–1.
78. Mulla Sadra, *al-mabda' va al-ma'ād* [the Origin and the Return], p. 605.
79. Mulla Sadra, *al-Asfār* [the Journeys], Vol. 3, p. 99.
80. Sadr al-Din Shirazi, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* [the Interpretation of the Qur'ān], p. 299, cited in Jambet, *The Act of Being*, p. 337.
81. Fazlur Rahman has written a book about Sadra in which this viewpoint is highlighted: Rahman, *The Philosophy of Mulla Sadra*, p. 187.
82. Mulla Sadra, *al-Asfār*, Vol. 3, p. 99.
83. Shah Wali Allah was a member of the Naqshbandi order and was one of the most influential Muslim scholars in the Indian subcontinent during the eighteenth century.
84. Even prior to the publication of this paper, Rahman had seen in Shah Wali Allah a thinker who had adopted the idea that religious ideas have to 'adjust themselves to and re-express themselves in terms of the genius of a particular age and of a particular people'. Rahman, 'The Thinker of Crisis', p. 45.
85. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, pp. 82–9.
86. Cited in al-Ghazali, *The Socio-Political Thought of Shah Wali Allah*, p. 205.
87. See Shah Wali Allah, *Sufism and the Islamic Tradition*, pp. 95–6.

88. Ibid., p. 59.
89. Cited in Halepota, *Philosophy of Shah Waiullah*, p. 229.
90. Ibid.
91. Shah Wali Allah, *al-Khayr al-Kathir* [the Great Benefit], pp. 98–103. For examination of this viewpoint in detail, see al-Ghazali, *The Socio-Political Thought of Shah Wali Allah*, p. 25.
92. Andrea, *Muhammad*, p. 66.
93. Rodinson, *Muhammad*, pp. 74–81.
94. Watt, *Islamic Revelation*, pp. 15, 108.
95. Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today*, p. 59.
96. Ibid., p. 66.
97. Watt and Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'an*, p. 22.
98. Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today*, pp. 68–9; Watt, *Islamic Revelation in the Modern World*, p. 46.
99. Watt, *Islam and Christianity Today*, p. 66.
100. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 19.
101. Watt, *Islamic Revelation*, p. 20.
102. Ibid.
103. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 16.
104. Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*, p. 61.
105. Soroush, 'The Prophet's Mission and Identity Crisis', pp. 2–3, cited in Aliabadi, 'Abdolkarim Soroush and the Discourse of Islamic Revivalism', p. 50.
106. Ibid.
107. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 67.
108. Ibid., p. 91.
109. This does not appear in the English translation of Soroush's 'Essentials and Accidentals in Religion', which is a part of his *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, but is found in the original Persian text. See Soroush, *Baṣṭ-e Tajrobeh Nabavī*, p. 80. See also Soroush, 'The Changeable and Unchangeable', p. 10.
110. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 104.
111. Soroush, 'The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge', p. 250.
112. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 63.
113. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 70. See also Soroush, *Farbeh-tar az Ideology*, p. 59.
114. Ibn Qutayba, *Ta'wīl Mushkil al-Qur'ān* [Elucidation of Difficult Passages of the Qur'ān], pp. 20–1.
115. Cited in Cook, *The Koran*, p. 94.
116. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 71.
117. Ibid., pp. 72–3.
118. Soroush, 'The Prophet's Mission and Identity Crisis', p. 6.
119. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, pp. 80–1.
120. Ibid., p. 81.
121. Soroush, 'The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge', p. 250.
122. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 78.
123. Ibid.
124. Soroush, *Nesbat-e 'ilm va Dīn* [The Relation between Science and Religion], p. 121.
125. Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*, p. 60.
126. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 89.
127. For further investigation of Shah Wali Allah's Concept of the Shari'a, see Miraj, 'Shah Wali Allah's Concept of the Shari'a', pp. 347–8.
128. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 89.
129. Ibid., p. 77.
130. Soroush, 'The Prophet's Mission and Identity Crisis', p. 3.
131. Soroush, *Qabz va Baṣṭ-e Te'orik-e Shari'at*, pp. 106–7.
132. Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*, p. 31.
133. Ibid.
134. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 233–51. Kant points out that since the properties of something as experienced 'depend upon the mode of intuition of the subject, this object as appearance is to be distinguished from itself as object in itself' (see Dahlen, *Islamic Law, Epistemology and Modernity*,

- p. 299). The *noumena*, for Kant, is an event that cannot be known by the use of the senses, while *phenomenon* refers to anything that appears to the senses. Translating this to the realm of religion, the reference becomes human experience and understanding of divine scriptures rather than an absolute law of God.
135. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 157.
 136. Ibid., p. 234.
 137. There is, however, another feature in Soroush's theory of *Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge* which is not necessarily developed from his theory of *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*. Soroush holds that knowledge in general is public and the 'creation of new knowledge is always in reference to the overall body of public human knowledge' (cited in Vakili, 'Abdolkarim Soroush and Critical Discourse in Iran', p. 154). See also Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Te'orik-e Shari'at*, p. 229. Thus, Soroush considers religious knowledge, like other branches of human knowledge, as a collective endeavour: 'religious knowledge is not a personal knowledge of a single individual but a branch of human knowledge that has a collective and dynamic identity' (Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*, p. 34). This suggests that religious knowledge has a collective nature while religious experience is highly individualistic. Soroush in general believes in the concept of the accumulation of knowledge over time. This notion of collectivity echoes Quine-Duhem's proposal that all forms of knowledge are inevitably collective (Ibid., p. 16).
 138. Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Te'orik-e Shari'at*, p. 165.
 139. Ibid., p. 187.
 140. Ibid., p. 167.
 141. Ibid.
 142. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 123.
 143. Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Te'orik-e Shari'at*, p. 265.
 144. Ahmed, 'Progressive Islam and Qur'anic Hermeneutics', p. 84.
 145. Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Te'orik-e Shari'at*, p. 271.
 146. Sadri, 'The Iran Situation'.
 147. Ibid.
 148. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 115.
 149. Ibid., p. 112.
 150. Ahmed, 'Progressive Islam and Qur'anic Hermeneutics', p. 89.
 151. The concept of pluralism was first coined by Enlightenment philosophers Christian Wolff and Emmanuel Kant (Riis, 'Modes of Religious Pluralism under Conditions of Globalization', p. 21). Subsequent theories about pluralism emerged during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, having resulted in countless explicit and implicit definitions. Edward Craig defines pluralism as 'a broad term, applicable to any doctrine which maintains that there are ultimately many things or many kinds of thing' (Craig, 'Pluralism', p. 463). This broad definition sets the stage for more specific forms of pluralism in three realms: cognitive, moral and religious pluralism.
 152. Eck, *A New Religious America*, pp. 70–1; Said and Funk, 'Dynamism of Cultural Diversity', pp. 21–2.
 153. Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, p. 35.
 154. Ibid. For a report on an urgent need for religious pluralism, see Hussain, 'Muslims, Pluralism, and Interfaith Dialogue', pp. 264–7.
 155. Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, p. 11.
 156. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 203.
 157. Ibid., p. 183.
 158. Ibid., p. 186.
 159. Ibid., p. 190.
 160. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 190.
 161. Dahlen, *Deciphering the Meaning of Revealed Law*, p. 218.
 162. Soroush Dabbagh, *Ayīn dar Ayīneh* [Religion in the Mirror], p. 124.
 163. Tavassoli, *Christian Encounters With Iran*, p. 145.
 164. Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam & Dissent in Post-revolutionary Iran*, p. 232. As I argue in the next chapter, Muhammad Mujtahed Shabestari raised similar viewpoints throughout his writings.
 165. Soroush, *Farbeh tar az Ideology*, p. 194.

166. Tavassoli, *Christian Encounters with Iran*, p. 144.
167. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 142. This is again due to the fact that worshipping provisions of religion such as 'the form and appearance of rites of worship and other rites' are considered as contingent and accidental (Ibid., p. 88).
168. Tavassoli, *Christian Encounters with Iran*, p. 139.
169. For an evaluation of Qur'ānic polemics and their relation to its context, see Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics*, pp. 33–45.
170. Soroush, 'The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge', p. 245.
171. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 137.
172. For Soroush's referring to Hick, see Soroush, *Şirāt-hāye Mostaqīm*, pp. 19–24; Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, pp. 131–4.
173. Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam & Dissent in Post-revolutionary Iran*, p. 225; Dahlen, 'Sirat al-mustaqim – One or Many', pp. 429–33.
174. In the next chapter, I discuss in great detail Hick's ideas on 'religious experience'.
175. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 376.
176. Hick, 'Christianity Among the Religions of the World', p. 21.
177. Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam & Dissent in Post-revolutionary Iran*, p. 225.
178. Panikkar, 'The Crosscultural Dialogue', p. 253.
179. Soroush, 'The Prophet's Mission and Identity Crisis', p. 4.
180. Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*, p. 223.
181. Ibid., p. 230.
182. Ibid.
183. Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Te'orik-e Sharī'at*, p. 260.
184. Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*, p. 230.
185. Ibid., p. 223.
186. Ibid., pp. 228–9.
187. Soroush, 'Contraction and Expansion of Women's Rights'.
188. Soroush, 'The Prophet's Mission and Identity Crisis', p. 4.
189. Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*, p. 226.
190. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 152.
191. Soroush, *Farbeh-tar az Ideology*, pp. 135–41.
192. Soroush, 'Hokūmat-e demokrātik-e dīnī', p. 20 Cited in Amirpur, 'The Expansion of Prophetic Experience', p. 422.
193. Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Te'orik-e Sharī'at*, p. 487.
194. Ahmad, *Reform and Modernity in Islam*, p. 214.
195. Ibid., p. 213.
196. While Soroush does not prevent the clergy and religious scholars from participating in political affairs of their society, he believes that the state must place them on an equal footing to all citizens in any competition for political leadership (see Ghobadzadeh, *Religious Secularity*, p. 206).
197. Extra-religious is a form of knowledge based in the natural and social sciences as well as the humanities.
198. Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy*, p. 128.
199. Ghobadzadeh, *Religious Secularity*, p. 62.
200. Ibid., p. 66.
201. Cited in Aliabadi, 'Abdolkarim Soroush and the Discourse of Islamic Revivalism', p. 68.

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