Abdolkarim Soroush (b.1945) is an Iranian philosopher-thinker whose innovative ideas on religious re-form are sure to win him a place among the most prominent Muslim reformers of this century. A graduate of Tehran University in pharmacology, Soroush’s intellectual fruition as a Muslim reformer in the 1960s, as a religiously committed and socio-politically concerned student, he pondered revivalist literature from Al-Afghani to Ali Shariati. Since returning to Iran shortly after the 1979 revolution, he has experienced the role of an Islamic government, the supremacy of an ideologized Islam, and the implementation of a jurisprudential understanding of Islam.

Contraction and expansion

Prior to postgraduate work, Soroush was long preoccupied with textual interpretation – a product of his extensive, systematic study of Qur’anic exegesis, and classical theological and philosophical works, such as Rumi and Al-Ghazali. These joined with new insights to draw him into a vortex of intellectual activity aimed at re-evaluating traditional metaphysics in order to find a convincing solution to the relationship between science and metaphysics/reason and revelation. Context has also contributed to Soroush’s intellectual fruition as a Muslim reformer. In the 1960s, as a religiously committed and socio-politically concerned student, he pondered revivalist literature from Al-Afghani to Ali Shariati. Since returning to Iran shortly after the 1979 revolution, he has experienced the role of an Islamic government, the supremacy of an ideologized Islam, and the implementation of a jurisprudential understanding of Islam.

Soroush’s goal goes beyond unsystematic reforms in certain selected, mostly legal, matters and his plan is multidimensional. Of his two major axes, one is to give new meanings and understandings to concepts that are considered superfluous and stagnant and have often obscured the essence of religion. The other is to distinguish between religion and extra-religious, though upheld by religious means and values, chiefly in reconciling reason and revelation.

Reason and revelation

His pathology of contemporary Islamic surfaces numerous ills. Although positing terminological conditions in Iran are central to his diagnosis, Soroush has no difficulty identifying these problems all over the Muslim world. He observes that the ideology of Islam, in its prevalent mode of Islamic resurgence since the 1960s, as detrimental to the essence of religion. Among other things, it makes reason an instrument for attaining goals. It promotes a dogmatic understanding of religion concerned with extraneous, accidental aspects, ignoring deeper meanings and resulting in intellectual rigidity and exclusivism. It fixes one understanding of religion as final, absolute, eternal and Â© to Professor Forough Jahanbakhsh.

Abdolkarim Soroush at the ISIM Muslim Intellectuals Conference, April 2002.

ISIM NEWSLETTER 8/01

Abdolkarim Soroush New ‘Revival of Religious Sciences’

Islamic and democracy

Soroush argues that discussion about Islam and politics should be approached from outside of religion. Reconciling religion and democracy is of the same nature as reconciling reason and revelation, both involving extra-religious values and means. In essence, the nature of the state and values and methods of governance are not matters of religious justification but belong to political philosophy. With regard to religion, they should be addressed in ‘alam (theology). Human beings are a product of identity with extra-religious means and values, including political ones. Pivotal values of democracy – justice and freedom – are extra-religious, though upheld by religious systems. Methods of government are also non-religious. Administering public life is a rational matter that should be based on modern social sciences, economics and administration. Fiqh is neither a science of administration nor a government platform. Anything that is religious in nature is Ôextra-religious, and Ôaccidental’; it is not Ôessential’ to religion. Arguing for the possibility of a religious democratic state, Soroush believes that if democracy is irrefutably with the normative legal reading of Islam, it can be compatible with another understanding that accords primary to human values such as rationality, justice, freedom and human rights. Therefore, democracy can work in a religious society only if the respective theoretical foundations are harmonized.

Islam and modernity

Acute aware of an epistemological break between the old and modern worlds, Soroush believes that any serious attempt at Islamic modernism should be based on the benefit from modern concepts, perceptual outlooks and intellectual means. Of the several features addressed by Soroush, two are modern critical reason vs. traditional hermeneutical reason, and rights vs. duties. Modern Muslim thought needs to adopt an explanatory reasoning, a tool that not only involves a critical historical approach to traditional religious paradigms but can also suggest alternatives to those. One of the major points of Soroush’s argumentation is the change 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. Equally critical of the shortcomings of the past duty-oriented mentality and the current loss of humanistic values from being assuaged by God-like characteristics and obligations on humans. However, the nature and definition of tranquillity and obligation differ between extra-religious, though upheld by religious legal solutions. Soroush does not underestimate the significance of Islam, and the implementation of a jurisprudential understanding of Islam. and politics should be approached from outside of religion. Reconciling religion and democracy is of the same nature as reconciling reason and revelation, both involving extra-religious values and means. In essence, the nature of the state and values and methods of governance are not matters of religious justification but belong to political philosophy. With regard to religion, they should be addressed in ‘alam (theology). Human beings are a product of identity with extra-religious means and values, including political ones. Pivotal values of democracy – justice and freedom – are extra-religious, though upheld by religious systems. Methods of government are also non-religious. Administering public life is a rational matter that should be based on modern social sciences, economics and administration. Fiqh is neither a science of administration nor a government platform. Anything that is religious in nature is Ôextra-religious, and Ôaccidental’; it is not Ôessential’ to religion. Arguing for the possibility of a religious democratic state, Soroush believes that if democracy is irrefutably with the normative legal reading of Islam, it can be compatible with another understanding that accords primary to human values such as rationality, justice, freedom and human rights. Therefore, democracy can work in a religious society only if the respective theoretical foundations are harmonized.

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