

reviewed here provide ample resources for future scholarship concerned with such reevaluation and committed to enacting liberatory practices within the profession of philosophy at large.

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## An Epistemological Turn in Contemporary Islamic Reform Discourse: On Abdolkarim Soroush's Epistemology

### *Abstract*

Abdolkarim Soroush's thought is regarded by some researchers as a turning point in contemporary Islamic reform discourse. This article concerns Soroush's epistemology as a determining factor in this paradigm shift and interprets this shift as an *epistemological turn* in Islamic reform discourse, shifting from »Islamic genealogy of modernity« to (re)rationalization of Islamic methodology. After a short introduction to Soroush's intellectual biography, this article will isolate neo-rationalism or neo-Mu'tazilism, religious post-positivism (post-scripturalism), historicism, hermeneutics, and dialogism as main features of Soroush's epistemology. This paper suggests that rationalism as reasoning independent from revelation and non-essentialism are two main determining pillars of Soroush's epistemology. In the conclusion, I shortly compare Soroush's thought with some other contemporary Muslim reform thinkers and discuss how and why Soroush's thought can be interpreted as an epistemological turn in Islamic reform discourse.

### *Keywords*

Abdolkarim Soroush, Islamic reform discourse, Islamic religious epistemology, epistemological turn, neo-Mutazilism, intellectual discourse in post-revolutionary Iran.

### 1 Introduction

When Abdolkarim Soroush (born 1945), Iranian philosopher and theologian, referred to the Qu'ran as being »The Word of Mohammad« in 2007<sup>1</sup> there was a diverse reaction. While many Muslim

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<sup>1</sup> A. Soroush, »The Word of Mohammad,« in A. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophe-*

theologians rejected this idea as heresy and called for Soroush to »return to the fold of the Islamic *umma*»<sup>2</sup>, other scholars regarded these words and generally Soroush's system of thought as the beginning of a paradigm shift and new phase in Islamic thought. *Post-Islamism*,<sup>3</sup> *post-fundamentalism*<sup>4</sup> *neo-rationalism*<sup>5</sup>, *neo-Mu'tazila*<sup>6</sup>, *post-revivalism*<sup>7</sup> *postmodernism*<sup>8</sup> have been used by these researchers to interpret the intellectual movement led by Soroush in post-revolutionary Iran as a breaking phenomenon. This paper will discuss the epistemology that underlines this paradigm shift. The paper has three main parts: I. An introduction to Soroush's intellectual biography (Section 2). II. The main features of Soroush's epistemology (Section 3). III. An explanation of how and why Soroush's thought may be interpreted as an epistemological turn in Islamic reform discourse (Section 4). One methodological point that should be remarked here is that this text does not adopt a theological or normative perspective. The paper does not intend to examine whether Soroush's interpretation of Islam is right or wrong; or, whether it is loyal to »original« Islam or not. It simply tries to illustrate the internal structure of Soroush's thought and explain it through a contextualization of Soroush's argument.

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*tic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, Leiden: Brill, 2009, pp. 271–275. Originally posted on *Soroush's Official Website*, December 2007, <http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-The%20Word%20of%20Mohammad.html> (last accessed on 17 April 2015).

<sup>2</sup> J. Sobhani, »Ayatollah Sobhani's First Letter [to Soroush],« in Soroush (2009: 276–287). The letter was originally posted on: *Fars News Agency*, 08.12.1386/25.02.2008, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8612070740> (last accessed on 01 May 2015).

<sup>3</sup> A. Bayat, »The Coming of a Post-Islamist Society,« *Critique: Critical Middle East Studies*, No. 9, Fall 1996, pp. 43–52.

<sup>4</sup> F. Jahanbakhsh, »Religious and Political Discourse in Iran: Moving Toward Post-Fundamentalism,« *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2003, pp. 243–254.

<sup>5</sup> F. Jahanbakhsh, »Introduction: Abdolkarim Soroush's Neo-Rationalist Approach to Islam,« in Soroush (2009: XVI).

<sup>6</sup> M. Hashas, »Abdolkarim Soroush: The Neo-Mu'tazilite that Buries Classical Islamic Political Theology in Defense of Religious Democracy and Pluralism,« *Studia Islamica*, Vol. 109, No. 1, 2014, pp. 147–173.

<sup>7</sup> Y. Matsunaga, »Mohsen Kadivar, an Advocate of Postrevivalist Islam in Iran,« *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 3, December 2007, pp. 317–329.

<sup>8</sup> A. Dahlén, »Towards an Islamic Discourse of Uncertainty and Doubt,« *ISIM Newsletter*, Vol. 10, No. 02, July 2002, p. 22.

## 2 A Brief Intellectual Biography of Soroush

Soroush's main concern has been the tradition-modernity dilemma; a concern that most Iranian and other Muslim religious intellectuals have shared since the late nineteenth century. Soroush explicitly suggests this intention in the introduction of *The Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge* (henceforth CERK) where he asserts that the mission of modern and contemporary religious reformers is to *transit* religion through the *dangerous passageway* of the modern age: »The intention of the formers was saving religion from misunderstanding and misusing but the intention of contemporaries is transiting the religion safely from the dangerous passageway of the time and giving meaning and relevance to religion in the evolutionary age« (1386/2007: 48).<sup>9</sup> In the late 1970s he appealed to Mulla Sadra's (Sadr al-Din Muhammad b. Ibrahim b. Yahya Qawami Shirazi) philosophy and post-positivist epistemology to make Islamic tradition understandable in the modern context and to defend Islam against materialism and Marxism. In this period he wrote books such as *Nahad-e Na-aram-e Jahan* (The Dynamic Nature of the Universe)<sup>10</sup>, which was a modern reading of Mulla Sadra's theory of *substantial motion* and *Tazadd-e Dialektiki* (Dialectic Antagonism)<sup>11</sup> both published in 1978. After the Islamic Revolution (1979) he cooperated with the Islamic Republic; he took part in televised discussions on Marxism and was nominated by Ayatollah Khomeini as a member of *Shuray-e Enqelab-e Farhangi* (*Advisory Council on Cultural Revolution*). Soroush was so close to the Islamic Republic in its early years that he was regarded by some as its »premiere ideologue« (Vakili 2001: 153).<sup>12</sup> After some years, however, it seems that Soroush

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<sup>9</sup> A. Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Teorik-e Shariat: Nazariyye-ye Takamol-e Marefat-e Dini* (Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge), Tehran: Serat, 1386/2007 (ninth print, first print 1370/1991). A note on translations and quotations from Soroush's works: The translations are mine unless another source is specified. Quotations are from paper editions of Soroush's works unless an e-edition is mentioned.

<sup>10</sup> A. Soroush, *Nahad-e Na-aram-e Jahan* (The Dynamic Nature of the Universe), Tehran: Serat, 1357/1978b.

<sup>11</sup> A. Soroush, *Tazadd-e Dialektiki* (Dialectic Antagonism), Tehran: Serat, 1357/1978c.

<sup>12</sup> V. Vakili, »Abdolkarim Soroush and Critical Discourse in Iran,« in *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, J. L. Esposito, and J. O. Voll (eds.), Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 150–176.

realized that political Islam not only does not help, in his own words, »transiting religion safely from the dangerous passageway of the time« (1386/2007: 48) but also actually it hinders realizing that goal. This *ideologized* and *maximalist*<sup>13</sup> Islam causes, in Soroush's words, »[a]nyone who encourages people to expect too much of religion (in the fields of ethics, practical behaviour, economics, hygiene, planning, governance, etc.) and places this excessive burden on religion, gradually robs religion of its standing and legitimacy« (2009: 115). Islamism increased indeed the conflict between Islam and modernity and made the understanding and defense of Islam in a modern context more difficult. So, Soroush shifted his critiques after the Islamic Revolution towards Islamism. He used diverse sources from Islamic mysticism and philosophy to post-positivist epistemology, hermeneutics and liberal Christian theology to provide a »minimal« and »faith-based« reading of Islam. So began Soroush's reform theology.

In the first phase of his reform theology, beginning from CERK in 1988, Soroush targeted religious knowledge and criticized traditional religious epistemology. Soroush distinguished between religion and religious knowledge and regarded religion itself as ahistorical but religious knowledge as historical and changeable. This was the primary focus of his first theory in this book. He intended to achieve two goals through historicization and pluralization of religious knowledge: Firstly, the de-legitimization of the Islamic state that was justified through claiming to have an absolute true understanding of Islam. Secondly, he aimed to dissolve the conflicts between religion and modernity through shifting such conflicts from religion to the human religious knowledge. This theory excluded and exonerated *religion itself* from the religion-modernity conflict. However, this theory has developed in the CERK, had shortcomings.<sup>14</sup> It was not enough for a reconciliation of Islam and modernity; it left the Qu'ran ahistorical; a source that has been cited by Islamists. And also it see-

<sup>13</sup> For Soroush's concept of ideologized and maximalist religion, see: A. Soroush, *Farbeh-tar az Ideologi* (More Substantial than Ideology), Tehran: Serat, 1372/1993; A. Soroush, »Din-e Aqalli va Din-e Aksari« (Maximalist Religion and Minimalist Religion), in Soroush 1385/2006, pp. 47–62.

<sup>14</sup> See for example: R. Hajatpour, *Iranische Geistlichkeit zwischen Utopie und Realismus. Zum Diskurs über Herrschafts- und Staatsdenken im 20. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2002; K. Amirpur, *Die Entpolitisierung des Islam: 'Abdolkarim Soroushs Denken und Wirkung in der Islamischen Republik Iran*, Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2003.

mingly contained many conflicts with modern reason and science. Therefore, Soroush began traversing an alternative direction, which led him to a slippery slope. It culminated in the second phase of his thought since 1998 and ended in *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience* (henceforth EPE). Soroush developed a second theory that historicized not just religious epistemology but religion itself including Islam as well as Mohammad and the Qu'ran. The Qu'ran as »The Word of Mohammad« (Soroush 2009) is indeed the result of this long way that led to the historicization of the revelation. A historicized Qu'ran and a minimal religion should disarm both Islamists and secularist modernists. If the Qu'ran is a historical and contextual text, then the legal and political systems that it offers cannot be interpreted as ahistorical and hence obligatory in contemporary era. Similarly, a humanized theory of religion, as the interpretation of the prophet from his religious experience, secures religion from critiques regarding its parts that are not, seemingly, compatible with modern reason and science. Making a brief conclusion about Soroush's intellectual biography, it can be said that his thought evolved from an *apologetic Islamic modernist theology* during the 1970s to a pluralist, historicist, and liberal theory of religion in Islamic thought starting in the 1990s.

### 3 Epistemological Nature of Soroush's Thought

Epistemology can be regarded the core of Soroush's reform project as a response to the tradition-modernity dilemma. Soroush's first main theory developed in CERK is about religious epistemology. Inspired from post-positivist philosophy of science, Soroush distinguishes religion from religious knowledge and argues for the contextuality and historicity of religious knowledge as human understanding of sacral texts. He rejects the idea of absolute religious knowledge, arguing instead for a diversity and fluidity of religious knowledge as interpretations of religion. The epistemological nature of Soroush's intellectual project can be seen in his next intellectual phases too. Soroush, for example, says that his theory of religious pluralism, *seratha-ye mostaqim*, is an »epistemological view rather than theological« (1380/2001: 1).<sup>15</sup> In his other main theory, EPE, Soroush extends and generalizes, indeed, historicity and plurality from religious episte-

<sup>15</sup> A. Soroush, *Seratha-ye Mostaqim* (Straight Paths), Tehran: Serat, 1380/2001.

mology to religion itself (sacral texts). He suggests the epistemological character of his project also in an interview about Muslim intellectuals in the twenty-first century. After mentioning what, according to him, a modern Muslim intellectual is not, namely a Muslim »who thinks of modernity in terms of its axiological phenomena like consumerism or material development,« Soroush further suggests that:

The modern Muslim intellectual has to be one who understands the fundamental differences between Islam and modernity, and would therefore be able to bridge the gap between the two. But in order to do this, he or she has to know how and why Islam and modernity are different, and where the differences actually lie. They cannot simply talk about differences in terms of dress, culture or behavior – these are merely the symptoms of difference, but they do not constitute the actual epistemological difference itself (2002: 20).<sup>16</sup>

#### 4 Main Features of Soroush's Epistemology

It can be said that rationalism, as reasoning independent from revelation in a religious context, and non-essentialism, as the historicity and constructiveness of knowledge, are two main pillars of Soroush's epistemology. Based on these two elements, some other epistemological concepts such as pluralism, nominalism, dialogism, hermeneutics, critical-historical and contingency can be regarded as core concepts of his epistemology too. Asef Bayat regards pluralism and historicity as making up the essential character of the post-Islamist turn in post-revolutionary Iran: »Islamist movements in Muslim societies are undergoing a post-Islamist turn characterized by rights instead of duties, plurality in place of singular authoritative voices, historicity rather than fixed scripture, and the future instead of the past« (Bayat 2005: 5).<sup>17</sup> This paper will review these concepts in Soroush's works as some of the main epistemological concepts of his thought.

<sup>16</sup> A. Soroush, »The Responsibilities of the Muslim Intellectual in the 21st Century,« in F. Noor, *New Voices of Islam*, Leiden: ISIM, 2002, pp. 15–21.

<sup>17</sup> A. Bayat, »What is Post-Islamism?« *ISIM Review*, No. 16, 2005, p. 5.

#### 4.1 Rationalism, Neo-Mu'tazilism

The epistemological nature of Soroush's thought and post-Islamist discourse is expressed sometimes by referring to Soroush as neo-Mu'tazila, the rationalist theological school in early Islamic scholarship (Hashas 2014). Soroush also often calls himself neo-Mu'tazilate.<sup>18</sup> By this Soroush means believing in rational reasoning which is independent of religion and revelation. In this regard, he says in this interview »I am interested in the Mu'tazilate's view on religion and ethics. My main interest in this school is because they spoke about reason independent from revelation« (1387/ 2008: n.p.).<sup>19</sup> A more specific aspect of Soroush's thought that makes him a »neo-Mu'tazilate« is that he regards values as being independent from religion. If Mu'tazilate argued that justice, for example, is valid independently from revelation, Soroush argues that democracy and freedom, likewise, are valid independently of religion and revelation. The text, namely the Qu'ran, being the product of a contextual interpretation of Mohammad from his individual religious/prophetic experience, loses its central authority/position in post-Islamist Islamic epistemology. Both Mu'tazila and neo-Mu'tazila argued for the independence of reasoning and values from revelation and religion. They pursued this goal and justified it through rejecting an orthodox dogma about the Qu'ran; Mu'tazila rejected the Qu'ran being *qadim* (eternal, not created) and neo-Mu'tazila questioned the Qu'ran's status as being a verbal revelation and the word of God.

The prefix of »neo« in neo-Mu'tazilae does not mean just a new emergence of Mu'tazilate but that neo-Mu'tazila goes further and regards the Qu'ran not just as *hadeth* (created by God) but as created by Mohammad, and not God. In the case of Soroush, the prefix »neo« also stands for some vital differences with classic Mu'tazilate ration-

<sup>18</sup> A. Soroush, »Nov-Mo'tazeli Hastam« (I am Neo-Mu'tazilate), *Ordibehesht* 1387/ May 2008, *Soroush's Official Website*, <http://www.dr.soroush.com/Persian/Interviews/P-INT-13870200-NoMotazeli.html> (last accessed on 20 June 2015); A. Soroush, »Tajdid-e Tajrobe-ye E'tezal« (Reviving the Experience of E'tezal), A Lecture in Amir-Kabir University, 1381/2002, *Baztab-e Andishe*, No. 30, Shahrivar 1381/ September 2002, pp. 7–12.

<sup>19</sup> See also his recent lecture: A. Soroush, »Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam,« Kenyon College, Ohio, USA, 2014, *Soroush's official website*, uploaded: 23.10.2014; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S04GZ7e8ovk#t=1994> (last accessed on 06 July 2015).

alism. The main difference between Soroushian neo-Mu'tazilite rationalism and classic Mu'tazilite rationalism can be understood by taking into account his historicism.

#### 4.2 *Post-positivism: From Scientific Post-Positivism to Religious Post-Positivism*

One of Soroush's first main theoretical frameworks was post-positivist philosophy of science. During his studies in London in 1970s Soroush became familiar with some post-positivist philosophers of science such as Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, Willard Van Orman Quine, and Imre Lakatos. Popper's philosophy of science but also his political philosophy was significant in Soroush's debates against both Marxists and Occidentalists during the early 1980s in Iran. That is the reason why Iranian academia and media regarded Soroush as being the main representative of the »Popperian« stream in post-revolutionary Iran. In a biographical interview in 2000, Soroush discusses his contact with the post-positivist philosophy of science:

The first philosopher of science I encountered was Karl Popper. [...]. The year 1974, the year I started my studies in the philosophy of science, coincided with the wider acceptance of the ideas of Thomas Kuhn as well. [...] I remember that the ideas of Karl Popper, Paul Feyerabend, and Imre Lakatos [...] dominated class discussions (2000: 9).<sup>20</sup>

Post-positivist epistemology was very present in Soroush's thought since his early works. For example in *Elm Chist, falsafe Chist?* (What is Science, What is Philosophy?) he refers to Thomas Kuhn as »contemporary historian and philosopher of science« (1357/1978a: 8).<sup>21</sup> Soroush talks more specifically about the influence of post-positivist philosophy of science in his theory CERK referring to Lakatos' concept of *research programs* (2000: 15). Post-positivism criticized the positivist concept of science as an objective picture of nature. These theories showed that different branches of knowledge are interconnected. Therefore, a change in one branch of knowledge influences the other branches of human knowledge. Soroush's main idea in CERK was that religious knowledge is no exception and as a part of

<sup>20</sup> Soroush, »Intellectual Autobiography: An Interview,« in Soroush (2000: 3–25).

<sup>21</sup> A. Soroush, *Elm Chist, Falsafe Chist?* (What is Science, What is Philosophy?), Tehran: Hekmat, 1357/1978a.

human »web of beliefs« it changes when other parts of knowledge experience change. In an interview, he remarks that it was Quine's theory of science that guided him to the theory of CERK. He goes on to add:

His [Quine's] theory is that all science is interconnected and, as such, judged as a whole, not as a collection of individual discrete theories, in the tribunal of senses. [...] It was Lakatos who, with the help of Quine's ideas, developed the notion of »research programs« in science: a whole family of theories, organized in a research program, enter judgment's court. In my book *Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge*, I have based one of my main arguments on this thesis (2000: 15–16).

Post-positivist epistemology that Soroush used in the 1970s and early 80s to criticize Marxism and its claim of »scientific realism« and Occidentalism will be instrumental later in his critique of *religious realism* and Islamism.

Soroush accused Marxists of positivism and occidentalists of both essentialism and Hegelian determinist historicism. During the following years he, however, realized the problematic consequences of a dogmatic and exclusivist Islam. Conservative and traditional Islam thus became a new ground of struggle. In his later intellectual phase, he directed, one might argue, those critiques towards Islamists' ideological and dogmatic interpretation of Islam. To do this, in CERK he shifted the focus of post-positivism from science to religion. He denied any objective and neutral interpretation of religion (religious experience and religious text). Furthermore, he criticized the kind of religious realism that argued for possessing the *ultimate truth* in a religious text, which I refer to as *scriptural positivism*. Scriptural positivism, like scientific positivism, presupposes a naive realist concept of knowledge. It holds that the text has an *ultimate and ahistorical meaning* that can be reached by an appropriately qualified reader. Soroush argued in CERK that a religious text can be understood differently in differing contexts. He mentioned his transition from philosophy of science to philosophy of religion in a biographical interview in 2000. In this interview Soroush discusses the »embryo phase« of this theory that occurred around 1982–1983 when he presented the primary formulation of this theory in twenty sentences to a selected audience at a regular lecture meeting. He says:

I remember the first thesis went roughly something like this: Religiosity is people's understanding of religion just as science is their understanding of

nature. [...] At any rate, my philosophical understanding of scientific knowledge as a collective and competitive process and my subsequent generalization of this understanding to religious knowledge opened new gates for me (2000: 15).

If, according to post-positivism in science, science cannot reveal to us any ultimate truth about nature, then, according to religious post-positivism, religious scholarship cannot declare any final and exclusive meaning of religion (religious text or experience).

#### 4.3 *Hermeneutics*

An important aspect of Soroush's thought is the diversity of understanding that results from the interpretive and subjective nature of human perception. If hermeneutics is the interpretivity of understanding, it should be then said that hermeneutics is at the core of his thought in different phases. This can be seen in Soroush's early application of post-positivist epistemology in humanities in the late 1970s to his last main theory EPF (1999) and *The Word of Mohammad* (2007). For example, in »What is Science, What is Philosophy« (1978a), he wrote about the subjectivity and interpretivity of human knowledge, saying that:

The theories affect even the observation of the facts. It means, two people with two [different] images in mind do not see a specific thing same. In other words, there is no naked event [phenomenon] that has for all people the same meaning. Every person has an inner tailor that clothes the body of phenomena with a cloth of interpretation. Then this clothed entity enters the mind (1357/1978a: 10).

Soroush reveals in his interview with Sadri that he combined philosophy of science with classic Islamic scholarship, as a result coming to a kind of hermeneutics without knowing that it actually was hermeneutics. On this note, he said, »My first attempts at interpretation concerned the Qur'an and an important Sufi text, *Mathnavi*. Later on, when I combined these insights with my knowledge of the philosophy of science and philosophy of history, I arrived at a relatively comprehensive hermeneutical theory (2000: 7).

In CERK Soroush rarely uses the word *hermeneutics*. He introduces CERK more as a theory grounded in »epistemology,« »philosophy of religion,« and »new theology.« CERK was mostly a combina-

tion of post-positivist philosophy of science, Islamic classic scholarship, *Religionswissenschaft*, and several topics in philosophy of religion or theology such as the religion-science conflict. However, since the mid-nineties Soroush has referred to hermeneutics increasingly. He reveals in his autobiographical interview that during the formulation of CERK he was not familiar with Hans-Georg Gadamer and was surprised when he learned of the similarity between his and Gadamer's thought, particularly about the latter's hermeneutics. He says: »To tell you the truth, up to the time that I composed the thesis of contraction and expansion I had not studied the hermeneutical theories of scholars such as Hans-Georg Gadamer. Indeed, I was struck by the affinity of my positions and those of Gadamer« (*ibid.*).

The main focus of Soroush's first theory was the change and evolution of religious knowledge, the human understanding of religion in its interaction with other parts of human knowledge. Inspired by hermeneutics – especially philosophical hermeneutics in his theory of EPF – Soroush introduces the Qu'ran as Mohammad's interpretation of his own individual religious experience. In this theory Soroush expands the subjectivity and interpretivity of not just religious texts but of religious/prophetic experiences, and argues for the historicity and contextuality of religion itself, i.e. religious texts and experiences. Some scholars have interpreted this development as a shift from Popper-Quine and the analytical paradigm to Gadamer-Derrida and the hermeneutic-continental paradigm. Ghamari-Tabrizi acknowledges this shift when he observes:

In his earlier works, Soroush was influenced by analytical philosophy and a post-positivist logical skepticism. Later, he adopted a more hermeneutic approach to the meaning of the sacred text. Whereas earlier he put forward epistemological questions about the limits and truthfulness of knowledge claims, later, in two important books *Straight Paths* (1998) and *Expansion of the Prophetic Experience* (1999), he emphasized the reflexivity and plurality of human understanding (2004: 516).<sup>22</sup>

Ghamari-Tabrizi regards this theory as a *radical break* from traditional theology. This »radical break« is indeed what I formulated as the expansion of interpretivity from religious knowledge to religious experience; in other words: from textual hermeneutics to philosophi-

<sup>22</sup> B. Ghamari-Tabrizi, »Contentious Public Religion: Two Conceptions of Islam in Revolutionary Iran Ali Shari'ati and Abdolkarim Soroush,« *International Sociology*, Vol. 19, No. 4, 2004, pp. 504–523.

cal hermeneutics. Considering Soroush's own words that he discovered Gadamer later (2000: 7), it might be said that after getting more familiar with Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, Soroush expanded interpretivity from the *text* to the (religious) *experience*.

#### 4.4 Historicism

Historicity is another important element of Soroush's religious epistemology. Soroush points this out explicitly in the preface of *Bast-e Tajrobe-ye Nabavi (The Expansion of Prophetic Experience)*. He suggests that CERK is about the historicity of religious knowledge while EPF is about the historicity of religion itself. He writes, »*The contraction and expansion of the religious knowledge* was about the human, historicity and earthianity of the religious knowledge and now in *The Expansion of the Prophetic Experience* the subject is humanity and historicity of religion itself and religious experience« (1385/2006: 4).<sup>23</sup> Thus, according to Soroush, religion and religious knowledge are not *ahistorical* but are constructed in a specific historical context. Religion, the prophetic experience, and its interpretation by the Prophet are historical. Moreover, religion should be understood from a specific context, which is also historical.

Soroush acknowledges the role of human agency in religion which entails in turn the acknowledgement of the endless possibilities of change and evolution in religion. Historicity and contingency played such an important role in Soroush's epistemology and theory of religion that he used them in the title of the English edition of his book. The book is titled *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion* (hereafter: EPE). Contingency means that circumstances and events in this world are not determined. They are contingent or could happen in different ways. For example, the Qu'ran has some verses that explicitly answer several questions which Mohammad's people proposed. Accordingly, Soroush argues that if there were more questions the Qu'ran would be longer or if Mohammad lived longer the Qu'ran would be thicker.

<sup>23</sup> A. Soroush, *Bast-e Tajrobe-ye Nabavi (The Expansion of Prophetic Experience)*, Tehran: Serat, 1385/2006 (first edition: 1378/1999) Quotation based on *Gerdab* edition 1385/2006.

Islam is not a book or an aggregate of words; it is a historical movement and the history-incarnate of a mission. It is the historical extension of a gradually-realized prophetic experience. [...] 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. Some would accuse the Prophet of being insane. Some would spread rumors about the Prophet marrying Zayd's wife. [...] And all of this would find an echo in the Qur'an and the Prophet's words. And if the Prophet had lived longer and encountered more events, his reactions and responses would inevitably have grown as well. This is what it means to say that the Qur'an could have been much longer than it is; even perhaps could have a second volume (1385/2006: 14).<sup>24</sup>

Soroush argues for the historicity and temporality of intellectual systems and adds that each paradigm has its own unthinkable elements. He asserts that »[e]very intellectual system makes some things unthinkable and unquestionable. The fairest intellectual paradigm, as it is a system, removes some questions and neglects some questions and makes them unquestionable. This is not limited to religious thought« (1385/August 2006: n.p.). Soroush uses historicity as a contrast to the divine and sacred. By »historicity« he intends that human and non-divine dimension of religion should be taken into consideration. He suggests that neglecting the human dimension of Mohammad is due to the mystification of Mohammad's personality in the Islamic tradition. Soroush criticizes this in his preface to *EPE*, arguing that Sufism has played a significant role in this particular theological problem. Soroush cites a verse of the Qu'ran, in which Mohammad introduces himself as »just a human« receiving revelation: »I am only a mortal like you; it is revealed to me« (18:110). Soroush says in this regard: »However, this was neglected in Islamic tradition. Especially our mystical tradition made its most and made the divine aspect of the Prophet very heavy. This tradition drew the Prophet as a spirit without body, a sun without shadow, a form without material, transcendence without immanence and a status without history and geography« (1378/1999: 3).

Soroush suggests that the »new theology« aims to demystify and humanize religion, including Islam. Thus he introduces his book, *EPE*, as a contribution to this very humanistic mission. He states:

Today the new theology aims to enter the humanity and historicity elements in religion to open intentionally a new chapter in the science of re-

<sup>24</sup> Translation from English edition: Soroush (2009: 16–17).

ligion and realize a promise that has been ignored for centuries. *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience* is a small effort in this great [intellectual] jihad (1378/1999: 4).

However, Soroush's concept of historicity is not ›absolute‹ historicism and does not include the deterministic aspect of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's historicism. Historicism has had two different principle strands in post-Kantian philosophy, which may be called Herderian and Hegelian historicisms. While Hegelian historicism entails a kind of determinism, Herderian historicism avoids it. Christopher Thornhill writes in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, »Historicism follows both Herder, in attempting to do justice to objective history in its discontinuity and uniqueness, and Hegel, in attempting to determine general patterns of historical change« (1998: 443).<sup>25</sup> Both constituted a critique of Enlightenment and Kantian universalist epistemology and normativity: »It [historicism] is intended as a critique of the normative, allegedly anti-historical, epistemologies of Enlightenment thought, expressly that of Kant« (*ibid.*). In addition, both emphasized the specificity and ›situatedness‹ of knowledge. However, while Hegel argued for a teleological, progressive and deterministic line of history, Johann Gottfried Herder's historicism was free from such determinism and the notion of progress. Herder's concept of historicism has been influential in contemporary epistemology including post-structuralism. The genealogical approach in humanities, including works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault, is the development of Herderian historicism rather than Hegelian. Herderian historicism emphasizes the social and cultural dimensions of reason. This was originally the critique of Herder's tutor Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788) of Kantian Enlightenment and its universal reason. »Hamann stressed the social and cultural dimension of reason, which had been much neglected in the eighteenth century. In this regard his teaching was influential upon Herder and anticipates the historicism of the nineteenth century« (Beiser 1998: 215).<sup>26</sup> Soroush's concept of historicism in historicity of religion embraces Herder's ›particularistic‹ and ›perspectivist‹ historicism that rejects any ultimate knowledge and that entails pluralism and uncertainty. In the

<sup>25</sup> C. Thornhill, »Historicism,« in E. Craig (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998, Vol. 4, pp. 443–446.

<sup>26</sup> F. Beiser, »Hamann, Johann Georg (1730–88),« in E. Craig (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 4, London and New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 215–217.

following, he provides a vivid explanation of the situatedness of knowledge that entails plurality and relativity:

The earlier, simplistic view that those closest to an event know it better has now been supplanted by a more refined theory: each group looks at an event from its own viewpoint – which immanently defines the limits of what it knows. No standpoint is inherently superior to any other. Each event creates waves – like ripples of a pebble in a pond – that widens into history and fades into eternity. Each generation receives the wave at a different distance from the point of origin and in a different pitch; each reconstructs a new picture of the original event. These pictures are infinitely numerous. The events themselves are not available for understanding as long as they are not flowing, that is as long as they are not historicized. The more they flow, the more they will grow and come to the foreground. There is no limit to the growth of this understanding (2000: 187–188).<sup>27</sup>

Soroush also connects historicism to uncertainty and relativity. He states, »Western science, philosophy, and technology have so shaken the foundations of human reason and mind; historicism has raised such a storm, and scientific and philosophical theories advanced so swiftly that no latitude has been left for stability and certitude« (2000: 125)<sup>28</sup>

This distinction between Hegelian and Herderian historicism also explains a seeming paradox: how historicity is so important to Soroush's thought although he criticized Occidentalists in post-revolutionary Iran for historicism. Occidentalists, inspired from counter-Enlightenment including Martin Heidegger criticized the West for its ontological and ethical decline. They also criticized the modernist Muslims, including Soroush, for being influenced by the corrupt and declined West and called them »West intoxicated.« Soroush rejects these assumptions by accusing Occidentalists for historicist determinism and essentialism. He writes: »Those who propagated the decadent, deterministic, and historicist version of the idea of West intoxication among us were themselves feeding from the same trough that fed the followers of extreme antireligious nationalism« (2000: 166).<sup>29</sup> Soroush criticized indeed the Hegelian determinist historicism. However, the historicity to which Soroush appeals later in the 1990s is Herderian: one that argues for contingent situatedness. In

<sup>27</sup> Soroush, »Let us Learn from History,« in Soroush (2000: 184–198).

<sup>28</sup> Soroush, »The Idea of Democratic Religious Government,« in Soroush (2000: 122–130).

<sup>29</sup> Soroush, »The Three Cultures,« in Soroush (2000: 156–170).



the same vein, Popper (one of the prophets of post-positivism that inspired Soroush) was very critical of Hegel's historicism. Popper criticized indeed Hegelian determinist historicism, but not Herderian historicism, as a source for totalitarianism (Thornhill 1998: 445).

#### 4.5 Critical-Historical Approach

Soroush's neo-rationalist and historicist religious epistemology indeed entails the possibility of critical-historical approach and methodology to religion including religious experience, texts and religious knowledge. In his works, he often calls for a critical-historical approach to Islam. He sees this as entailing a distinction between the »essentials and accidentals« of religion. In his article, »Essentials and Accidentals in Religion«, he argues that only the essentials of Islam are obligatory for being a Muslim, but not the accidentals. He asserts, »Islam (and any other religion for that matter) is a religion by virtue of its essentials, not its accidentals. And being a Muslim demands belief and commitment [just] to the essentials« (1385/2006: 20).<sup>30</sup> In this article Soroush suggests some elements, such as Arabic language, Arabic culture, historical events that entered into the Qu'ran and Sunnah (the precepts of Islamic law), abilities and understanding of the people addressed by religion, as accidentals of Islamic religion.<sup>31</sup> Accidentals, according to Soroush, include all elements of a religion that are not necessary for its ultimate purpose and that have entered into the understanding and text(s) of a religion due to the social and cultural conditions of its emergence. Soroush writes in this regard: »There is no doubt that, had Islam come into existence in Greece or India, instead of in *Hijaz*, the accidentals of a Greek or Indian Islam – accidentals which penetrate so deep as to touch the kernel – would have been very different from those of an Arab Islam« (*ibid.*: 37; 2009: 77).

<sup>30</sup> Soroush, »Zati va 'Arazi dar Adyan« (Essential and Accidental in Religions), in Soroush (1385/2006: 20–46). Translation from English edition: Soroush (2009: 63).

<sup>31</sup> The complete list is: a. Arabic language; b. Arabic culture; c. the terms, concepts, theories and presuppositions used by the Prophet; d. historical events that entered into the Qu'ran and Sunnah; e. the questions posed by believers and opponents and the answers to them; f. the precepts of Islamic law; g. fabrications, inventions and distortions introduced into religion by its opponents; and h. abilities and understanding of the people addressed by religion (Soroush 1385/2006: 20). Translation from English edition: (Soroush 2009: 63).

It is according to this historicist approach that Soroush calls the Qu'ran *The Word of Mohammad*. Based on his theory of religion, he argues that *fuqaha* (scholars of *fiqh*, a normative discipline in Islamic knowledge culture that contains both legal and moral norms, similar to *Halakhah* in Jewish tradition) should use the historical-critical studies in their methodology. Soroush holds that there should always be a kind of »cultural translation« in the interpretation of religion and not a »literal translation.« By »cultural translation« he means an interpretation that takes the cultural condition of the formation of holy texts into consideration and does not regard the cultural and social characteristics of early Islam as being an essential part of religion as well as *Sharia* as Islamic normative system. In this regard Soroush often refers to Shah Waliullah Dehlavi (1703–1762) as being a pioneer of critical-historical approach in Islamic scholarship. He writes: »So far, Shah Wali Allah has spoken of two important accidentals of religious law [*Sharia*]: first, the characteristics of prophets and, second, the characteristics of the peoples being brought under the laws« (*ibid.*, 43; 2009: 86).

However, Soroush does not undertake a systematic historical-critical study of Islam. He merely occasionally suggests some examples of critical-historical analyses of Islamic sources, including the Qu'ran and Sunnah. He discusses, for example in his article »The Essential and Accidental in Religions,« the historicity and hence accidentality of some concepts such as *huri*, description of paradise as a garden and hell as fire and other metaphors that are inspired by the geography and culture of Arab society of Mohammad's age (*ibid.*). Soroush, one might argue, has merely provided the theoretical base for such a methodology. He has in this manner provided an Islamic legitimacy and justification for a critical-historical approach to Islam and the Qu'ran.

#### 4.6 Dialogical and Translational: *Beyond Orientalism and Occidentalism*

A main characteristic of Soroush's methodology is the diversity of his sources. His thought contains different elements from classic Sufi (Islamic mysticism) tradition and Islamic rationalist tradition to modern liberal Christian Theology, post-positivist epistemology, post-structuralist discourse and hermeneutics. He refers to thinkers as var-

ious as Abu Nasr Farabi (870–950), Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), Jalaluddin Rumi (1207–1273), Shah Waliullah Dehlavi (1703–1762), Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Mohammad Iqbal (1877–1936), Karl Popper (1902–1994), Willard Van Orman Quine (1908–2000), Thomas Kuhn (1922–1996) and John Hick (1922–2012). He uses mystical-intuitional concepts, rationalist concepts, hermeneutics, and post-positivist elements. For example, he employs, Kant's distinction between noumenon-phenomenon and John Hick's theory of religion as »Human Response to the Transcendence« as well as Rumi's mystical poems on the social and intellectual diversity as God's different manifestations in providing an interpretation of religious pluralism.<sup>32</sup> The diversity of Soroush's sources is not just geographical but also methodological. He utilizes for example both Islamic rationalism (Mu'tazila) and mysticism. He uses the concepts of *zahir-batin* (apparent-hidden, Rumi) or *tazahorat-e haq* (manifestation of God) and *vahdat-e vojud* (the unity of Being, Ibn Arabi) from Islamic mysticism and at the same time refers to the sufficiency and independency of reason in understanding values (a contribution of Mu'tazila thinking to classical Islamic tradition). This eclectic characteristic has been interpreted by some critics as inconsistent and indicating a contradictory methodology. Ghamari-Tabrizi, for example, contends that: »Soroush's thesis was shaped by multiple and at times contradictory sources, both in western philosophy and the Muslim Gnostic traditions« (2004: 517). At the beginning of his reform project – namely in developing the theory of CERK – Soroush was strongly inspired by post-positivist philosophy of science and Qu'ranic exegeses. He points out in his interview with Sadris that he was inspired by different Islamic and Western sources in developing the theory of CERK. After narrating a biographical review of the background of the formulation of this theory, Soroush summarizes the theoretical sources of this theory into four main subjects. The first field that inspired him to explore the human aspects of religion and developing his theory of CERK was his self-taught knowledge on the *diversity of Qu'ranic*

<sup>32</sup> See: H. Shadi, »An Islamic Theology of Religions,« *Zeitschrift für interkulturelle Theologie*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2013, 32–60; A. Dahlén, »Sirat al-Mustaqim: One or Many? Religious Pluralism among Muslim Intellectuals in Iran,« in I. Abu-Rabi (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Contemporary Islamic Thought*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, pp. 425–428.

*exegeses*. The second field was a *comparison between mystics and politicians*. Knowing the spiritualist interpretations of Islamic mystics of Islam, Soroush witnessed politicians such as Mehdi Bazergan (1907–1995) and Ali Shariati (1933–1977) »who favored extracting their political doctrines from religion. [...] Both the world-flight ideology of the Sufis and world-domination ideology of the politicians were extracted from the Qur'an [...] I wondered why a certain class of interpretations of religious texts rise in a particular time and not in others« (Soroush 2000: 14). Soroush's early encounter with the *scientific interpretations of religion* in *Alavi Madrasa* was the third factor inspiring him to develop his theory of religious knowledge. He means by scientific interpretation of the Qu'ran those interpretations that tried to extract new theories in natural sciences from the Qu'ran. Finally his knowledge of philosophy of science that he encountered during his education in London played a role in the formulation of his new attitude towards religion. Soroush often talks about the influence of contemporary Western thinkers such as Wittgenstein, Quine, Lakatos and Kuhn on his thought (see above). In his first theory CERK, Soroush was inspired by both Islamic and Western sources. From Islamic sources came the diversity in the interpretation of religion in the Islamic tradition, such as mystical and political readings of Islam as well as the diversity within a specific field of Islamic scholarship, namely Qu'ranic exegeses. From Western sources the main inspiration came from some directions in the post-positivist philosophy of science that emphasized the contingency and collective nature of knowledge. Indeed, one might argue that the theories in philosophy of science namely post-positivist interpretation of knowledge helped Soroush to explain the diversity that he recognized already in Islamic scholarship and religious knowledge. He used the post-positivist epistemology to theorize and hence justify the diversity in religious knowledge.

Some critics have regarded this characteristic of Soroush's thought as being inconsistent and inauthentic. However, this aspect of his methodology might be interpreted as exemplifying a kind of *cosmopolitan epistemology*. This is what distinguishes Soroush from other contemporary Iranian thinkers, such as nativist/Occidentalists thinkers, who take the orient-occident dichotomy into consideration. Soroush often explicitly says that he does not care about the source of an idea; as, according to him, truth does not have geography (Sor-

oush, 1363/1984: 19).<sup>33</sup> In an autobiographical interview, Soroush suggests that all truths are stars shining in one single sky:

»I believe that truths [...] are all the inhabitants of the same mansion and stars of the same constellation. [...] Thus, in my search for the truth, I became oblivious to whether an idea originated in the East or West, or whether it had ancient or modern origins. Obviously, we don't possess all of the truths, and we need other places and people to help unfold different aspects of it« (2000: 21).

Let me draw on an example: In »What is Science, what is Philosophy?« (1978) after writing about the concept that theories and world views influence the understanding of a person while observing and absorbing facts, he cites some post-positivist philosophers such as Kuhn (1357/1978a: 10) and then immediately cites a poem by Rumi emphasizing the subjectivity of our perception of the external world:

If thou art narrow (oppressed) at heart from (being engaged in) combat,  
thou deemest the whole atmosphere of the world to be narrow;

And if thou art happy as thy friends would desire, this world seems to thee like a garden of roses.

How many a one has gone as far as Syria and 'Irâq and has seen nothing but unbelief and hypocrisy;

And how many a one has gone as far as India and Hirâ (Herât) and seen nothing but selling and buying.<sup>34</sup>

This characteristic of Soroush's project can also be interpreted in a positive way and called ›dialogical.‹ Another term that may explain this point is ›translationality‹ of culture. One can hold that Soroush brings different intellectual traditions to dialogue in specific topics. The dialogical characteristic of Soroush's project saves him from tripping over the concept of ›authenticity,‹ a main concept used by both religious and secular nativists in Islamic world, namely Islamists and occidentalists, encountering the modern West. Not being enchanted by cultural ›authenticity,‹ Soroush is able to go beyond the false circle of West toxification/Anti-westernism, continually repeated during the last two centuries in the Iranian intellectual arena.

In spite of a soft nativist accent in some of Soroush's early

<sup>33</sup> A. Soroush, »Vojud va Mahiyat-e Gharb« (Existence and Substance of the West), *Keyhan-e Farhangi* (Cultural World), No. 5, Mordad 1363/July 1984, pp. 19–22.

<sup>34</sup> Jalaluddin Rumi, *The Mathnawî*, R. A. Nicholson (ed.), Vol. 5, London: Luzac & Co., 1933, poem No.: 2371-2374.

works<sup>35</sup>, his epistemological cosmopolitanism can be traced even in his early works.<sup>36</sup> This is a familiar concept throughout the history of Islamic scholarship. Hellenic culture was translated and appreciated by classic Islamic scholars. Ya'qub Ibn Ishaq Al-Kindi, for example, a pioneer of Islamic philosophy, says in this regard:

We ought not to be ashamed of appreciating the truth and of acquiring it wherever it comes from, /even if it comes from races distant and nations different from us. For the seeker of truth nothing takes precedence over the truth, and there is no disparagement of the truth, nor belittling either of him who speaks it or of him who conveys it. (The status of) no one is diminished by the truth; rather does the truth ennoble all (Al-Kindi 1974: 58).<sup>37</sup>

Suroosh Irfani is one of the few scholars who have stressed the dialogical nature of post-revolutionary intellectual discourse in Iran. By discussing the signs of an emerging intellectual paradigm in the post-revolutionary media in Iran, Irfani has come to realize the dialogical characteristic of an alternative Iranian modernity. He maintains that post-revolutionary Iran has two dialogues: dialogue with its local and native as well as with its Western heritage (Irfani 1996: 22).<sup>38</sup>

Soroush also talks explicitly about the hybrid and translational nature of his thought as a modern Muslim intellectual. He appreciates that modern Islamic reform discourse is hybrid and in dialogue with many partners; with the past and the present, with the West and the East. He says:

<sup>35</sup> For example Soroush writes in the introduction of *Nahad-e Na-aram-e Jahan* (The Dynamic Nature of the Universe): »Referring to the words of Sadr al-Din Shirazi [Mulla Sadra] and using his opinions [in this book] is firstly for his rich philosophy and secondly is to prove the authenticity of this idea [substantial motion] and removing any feeling of bagging from this or that philosophy or school and [thereby] creating a feeling of sufficiency and independency in the contemporary Islamic thought.« (1357/1978b: 5, e-edition).

<sup>36</sup> Soroush (1363/1984: 19).

<sup>37</sup> Ya'qub Ibn Ishaq Al-Kindi, *Al-Kindi's Metaphysics, a Translation of Ya'qub Ibn Ishaq al-Kindi's Treatise »On First Philosophy«* (Fi al-Falsafa al-Ula), Translation with Introduction and Commentary, A. L. Ivry, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1974. Also see: S. H. Nasr, *The Philosophy of Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, L. E. Hahn, R. E. Auxier, and L. W. Stone (eds.), The Library of Living Philosophers, Vol. 25, Chicago: Carus Publishing Company, 2001, p. 118.

<sup>38</sup> S. Irfani, »New Discourses and Modernity in Post Revolutionary Iran,« *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1996, pp. 13–27.

Modern Muslim intellectuals are, in a sense, a hybrid species. They emerged in the liminal space between modern ideas and traditionalist thought. We have seen the emergence of such figures in many Muslim countries that have experienced the effects of colonization and the introduction of a plural economic and educational system. They have their feet planted in their local traditions as well as the broader world of the modern age. As such, they are comfortable in both, handicapped by neither (2002: 20).

Soroush treats intercultural and inter-civilizational intellectual exchange as a natural and human phenomenon. In an interview about Enlightenment he says that Spinoza's historical concept of religion was influenced by al-Farabi's theory on religion and prophecy:

What makes Spinoza modern is that he historicizes all prophethood; but his ideas of prophethood are inspired in part by al-Farabi and Moses Maimonides. Like al-Farabi, Spinoza thinks that philosophy is prior and superior to prophethood: philosophers usually work with their speculative or intellectual faculty ('aql), whereas prophets mainly work through the imagination; they cast the universal in particulars and symbols and thus make it accessible to the layman. All of this you can find in Spinoza, but the roots are in al-Farabi; Maimonides thinks that Prophet Moses is above imagination, but for Spinoza, all prophets are on the same footing (2002: 36).

Soroush then suggests that the influence of al-Farabi on Spinoza was indeed mediated by Maimonides. This shows that Soroush is well informed about the very long and complicated ways of the historical interpretation of prophethood. In Soroush's understanding, the dialogical nature of his thought is not limited to other religions or consenting philosophies but to the critics of religion: »Hume, Kant, Hegel, Marx and Feuerbach were respectful critics of religion. Religious people are till the end of time indebted to their intellectual scrutinies« (1991/2012, n.p.).<sup>39</sup>

## 5 Epistemological Turn in Contemporary Islamic Reform Discourse

Let me now go on to explain why Soroush's thought can be interpreted as an epistemological turn in Islamic reform discourse. The

<sup>39</sup> A. Soroush, »Ke Del Be Dast-e Kaman Abruist Kafar-Kish,« *Ruz*, 17.03.1391/06.06.2012, <http://www.roozonline.com/persian/news/newsitem/archive/2012/june/06/article/-4d4c71941a.html> (last accessed on 10 July 2015).

early modernist Muslim thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century appreciated modernity and understood it as being a partner in fighting political despotism, lack of literacy and other social and political problems. They requested and established modern schools, constitutions, and courts. Acting against their critics and in order to legitimize modern education and politics, they appealed to religious sources. These were mostly attempts to »bring out« the so called modern values and institutions from the Qu'ran and Sunnah. The philosophical foundations of modernity were hardly elaborated on. However, the core of Soroush's project is epistemology and hermeneutics. His first main theory in his reform project, CERK, tried to contextualize and historicize religious knowledge. One of the main characteristics of Soroush's thought is his criticism of the monopoly, not just of religious knowledge but monopoly of general cognition and the truth as well. If the early generations of reformists tried to justify the new emerging values and institutions in the Islamic context by referring to Islamic sources, the new paradigm re-thinks religious knowledge and argues that there is really no »official« and absolute interpretation of religion and religious texts. In this way they delegitimize religion as a source of legitimization for socio-political affairs. As Bayat says, post-Islamist discourse ends the professionalization of religious interpretation and individualizes religiosity. Referring to post-Islamism he says:

Epistemologically, it calls for a hermeneutic reading of the Quran, rejecting a single »true reading,« or, for that matter, an exclusive »expert reading« by the *ulama*. In fact, the Alternative Thought Movement seeks to end the professionalization of religious interpretation by the clergy, who subsist on their monopoly of religious knowledge (1996: 47).

Soroush's interpretation of religion and religious knowledge is an epistemological evolution in the Islamic reform discourse. Ghamari-Tabrizi seconds this reading and comments that Soroush's thought is »a radical break with all movements of Islamic revival« (2008: 15).<sup>40</sup>

The methodology of post-Islamism was adopted due to the failure of the methodology of early modernists. Early modernists tried to reconcile Islam with modernity by providing legitimization of modern values and institutions from Islamic sources. However, this meth-

<sup>40</sup> B. Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran: Abdolkarim Soroush, Religious Politics and Democratic Reform*, London: I. B. Tauris, 2008.

odology has faced the problem that in these Islamic sources one can find confirmation of many different interpretations. One can look to the Qu'ran for religious pluralism and peaceful co-existence with other religions while others can look to the Qu'ran in support of religious exclusivism and the legitimization of discrimination and hate. While Muhammad Husain Naini (1860–1936) and Jamaluddin Afghani (1838–1997), for example, looked to the scripture in seeking support for democracy, Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) and Ruhullah Khomeini (1902–1989) looked to it in support of their vision for a theocracy. This fact has led the new generation of Muslim reformers to change their methodology and try to justify modern values independently of Islamic sources. For this reason Soroush argued that the text is »silent« and lets the reader speak. Soroush demanded therefore a neo-Mu'tazila approach and a new *ijtihad* (reasoning) in Islamic thought. He called sometimes this new approach »ijtihad dar usul« (reasoning in principles) borrowing *ijtihad* from conventional Islamic methodology that has used *ijtihad* more on legal affairs not on theological and methodologies topics.

If Islamist discourse after the 1960s was a response to the failure of the first phase of modernity in Islamic world in late nineteenth and early twentieth century, post-Islamist discourse since the 1990s can be interpreted as a result of the failure of the Islamist discourse in some cases. While Sayyid Qutb, Abul'ala Maududi (1903–1979), Ali Shariati and Ruhullah Khomeini »maximized« and ideologized Islam, Soroush and other the post-Islamist Muslim thinkers, »minimize« and de-ideologize Islam through developing a new methodology in Islamic reform discourse that was introduced in this paper.

## 6 Conclusion

Inspired by post-positivist philosophy of science, Soroush has for several decades generalized and transmitted the relative and changeable nature of (post-positivist) science onto religion. He has applied these theories in the philosophy of science to philosophy of religion. Soroush combined Islamic classic scholarship and post-positivist philosophy of science arguing for the subjective interpretivity of religious texts, resulting in the belief of plurality and the fluidity of religious knowledge. Later inspired by philosophical hermeneutics and Sufism, Soroush extended interpretivity from religious knowledge to »reli-

gious/prophetic experience« and the text. This led him to regarding the Qu'ran as »The Word of Mohammad.«

Soroush's path to this position, which has been interpreted as a potential theology for post-Islamism, went through the Islamic Revolution and the practical dealing with the problems of Islamism in Iran. In addition, he knew that the methodology of an earlier generation of modernist Muslim intellectuals in late nineteenth century and early twentieth century that tried to justify modernity through Islamic sources was used by the Islamist discourse too. Both early modernists and Islamists referred to the Qu'ran or Sunnah to justify democracy or theocracy, respectively. So, Soroush searched for a new methodology in reconciliation of Islam and modernity; a methodology that is free from shortcomings of the methodology of early Muslim modernist namely: dependency on the scripture. He shifted the Islamic reform discourse from »an Islamic genealogy of modernity« to a new epistemology that can (re)rationalize the Islamic methodology and de-scripturalize it. It delegitimizes the political-social claims of the religion through historization and pluralization of religion. This epistemological approach to the problem that distinguishes Soroush not only from Islamists but also from early modernist Muslim intellectuals, is interpreted then as epistemological turn in Islamic reform discourse.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> This article is a part of the author's dissertation defended at the Faculty of Philosophy in Erfurt University (Germany), 2013. In the first section, the author draws on his previous publications, especially on his article »Toward a Historical-Critical Methodology in Islam: Abdolkarim Soroush's Historicist Religious Epistemology« (in *Transformation of Muslim World in 21st Century*, Istanbul: ILEM, 2013, pp. 247–260).