



“Islam versus the West” and the Political Thought of AbdolKarim

Soroush¹

Hassan Abbas

Introduction

Interaction between Islam and the West, at various levels and in different forms, is a centuries-old phenomenon. In the post-September 11 context, however, the discourse is increasingly framed in terms of “us versus them,” an “Islam versus the West” issue. Terrorist attacks in Spain and United Kingdom in the last two years and the recent cartoon controversy have further exacerbated this confrontational discourse. Within the Muslim world today, the conservative elements largely understand interactions with the West as “Muslims versus Christians,” including an element of Jewish conspiracy as well. Most Muslims see America’s military campaign in Afghanistan in October 2001; its so-called “preemptive attack” on Iraq in early 2003 and its bloody aftermath; and media disclosures about U.S. police profiling of Muslims as reflective of an American war on Islam rather than as components of a war on terror. Many westerners also view ordinary Muslims as potential terrorists and as adherents of a religion that is orthodox in its approach and violent in its worldview, an excessively sweeping and profoundly incorrect assessment. Tragically, these perceptions have generated a gulf of estrangement between Islam and the West.

This paper represents an effort to understand these trends and shifts in perception and approach of both Muslims and the West (primarily the United States) in the light of how AbdolKarim Soroush, a leading and influential Muslim scholar from Iran, analyzes this matter. Soroush was born in Tehran in 1945. He studied chemistry and then

Hassan Abbas is a Ph.D. candidate at The Fletcher School and a research fellow at the Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

philosophy of science in United Kingdom before returning to Iran immediately after the 1979 Revolution. There, he became part of an effort to reform the education system. His relationship with the establishment was short-lived, as he became critical of the political role played by the Iranian clergy. His lectures and writings became very popular in Iran, and since the early 1990s, he has emerged as one of the leading moderate revisionist thinkers of the Muslim world. Since 2000, Soroush has taught at Harvard, Yale, Princeton and most recently at Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin.

The major focus of this paper will be on the political thought of Soroush *vis-à-vis* his views on Muslims’ interaction with Western culture. To understand his work, it will be looked at in the Iranian political and religious context as well.

West-toxication: Soroush: Coming to Terms with Western Culture²

Truth Versus Identity

While briefly referring to Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” argument, Soroush maintains that there are two kinds of Islam: the Islam of identity and the Islam of truth. In the former, Islam is a guise for cultural identity and a response to what is considered a “crisis of identity.” The latter refers to Islam as a repository of truths that direct believers toward the path of worldly and outwardly salvation. The Prophet of Islam, he argues, was recognized as a messenger of those truths, and his intention was not merely to build a new civilization. Soroush interestingly maintains that “the term civilization is a construct of the historians,” and expresses his concern that Muslims in “their confrontation with the Western civilization wish to turn to Islam as an identity.”³

For Soroush, there are two kinds of Islam: the Islam of identity and the Islam of truth. Islam can be a guise for cultural identity and a response to a “crisis of identity.” Or it can be a repository of truths that direct believers toward the path of worldly and outwardly salvation

For Soroush, this identity-based Islam represents one of the greatest theoretical plagues of the Islamic world. His proposed solution is that “Islam of

identity should yield to the Islam of truth.” Soroush argues that Islam as truth can co-exist with other truths, while Islam as identity is by its very nature belligerent and bellicose: “Two identities would fight each other, while two truths would cooperate.”⁴

This is an attractive argument theoretically, but the reality is that Islam has generated a civilization and a sense of Islamic identity. Islamic civilization has different shades in different parts of the world, with distinctive

colors in Iran, South Asia and Turkey for instance that are influenced by pre-Islamic cultures of these regions. In many ways, Muslims in these states are as influenced by Islam as by their historic local cultures in everyday life. Secondly, for millions of Muslims living in Europe and North America, their religious orientation is a matter of identity for them, in addition to their national origins.

Early Encounters

Soroush believes that the initial encounter between Islam and the West—and between Islam and classical Greek thought—during Islam’s early years of expansion represented a dynamic and fruitful interaction. This was the case because Islam possessed ample power to absorb and entice, while “[Islam’s] attitudes about foreign ideas was that of a victor dealing with the vanquished.”⁵ However, during the early twentieth century, when Muslims faced Western culture as an “invading culture armed with weapons of science and technology” the Muslims were weak and drained. He also terms this encounter as one between a strong culture (Western) and a stagnant and feeble one (Islamic), though he is specifically referring to the case of Iran and to the constitutional revolution of 1905-11. Consequently, Western culture witnessed little resistance and proceeded to “enchant and mesmerize all.”⁶ Here Soroush cites examples from Reza Khan’s era in Iran, along with that of Ataturk in Turkey.

His argument and logic arrests on generalizations, but they are nonetheless largely

applicable to other Muslim-majority regions, such as the Arab world. However, in the Indian sub-continent there was a resistance of sorts, spearheaded by the religious groups, against the British imperialist project. In addition, it can be argued that between these two encounters there was regular interaction between Islam and the West, and that it did not always take the form of conflict.

Iranian Reactions: West-toxication and Westernization

Soroush further expands the above thesis by arguing that that during this “second encounter,” Muslims in Iran had two different kinds of reactions. One reaction was to lament Muslims who had been captured by *gharb zadegi* (West-toxication).⁷ West-toxication is a perjorative term for the vast influence of Western customs, manners, and technology, often at the cost of local and Islamic cultural assets and historical legacies, that is frequently used to urge Muslims “back to traditions.” However, the other reaction (though also framed as *gharb zadegi*) was that Islamic and native cultures were long past their prime and, having been superseded by the west, were incapable of revival or cultural renewal. For this group *gharb zadegi* meant sharing in the historical destiny of the West. Soroush concludes that the former interpretation of the events and its proposed reaction (i.e. that Western influences must be carefully examined but vigorously resisted) was flexible because it was based on a critical approach to Western culture. By contrast, the later version was passive and smacked of defeatism. Soroush infers that the Westernizing bent became the more popular version in Iran and maintains that “Western customs, rites, worldviews and philosophies wafted through us and were enthusiastically received” with the consequence that “walls crumbled as exchanges intensified.”⁸ It is debatable whether this was the case in the rest of the Muslim world as well, although it can be argued that Muslim elites in the Middle East and the Indian Sub-continent

For Soroush, identity-based Islam is one of the greatest theoretical plagues of the Islamic world: “the Islam of identity should yield to the Islam of truth.” Islam as truth, says Soroush, can co-exist with other truths, while Islam as identity is by its very nature belligerent and bellicose

were also undergoing a similar transition or at least pretending to be influenced by similar trends.

Prescriptions

Finally, Soroush argues that Islamic civilizations should engage in a constructive cultural exchange with the West instead of adopting Western culture uncritically as a means to develop and progress. Soroush distinguishes between servile and dignified varieties of exchange, while lamenting the shortsightedness of

Soroush's lectures in Tehran, once routinely covered by state electronic media, were discontinued. His concern that Iran's humane Islamic values could come under threat from religious despotism had gotten him into trouble with the religious establishment

Muslims who view every encounter through the prism of "us versus them." Soroush offers the examples of Muslims who feel that, to justify embracing Western science and technology, they must attempt to trace the roots of these sciences back to Muslims. Such Muslims claim that Europeans borrowed such disciplines as mechanics, medicine, pharmacology, philosophy, and astronomy from Muslims and then developed these to their present form. Soroush is not challenging this assertion per se but instead exposing the

mentality of those who argue that science and technology are only deserving of Muslim attention and acceptance because they were originally "ours." The underlying logic is that if something has not sprouted in our midst, it is necessarily alien to us and somehow unworthy.

The crux of Soroush's argument is that there is no shame in choosing to maintain or abandon certain elements of one's culture on the basis of investigation, insight, and critical inquiry. Here, he aggressively makes a case for rational choice in the world of ideas. He proposes that in this process, "blind imitation is forever condemned, whereas the rational search for truth is eternally noble."⁹ To understand Soroush's plan for implementing such attitudinal changes, one must explore Soroush's proposals in light of the Iranian political context from which they arose.

Iranian Context of Soroush's Philosophy

In the aftermath of Iran's 1905 constitutional revolution, the debate between traditional Shi'a clergy and secular intelligentsia about the role of

religion in governance gained momentum and became more public. Despite their disagreements, both groups had favored a constitutional path for Iran with the aim to "limit the power of uncontrolled autocrats who were selling Iran to the Western powers."¹⁰ Reformist thought in Iran was not a consequence of its interaction with the West. Iran has always had reformists in the fields of religion, politics, poetry, and politics.¹¹ The debate went through many phases, though by and large the clergy remained confined to Qom, which housed the most prominent Iranian seminaries, while the "enlightened" regimes of Reza Khan and his son Reza Shah Pahlavi established secular foundations of Iran.

The most popular democratic leader produced by Iran, Mohammad Mossadegh, was also a secular person. He served as prime minister during the early 1950s. Mossadegh's fight to nationalize the oil industry and remove it from British control roused nationalist fervor and energized democratic institutions, but this proved short-lived as British and US intelligence agencies orchestrated his overthrow in 1953.¹² Iran reverted to complete authoritarian system of government, and the foreign-sponsored coup against a popular leader sowed the seeds of an anti-Western revolution.

In tune with the global politics of the times, many Iranian scholars adopted Marxist terminology to express their anger against the growing Western, and specifically American, influence in Iran, and on the policies of Reza Shah. Clergy was also active in this struggle. The most prominent among the clergy were Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Ayatollah Shariatmadari, and Mamud Taleqani. Among the liberal intellectuals, Mehdi Bazargan, Ali Shariati, and AbolHasan Bani Sadr were at the forefront. All these individuals had different agendas and objectives in political realm but had a common cause – getting rid of Reza Shah and his program of supposed Westernization. Soroush's political thought is greatly influenced by the writings of these individuals, particularly by the works of Ali Shariati, who was the most popular and influential Iranian intellectual of pre-revolution Iran. When asked about how he compares himself with Shariati, Soroush maintains, "Shariati wanted to

The crux of Soroush's argument is that there is no shame in choosing to maintain or abandon certain elements of one's culture on the basis of investigation, insight, and critical inquiry. He aggressively makes a case for rational choice in the world of ideas

make religion plumper, but I want to make it leaner.”¹³ A comparative reading of Shariati and Soroush shows that while Shariati focused on establishing the dynamism of Islamic philosophy and framed issues in an anti-Shah context,¹⁴ Soroush challenges the orthodox clergy for its lack of knowledge and failure to learn from modern sciences and political thought.

The 1979 Iranian revolution rid the country of the corrupt and repressive government of the American-backed Shah, and Iranians optimistically expected a government that would promote social justice and spiritual fulfillment. However, the leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, quickly admonished Iranians that the purpose of the revolution was not “to have less expensive melons” but to lead a more elevated life.¹⁵

Unexpectedly, Khomeini saddled Iran with something for which not all of his supporters had bargained: the doctrine of *velayat-i-faqih*, or the rule of the jurist. This doctrine effectively delivered

the forefront of debates about religion, reform, and politics. This discourse gained increasing popularity in the 1990s, especially among the urban middle class, and proved to be more than a mere philosophical debate. The reformist discourse began to have a significant impact on the formulation of public policy in Iran, on the larger Iranian polity, and even on Iran's relations with the outside world.¹⁶ The rise of reformist cleric Mohammad Khatami to the Presidency of Iran in 1997 can be viewed as an outcome of this trend. Reformist ideas and debates attained mass currency in a relatively short period of time and quickly became popular through journals and various progressive newspapers. The religious establishment has responded to this trend with autocratic press restrictions, election manipulation, jailings and attacks on dissidents.

The story of Iran today is one of economic decline: its per capita income is one-third of what it was before the revolution; oil production is two-thirds of its 1979 level, and the middle class is being squeezed by chronically high inflation, widespread unemployment. Perhaps most importantly, two-thirds of Iran's population

is under the age of 30.¹⁷ The 1979 revolution faces a profound challenge from this new and disenchanting generation, widely known in Iran as “the third force.”¹⁸ For this generation, the revolution's promise of a just and free Islamic society is still a dream. Unfortunately, the US response to this generation has been disappointing. Instead of attempting to understand Iran's historical currents and positively responding to President Khatami's offer of “dialogue among civilizations,” thereby strengthening reformists, the Bush administration imprudently declared Iran a member of the “axis of evil” in early 2002. Ideas about US-sponsored “regime change” in Iran became popular in some US think tank and media circles. These policy decisions led to a revival of the clergy's influence in Iran by enabling them to target the reformists as

“I openly declare that most of the current theological views taught in the religious seminaries are unexamined and merely taken for granted. If *Hawzeh* (seminary) decides to clean house, we shall see that many of these views are open to revision. But this airing out can proceed only in an open atmosphere cleansed of pseudo sacredness,” says Soroush

autocratic executive powers to Iran's clerics, and particularly to the Ayatollah deemed wisest by his peers—in this case, Khomeini himself. Soroush was appointed by Ayatollah Khomeini as a member of the Cultural Revolution Committee (CRC), though he quit over differences with committee members about the religious content of school curricula. His lectures in Tehran, which were routinely covered by state electronic media, were discontinued. Soroush's caution and concern that Iran's humane Islamic values could come under threat from religious despotism had gotten him into trouble with the religious establishment.

Soroush's disagreements with the clergy intensified when he started directly attacking the clergy's growing role in politics. Soon, the religious establishment made life difficult for him and he was forced into exile. Soroush was not alone in this struggle. Other scholars like Hasan Yosufi Eshkevari, Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari, and Mohsen Kadivar have also been at

Extremist forces in the Muslim world can only be defeated if progressive forces in both the West and the Islamic world cooperate to tackle the issue through dialogue and constructive engagement. A partnership is required. A unilateral campaign by the West to win the hearts and minds of Muslims without listening to their concerns or enlisting their aid will not succeed

agents of outside forces. On this pretext, the ruling clergy entrenched itself further.

Against this backdrop, scholars such as Soroush have continued to write passionately against the excessive role of clergy in society and government policymaking, without associating themselves politically with any side. For Soroush, pronouncements such as the following do not necessarily tilt toward reformers so much as against orthodox clergy: "I openly declare that most of the current theological views taught in the religious seminaries are unexamined and merely taken for granted. If *Hawzeh* (seminary) decides to clean house, we shall see that many of these views are open to revision. But this airing out can proceed only in an open atmosphere cleansed of pseudo sacredness."¹⁹ He further argues that because *ayatollahs* and *mujtahids* (accomplished religious scholars), and not God or the Prophet, reside in seminaries, whatever they produce is not sacred knowledge and thus should be open to criticism and questioning²⁰. This view, as obvious as it might seem in the West, is a revolutionary statement to make in a country where religious seminary is perceived to be the center of the world and above any challenge.

With respect to gender issues, Soroush challenges the clerics to clarify their position once and for all about the general image of women in the *revayat* (traditions) passed on by religious authorities. This indeed is one of the central questions in the "Islam versus the West" debate because the status of women in Islam is often questioned in the West. He maintains that controversial religious commentaries on women's issues must be critiqued and "if religion is not to become a historical relic or a curiosity in a museum."²¹

Finally, Soroush also makes a strong case in support of democratic government. Although his preferred brand is "religious democratic

government" and not what he calls "jurisprudential democratic government." He asserts that religious understanding will have to adjust to democracy, not the other way around. Soroush's most potent contention is his theory that justice and human rights are values that cannot be religious, and religion must be made to be just.

Conclusion

The internal crisis in the Muslim world today, both in Muslim-majority states and in the Muslim communities in the West, is grave and complex. In this context, AbdolKarim Soroush's views and analysis are cogent, logical, and highly relevant. Extremist forces in the Muslim world can only be defeated if progressive forces both in the West and in the Islamic world cooperate to tackle the issue through dialogue and constructive engagement. A partnership is required. A unilateral campaign by the West to win the hearts and minds of Muslims without listening to their concerns or enlisting their aid will not succeed. Moreover, America should keep in mind that democracy can be promoted, supported, and nurtured, but not enforced or imposed. That is the only way to overpower mutual mistrust, which sadly seems to be on the ascendant these days. In this sphere, AbdolKarim Soroush provides a valuable framework for progressive forces in the Muslim world.

The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author's own, and do not necessarily represent those of Al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.

¹ The research paper was originally written in late 2004 as a requirement for Prof. Ayesha Jalal's course "Islam and the West" at the Fletcher School, Tufts University. This is a shorter, revised and updated version of the paper that benefits from Prof. Jalal's comments on the paper.

² The views of AbdolKarim Soroush about the interaction between the West and Islam are summarized from his articles that appeared in his collection of essays (*Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*), and various websites that are dedicated to his works such as: <http://www.drSORoush.com/English.htm>, <http://www.seraj.org/>, http://www.iranchamber.com/personalities/asoroush/abdolkarim_soroush.php, <http://www.islam-democracy.org/SoroushAddress.shtml>, and from notes that I took during his various lectures while he was a visiting scholar at the Harvard Law School during 2002.

³ Mahmood Sadri and Ahmed Sadri, eds., *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of AbdolKarim Soroush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 24.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 159.

⁶ Ibid., 160.

⁷ This phrase was first used by Iranian scholar Al-e Ahmed.

⁸ AbdolKarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*, 161.

⁹ Ibid. 169.

¹⁰ Nikki R. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1981), 194.

¹¹ Ibid., 186.

¹² For details of the episode, see Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (New Jersey: Jon Wiley and Sons, 2003).

¹³ Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmed Sadri, eds., *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*, 21.

¹⁴ The comment is based on a comparative reading of Soroush's book under discussion and Ali Shariati's *On the Sociology of Islam*.

¹⁵ Laura Secor, "The Democrat: Iran's leading reformist intellectual tries to reconcile religious duties and human rights", *Boston Globe*, March 14, 2004.

¹⁶ Mehran Kamrava, "Iranian Shiism under Debate", *Middle East Policy Council Journal*, Volume X, No. 2, Summer 2003.

¹⁷ Afshin Molavi, "Buying Time in Tehran", *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2004.

¹⁸ Jahangir Amuzegar, "Iran's Crumbling Revolution", *Foreign Affairs*, January/February, 2003.

¹⁹ AbdolKarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*, 176.

²⁰ Ibid., 177.

²¹ Ibid., 182.