Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush

Translated and edited, with a critical introduction by
Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri
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While the public role of intellectuals in North America, and perhaps in the West more generally, is declining, one may hazard to say that their role remains significant in the Muslim world, judging by the number of intellectuals who have been censored in Muslim societies. Iran, in particular, has a strong tradition of public intellectuals, the latest of whom is Abdolkarim Soroush, a vocal critic of the post-revolutionary clerical regime. An official in the early years of post-revolutionary Iran, he has subsequently been harassed and censored for arguing that secularism is

the best way to guard against the abuse of power. Since Soroush has quickly gained a following both inside and outside Iran, the editors are to be commended for editing and translating his wide-ranging ideas and making them accessible to the English reading public.

The editors' introduction contextualizes Soroush's work by locating him within a current of Iranian enlightened-religious intellectuals, and, more generally, in a current of Muslim reformist thought that includes the likes of Muhammad Iqbal and Ali Shariati. Chapter 1, an interview with Soroush, reveals the major influences on the development of his thought, while the remaining 11 chapters are a collection of his essays, lectures, and speeches. Most of this material consists of lectures that he delivered in the early 1990s. Chapters 2, 4, and 6-9 represent the core of his ideas on the limits of religious knowledge, secularism, and the mutual dependence of freedom and critical reason. The remaining chapters nicely round out the book with topics ranging from a defense of critical reason, science, and freedom to the differences between the educational model of the traditional religious seminary versus the modern university.

Chapter 2 presents Soroush's theory of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge. Here, he makes the controversial (at least in the post-revolutionary Iranian context) argument that while religion and sacred scriptures may be flawless and constant, the interpreters of religion are not. Hence, Soroush argues that traditional Islamic knowledge needs to be treated like any other branch of knowledge, "as incomplete, impure, insufficient, and culture-bound" (p. 32).

Chapters 4 and 6-9 discuss the issue of morality in religious and secular forms of governance. In these latter essays, one senses Soroush's assertiveness in objecting to Iran's clerical regime and the threat that his ideas present. He argues that while the combination of religion and politics endows government with a sense of sacredness that puts it above critique, secularism is a form of non-religious reason that provides crucial limitations to the abuse of power by fallible leaders. In so doing, secularism may marginalize religion to the extent that it separates religion and politics. But, according to him, this need not entail an irreligious society.

Furthermore, Muslim societies seeking to harmonize Islam and democracy should begin this attempt by discussing human rights, justice, and the restriction of power, that is, with precisely those issues that are out of the jurists' purview. In fact, this is a general point in Soroush's arguments: Religious thought will only develop as a result of competition and struggle with ideas coming from outside of religion.

Although clearly rooted in Soroush's desire to limit the power of Iran's post-revolutionary regime by relativizing the *fiqh*-based understanding of religion and society, his work is theoretical and claims to be general. But this becomes problematic. Read outside of the Iranian context and in view of the innumerable critiques of critical reason, liberal democracy, modernization, and secularization, his unquestioning faith in the epistemological premises of liberalism and secularism appears exaggerated and naïve.

It is not that Soroush is unaware of the multifarious critiques; he just does not take them seriously enough. For instance, without falling prey to economic determinism, Soroush's naïve belief in the competition and struggle of ideas would benefit from the argument of political-economy that the competition of ideas is never as free from distortions as the ideologues of liberalism make it out to be. Furthermore, he regards only the positive aspects of modernity – the liberal democratic version in its own ideal representation. He overlooks the fact that the socialist experiment, which was equally secular and modern, is the other half of modernity, as Z. Bauman has pointed out.

Another set of problems in Soroush's work are the fundamental rifts that he draws between religion and religious knowledge, a traditional conception of the natural order of things and a modern conception of the conscious management of the social order, and a religious discourse of obligations and a secular discourse of rights. These dichotomies not only betray his desire to synthesize traditional Islamic teachings with modern philosophies, but also indicate that he has completely bought into an evolutionary model of history. However, tradition and modernity interpenetrate in so many subtle ways that go beyond dichotomies and evolutionary models.

These problems notwithstanding, this is an immensely interesting book. We are given insight into what an Islamist government cannot tolerate and to the latest turn in the current of reformist Muslim thought. Yet it will also appeal to those interested in more theoretical issues, such as the philosophy of science and social science, the sociology of knowledge, and the epistemological underpinnings of modernity.

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