

**Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush**, by Abdolkarim Soroush. Translated, edited, and with a critical introduction by Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 225 pages. Bibliography to 229. Index to 236. Price \$29.95

Over the last two decades, Abdolkarim Soroush has emerged as Iran's most creative and controversial Islamic thinker. *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam* presents to the English-speaking world 11 of his seminal essays originally published in Persian between 1985 and 1994. In addition to their competent translation and editing of these essays, Mahmoud and Ahmad Sadri have enhanced the overall importance of this book with an introductory essay informed by the sociology of religion, and a revealing interview with Soroush that divulges parts of his hitherto unknown intellectual biography. In this interview, Soroush informs the reader of how his ideas have been influenced by Al-Ghazzali, Mehdi Bazargan, Rumi, Sa'adi, 'Ali Shariati, and Allamah Tabatab'ai, as well as Pierre Duhem, David Hume, Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper, and W.V. Quine.

The essays assembled in this book make abundantly clear why his admirers consider Soroush an innovative thinker while the clerical officialdom in Iran regards him as an *enfant terrible*. Soroush establishes his revisionist credentials by declaring: "There is hardly a philosopher or theologian who would confidently assert that it is possible to adduce an irrefutable argument for the existence of God" (p. 71); "clerical government is meaningless" (p. 22); "secular governments are not opposed to religion" (p. 56); "democracy does not require believers to abandon their convictions, secularize their creed, and lose faith in divine protection" (p. 135); "freedom is the sine qua non of humanity because reason and freedom are inextricably intertwined" (p. 89); "justice, as a value, can not be religious; it is religion that has to be just" (p. 131); whereas "the language of religion (especially that of Islam as exemplified by the Qur'an and the

Tradition) is the language of duties, not rights,” in the modern world “rights are honored above duties”(pp. 61-62); sensitivity to human rights is not tantamount to “surrender to relativistic liberalism” (p. 129); the ends cannot justify the means (p. 92); “ideology is the veil of reason” (p. 94); “ideologization of religion is a problem in religious societies” (p. 21); and, finally, “one of the greatest theoretical plagues of the Islamic world, in general, is that people are gradually coming to understand Islam as an identity rather than a truth” (p. 24).

Equally, if not more, appalling to the conservative clerics is Soroush’s theory of contraction and expansion of religious interpretation, as articulated in the following epistemological propositions: “Religion should be distinguished from religious knowledge since the former is constant and the latter in a permanent state of flux” (p. 30); “no truth clashes with any other truth” (p. 21); “what is opposed to the truth is not freedom but power” (p. 100); “revolution, human rights, free will, and meaningfulness of religious propositions are extra-religious concepts” (p. 22, 69); and “religious scholars cannot afford to be oblivious to extra-religious knowledge” (p. 127). Soroush maintains that his theory is “the missing link” in the endeavors of the revivalists and reformers of the past (p. 30), and that it provides “the only natural way” to blend sacred religion and secular politics (p. 60).

While one can be favorably disposed to Soroush’s calls for Muslims to be more inwardly religious while upholding the sanctity of freedom of belief, it is still possible to raise a set of questions, reservations, and objections to his theoretical propositions. What this reviewer finds to be particularly troublesome is Soroush’s theosophical theory of a

“religious democratic government,” based on assertions such as these: “in a religious society, any purely secular government would be undemocratic” (p. 126); “democracy, without an intrinsic alliance with life-sustaining moral principles, will be no more than a mere façade” (p. 153); and “the life blood of modern life is the traditional vices not virtues” (p. 43).

Soroush’s theory of a religiously democratic government does not take into account the form of the state, nor other pertinent factors, such as the existence of civil institutions, the presence of a tolerant political culture, discrepancies in the social, economic and political status and power base of various groups, the nature of the economic system, etc. Soroush wants us to accept a limited definition of democracy with reference to a set of principles that he has deduced from epistemological assertions. He contends that in a “truly religious society,” all aspects of life, including politics, naturally take on a religious coloring. However, why should we accept this assertion? Can politics -- a game of deceit, machination, and halfway measures -- be perceived in such an unproblematic fashion? Can *realpolitik* so easily abandon its hypocritical and sanctimonious oaths? Can any state’s politics be morally edifying, considering the divergent allegiances, judgments, and preferences of its constituents? Furthermore, isn’t it a bit unrealistic to maintain that a multidimensional and tangled society, such as that of Iran, can be turned into a monophonic Islamic community whereby the totality of the citizenry’s cultural, economic, emotional, familial, financial, informational, legal, and linguistic interactions and norms will be governed primarily, if not fully, by religious edicts? Finally, based on what institutions, rules, and laws would Shari‘a serve as the arbiter of social affairs?

Had Soroush examined the lineage of democratic evolution in the West beyond a mere perusal of political-philosophical tomes, he would have encountered a whole tapestry of anthropological, cultural, economic, and social factors and nuances at work. The conspicuous absence of these factors in his theory of “democratic religious government” cannot be easily disregarded.

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