

Prophetic Subjectivity and the Dynamics of Revelation: An Analysis of Abdolkarim Soroush's Thought in Contemporary Qur'anic Hermeneutics

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Abstract: *Debates about the nature of revelation (wahy) in Islam have always been a major topic in both theological and hermeneutical studies. In fact, traditional Islamic theology tends to view revelation as a divine communication coming from beyond and outside the historical context, which then leads to the idea of the Prophet Muhammad as just the receiver of God's word. This model, while it has successfully kept the sacredness of revelation intact, runs into great difficulties when faced with new issues such as interpretative diversity, the rethinking of Islamic law, and the compatibility with modern human values. This paper scrutinizes Abdolkarim Soroush's notion of revelation as the Prophet's religious experience expressed through the history and human mediation. The research, which is based on the study of relevant literature and uses a philosophical-hermeneutical method, delves into the philosophical and theological ramifications of Soroush's idea. The results indicate that the separation of religion from religious knowledge, as well as the distinction between the essential and the accidental parts of religion, can be used to philosophically justify Muslim's dynamic and contextual interpretations of the Qur'an. However, the paper also points out some major ontological and theological challenges in Soroush's system, especially regarding the nature of revelation and the role of the prophet's authority. Consequently, we should not see Soroush's thinking as a substitute for classical theology but rather as an epistemological intervention that broadens the scope of modern Islamic theological discussions.*

Keywords: *Abdolkarim Soroush; Islamic philosophy; prophetic subjectivity; Qur'anic hermeneutics; revelation.*

Abstrak: *Perdebatan mengenai hakikat wahyu dalam Islam senantiasa menjadi salah satu tema utama dalam kajian teologi dan hermeneutika. Dalam tradisi teologi Islam, wahyu pada umumnya dipahami sebagai komunikasi ilahi yang berasal dari luar dan melampaui konteks sejarah, sehingga Nabi Muhammad diposisikan semata-mata sebagai penerima firman Allah. Model pemahaman ini, meskipun berhasil menjaga kesakralan wahyu, menghadapi kesulitan yang cukup besar ketika berhadapan dengan persoalan-persoalan baru seperti keragaman penafsiran, kebutuhan untuk meninjau kembali hukum Islam, serta tuntutan kesesuaiannya dengan nilai-nilai kemanusiaan modern. Artikel ini mengkaji konsep wahyu menurut Abdolkarim Soroush, yang memandang wahyu sebagai pengalaman keagamaan Nabi yang diekspresikan melalui sejarah dan dimediasi oleh unsur-unsur kemanusiaan. Penelitian ini didasarkan pada kajian kepustakaan yang relevan dan menggunakan pendekatan filosofis-hermeneutis untuk menelaah implikasi filosofis dan teologis dari gagasan Soroush. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa perbedaan antara agama dan pengetahuan keagamaan, serta antara aspek-aspek esensial dan aksidental dalam agama, dapat menjadi landasan filosofis bagi penafsiran Al-Qur'an yang dinamis dan kontekstual di kalangan umat Islam. Namun demikian, artikel ini juga mengemukakan sejumlah tantangan ontologis dan teologis yang mendasar dalam sistem pemikiran Soroush, terutama yang berkaitan dengan hakikat wahyu dan kedudukan otoritas kenabian. Oleh karena itu, pemikiran Soroush tidak semestinya dipandang sebagai pengganti teologi klasik, melainkan sebagai suatu intervensi epistemologis yang memperluas cakupan diskusi teologi Islam kontemporer.*

Kata Kunci: *Abdolkarim Soroush; filsafat Islam; subjektivitas kenabian; hermeneutika Al-Qur'an; wahyu.*

Introduction

Discussions about the nature of revelation (*wahy*) is one of the main issues of Islamic theology in a way that it touches deeply the classical legacy of the past times while at the same time the main issue is the challenge of modern times. Traditionally, in the Islamic mainstream, *Wahy* has been mainly understood in the normal form of dictation. Therefore, Prophet Muhammad was totally passive in receiving the divine message and the personality and the involvement by the subjective side of the prophet were insignificant, and neither that prophet's social, cultural and historical contexts were taken into account. The theological root of this idea can be traced back to Ash'arite theology, which stresses the utter transcendence of Divine speech and, therefore, is unable to think about God and human history as interacting with one another. Although such a standpoint on revelation is at times held to be suitable for raising the unchangeableness of the divine law, it fails to face the contemporary issues of democracy, human rights and plurality.¹

¹ Alina Isac Alak, "The Impact of the Islamic Theories of Revelation on Humanist Qur'anic Hermeneutics," *Studia Islamica* 119, no. 1 (2024): 1–33, <https://doi.org/10.1163/19585705-12341484>. Abu Bakr al-Baqillani, *Al-Tamhid Fi al-Radd 'ala al-Mulhidah Wa al-Mu'attilah.*, Edited by Richard J. McCarthy (Imprimerie Catholique, 1957); Abu al-Ma'ali al-Juwayni, *Al-Irshad Ila Qawati' al-Adillah Fi Usul al-I'tiqad* (Maktabat al-Khanji, 1950); Fahrul Rozi et al., "Reformulation of Mu'tazilah Theology and

In this light, Abdolkarim Soroush, a modern Iranian thinker, has been recognized as one of the key figures in revitalizing Islamic thought. Soroush critiques the traditional versions of revelation that completely separate the divine and human aspects. He suggests treating revelation as a religious experience of the Prophet Muhammad to radically change the revelatory process. He supports his thesis with his knowledge of philosophy of science, especially Karl Popper's epistemology based on fallibility. In Soroush's view, revelation is not simply an event that happens at one time in history. On the contrary, it is developing through the interaction of the transcendent message with the human side of the Prophet who as a man was subject to a social, cultural, and linguistic setting. He calls this concept *Bast-e Tajrube-e Nabavi*, or the Expansion of Prophetic Experience.²

For Soroush, the Prophet is not merely a passive medium in the process of revelation, but an active subject who gives revelation its historical and linguistic form. The implication is that the Qur'an must be understood as possessing both divine and human dimensions; it may therefore be analyzed as a text that interacts with the historical conditions and social dynamics of seventh-century Arab society. This view is consistent with historical-critical approaches in the study of religion, which regard religious texts as part of symbolic and discursive formations that unfold over time. It also opens space for distinguishing between the essential elements of religion, such as *tawhid*, justice, and universal moral values, and its accidental elements, such as language, cultural symbols, and legal formulations that are bound to particular historical contexts.³

Soroush's approach has significant implications for the development of contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics. Interpretation is no longer viewed as a direct reflection of transcendent divine truth, but as a historical, dynamic, and criticizable human intellectual activity. From a hermeneutical perspective, the meaning of a text is never entirely closed; it remains open to a surplus of meaning that emerges through dialogue among the text, the interpreter, and the interpreter's historical context. Soroush's thought

the Birth of al-Ash'ariyah Theology as Moderate Islamic Understanding," *Journal of Contemporary Islamic Education* 5, no. 1 (2025): 57–68, <https://doi.org/10.25217/jcie.v5i1.5116>. Reski Pratama et al., *Epistemologi Tafsir Al-Qur'an: Relasi Wahyu, Akal, Dan Konteks Sosial*, (Palembang) 3, no. 2 (2025); Fazlur Rahman, "Law and Ethics in Islam," in *Ethics in Islam: Ninth Giorgio Levi Della Vida Biennial Conference*, Richard G. Hovannisian (Ed.) (Undena, 1985).

² Muhammad Erfa Redhani, "Science and Prophetic Law: Karl Popper's Falsification Principle and Three Worlds of Science," *Prophetic Law Review* 6, no. 1 (2024): 98–119, <https://doi.org/10.20885/PLR.vol6.iss1.art5>; Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (Hutchinson, 1959). Abd al-Karim Soroush and Forough Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion* (Brill, 2009); 'Abd al-Karīm Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of 'Abdolkarim Soroush*, ed. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri, Oxford Scholarship Online (Oxford University Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195128123.001.0001>.

³ Abdolkarim Soroush, "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge," in *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, Charles Kurzman (Oxford University Press, 1988). Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam Occasional Papers Series*, (Georgetown University), 1986; Ahmad Arif Noeris and Supriyanto, *Pendekatan Historis Dalam Studi Islam: Kerangka Metodologis Dan Urgensinya Dalam Konteks Kontemporer*, (Palembang) III, no. 2 (2025). Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Shari'ah Law: An Introduction* (Oneworld Publications, 2008); Rahman, "Law and Ethics in Islam"; Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*.

thus attempts to provide a philosophical framework for a contextual reading of the Qur'an that remains responsive to changing historical circumstances without denying its transcendent dimension.⁴

Although Abdolkarim Soroush's thought has been widely discussed, particularly in relation to religious epistemology, criticism of religious authoritarianism, and the concept of religious experience, much of this scholarship remains descriptive or normative. The relationship between prophetic subjectivity and its implications for the construction of contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics has not yet been elaborated systematically within a comprehensive theological-philosophical framework. Yet this issue is highly significant in light of the plurality of Islamic meanings and the crisis of normative authority in the contemporary Muslim world. Unlike previous studies, this article positions prophetic subjectivity as the principal analytical category for understanding Soroush's reconstruction of revelation. This article presents a fresh, innovative perspective on the expansion of prophetic experience, demonstrating that this theory, in addition to the renewal of the concept of revelation, is capable of furnishing the epistemological basis for the formulation of a Qur'anic hermeneutics which is living and contextually aware in this modern time. With this contribution, the paper works towards combining Soroush's studies in the theory of revelation with the latest Qur'anic hermeneutical discourses of Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Mohammed Arkoun, and also adds the dimension to the ongoing discussion on the relationship between transcendence, the Prophet's subjectivity, and contemporary Islamic thought.⁵

Taking this research gap into account, this paper seeks to do a close reading of Abdolkarim Soroush's reconstruction of revelation, highlighting prophetic subjectivity and its overall impact on the evolution of Qur'anic hermeneutics in our time. Based on a philosophical and conceptual analysis of Soroush's key texts, this study not only outlines a different interpretive model for tackling the problems of intellectual stagnation, Islamic

⁴ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Columbia University Press, 2005); Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, 1st ed, with Ted Klein (Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

⁵ Ainurrofiq dkk., "Kontribusi Abdul Karim Soroush dalam Mendialogkan Agama dan Sains"; Sufyan dan Irwan, "Agama Vs Ilmu Agama." Badarussyamsi Badarussyamsi, "Pemikiran Abdulkarim Soroush Tentang Persoalan Otoritas Kebenaran Agama," *ISLAMICA: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 10, no. 1 (2016): 56, <https://doi.org/10.15642/islamica.2015.10.1.56-81>. Ali Akbar, "'Abdolkarim Soroush's Approach to 'Experience' as a Basis for His Reform Project," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 28, no. 3 (2017): 313–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2017.1288427>; Sufratman and Kholid Karomi, "Abdul Karim Soroush's 'al-Qabd Wa al-Bast' Theory as a Basis for the Development of Islamic Epistemology," sec. 1, *AL-AFKAR: Journal for Islamic Studies* VII (2024). Ali Akbar, *Contemporary Perspectives on Revelation and Qu'ranic Hermeneutics: An Analysis of Four Discourses* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474456180>; Frank Griffel, *Islam and Rationality: The Impact of al-Ghazālī Papers Collected on His 900th Anniversary*, *Islam and Rationality* 2 (Brill, 2016); Mahmoud H. Sadri, "Sacral Defense of Secularism: The Political Theologies of Soroush, Shabestari, and Kadivar," "Sacral Defense of Secularism," sec. 2, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 15 (2001): 257–70. Soroush, "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge"; Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*; Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam*.

law's mutability, and the diversity of Muslim religious life, but it also leaves intact the transcendent aspect of revelation.⁶

Method

The article is mainly library research and it discusses a conceptual and philosophical analysis of Abdolkarim Soroush's view on revelation and prophetic experience. This method is suitable because the main focus of the study is the building of ideas, theological arguments, and epistemological frameworks from Soroush's writings and the academic discourse related to them. The main sources of this paper are Soroush's major writings especially *Qabd wa Bast*, Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam, and The Expansion of Prophetic Experience, which relate the connection between revelation, prophetic subjectivity, and the changes in religious knowledge. Besides these, the secondary sources comprise journal articles, books, and critical studies, including dissertations and theses, that deal with Soroush's ideas, Islamic theories of revelation, and the evolution of contemporary Qur'anic hermeneutics, especially the works of Fazlur Rahman, Mohammed Arkoun, and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd.

The data went through various steps of analysis. Initially a hermeneutical reading of Soroush's works was done to map the key notions of prophetic experience, the function of the prophet's subjectivity, and the distinction between necessary (*dhati*) and contingent (*'aradi*) elements in religion. Furthermore, the text was perceived not a finished piece but as a conversation that could be heard only in the specific intellectual context, including Soroush's knowledge of the modern philosophy of science and the classical Islamic intellectual tradition. After that, these ideas were rethought through philosophy of religion and epistemology to find the religious/theological implications of the Prophet Muhammad as an active epistemic subject in the revelatory process. Also, this dissection attempted to follow how the metaphoric/proposed theory of the expansion of prophetic experience links revelation, the status of the Qur'an, and parameters of religious interpretation. Finally, the findings were related to modern theories of Qur'anic hermeneutics to find the significance and uniqueness of Soroush's ideas at the level of contextual and dynamic interpretation of the Bible. Thus, the article is not just reporting what happened but is also forming a view, both recognizing the prophetic subjectivity potentialities as well as its limitations for addressing the deadlock and multiplicity of religious interpretations.

Discussion

The Concept of Revelation in Islamic Thought: From Transcendence to Historicity

Some of the traditional Islamic conversations on revelation start from a theological premise about the transcendental nature of the Qur'an as the speech of God unveiled to the Prophet Muhammad by the angel Gabriel. Ash'arite and Maturidite theologians, in particular, hold the view that revelation is entirely divine and the Prophet only serves to

⁶ Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament*, Paperback edition (Columbia University Press, 2014); Ahmed Ali Siddiqi, "Moral Epistemology and the Revision of Divine Law in Islam," *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 10, no. 1 (2021): 43–70, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ojlr/rwab006>.

receive and transmit the divine message. According to this view, the Prophet's human aspect is not considered as making a significant contribution to the revelatory message. Similar views also appear in the texts of famous classical Islamic commentators like al-Tabari and al-Razi who stress the sanctity and immutable character of the Qur'anic text.⁷

Typically, classical theology focuses on the transcendence and divine authority of revelation. Therefore, the prophet's historical aspect and subjectivity are often considered less significant as primary epistemological categories. Revelation is looked at as a fully divine and transcendent event: God is the absolute subject of the action, and the Prophet Muhammad is only seen as the one receiving the message from God. The Qur'an is regarded as the words of God that come down in their full and final form without the slightest touch of human subjectivity or historical determination. This understanding has been formulated especially by Sunni theologians of the Ash'arite and Maturidite schools. The transcendence of revelation as a concept is not without its epistemological consequences. If revelation is depicted as something that exists outside of history, then it is believed that the meaning of the Qur'an was entirely established right at the time of its revelation. In the classical tradition, the language of the Qur'an is seen as the ultimate and authoritative expression of God's will for all times and places. For this reason, the text of the Qur'an is considered a constant source of meaning, whereas the interpreter is seen as someone who simply discovers the meanings that are already there.⁸

Nevertheless, certain classical thinkers, such as al-Ghazali and Ibn Khaldun, offered early indications of the psychological and sociological dimensions of prophetic experience, even though they did not develop a conceptual formulation that placed the Prophet's subjectivity as a major epistemic factor in revelation. In *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, al-Ghazali describes prophetic experience as the highest form of mystical witnessing (*mushahadah*). In his view, the purified soul of the Prophet is able to receive divine illumination through spiritual purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*). This suggests that prophecy is linked to a human psychological potential, *al-quwwah al-qudsiyyah*, or the sacred faculty, through which the Prophet apprehends truth. Among ordinary human beings, the earliest signs of this capacity may appear in true dreams (*al-ru'ya al-sadiqah*). Ibn Khaldun, by contrast, emphasizes in the *Muqaddimah* that the Prophet as bearer of law or sharia is necessary for human beings as social creatures in order to prevent conflict. The Prophet therefore functions not only as a transmitter of revelation, but also as an agent of social transformation who establishes a new civilization.⁹

⁷ Al-Baqillani, *Al-Tamhid Fi al-Radd*, 287–95; al-Juwayni, *Al-Irshad Ila Qawati*, 312–20. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *Mafātīḥ Al-Ghayb* (Dār al-Fikr, 1999), 1:120–25; Al-Thabari, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān* (Dār al-Fikr, 1995), 21:34–40.

⁸ Richard M. Frank, "The Aṣ'arite Ontology: I Primary Entities," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (1999): 163–231, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0957423900001326>; Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, Facs. ed, *Structure and Growth of Philosophic Systems from Plato to Spinoza* 4 (Harvard Univ. Press, 1992), 235–60. al-Razi, *Mafātīḥ Al-Ghayb*, 1:10–15; Al-Thabari, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl Āy al-Qur'ān*, 21:50–55. Mohammed Arkoun, *Islam: To Reform or to Subvert?*, Saqi Essentials (Saqi, 2012), 154–58; Muhammad Nasir, "Akal Dan Wahyu Dalam Perspektif Muhammad Iqbal," *Hijaz: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 2, no. 1 (2022): 27–31, <https://doi.org/10.57251/hij.v2i1.876>.

⁹ Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Dār al-Ma'rifah, 2000), 3:15–20. Al-Allamah Abdurrahman Ibnu Ibnu Khaldun, *Muqaddimah* (Dār al-Fikr, 2005), 1:458–65.

These classical discussions are important foundations for contemporary discourse, but they also reveal the limits of traditional accounts of revelation when faced with modern hermeneutical problems. The emphasis on the transcendence of revelation directly shapes the Prophet's position within classical Islamic theology. The Prophet is primarily understood as a *muballigh*, a transmitter of the divine message, rather than as an epistemic subject who participates in shaping the structure of revelation. His human dimensions - psychological experience, language, and social context - are not assigned epistemological weight in the revelatory process. This paradigm totally eliminates the idea of revelation as a dialogue between God and man. Revelation is understood as something that comes entirely from God and does not change according to human history, and the Prophet is simply a passive conduit. Even though great Muslim scholars like al-Ghazali talked about the inner aspect of prophetic experience and Ibn Khaldun even mentioned the social and historical role of prophecy, these insights were not turned into an epistemological theory which sees prophetic subjectivity as a part of revelation. Classical theology, therefore, kept a strict distinction between revelation as a divine reality and history as a human sphere, without providing a conceptual tool for connecting the two.¹⁰

Belief in a timeless and eternal nature of revelation entails substantial changes in the way the Qur'an is interpreted. If revelation is simply regarded as a text with an unchanging and definitive meaning, the role of interpretation will generally be limited to reproducing what has already been handed down: it will safeguard the ongoing existence of traditional meanings and will not foster new contextual understandings. During the modern era, this way of thinking has been clearly inadequate in many respects. Contemporary issues such as democracy, human rights, gender equality, and religious pluralism are often difficult to address through textual readings grounded in ahistorical assumptions. When the meaning of revelation is assumed to be complete and closed, reinterpretation can easily be suspected of deviating from divine will.¹¹

Moreover, the absolutization of revelatory meaning reinforces particular claims to interpretive authority. As Mohammed Arkoun argues, such conditions make possible the sacralization of interpretation and the closure of critical discourse, so that hermeneutical problems become not only methodological but also epistemological and political. Similar critiques have been advanced in contemporary scholarship, which shows that interpretive authority in the Islamic tradition is often closely connected to political, social, and religious structures of power. These limitations suggest that the central problem lies not in revelation itself, but in the epistemological framework through which revelation is understood. Without denying the transcendent dimension of revelation, a number of

¹⁰ Alak, "The Impact of the Islamic Theories of Revelation on Humanist Qur'anic Hermeneutics"; Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton University Press, 2016). 24. al-Ghazali, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm Al-Dīn*, 3:20–25; Ibnu Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, 1:460–70.

¹¹ Fazlur Raḥmān, *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002), 5–20. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Maḥmūd Al-Nass: Dirasah Fi Ulum al-Qur'an* (al-Hay'ah al-Misriyyah, 1994a), 15–30; Masood Raja, *Democratic Criticism: Poetics of Incitement and the Muslim Sacred* (Lever Press, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.12682261>.

contemporary Muslim thinkers stress the importance of recognizing its historicity - that is, acknowledging that revelation appears and is understood within the horizon of human history.¹²

Moving from a description of God communicating only in a transcendent way to one influenced by looking at history is not to say that God communicating becomes entirely a human production. On the contrary, it is only then that communication of God can be conceived as a dialectic event: the meeting of God's word and human awareness in a certain time and culture. On that account Prophet's inner self does not pose danger to the holiness of God communication but to the extent of knowledge vehicle through which the divine speech may be made and understood. Such a dialectical approach to revelation is also close to philosophical hermeneutics, which emphasizes that textual meaning emerges from the interaction between the text and the historical horizon of the interpreter.¹³

It is precisely the need for such a dialectical framework that creates space for Abdolkarim Soroush's thought. Unlike classical Islamic theology, which emphasizes a strict separation between revelation and prophetic subjectivity, Soroush places prophetic experience at the center of theological analysis. In his writings, he interprets revelation as a form of the Prophet's religious experience expressed through human language, imagination, and consciousness. By making prophetic subjectivity an epistemic category, Soroush offers an approach capable of mediating between the transcendence and historicity of revelation. This approach not only reconstructs the Prophet's position within Islamic theology, but also provides a conceptual foundation for a contextual and dynamic Qur'anic hermeneutics - a possibility that is difficult to achieve within a classical, ahistorical framework of revelation.¹⁴

Abdolkarim Soroush and the Theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience

The Intellectual Background of Abdolkarim Soroush

Abdolkarim Soroush is among the most influential contemporary Muslim thinkers in debates on the renewal of Islamic thought, especially in the fields of religious epistemology, philosophy of religion, and contemporary Islamic hermeneutics. He was born in Tehran in 1945 and received his early education within Iran's classical Islamic intellectual tradition, including Islamic philosophy and traditional religious sciences such as jurisprudence and Sufism. This early formation introduced Soroush to the richness of

¹² Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (Saqi Books [u.a.], 2002), 45–60. 28. Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, 14–20; Wael B. Hallaq, *Authority, Continuity, and Change in Islamic Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1–25. 29. Abu Zayd, *Maḥmūl Al-Nass: Dirasah Fi Ulum al-Qur'an*, 20–30; Raḥmān, *Islam & Modernity*, (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002), 6–10.

¹³ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Naqd Al-Khitab al-Dini* (Sina Publishing, 1994), 30–35. 31. Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory*, 71–88.

¹⁴ Soroush, "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge," 30–45; Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 15–40. Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 20–40.

classical Islamic thought, including Peripatetic philosophy, kalam theology, and Islamic mysticism. It later became an important background for his intellectual reflections.¹⁵

First, Soroush finished his schooling in Iran. Then, he went to England to study there and read a lot about the philosophy and history of science. He came across modern philosophical thoughts there, especially Karl Popper's critical rationalism, the epistemology of science, and the various theories about the development of scientific knowledge. That's why he thinks, after he was inspired by the modern philosophy of science, that human knowledge is fundamentally open, tentative, and always subject to revision. Moreover, according to this line of thought, religious knowledge is not a closed system of ultimate truth, but rather a continual unfolding interpretative process.¹⁶

Soroush's double scholarly background the old Islamic tradition and the modern Western philosophy was the major decisive factor of the character of his thought: a deep and continued effort to bring the Islamic intellectual heritage into dialogue with modern epistemology. One can clearly see this fusion in his resorting to ideas from the modern philosophy of science for doing theology and solving classical problems in theology, especially those related to divine revelation, religious authority and the interpretation of holy scriptures. Making use of this approach, Soroush is usually associated with the Islamic neo-modernism which, among other things, aims at the creation of new religious ideologies which are not only in harmony with modern rationality, but also aware and respectful of intellectual diversity.¹⁷

Soroush's epistemological project reached its clearest and most extended expression in his gigantic *Qabd wa Bast-e Teorik-e Shari'at* (The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of the Sharia) a book which was first published in Persian during the 1980s and which has then come out in English. As the reader goes through it, Soroush unpacks the idea that one's understanding of religion is a matter of history and that it keeps evolving in line with the progress of human knowledge. In fact, changes in science, philosophy, and the social circle can completely change one's grasp and interpretation of religion. However, Soroush's theory is centered around one main idea: making a sharp difference between religion (*din*) as a divine reality that is totally fixed and religious knowledge (*ma'rifat-i dini*) as a human intellectual product that is relative and historical. Religion in the first sense is the guy who delivers the perfect divine revelation, while religious knowledge is the human being who interprets and therefore finds himself open to revision. By making this difference, Soroush manages to, on the one hand, keep the holiness of revelation intact, and, on the other hand, recognize the ongoing nature of human interpretation.¹⁸

¹⁵ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism*, 1. ed., [Nachdr.], Mohamed El-Hindi Series on Arab Culture and Islamic Civilization (Syracuse Univ. Press, 2007), 158–65.

¹⁶ Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, 33–39; Sadri, “Sacral Defense of Secularism: The Political Theologies of Soroush, Shabestari, and Kadivar,” 257–70.

¹⁷ Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam*, 23–35. 37. John L. Esposito and John Obert Voll, eds., *Islam and Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 1996), 130–35.

¹⁸ Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam*, 30–45. 39. Soroush, “The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge”; Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam*. Hossein

Through these differences, Soroush challenges those absolutist claims about religious interpretation which often tend to be a recurring feature in the religious traditions. According to him, if religious interpretation is seen as the absolute truth, then religion can turn into an authoritarian system that does not allow any room for rethinking and intellectual renewal. Therefore, realizing that religious knowledge is not absolute is the first step towards the emergence of an open and democratic religious community. Soroush then uses the notion of contraction and expansion of religious knowledge as the epistemological basis for his subsequent theory of the expansion of prophetic experience (*Bast-e Tajrube-e Nabavi*), which delves deeper into the interaction between revelation, religious experience and the subjectivity of the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁹

Revelation as the Prophet's Religious Experience

The summit of Abdolkarim Soroush's theological reinterpretation is his thesis of *Bast-e Tajrube-e Nabavi*, or the Extension of the Prophetic Experience. In this context, Soroush maintains that revelation is essentially a kind of the Prophet Muhammad's religious experience, not simply a verbal and mechanical delivery from God to the Prophet. For Soroush, the prophetic experience is a deep spiritual encounter in which the Prophet experiences the highest reality; nevertheless, this encounter is always expressed through the pattern of human consciousness.²⁰

While classical Islamic theology regards revelation as God's direct oral communication to the Prophet, Soroush sees it as a religious experience that has psychological, linguistic, and historical aspects. Instead of a revelation being a finished written document in a certain language, it is first a spiritual experience that the Prophet later expresses in human language. Hence, the Qur'an becomes a means of presenting the prophet's religious experience through words, rather than a divine language completely outside the prophet's mind. In Soroush's view, the divine message is by nature beyond human language and can only be hinted at through it. So, revelation cannot be seen as God's literally floating down a list of words that is the direct transmission of the letter of the word; it is a spiritual awakening that first takes shape in words through the very nature of the Prophet's thinking. As such, the language of the Qur'an is the Prophet's verbalization of his religious experience within the social and cultural landscape of seventh-century Arabia. Therefore, the grammatical design, imagery, and persuasive manner of the Qur'an exhibit both the Prophet's spiritual state and the cultural setting in which the revelation was unveiled.²¹

Dabbagh, "Epistemology of Religion and Phenomenology of Revelation in Post-Revolutionary Iran: The Case of Abdolkarim Soroush," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 49, no. 10 (2023): 1244–61, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537221101318>.

¹⁹ Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam*, 50–70. Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 1–20.

²⁰ Ali Akbar, "Abdolkarim Soroush's Theory of Revelation: From Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge to Prophetic Dreams," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 33, no. 1 (2022): 19–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2021.1981632>; Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 15–30. Marziyeh Bakhshizadeh, "A Social Psychological Critique on Islamic Feminism," *Religions* 14, no. 2 (2023): 202, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14020202>.

²¹ 45. Sadri, "Sacral Defense of Secularism: The Political Theologies of Soroush, Shabestari, and Kadivar," 257–70. Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 40–60.

This interpretation sees the Prophet not only as the passive recipient of revelation but also as a historical agent in giving form to the revelatory experience. The Prophet is an epistemic agent who transposes the transcendent experience into human language that his community finds intelligible. On this view, the prophetic subjectivity, far from being a factor that would lessen the sacredness of revelation, is actually the very means by which revelation is made communicable and understandable. Soroush's idea of revelation as religious experience is very much in line with the modern philosophy of religion which highlights the experiential aspect of religious life. In the philosophy of religion, religious experience is often seen as a direct human apprehension of the transcendent reality which is then communicated through religious symbols and language. However, Soroush does not merely take the modern ideas of religious experience at their face value; rather he reinterprets them in Islamic theology via the notion of prophetic experience.²²

With this method, revelation is interpreted as a dialectical happening that includes a divine reality and the human consciousness of the Prophet Muhammad. The language of the revelation is not entirely divine, yet it cannot be regarded as a human production only. It is the fruit of the meeting of God and a person in a prophetic experience. This dialectical method gives Soroush the means to keep the superhuman aspect of revelation intact while at the same time addressing its history. The theory of prophetic experience also serves as a support for Soroush's description of the workings of revelation. For him, the Prophet's religious experience became, to a great extent, a function of his spiritual and intellectual development. Therefore, revelation is not a one-time thing, but a part of a series of revelations from the Prophet's life. So, the idea of the expansion of the Prophet's experience not only brings the notion of revelation to life, but it also overturns the Prophet's role in Islam. He is no longer the simple instrument of divine communication; rather, he is a creator who has a major part in the formation of the revelatory text. This point of view is a vital basis for Qur'anic hermeneutics that highlight the historical and human aspects of revelation.²³

Prophetic Subjectivity and the Human Dimension of the Qur'an

One of the biggest impacts of Soroush's concept of prophetic experience is that it recognizes the Prophet's subjectivity as one of the ways of knowing in the prophetic enlightenment. In this manner, revelation is not seen as a completely separate message from the Prophet's mind. It is a religious experience, however, defined by the Prophet's

²² Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam*, 30–45. Rusmir Šadić, “Abdolkarim Soroush’s Pluralistic Philosophy of Religion,” *Synthesis Philosophica* 37, no. 1 (2022): 223–35, <https://doi.org/10.21464/sp37111>. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study In Human Nature* (Taylor and Francis, 2012), 30–50; Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*, 1. Harvard Univ. Press paperback ed, Institute for Human Sciences Vienna Lecture Series (Harvard Univ. Press, 2003), 10–25.

²³ Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 70–90. Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 100–120. Halim Calis, “The Theoretical Foundations of Contextual Interpretation of the Qur’an in Islamic Theological Schools and Philosophical Sufism,” *Religions* 13, no. 2 (2022): 188, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020188>; Mohammad Fadel, “The True, the Good and the Reasonable: The Theological and Ethical Roots of Public Reason in Islamic Law,” *Canadian Journal of Law & Jurisprudence* 21, no. 1 (2008): 5–69, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S08418209000432X>.

mental and emotional frameworks. So, the Prophet is not only a vessel for revelation; he is also a person who, to some extent, determines the way the revelation is side. In a letter to the community, the Messenger of God said, "Know that the Role of the Prophet in the experience of revelation is not that of a silent listener; he is a man who, in the full knowledge of the highest and deepest things of the world, is also a man engaged in shaping revelation itself." In a letter to the community, the Messenger of God said, "Know that the role of the Prophet in the experience of revelation is not that of a silent listener; he is a man who, in the full knowledge of the highest and deepest things of the world, is also a man engaged in shaping revelation itself." Based on this prophet's whole being, between reason, fantasy, emotions, etc., the prophet's level of understanding determines how deeply he can grasp divine revelation, while his psychological and life experiences define the way he will present the divine. In short, the Qur'an is not just the word of God but also a reflection of the Prophet's spiritual journey as a human being who is without a doubt a figure of history.²⁴

So, this perspective is that the Qur'an is God-inspired but also human in its expression. The divine aspect is God's role in sending the revelation. The human role is the language and thinking through which it has been told. For Soroush, this distinction is the theological necessity of maintaining the belief that revelation is God-given and the Prophet being a historic person who shaped the Qur'anic script. Contrary to the accusation that admitting to the human aspect of the Qur'an diminishing the sanctitude of the book, Soroush maintains that the human aspect is actually what makes divine communication possible: God's message can only be comprehended by man when it is conveyed in man's language. Thus, one should not see the Qur'an's historical and linguistic features as flaws of revelation, rather they are the manifestation of divine meaning in the human sphere.²⁵

This method is similar to what some contemporary hermeneutical theorists propose, stressing that one can never get a text out of the language and the history it comes with. Philosophical hermeneutics understands language as a medium that both makes it possible for humans to grasp reality and at the same time limits their understanding of it. So, knowledge of Qur'an is bound with the knowledge of Arabic language and the social reality in which the revelation was made. Another side effect is that Qur'an is dependent on the factors of history and language. The features like narrative structures, symbolism and social concepts of Qur'an are a reflection of the condition of Arab society of the seventh century. Hence, the dealing of Qur'an is necessarily linked to the historical and sociological analysis of the milieu of revelation. That is precisely the kind of view which allows for contextualized Qur'anic hermeneutics. If indeed Qur'an has a historical aspect, then its interpretation should take into account the changing societal conditions and the growth of human knowledge. Qur'an's meaning is, therefore, not entirely fixed but a growing comprehension field.²⁶

²⁴ Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 40–55. 60–80.

²⁵ Kamali, *Shari'ah Law*, 20–30. Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 35–50.

²⁶ 57. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2., rev. ed (Continuum, 2003), 305–20. 58. Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 8–15. 90–110.

Soroush's perspective on the human aspect of the Qur'an is quite similar to that of several contemporary Muslim thinkers who stress the historicity of the text of revelation. The Egyptian intellectual Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd contends that the Qur'an, as a linguistic text, is inseparable from the cultural structure of classical Arab society. However, Soroush surpasses this by making the Prophet's subjectivity a vital factor in the very process of the revelation. The concept of prophetic subjectivity thus alters not only the understanding of revelation but also the definition of the relationship between God, the Prophet, and the holy text. Revelation is viewed as a dialogue between divine reality and the Prophet's human consciousness, making the human aspect of the Qur'an a fundamental part of the structure of revelation itself. This point of view offers a solid foundation for a historical and evolving interpretation of the Qur'an.²⁷

The Essential and Accidental Distinction in Religion

One of Soroush's major contributions to the reconstruction of modern Islamic epistemology is his distinction between the essential (dhati) and accidental ('aradi) dimensions of religion. This distinction forms an integral part of his intellectual project to explain how transcendent revelation can appear in historical form without losing its normative authority. For Soroush, religion as divine revelation has a universal and transhistorical normative core. This core includes fundamental principles such as the oneness of God (tawhid), human moral responsibility, and justice. These values constitute the essential dimension of religion because they do not depend on any particular social context and remain relevant throughout human history.²⁸

Religion also contains accidental elements, namely aspects formed within particular historical contexts. These include the language of revelation, cultural symbols, and the institutional and legal forms that developed within the early Muslim community. For Soroush, these elements are not identical with the essence of religion; rather, they are historical forms through which revelation is articulated. This distinction is rooted in Soroush's epistemological separation between religion (din) and religious knowledge (ma'rifat-e dini). Religion as divine revelation is fixed, but human understanding of religion evolves in accordance with changes in knowledge and social conditions. Accidental elements in religion can therefore be reinterpreted without changing the essence of revelation itself.²⁹

By doing so, Soroush is able to solve the dilemma of the absolute nature of revelation vs. the relative nature of interpretation in a new way. When he admits that there are some elements in religion that are accidents, he not only opens a new door for Islamic thought without totally relativizing revelation, but he also maintains the possibility of renewal. Thus, in this system, changing or even revising Islamic laws is not a break with the tradition; rather, it is the inevitable result of the historical nature of the human understanding of the revelation. Besides this, the distinction between essential and

²⁷ Abu Zayd, *Ma'fhum Al-Nass: Dirasah Fi Ulum al-Qur'an*, 24–35. Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 120–40.

²⁸ Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 45–50.

²⁹ Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam*, 30–35. Soroush, "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge," 244–50.

accidental is very useful for the method of interpretation of Islam in the present day. Firstly, it gives a theoretical basis for the idea that certain values, which are "universal, timeless, and unchanging" should always be preserved while their historical expressions are subject to change. Therefore, on the one hand, Soroush establishes a foundation for the continuity of the traditional Islam while, on the other hand, he also prepares the ground for their refreshing Islam by means of the intellectual, artistic and political resources of the present day. In other words, his philosophy of Islam serves as a bridge that unites Islam and the West, thereby making the harmony of Islam and modernity a reality.³⁰

However, the idea has not escaped criticism. Some philosophers contend that the line between essential and accidental aspects is not only hard to define but may also be influenced by one's point of view. Such arguments show that while Soroush's theory offers a vast interpretive opportunity, it also, however, poses new methodological questions about religious interpretive authority. Nevertheless, most scholars of the current Islam consider the essential-accidental distinction an invaluable conceptual instrument in explaining the relationship between revelation and history. It offers a philosophical basis for the contextual interpretation of the Qur'an and the development of Islamic law; it also upholds a firm belief in the transcendence of religion.³¹

Critique of the Absolutism of Religious Knowledge

Soroush's work critically challenges the absolutism of religious knowledge in that it points to the practice of equating human interpretation of revelation with the revelation itself or divine truth, as the main manifestation of religious knowledge absolutism. In the framework of Soroush's argument, absolutism in religion occurs when the line distinguishing religion as divine revelation and religious knowledge as a human product of interpretation is erased. Hence, a certain interpretation comes to be regarded as the very God's will and as such it is considered above any query or criticism. Beyond seeing it solely as an epistemological challenge, Soroush also points out that the consequences of this absolutism of religious knowledge are so extensive, that they are social and political. If a religious interpretation is deemed to be the same as divine truth, then the religious authority attains an almost unlimited source of legitimacy. This can, in fact, be the basis for the emergence of religious authoritarianism, which not only is a threat to critique but also deprives the community of its intellectual growth.³²

In his books, Soroush explains that the very mistake of religious absolutism is that it does not see that religious interpretation is a human activity. The way we understand a religion depends on the thought tools that are available at the time, including science,

³⁰ Forough Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran (1953-2000): From Bāzargān to Soroush*, *Social, Economic and Political Studies of the Middle East and Asia* 77 (BRILL, 2001), 137–45, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047400714>. Akbar, "Abdolkarim Soroush's Theory of Revelation"; Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *The Parameters of Halāl and Harām in Shari'ah and the Halāl Industry* (International Institute of Islamic Thought; International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies (IAIS) Malaysia, 2013).

³¹ Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri, "Introduction," in *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2000), xx–xxv. 68. Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (Taylor & Francis, 2006), 120–30.

³² 69. Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam*, 29–34. 70. Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran (1953-2000)*, 128–40.

philosophy, and social conditions. So, it is changing and develops as human civilization does. According to his epistemological system, Soroush points out that the relativity of religious knowledge does not mean nihilistic relativism. He also does not refuse the existence of objective religious truth; on the contrary, he challenges the idea that people have absolute access to that truth. Religious knowledge is only a part and it can be corrected.³³

This opinion is a nod to the impact of contemporary philosophy, chiefly Karl Popper's spot-on argument about the provisional character of knowledge and the priority of logical critique. Just as Popperian epistemology, the idea of truth is not something that can be reached by absolute certainty but through continuous critique and revision. Basically, in religion, different interpretations are not considered as deviations but are just a part of the search for truth. Soroush also sees interpretive plurality as the inevitable result scenario of human epistemic limitation. Since each interpreter has a different intellectual and social background, there will be different interpretations of revelation. To understand this kind of plurality as a threat to the unity of faith would be wrong, on the contrary, it is a manifestation of the Islamic intellectual tradition.³⁴

So, reason and conversation are the main ways through which religious knowledge progresses. According to Soroush, a good religious conversation should always be open to criticism from science and philosophy. If there is no criticism, religious knowledge will stop developing and become irrelevant to the times. This way of thinking gives a philosophical justification for tolerance in contemporary Muslim societies. If we see religious interpretation as only a limited human production, then no one can say that they have the whole truth. Within this perspective, religious pluralism is seen as a direct outcome of the temporal nature of religious knowledge.³⁵

Meanwhile, Soroush's critical stance towards religious absolutism has stirred discussions among Muslim scholars. One of the main concerns of the critics is that focusing too much on the relativity of religious knowledge, might end up undermining the Islamic tradition's normative authority. This criticism unveils a persistent dilemma between the desire for normative certainty and the recognition of the historicity of interpretation. Yet, the majority of scholars consider Soroush's critique of absolutism as a major contribution to the revival of contemporary Islamic thought. He breaks down the relation between revelation and interpretation, thereby creating room for more vibrant intellectual activity without giving up the commitment to the divine aspect of religion.³⁶

³³ Soroush, "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge," 244–50. Sadri and Sadri, "Introduction," xv–xxv.

³⁴ Karl R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, Repr, Routledge Classics (Routledge, 2007), 33–39. 74. Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 85–95.

³⁵ Kamali, *The Parameters of Halāl and Harām in Shari'ah and the Halāl Industry*. Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 118–30; Mukhammad Zamzami et al., "On the Intersection of Science and Religion: A Critical Analysis of Abdulkarim Soroush's Thought," *Religio Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama* 12, no. 2 (2022): 233–60, <https://doi.org/10.15642/religio.v12i2.2167>.

³⁶ Hallaq, *Authority, Continuity, and Change in Islamic Law*, 207–15. 78. Banafshe Madaninejad, "New Theology in the Islamic Republic of Iran: A Comparative Study between Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohsen Kadiva" (Dissertation, The University of Texas, 2011).

Implications of the Theory of the Expansion of Prophetic Experience for Qur'anic Hermeneutics

One of the major consequences of the theory of growth of prophetic experience is a change in interpretation from word-for-word approaches to historical and contextual ones. When revelation is seen as the expression of the religious experience of the Prophet Muhammad within a given historical context, then the Qur'anic text should be united with the social, cultural, and linguistic environment of the seventh century CE. So, interpretation of the Qur'an is a very sensitive issue that has to be done carefully; it is not enough just to do grammatical analysis or to concentrate on the surface meaning of the text only. This approach, in a way, is like Fazlur Rahman's method of double movement, which involves moving from the historical context of the text to universal moral principles and then back to the present context. In Soroush's system of thought, hermeneutics is not a tool that is used to find a single final meaning, it is a tool that opens the doors for meaning to develop as they relate to the changing historical situations. So, interpretation of the Qur'an is a historical and intellectual occurrence. Each generation can understand revelation differently based on their own knowledge and experience. This is in accordance with the new philosophical hermeneutics which focuses on the influence of history in shaping meaning.³⁷

Soroush's line of thought contributes to the conception of Qur'anic interpretive authority as well. In sharp distinction between religion and religious knowledge, Soroush rejects the idea that a single interpretation can be God's will completely. According to this point of view, Qur'anic hermeneutics is a human intellectual activity that is provisional, historical, and subject to change. The point is to take apart interpretive authoritarianism that has frequently been justified by traditional religious institutions. Interpretive authority is no longer the exclusive prerogative of a single group; rather, it is shared in a rational, dialogical space that includes a wider community of interpreters. This is in line with Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's stance against the sacralization of interpretation and his determination not to equate textual meaning with absolute truth.³⁸

Recognizing the role of the human element in revelation also means admitting that the Qur'an can be interpreted in various ways. Since revelation is conveyed through the Prophet's human experience, the text's meaning is not one-sided and final, but rather it is open to a number of interpretations conditioned by the epistemic background of the interpreters. In such a setting, variations in interpretation are not straying from the truth

³⁷ Soroush, "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge." Khalid Hussain Mir and Rafique Anjum, "Unraveling the Neo-Sufi Paradigm: An Analysis of Dr. Fazlur Rahman's Theoretical Insights and Concepts," preprint, February 21, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.32388/VG4IAJ>; Putra Pandu Dinata Nurdiansyah, "The Paradigm of Reconstructing Fazlur Rahman's Ethical-Legal Contextual Interpretation of the Qur'an: Paradigma Rekonstruksi Tafsir Kontekstual Etik-Hukum Al-Qur'an Fazlur Rahman," *Takwil: Journal of Quran and Hadith Studies* 4, no. 1 (2025): 110–25, <https://doi.org/10.32939/twl.v4i1.5256>; Fazlur Rahmān, *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, 8. impr, Publications of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies 15 (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002). Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam*, 31–45. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 295–310.

³⁸ Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam*. Abu Zayd, *Maḥmūl Al-Nass: Dirasah Fi Ulum al-Qur'an*.

but simply results of human intellectual limitation. Qur'anic hermeneutics turns into a dialogical platform through which interpretations amend and complement each other. This perspective very much accords with Mohammed Arkoun's critical hermeneutics, which disallows the sealing of meaning in Islamic discourse.³⁹

Another important hermeneutical dimension is the use of the essential-accidental distinction for Qur'anic interpretation. By splitting timeless values from their episodic expressions, Qur'anic hermeneutics is led away from the mere safeguarding of legal forms which are tied to particular times toward grasping the moral and ethical intentions of the revelation. This method makes possible the updating of legal and social verses that have become tough cases in the contemporary world, such as those related to gender issues, religious freedom, democracy, and human rights. The purpose of the interpretation work is no more to produce a word-for-word translation of the text but to bring into being the value-system which is the major intention of the revelation. To this extent, the thinking of Soroush can be regarded as a major input through which the Qur'an is ethically hermeneutically disengaged.⁴⁰

The theory of expansion of the prophetic experience leads to a change in the way Qur'anic hermeneutics is conceived from a strictly normative activity to a dynamic and critical knowledge-epistemic one. In this sense, interpretation is seen as a stage of the evolution of human knowledge and is, therefore, revisable in view of: a) scientific discoveries b) changes in society. In such a perspective, Qur'anic hermeneutics serves not only the purpose of ensuring consistency with tradition but also the purpose of documenting a deep self-reflexive critique of Christian understandings even after centuries. Interpretation is here a tool of critical reflection that provides religion the possibility of not only keeping up with the times, but also of not sacrificing its moral values to do so. The method supports the contention that being true to revelation does not mean that one should never change the meaning but should be willing to use the means of a responsible continuous re-interpretation of the meaning of revelation.

Ontological and Theological Problems in Soroush's Theory of Revelation

Soroush's theory of the expansion of prophetic experience has profound theoretical implications not only for Qur'anic hermeneutics but also for the reconstruction of Islamic theology. By positioning the Prophet's subjectivity as an epistemic category in the revelatory process, Soroush revises the classical theological paradigm that views revelation as a literal verbal communication wholly independent of human consciousness. In his framework, revelation is a religious event involving interaction between divine reality and the human consciousness of the Prophet Muhammad. This reconstruction shifts the focus of theology from metaphysical questions about the essence of revelation to epistemological questions concerning how revelation is understood by human beings. In classical theology, attention is directed primarily to the ontological status of the Qur'an

³⁹ Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*. Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporar*.

⁴⁰ Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*. Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression*, Reprinted 2002 (twice) (Oneworld, 2002); Rahman, "Law and Ethics in Islam."

as the speech of God. In Soroush's approach, attention turns instead to the historical process through which revelation is articulated in human language. This shift marks a transformation from an ontologically oriented theology to one that is more epistemological and historical.⁴¹

Soroush's approach also allows for a reconstruction of the relationship between revelation and rationality. In the classical view, reason is often positioned as a tool for understanding revelation whose meaning is already fixed. By contrast, in Soroush's framework, reason plays an active role in the formation of religious knowledge. Revelation remains the normative source, but its understanding is always mediated by human intellectual activity. Another important implication is the possibility of contextual interpretation of the Qur'an. By acknowledging revelation's historical dimension, Soroush's theory provides an epistemological basis for interpretive approaches that seek to connect the Qur'an with contemporary social realities. This approach enables the Qur'an to be understood as an ethical source of inspiration relevant to modern society without being rigidly bound to particular historical formulations.⁴²

In a broader framework, Soroush's thought may be understood as an effort to bridge the gap between religious tradition and intellectual modernity. He seeks to maintain a commitment to revelation as a source of religious truth while acknowledging that human understanding of revelation is always limited and historical. This approach avoids two extremes: fundamentalism, which rejects change, and secularism, which excludes religion from the public sphere. Soroush's theoretical contribution also lies in providing a philosophical framework for productive dialogue between the Islamic tradition and modern knowledge. By emphasizing the dynamic character of religious knowledge, he opens the possibility of integrating revelation and the development of science without sacrificing religion's transcendent dimension. Some scholars see this approach as one of the most systematic forms of contemporary Islamic theological reconstruction. By combining philosophical reflection on revelation, religious epistemology, and hermeneutics, Soroush offers a theological model that seeks to preserve the sacredness of revelation while recognizing the historicity of human understanding.⁴³

Despite its important contributions to the renewal of Islamic theology and Qur'anic hermeneutics, Soroush's theory of the expansion of prophetic experience raises a number of ontological and theological problems that have generated extensive debate among contemporary Muslim scholars. These critiques concern, above all, the ontological status of revelation, the Prophet's role in the revelatory process, the sacredness of the Qur'an, the limits of interpretive relativity, and the implications of the theory for the normativity of Islamic law. These problems show that Soroush's reconstruction of revelation is not

⁴¹ Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 3–15. Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran* (1953–2000), 120–35.

⁴² Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 3. rev. and enlarged ed (The Islamic Texts Society, 2003). Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporar*, 52–68.

⁴³ Sadri and Sadri, "Introduction." Roxanne Leslie Euben and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, eds., *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden*, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics (Princeton University Press, 2009), 386–95.

merely an epistemological renewal; it touches the theological foundations that have structured Islamic thought for centuries.⁴⁴

One of the most fundamental critiques of Soroush's theory concerns the ontological status of revelation itself. In classical Islamic theology, revelation is understood as kalam Allah, the word of God, with divine origin and absolute authority. Through his theory of prophetic experience, Soroush shifts attention from revelation as God's verbal communication to revelation as the Prophet's religious experience later expressed in human language. This shift raises a basic question: can revelation still be understood as the word of God in the traditional theological sense, or has it become the Prophet's religious experience that receives legitimacy because of its transcendent source? Some critics argue that Soroush's theory risks reducing revelation to a phenomenon of religious consciousness that is not fundamentally different from the mystical experiences of saints or other religious figures. In this regard, a frequent criticism is that Soroush has not fully explained how the relationship between divine reality and the human expression of revelation can be maintained without obscuring the ontological identity of the Qur'an as God's word.⁴⁵

A second issue concerns the position of the Prophet Muhammad within the structure of revelation. Classical Islamic theology presents the Prophet as the ma'sum recipient of revelation, protected from error and charged with conveying the divine message to humankind. Soroush, by contrast, presents the Prophet as an active subject who participates in forming the language and structure of revelation. In this view, the Prophet's experience, imagination, and intellectual capacity play an important role in the articulation of revelation. Although this approach helps explain the historicity of the Qur'an, it also raises new questions regarding prophetic authority. If revelatory language is shaped through the Prophet's human consciousness, where should the boundary be drawn between the divine message and the Prophet's human contribution? Does the entire content of the Qur'an retain the same normative authority, or are some of its elements historical reflections of the Prophet's experience? This question becomes more complex because the doctrine of prophethood in Islam has traditionally rested on the assumption that revelation is divinely guaranteed in both truth and authority.⁴⁶

A further critique concerns the implications of Soroush's theory for the sacredness of the Qur'an. Soroush maintains that recognizing the human dimension of the Qur'an does not diminish its sanctity, because human language is the only medium through which revelation can be communicated. Nevertheless, some scholars argue that this approach may shift the traditional understanding of the Qur'an as a text wholly originating from God. If the language and formulation of revelation are the result of the Prophet's

⁴⁴ Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran (1953-2000)*, 145–60.

⁴⁵ Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī, *Kitāb Al-Tamhīd* (Dār al-Mashriq, 1957), 287–95. Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 35–60. Husain Naṣr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy*, SUNY Series in Islam (State Univ. of New York Press, 2006), 286–90. Griffel, *Islam and Rationality*, 312–20.

⁴⁶ Al-Juwayni, *Al-Irshad Ila Qawati*, 312–20. 101. Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 70–90. Jahanbakhsh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran (1953-2000)*, 152–55. Richard M. Frank, *Creation and the Cosmic System: Al-Ghazālī & Avicenna*, Abhandlungen Der Heidelberger Akademie Der Wissenschaften, Jg. 1992, Abh.1 (Winter, 1992), 67–74.

articulation, to what extent can the Qur'anic text still be understood as divine speech in the classical sense? This criticism is especially prominent among theologians who argue that an excessive emphasis on the historical and human dimensions of the Qur'an may weaken the foundations of textual sacredness and open the way for the deconstruction of Qur'anic authority.⁴⁷

One of Soroush's greatest contributions is the distinction between religion and religious knowledge. Yet this distinction also creates a serious epistemological problem. If all religious knowledge is historical and relative, what are the limits of acceptable interpretation? Soroush rejects nihilistic relativism and continues to acknowledge the existence of objective truth in religion. However, his theory does not fully explain the epistemological mechanism by which one may distinguish between responsible interpretation and deviant interpretation. In Qur'anic hermeneutics, this question is crucial: without clear criteria, interpretive plurality may develop into relativism that weakens the normative function of revelation.⁴⁸

The final issue concerns the implications of Soroush's theory for Islamic law. The distinction between essential and accidental elements of religion opens the possibility of reinterpreting legal norms that are tied to particular historical contexts. Although this approach provides a philosophical basis for Islamic legal reform, it also raises questions about the boundary between reinterpretation and the deconstruction of religious norms. If certain elements of the Qur'an are understood as historical products, how can one determine which parts remain normative and which parts may be revised? This critique shows that Soroush's theory faces the challenge of formulating a consistent methodology for differentiating legitimate interpretive change from forms of change that may eliminate the normative authority of revelation.⁴⁹ 110,111,112

Despite these critiques, the theory of the expansion of prophetic experience remains a significant contribution to opening new reflections on the relationship among revelation, history, and human subjectivity. Its contribution, however, must be read critically. The theory's main strength lies in its ability to explain the historicity of revelation and the dynamics of religious knowledge, while its main weakness lies in its incomplete account of the ontological status of revelation and the basis of religious normativity. Soroush's theory of revelation is therefore better understood as a project of epistemological reconstruction that challenges classical assumptions about revelation, rather than as a final theological formulation that resolves all questions about the relationship among God, the Prophet, and the sacred text.

⁴⁷ Soroush and Jahanbakhsh, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, 90–110. 105. Naṣr, *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present*, 287–89. 106. Muḥammad Legenhausen, *Islam and Religious Pluralism* (Al-Hoda, 1999).

⁴⁸ Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam*, 29–56. Sadri, “Sacral Defense of Secularism: The Political Theologies of Soroush, Shabestari, and Kadivar,” 257–70. Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporar*, 55–70.

⁴⁹ Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam*, 50–70. Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 118–32. Hallaq, *Authority, Continuity, and Change in Islamic Law*, 207–15.

Conclusion

The discussion in this article has brought to light that disputes about the nature of revelation in Islam are not just theological but also epistemological and hermeneutical. The traditional theological perspective in Islam that highlights the otherness of revelation and the Prophet's role as a passive receiver has historically contributed to safeguarding the sanctity of the Qur'anic revelation. However, this traditional method has less power to deal with present-day issues, especially when the holy scripture is challenged by the ideals of justice, pluralism, and changes in modern society. Abdolkarim Soroush, through his theory of the expansion of prophetic experience, provides a framework that sees revelation as the Prophet's deeply religious experience which is also the result of a historical and human development. Prophetic subjectivity taken as an epistemic category is what Soroush does through which he also makes room for the critical examination of the infallibility of religious knowledge while keeping the divine origin of revelation. Besides making a distinction between religion and religious knowledge, Soroush also distinguishes between the essential and the accidental elements in religion and these two together form a main framework for shifting Islamic theology from the asserting the finality of religious truth to realizing the historicity of human understanding.

The consequences of this modification are profound. Especially in the sphere of Qur'anic exegesis, Soroush's idea facilitates a shift away from the literal-textual interpretation toward the historical-contextual interpretations that take into account the ethical intentions of the divine revelation more deeply. Thus, the act of interpreting is no longer considered merely a quest for the single definitive meaning, but rather, a revelation-related, knowledge-constituting, and interactive process. When it comes to Islamic jurisprudence, this way of thinking opens the door to justifying the alteration of Islamic law, which is based on universal values like justice, common good, and human dignity. Even in the scenario of religious pluralism, Soroush's idea serves as a theological foundation for recognizing the distinction in religious experiences without resorting to an extreme relativistic nihilism.

At the same time, this article has emphasized that the theory of the expansion of prophetic experience is not free from ontological and theological problems. Ambiguities regarding the status of revelation and the position of prophethood indicate that Soroush's thought cannot be accepted uncritically or in its entirety. His main contribution should therefore be understood not as a substitute for classical Islamic theology, but as an epistemological corrective that enriches the contemporary Islamic intellectual tradition. The tension between the transcendence of revelation and the historicity of human understanding should be preserved as a productive space for ongoing theological reflection. In this sense, prophetic subjectivity in Soroush's thought may be read as an intellectual proposal for mediating fidelity to revelation and the need for renewed religious understanding in the modern age. This approach invites Muslims to move beyond defensive attitudes and to engage in responsible critical dialogue. Future studies should further explore the possibility of bringing Soroush's theory into conversation with the classical tradition, especially in formulating a hermeneutical framework capable of

preserving the sacredness of revelation while acknowledging the epistemic limitations of human understanding.

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