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Islam and Democracy. Prospects and Possibilities. A Critical Analysis of the Theory of the Religious Democracy of Dr Abdulkarim Soroush

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Islam and Democracy Prospects and Possibilities

**A Critical Analysis of the Theory of Religious
Democracy of Dr Abdulkarim Soroush**

Aminullah Habibi

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of
the requirement of the University of
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Synopsis

This research is about Islam and democracy and the political theory of ‘democratic religious government’ of Dr Abdulkarim Soroush, an Iranian scholar and one of the leading figures in the debate on Islam and democracy in the Islamic world. The research endeavours to answer several questions: How far has the debate on Islam and democracy developed? Was the Islamic revolution in Iran an Islamic revolution and has it been a step forward for democracy there and an example of the compatibility of Islam and democracy? What are the specificities of Soroush’s political theory and how far are they sustainable? Is he successful in offering, at least in theory, a political model that can accommodate Islam and democracy?

The research puts Soroush’s political theory into context and begins by exploring the background of the debate on Islam and democracy and the debate concerning Shia political thought and the legacy of the Iranian revolution. My research finding in the first chapter is that the political challenges posed by democracy as a political system based on the rule of people, regardless of their faith or gender, have been the most serious challenges Islam and Muslims have faced, especially in the past few decades. It also demonstrates how immature the debate is. The second chapter reveals how the Iranian revolution puts Shia Islam on a new track so that it can neither go back to its isolationist position nor resist the trend of secularisation and democratisation. A religion that, I will argue, was an impediment for democracy and open society, has become a force for reconciliation of the faithful’s spiritual needs and their human rights.

In the third chapter I explore Soroush’s religious beliefs and development in his religious thoughts. I will try to establish in this chapter how he has found Islam to be exposed to scholarly debate and an easy target for modern Muslim scholars and intellectuals equipped with modern methodology to rehearse it, adjust it and rationalise it in order for it to become compatible with modern forms of life and human rights. I also demonstrate

in this chapter that whatever the contents of Soroush's political theory, he is a faithful Muslim and his religious beliefs do not support a democratic political system.

Soroush's political theory is the topic of the fourth chapter. In this chapter I have discovered how Soroush removes religious hurdles through his religious theory in order to present his political theory. It appears that Soroush believes what we have in the name of religion is nothing more than our knowledge and interpretations of religion. Since these are human understandings, they are like other human knowledge and, therefore, they are historical products that are timely and open to critical analysis and adjustable to humans' socially evolving demands. I also explain in the fourth chapter why Soroush feels the existence of religion in public life is under threat and therefore endeavours to reconcile religion with the realities of the modern era to secure a space for religion. In doing this, Soroush loses theoretical consistency because he makes every effort, though unsuccessfully, to become the champion of all across the political spectrum, whether religious or liberal. Soroush's contribution to the debate on Islam and democracy is significant, but he fails, as it will be argued, to offer a viable political theory on the compatibility of Islam and democracy.

The research concludes with an assessment of the prospects and possibilities of the ideas of compatibility of Islam and democracy and highlights the contradictions and challenges of the idea. The conclusion sets the steps and prerequisites for a serious debate on Islam and democracy and illuminates the tenability of the debate by raising serious doubts about the authenticity of the debate on Islam and democracy.

Introduction

The encounter between Islam and democracy has been one of the significant aspects of the encounter between Islam and modernity, despite the fact that it is quite recent, and, in the case of Iran's religious intellectual and clerics, as recent as after the Islamic revolution of 1979. The struggle for some form of broader political participation in Iran, mainly among the elite, dates back to the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–11, but the real debate on Islam and democracy is new and pioneered by Abdulkarim Soroush, the Iranian scholar whose theory of democratic religious government will be the topic of this research. In addition, the current Iranian constitution is the closest legal charter to democracy Iran has ever had.¹ However, the constitution was not written on the basis of compatibility of Islam and democracy and some structural elements of democracy such as universal suffrage were adopted without theoretical acknowledgement that Islam was compatible with democracy. In other words, it was not written following scholarly debates and consensus among the revolutionary elite that Islam was compatible with democracy. In a meeting with Iranian students and educators in Qom after the revolution in March 13, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini said: "Don't listen to those who speak of democracy. They all are against Islam. They want to take the nation away from its mission. We will break all the poison pens of those who speak of nationalism, democracy, and such things."² Soroush recalls the time he was studying in London before the revolution when there were not only debates on democracy but democracy was even ridiculed by intellectuals as the system of imperialists and the dominant powers of the world.³

By 'democracy', in this dissertation, I mean a political system that is based on the rule of people, equal rights, individual freedom and rule of law or, as John Keane writes, has its "roots in popular consent."⁴ The format and structure of this political system may be

different in different societies, as they are different in France and the United States, for instance, but the contents are the same everywhere: everywhere it is people as citizens regardless of their race, gender or faith who elect their rulers and hold them accountable. The principal element among all of them is that human beings are rational and can manage their affairs rationally and, in order to exercise their rationality, they should be free. A community of these rational and free individuals constitutes a people and it is the rule of this people that I call democracy, not the community of the faithful as we see in Iran today, or those of particular religious beliefs or social class. The American constitution begins “We the People of the United States ... do ordain and establish this constitution.” It does not say we the Christian people, or the faithful or secular people of the United States, but rather, we the people of the United States, and that includes whoever are the citizens of the United States. The rule of people in this sense constitutes the definition of democracy in this research.

In Iran, however, the political reality has determined the terms of debate on democracy there. Due to intolerance and religiosity of the Islamic revolution, the debate started and evolved in the form of Islam and democracy, or, as Soroush describes it, “democratic religious government” by religious intellectualism in Iran, rather than explicit debate on democracy. As the Islamic government continued to become established without upholding the democratic rights of the Iranian people promised by the revolution, the discourse on Islam and democracy found growing support, mainly among religious intellectuals. In fact, it was Soroush who initially set the discourse on Islam and democracy in Iran.

Soroush was born into an ordinary Tehrani family in southern Tehran in 1945 on the day of Ashura and was named Hussein. He began his education at Qa`imiyyeh School and proved himself to be one of the bright students there. Soroush was privileged to be one of the students of the newly inaugurated Alavi High School that was established by a group of merchants including Asghar Karbaschiyan and Reza Rouzbeh, who were keen to promote understanding of both religion and modernity. It seems that Soroush’s interests

in modern science and religion and the relation between them evolved during this period of his education. Together with his school education, Soroush invested immense energy in learning about Islam and attended classes on Islamic literature and Persian poetry.⁵

Soroush passed the university entrance examination and studied pharmacy after high school and began to live an ordinary life. He served in the army for two years as part of his compulsory national service at the end of his university course. He also took a position after his degree as part of the Out of Capital Service, a national project that required university students to work for a period of time in the poorer areas of the country: Soroush worked as the director of the Laboratory for Food Products, Toiletries, and Sanitary Materials in Bushehr. That was followed by his job at the Laboratory for Medicine Control in Tehran fifteen months later. It was evident from this period of Soroush's life that his interest in science or rather modern natural science was determining the course of his life. Even when he moved to London, he initially chose to do an MSc in Analytical Chemistry.

It seems that Soroush's real aspiration for understanding modernity and modern philosophy was nurtured in London and after taking his MSc in Analytical Chemistry at the University of London, he entered Chelsea College to study the history and philosophy of science there. This period of Soroush's study coincided with the political situation in Iran gathering momentum that ended in the 1979 Islamic revolution. He became involved in ideological and political debates and in parallel with the atmosphere of his time and in line with what Dr Ali Shariati, the iconic Iranian scholar and mentor of Islamic intellectualism in Iran, was doing, Soroush became preoccupied with providing sound philosophical and theological interpretations of Islam that on the one hand discredited the leftist movements and their approach to Islam and, on the other, secured his position in the ranks of those such as Shariati and Ayatollah Motahari. His book *Dialectical Antagonism (Tazad-e Dialectic)* was the outcome of his lectures at the Islamic student centre Imam-barah in London.⁶

Soroush's next book, published soon after *Tazad-e Dialectic*, was *The Restless Nature of the World (Nahad-e Na-Aram-e Jahan)*, aligned him with the spirit of the revolution and brought him a reputation among the revolution leadership. This book is about the Iranian Muslim scholar Mullah Sadra's theory of 'quintessential motion'. Soroush builds his understanding of monotheism and resurrection based on Mullah Sadra's theory. He was an ideological theologian during that time and had no idea what an Islamic government in today's world was like. He was also following in the footsteps of the Islamic intelligentsia elites such Dr Ali Shariati in Iran and Allama Iqbal Lahori in the subcontinent, who were modern, educated Islamic scholars and thinkers who endeavoured towards and believed in Islamic revivalism. What was evident during that time was that Soroush did not indicate himself to be a liberal Islamic thinker even in the form of an Islamic scholar, as he is today, and became one of the supporters of the Islamic revolution under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini. His other book, *In Which World Do We Live (Dar Kodam Jahan Zendagi Meikoneim)*, is the manifestation of his revolutionary thought during this time and demonstrates his fundamentalist thoughts in line with the radical revolutionaries fighting for an Islamic government.

On his return to Iran from London during the revolution, Soroush was an already-recognisable person or, rather, scholar for the revolutionary leadership, and played a decisive role in the regime's policy regarding the country's educational system, since the universities had been closed and there was pressure by some hardliners to keep them closed. The Cultural Revolution Institute (*Setade Enghelabe Farhangi*) was formed soon after the revolution to deal with the closure of the universities and Soroush was appointed as one of the seven members of this institute directly by Ayatollah Khomeini. This Institute soon urged Ayatollah Khomeini to reopen the universities, which he did, and it was evident that Soroush, as a bright academic, would have had a great impact in that decision. However, Soroush continued serving as a member of the Cultural Revolution Institute until it changed to the High Cultural Revolution Council (*Shoraie Aali Enghelabe Farhangi*) in 1983, soon after which he offered his resignation to Ayatollah Khomeini, disappointed with the course of the revolution. He has stayed out of official

positions ever since and has worked as a lecturer with some universities in Iran, including Tehran University, on various subjects including two of his favourites: philosophy of science and Mawlana (Balkhi, Rumi).⁷ His lectures on Mawlana that were broadcast on Iranian Television drew varied audiences and became very popular in Iran. Having the luxury of being broadcast on Iranian state TV was a sign that his honeymoon with the Islamic state was not over and that he still had a platform to advocate his views. Furthermore, Soroush gave a series of lectures on some subjects in *Nahjulbalaghah*, a book that is a collection of the sermons of Imam Ali at Imam Sadegh Mosque in northern Tehran, similar to Ali Shariati's lectures at Husseinieh Ershad Mosque in northern Tehran.

Soroush is neither a political figure nor a politician and the growing tension between him and the Islamic regime has not been for the reason that he has adopted a political stance against the Islamic state or rallied his supporters behind a political party; opposition to the current Islamic regime is in the nature of his theology, which has unfolded mainly after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. It is a liberal interpretation of Islam or, rather, negation of the clerical understanding of Islam and politics. Publication of his book *The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of Religion*, in which he discusses the evolution of religion and distinguishes between religion and our understanding, or knowledge, of religion, which is not sacred and subject to change, and also his articles in *Kiyan* monthly magazine, put Soroush under the spotlight as a figure of opposition to the Islamic regime. The above book and continuous publication of *Kiyan* became a forum for religious intellectualism to spread its liberal version of Islam and critique of the clerical Islam in Iran, which can be considered a mini-revolution in Iranian theologian debates. From the beginning of the 1990s, Soroush was considered the regime's main opposition, though not a political opponent but rather a figure that was undermining the religious legitimacy and authenticity of the Islamic regime.

Soroush's significance in religious and philosophical debate after the Islamic revolution has been due to two factors; first, he comes from inside the Islamic system and has had

enough legitimacy and time to spread the seeds of critical rationalism gradually and steadily; in other words, owing to his legacy of being one of the supporters of the revolution, he has been tolerated by the regime. Secondly, Soroush has been the only intellectual inside the system that has put forward theoretical, theological and philosophical challenges to the clerics after the Islamic revolution, who have all the time claimed a monopoly on religious knowledge. Shariati's attack and criticism of the clerical establishment was mainly ideological and the clerics were not obliged or rather were not put under the spotlight to reply to those criticisms, due to the fact that those criticisms did not seem to have grave implications for clerics' traditional power base. The situation has been different after the revolution, since on the one hand the clerics are in charge and expected to deliver solutions to the emerging challenges that need to be Islamic as well as democratic, and on the other the clerics must be able to preserve their moral high ground and show that they possess the theoretical upper hand. Yet they have been critically challenged by Soroush, who has been not just a political opponent, but rather an Islamic scholar and theologian refuting the clerical political philosophy and has drawn a significant amount of support for his position. In addition, democratisation in some sections of the clerical system, part of which was embodied in the reformist movement headed by the former president of Iran, Mohammed Khatami, owes a great deal to the legacy of Soroush. It is fair to say that Soroush is the father of the debate on Islam and democracy in Iran.

Soroush's contribution to the debate can be seen within the context of the Iranian Islamic revolution. He acknowledges that democracy was not a matter of debate for Iranian intellectuals, including religious intellectuals before and during the revolution. The debate is quite recent and came into being as the Islamic system failed to meet the political demands of Iranian people. Soroush is the product of the Iranian revolution and its challenges. The revolution was not only a great step away from religious conservatism in Iran, but also a great force for secularisation of Iranian religious intellectualism. Soroush's political theory of democratic religious government can be interpreted in the context of this secularisation process, the process by which not only the Iranian people,

especially the middle class, but also religious intellectuals are becoming increasingly critical of the religiosity of the political system.

Secularisation is an unintentional social process and as Olivier Roy explains, it is:

a social phenomenon that requires no political implementation: it comes about when religion ceases to be at the centre of human life, even though people still consider themselves believers; the everyday practices of people, like the meaning they give to the world, are no longer constructed under the aegis of transcendence and religion, smoothly and gently accomplished (Europe, for example, experienced a decline in religious observance throughout the nineteenth century). But secularisation is not anti-religious or anti-clerical: people merely stop worshipping and stop talking about religion: it is a process.⁸

It is illuminating to see the history of secularisation, whether in Europe or elsewhere, as a process that is not imposed on people. On the contrary, it has taken place, in some cases, with challenges as we see in the contemporary Islamic world. I am aware of the diversity of opinion on secularisation and the shape and form it has taken in different societies. However, secularisation is viewed as a process throughout this research in which religion simply ceases to determine the human course of action anymore and becomes gradually insignificant without any political pressure and coercion.

The question is why is Soroush significant enough in the debate on Islam and democracy to be the topic of this research? Soroush is a modern, educated scholar, a mystic and a theologian who is called the 'Luther of Islam' (*The Guardian*, 1 February 1995; *Los Angeles Times*, January 1995) in the West or the 'Erasmus of Islam' by the Erasmus foundation when he was awarded the Erasmus prize in 1994. He was also nominated as one of the top 100 intellectuals whose works and intellectual endeavours had a transforming role in the world by *Time* magazine in 2005. As yet, there is no substantive research, on the one hand, into his religious and political beliefs and, on the other, into

the topic of an Islamic democracy that has made him an international figure. Soroush is an exceptional case in the debate on Islamic democracies, since he has a legacy in the Iranian Islamic revolution and revolted against the Islamic regime there, claiming to offer a new theory that can uphold both Sharia and democracy. Is Soroush really offering a new model that is different from the Iranian Islamic political system or he is rephrasing the same system based on Sharia law rather than a democratic system? Moreover, will putting so much hope and expectation on somebody whose entire theory, religious and political beliefs are not explored (and in fact, is offering yet another copy of the current Iranian political system) not bring the debate on Islam and democracy to a stagnant position? This research is going to take the debate on Islam and democracy one step further by offering a balanced assessment of Soroush's accounts of the debate.

Soroush's theological and political accounts needed to be fully researched for three reasons; first, because his political beliefs have been dismissive of secular interpretations of Islam and politics and have been a boost to the dominant religious definitions of politics in Iran. Second, his political theory is offered more credit and attention than it merits in Western secular academia where it is understood to be a revolutionary secular approach to Islam and politics, while in fact, as it will be argued, it is a similar version of the Iranian Islamic system. Third, he is wrongly understood as the 'Luther of Islam' in the West as what he has offered is not a reform in Islam but, rather, he is applying modern methodology to justify the same beliefs to modern audiences as the clerics do in their madrasas (religious schools) to their traditional followers. The lines between the real efforts for democracy, human rights and centrality of human beings on the one hand and centrality of God, Sharia law and religious interpretations of politics on the other should be identified in order to move towards the establishment of real democracies in the Muslim world.

Soroush might have a point in claiming that Islamists are on the rise in the Muslim world and that talking about secular democracies in these countries seems absurd in the current political climate.⁹ Islamist is a term that represents a broad spectrum of Islamic

movements, scholars and intellectuals, from Hassan al-Banna, the founder of Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt in the 1930s and Abul-Ala Maududi in the subcontinent, to Ayatollah Khomeini, Ali Shariati, Soroush and Jihadists in the past few decades. In other words, Islamists are those who consider Islam as an ideology as well as a religion, or see a significant role for Islam in politics. Soroush is a moderate voice in this spectrum.

Soroush's political theory is caught up in the above political fever and, under the influence of his view of the current international political climate, he argues that "religious governments are returning and religions are gaining power everywhere and that liberalism will not be sustained as it is any longer". Soroush's religious political theory seems to be a reaction, in his view, to the re-emergence of Islamic governments and to Islamists gaining power. As it will be argued, he could be a powerful force for democracy in Iran and in the Islamic world in the long term if he looked for secular interpretations of politics in Islam. He has not contemplated a secular democratic system in the Islamic countries, whereas the issues of compatibility of a secular system with religiosity of the people, which is his main concern, could be handled by consideration of the proportionality of the secularity of each society. For example, a secular political system in a Muslim-majority country, depending on the secularity of that society, will be bound by the value systems of its people while the official legal and political systems are not religious. Certainly a law that recognises equal rights for gay people will not and cannot pass in the parliament of an Islamic country with a secular democratic political system, at least in the near future, and the secularity of the political system there will be adjusted by the value systems and mindsets of the people. However, out of fear of secularism, introducing an ideological government in the name of religious democracy and binding this democracy to Sharia law, as Soroush is doing, might not produce democracy.

Despite the challenges Soroush's religious political theory is facing in reconciling Islam with democracy, and regardless of the amount of success he has had in delivering a viable theory, he has been, as a matter of fact, the driving force behind the contemporary

deliberation on reform in Islamic thought and compatibility of Islam with democracy in Iran. He pioneered the debate and dialogue on religious reform and democratisation of Islamic political thought in Iran since he was part of the system and was not considered to be an outsider. He also believes in a religious system and has not rejected the entirety of the Iranian Islamic political system. Soroush's affiliation with the Islamic system has given him a platform to steer the debate on religious reform and religious democracy. This has produced a great amount of literature in Farsi by Soroush and other Iranian intellectuals about Soroush and his thoughts. However, due to Soroush's preoccupation with the level of tolerance in the Iranian Islamic system and promotion of a somewhat similar religious political system, his writings have mainly remained attractive to Iranian religious intellectuals and been limited to within the borders of Iran. Apart from his book *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*, which is translated into English, and some articles addressing, directly or indirectly, his views, there is no major research on him. Soroush is a religious intellectual and the majority of those who have written and commented on Soroush are of the same belief circle. He belongs to the religious intellectualism in Iran that predates the Islamic revolution of 1979 and is championed by its iconic figure Ali Shariati, and has been a great force for reconciling Islam and tradition with modernity there and has produced a much more moderate and tolerant version of Islam than the clerical narrative. Soroush has been the leading figure in this movement, since the revolution and the literature produced by this movement has not gone beyond Soroush's understanding of religion and politics.

Moreover, Soroush's views and political theory have not attracted a broader audience beyond religious circles and the reason that he has become well known in the West is mainly due to inadequate understanding of his beliefs or, rather, lack of a perception about the entirety of his religious and political beliefs as well as his opposition to the Islamic regime in Iran. What I am going to do in this research is to, on the one hand, make sense of Soroush's accounts of a religious democracy and the debate on Islam and democracy as the main product of the religious intellectualism in Iran and, on the other, highlight the failure of the religious democracy debate, mainly for the audience

unfamiliar with the logic of religious political debate in Iran.

Soroush has been living in exile for several years now, due to intolerance of his reformist thoughts by the Iranian government. Despite the evolution we notice in his theological and political thoughts since the beginning of the revolution, from a religious fundamentalist believing in a God-centred world to a moderate scholar advocating for democracy and from a theologian campaigning for a democratic religious government based on Sharia law to a thinker being indirectly critical of the role of Sharia law in governance, we have not seen him distancing himself from the views and theories he was preaching in Iran, such as compatibility of Islam and democracy and the role of religion in politics. The political constraints in Iran were thought to be determining the extent of his liberality and the content of discourse he was representing. Within those constraints and context he took important steps from the radical and hard-line position of his younger days to a more settled critical view of the Islamic political system. The growing secularity of religious intellectualism in Iran that is evident in Soroush's political thoughts, for example the way he describes the specificities of his political theory at different times, raises the expectation that the discourse on religious democracy will evolve into a discourse on democracy. Despite being in exile and with much less emphasis on the religiosity of democracy by Soroush, he has not been openly critical of his religious political theory. In a lecture and question and answer session of an hour and 44 minutes on November 2010 on "theoretical obstacles to democracy in Iran", he talks about the challenges Iranians have faced for establishing democracy in their country, but he does not use, even once, the terms religious democracy, Islamic democracy, or 'democratic religious government'.¹⁰ His silence seems to be indicating he is distancing himself from his theory of religious democracy, but he is not negating the notion of building a democracy on religious principles, including Sharia law.

The implications of the findings of this research will reveal the logic of the project of religious democracy and will illustrate that despite the great step that the project can be towards democratic political systems in the Muslim countries, in terms of offering

theories of democratic religious governments, it will complicate the process further and cannot offer a breakthrough for the establishment of democratic systems. The research will explain how ambivalent the project is: on the one hand it unveils a compelling need for a rational approach towards democracy and the plight of people in terms of political rights; on the other, it cannot come to terms with the lack of relevance of religion in its normative form to modern humans' democratic sociopolitical aspirations, and acts like a political movement with a religious ideology rather than an epistemological movement that is seriously heading towards removing the theoretical obstacles to democracy in the Islamic world. What the research is highlighting is not why Soroush is a liberal figure, as he is known to be in the West, but, rather, why he is advocating for a religious system in the name of democratic religious government.

I begin my research with a brief look at the background to the debate on Islam and democracy and the evolution of democratic thought, and also the Iranian revolution as an unprecedented event in Islamic history. The encounter between Islam and modernity and democracy as a modern political system has raised numerous challenges for Muslims, especially in the past few decades. The political challenges posed by democracy as a political system based on rule of people, regardless of their faith or gender, have been the most serious ones. Although there is a great deal of literature on compatibility, or contradiction between Islam and democracy, the debate needs to be explored further. The first introductory chapter will look at the challenges democracy has faced during its evolution process and the debate on Islam and democracy.

The second chapter investigates the Iranian Islamic revolution and tries to discover the effects and implications of the revolution in Shia thought in Iran and Shia communities around the world. The chapter will also examine whether the revolution further secularised Iranian society and was unintentionally a force for open society or reinvigorated religion and prevented spread of secularisation in Iran. Additionally, I try to explore in this chapter whether this revolution was really an Islamic revolution and established an Islamic government.

The Shia clerical establishment has not been ideological and has not had a specific political agenda for gaining power and, for the first time in history, Ayatollah Khomeini broke this rule and provided a political theory for establishing an Islamic political system, despite the reservation of nearly all clerical establishment elites. A religion and establishment that had its own territory and area of influence and was not fully engaging with society at large; in other words, the establishment that was a government inside the Iranian government has become exposed to modern interaction and transformation. The Ulama (the clerical elites) and the clerical establishment had mainly been isolationist and their minimal interference in politics had been demonstrated when it was in line with the Iranian civil right movements. All that they expected from the governments had been to respect their area of influence and be mindful of the Sharia law.

This chapter also looks at another major topic: the religious content of the Iranian Islamic revolution. Soon after the revolution, the protection and welfare of the state were the highest priorities for Ayatollah Khomeini. The Islamic revolution took place alongside Iranian civil right movements and, on this occasion, Islam became instrumental for the Iranian civil and national aspirations. The Iranian system has observed all aspects of Iranian nationalism; except for the supreme leader and a few other positions, being Iranian is not a requirement but, in practice, a non-Iranian cannot be elected to these positions. It is as difficult for an Afghan Persian-speaking man to marry an Iranian as for a French man, according to Olivier Roy, the French specialist in political Islam.¹¹

The Iranian Islamic revolution seems to have transformed the Shia discourse on politics and while it meant to establish an Islamic system, it has, though unintentionally, become a force for democratisation and secularisation in Iran. The clerics, who were resisting modernisation of their societies and provided religious arguments to oppose the products of modern civilisation like democracy, human rights and equality of rights for men and women, had to adjust themselves to the modern demands and aspirations of the Iranian people. Religion, once the possession of the clerics and a prohibited zone for the

academics and wider public, has become the subject of debate and is in a position to deliver solutions to the emerging challenges, and, if it fails to deliver, further secularisation will be the outcome.

I am also going to demonstrate that the level of interest and attention paid to Soroush's reformist position is not merely a personal triumph for him. He was a supporter of the revolution and held a senior position in the Islamic system but later became the critical voice of the Iranian Islamic intellectualism and challenged the clerical narrative of Islam and politics. Soroush has enjoyed the platform that the revolution offered him and scholars like him, in terms of putting religion in a debatable position and making it a subject of critical analysis. Taking advantage of the position offered by the revolution and spreading critical debate and analysis of religion, or rather legitimising critical analysis of Islam under the ruling of clerics, might be one of Soroush's biggest achievements.

The chapter also investigates the numerous channels to the debate on Islam and democracy opened by the Iranian revolution. On the one hand, it placed Shia Islam on a new track so it can neither go back to its isolationist position nor resist the trend of secularisation and democratisation. That is why scholars like Soroush have been concerned with the continual existence of religion in public life and therefore endeavour to reconcile religion with the realities of the modern era. The discourse on Islam and democracy and compatibility of Islam and democracy in the wider Muslim world, particularly in Iran, owes a great deal to the Iranian Islamic revolution that moved the debate a great step forward from a context of general debate on Islam and modernity or tradition and modernity to an explicit debate on Islam and democracy.

On the other hand, the revolution exposed Islam to a scholarly debate and made it easy for modern Muslim scholars and intellectuals equipped with modern methodology to deconstruct it, adjust it and rationalise it to become compatible with modern forms of life and human rights. "Muslims are not supposed to walk on their heads while rational people walk on their feet",¹² as Soroush has said, which means that if the rational people

of the world have found rational and better ways of managing their affairs, the religious people should do the same and not oppose them simply because they do not match their religious understandings or they are introduced by non-Muslims. Religion that was an impediment for democracy and open society has become a partner for reconciliation of the faithful's spiritual needs and their human rights, including their political rights.

Before entering the debate on Soroush's theory of democratic religious government in the fourth chapter, I try first to establish his religious beliefs in the third chapter. Soroush is not only a Muslim, but also a Shia Muslim, who is devoted and faithful to Islam. As it will be argued in this chapter, he was a fundamentalist Muslim during his younger years, who believed in the literal wording of religious messages and absolute righteousness of Islam over all other schools of thought. I begin with looking at his intellectual life during his younger period when he was a follower of Islam, which he believed to be a superior belief system and also believed that all those who were not followers of Islam were going astray. Even our humanity, in his view, was not complete if it was not directed by the direct order of God. I then examine the reasons why Soroush claims to have relinquished the type of religious belief he was advocating and whether he really distanced himself from those views or has pioneered a smarter method to redraft them to serve modern audiences. The question that this chapter answers is: how genuine and sustainable is his current approach? Is it a cosmetic transformation or a revolution in content in his intellectual life? Is he the same Soroush that has deployed modern methodology and terminology to sell his religious beliefs and dogmas to a modern audience?

There is a great deal of literature regarding the encounter between tradition and modernity, especially in Iran, such as *Modernity and Critical Thought* by Babak Ahmadi, and *Tradition and Secularism* by Soroush, and many more books and articles created by Iranian scholars since the beginning of the twentieth century. Modernity is considered to be, in this dissertation included, a cultural and philosophical movement in the history of Europe that has brought human beings at the centre of this universe to rationally comprehend and interpret it, It is also understood to be anything new, man-made, and

scientific. Soroush endeavours to find a space for tradition and religion in the light of modernity. Indeed, the political theory of Soroush's 'democratic religious government' is not the main component of his intellectualism, though the political nature of the theory and his innovation of a new and modern model of government to be on the one hand Islamic and on the other, modern has posed a direct challenge to the position and authority of the conservative establishment in power in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Moreover, whatever the depth and authenticity of Soroush's contribution to the debate, his mere involvement in this debate has highlighted the significance and seriousness of the modern challenges Islam and the Islamic countries are facing today.

What I hope to ascertain and illustrate in the third chapter is that despite the fact that Soroush has contributed more than anyone else to the debate on liberalisation of Islamic thought in his country, he has nonetheless offered too little and has not gone far enough to significantly differentiate him from his radical younger position. In other words, Soroush's religiosity and interpretation of Islam is not much different from his younger radical resolve. Ultimately, one cannot be very different if one defines oneself as being in a particular religious structure, since, whatever the difference, you are in that structure anyway and constrained by that: the structure that has its boundaries and red lines already set. In effect, we cannot have an Islamic liberalism. In other words, the extent of liberalisation of Islam is limited and bound by the religious texts and the Prophet's sayings and deeds and, indeed, Sharia law.

With a thorough analysis and understanding of Soroush's religious beliefs achieved, I move on to his political theory. In spite of the fact that the third chapter addresses Soroush's religious beliefs, I begin my investigation in the fourth chapter with a look at the elements of Soroush's religious theory that seem to be the basis of his political theory. The theory of 'democratic religious government' and his efforts to find some form of compatibility between Islam and democracy have been among the most controversial parts of his intellectual career, while in fact they are the natural product of his religious theory. Soroush's definitions of Islam and democracy are very diverse and,

depending on the occasion and audience, inconsistent; therefore, it will be immensely exigent to conclude a monistic understanding of definitions of the concepts. Soroush is a master of hermeneutics and has endeavoured to open a vast theoretic area of manoeuvre, where he can inject modern spirit into religious concepts, challenge the clerical establishment with sound knowledge of modern methodologies and apply modern logic and rationalism into the debate on religion and understanding of religion.

Rational choice, reason and rationalism are familiar concepts in the Islamic and Persian mystical literature, especially among modern intellectual circles. There is a broader consensus on the definition of reason and everybody would agree with what Alexander Jamieson said two centuries ago that: “Reason is the faculty by which we are acquainted with abstract or necessary truth; and enabled to discover the essential relations of things”.¹³ It is this very basic human specificity that is causing challenges for religions and has been considered as a rival for religions. The status of reason is accepted in Islam but only as an instrument to understand the intentions of God, the Prophet, the Qur’an, and Sharia and not as a sovereign power of intellect that is capable of discovering the truth independently. By reason in this dissertation, I mean this independent status of mind and rationalism and faith in the capability of reason, as “an approach to life based on reason and evidence” that encourages people to think for themselves.¹⁴ Rationalism is often considered to be anti-religion and the majority of rationalists are either atheist or agnostic. The religious views of rationalism are well defined by George Park Fisher who says “rationalism is a term often used to designate the position of those who disbelieve in revelation and suppose that whatever knowledge we have in religion is derived from unassisted reason.”¹⁵ However, rationalism is not supposed to be necessarily anti-religion but invites human beings to rehearse, redefine and re-examine any human affairs, including religion based on reason and human understanding, rather than adhering to pre-packed and prescribed models of life offered by religions.

My intended meaning of religion in this research is mainly the functional definition and meaning of religion and its role in society, whether through engaging in politics or its

application as a political tool by the religious groups, like the use of religion as a political means by the minority conservative clerics in Iran. Religion is a set of principles and a system of thought that is based on a belief in God, and feelings, rituals, dogmas and practices that are considered divine and defines the relation between the faithful and God; it is a source of identity and claims to have the absolute truth, is prejudiced and often has a sacred book revealed to a prophet directly, in the case of Islam, by God. Religion, as Allama Iqbal Lahori defines it, is “description and interpretation from the whole existence of a human being”,¹⁶ or as Andrew Greeley puts it; “a system of narrative metaphors that gives meaning and purpose to life, that answer questions about tragedy, suffering, death and about happiness and ecstasy.”¹⁷ The essence of religion, epistemologically, as Mircea Eliade explains, is to be understood “first and foremost as belief in a realm of supernatural beings.”¹⁸ However, regardless of the abstract definitions of religion, the best functional articulation of religion that can represent the premise of this research is what Emile Durkheim has said:

the real function of religion is not to make us think, or enrich our knowledge, nor to add to the conceptions which we owe to science ... but rather, it is to make us act, to aid us to live. The believer, who has communicated with his god, is not merely a man who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is stronger. He feels within him more force, either to endure the trials of existence, or to conquer them.¹⁹

Soroush believes that what we have in the name of religion is nothing more than our knowledge and interpretations of religion and, since these are human understandings, they are like other human understandings and knowledge and therefore, they are historical products that are not eternal facts, but knowledge at a particular time and open to critical analysis. Treating religion as the knowledge of religion, on the one hand, puts religion in an insecure position and, on the other, paves the way for adjusting religious understanding to socially evolving human demands. In order to introduce his political theory, Soroush removes the religious opposing elements through his religious theory.

The resentments against his political theory by the conservative clerics come mainly from the challenges posed by his religious theory.

The other important element in Soroush's political theory is that religious society is the precondition for a democratic religious government and, in such a society, no other form of government can be democratic except a religious government. Religious society is the only condition that Soroush considers to be required for a democratic religious government on all occasions. He fails to clarify his position as to what the specificities of a religious society are. Is it a society in which only religious people live, and, if so, do they all have the same religion? Is it possible to have a society where only people from the same religion and with the same interpretation of that religion exist? If not, what happens to the followers of other religions and minorities and those who do not believe in any religion, or followers of the same religion with different interpretations of that religion? Soroush also believes that a democratic religious government is a government like any other democratic government and being religious does not differentiate it from other forms of government. If there is no difference between religious and nonreligious democratic governments, why is it that a democratic religious government can only take place in a religious society?

Democracy seems to have some preconditions such as that the people who cast their vote are rational and do so according to their own reason and understanding and have the choice to vote based on their understanding, reason and interests. Without such individuals we might not have democracy and, with such individuals, a society with one collective belief or religion sounds difficult to conceive of. Establishment of a democracy is linked to various other social developments such as education, economic progress and cultural tolerance. Once the fertile ground for the emergence of individuals who think that they can choose based on their own understanding and interests is generated, the establishment of democracy may be facilitated.

Methodology

Investigating Islam and democracy and Soroush's theory of democratic religious government required an in-depth study of Islam, particularly Shia Islam, on the one hand, and democracy on the other in order to set the discourse. Without an in-depth study of Shia Islam and the evolution and establishment of the clerical system in Iran and the history of the relation between Shia Islam and politics, writing about Islam and democracy was not possible. Despite the different political experiences among the Sunni and Shia Muslims, Islamic literature, as a whole, is not rich on the compatibility of Islam and democracy and the debate is new, though the challenges Islam has faced from modernity have existed for centuries. I have endeavoured to investigate the debate on Islam and modernity as well as democracy so as to establish how mature the debate is and what the potential is for Islamic democracies and what the position and contribution of the Iranian Islamic revolution are in this debate. I have also made an in-depth investigation of mysticism in Islam and Persian culture to establish its role, on the one hand, in the crystallisation of the anti-rational approach in life and politics and, on the other, its relaxed approach to religiosity and anti-Sharia spirit, and I have assessed its effects on the definitions of the concepts and formation of the political views of Muslims and Soroush.

I have tried to provide definitions of the key concepts such as democracy, modernity, rationalism, religion, and secularism in the introduction so that I can use them in the main debate unhindered, with the awareness of the fact that these concepts are contested and the definitions provided in this dissertation are demonstrating the intentions of the thesis of the concepts. In this essay, I have also looked at some of the parallel literature available such as the writings of John Esposito and Olivier Roy, in order to establish the legacy and effects of the Iranian Islamic revolution on the debate in general and on Soroush in particular. Establishing a sound picture of the Iranian Revolution due to its

complexity and a balanced assessment of the religious and political aspects of the revolution has facilitated putting Soroush's theory and the debate on Islam and democracy into context.

Soroush's views are not straightforward and through my research I noticed that I had to read his works and listen to his speeches for different occasions and audiences in order to have a balanced understanding of his theory. For instance, all that he tries to prove, when he talks politics, is that the democratic religious government cannot be established based on jurisprudence and it has to be based on religious faith and nonreligious rights of people. He even said in an interview with the BBC Persian Service that "if we raise the light of some of the Sharia laws' lantern, they will put the whole house on fire".²⁰ He also says that the religious government has a duty to protect religion and application of Sharia law strengthens these democratic religious governments. I have tried to discover, through sequences of events, audiences Soroush has addressed and timings of his speeches, the dominant thoughts in his works.

In addition, the main body of Soroush's books is formed by the texts of his speeches and I have endeavoured to see where and under what constraints he has spoken and compared his views expressed inside and outside Iran. Moreover, not all of his books are listed on his official website, especially those that were written when he was younger and while he was expressing his radical and fundamentalist Islamic views and revolutionary ideology. I made every effort and did extensive research in Iran; it is extremely challenging even for a Farsi speaker who is not familiar with the mindset of religious intellectualism in Iran, let alone for a non-Farsi speaker, to gain access to those sources that are not available in the market anymore. Soroush does not talk about that part of his life and the revolutionary Islamist views he had at that time but it was extremely important for my research to find out about the roots of his religiosity and establish his ideological approach and links, on the one hand, with the mainstream religious intellectualism championed by Ali Shariati, and, on the other hand, with the Islamic revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini. Findings on Soroush's earlier religious and political convictions

and tracing these convictions up to today has served to demonstrate the evolution in his intellectual life and to reveal whether he has distanced himself from those views or still expresses a moderate version of the same beliefs.

Furthermore, it is immensely difficult to have a clear idea of Soroush's religious and political intellectualism without a sound understanding of the Iranian religious intellectualism headed by Dr Ali Shariati. My detailed knowledge of Shariati's influential religious intellectualism, with its approach of declericalisation of Islam, put me in a better position to understand the ideological background of Soroush's intellectualism and the discourse his intellectualism adheres to. I have taken great advantage of my background knowledge and knowledge of the power structure in Iran and the long history of rivalries between the clerics and religious intellectualism there in order to read Soroush's works. Due to the complex political situation after the Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran and the grip of clerics on power, Soroush became a master of hermeneutics. Resorting to hermeneutics was, on the one hand, negation of his younger absolute, ideological and normative understanding of religion, and on the other, a means of combating and challenging the dominant clerical understanding of Islam in order to open the space for dialogue on Islam and democracy. I have applied a great deal of attention to his craft of hermeneutics in reading his works and reaching my conclusions.

Moreover, since the main body of my research is on Soroush, many of his 25 books written in Farsi, including *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*, translated into English, have been investigated in the second and third chapters. I have also listened to hundreds of hours of his speeches on religion and politics. His interviews and website are other invaluable sources of his intellectual life that are examined. Soroush's encounter at the Centre for the Study of Democracy on 3rd November 2006 and his speech on 'Qur'an and Balkhi (Rumi)', at the Iranian Students' Islamic Centre in London, where I put some of my questions directly to him, were other points of reference. Soroush is a theologian and due to his circumstances even his religious accounts are political and in order to get to the bottom of his arguments a thorough investigation of his intellectual life has been

the target of my research.

In addition, despite the fact that I know Farsi, Soroush's first language, and have first-hand access to his writings, providing a fair account of Soroush's political philosophy has presented great challenges. I am fully aware that Soroush is taking advantage of his skills of hermeneutics greatly in his works and it is this methodology that has offered him the opportunity to open a space for intellectual debate and modern interpretations of Islam. In order to have a fair account of Soroush's theological and political philosophy, one needs to be aware of the tremendous skills that he has in reading and interpreting the religious texts and, therefore, my knowledge and familiarity with the Persian language and mystical culture has given me an important advantage in adopting a sound methodology of reading Soroush's works.

Additionally, I have also taken advantage of the Centre for the Study of Democracy's seminars, events and public lectures and the University of Westminster's libraries as well as the British, LSE and SOAS libraries. During the process of my research I have had the privilege of personal supervision by Professor John Keane, who himself is an outstanding writer and expert in political philosophy and the area of my research.

Chapter 1

Islam and Democracy: Plausibility and Challenges

Despite the initial appearance of the Islamic resurgence seeming to oppose democratisation in the Muslim world in the past half a century, these two have not only coincided, but also have supported each other; for example, Islamic resurgence helped democratisation in the form of removal of the authoritarian Shah regime in Iran in 1979, whereas democratisation opened a space for Islamists in the form of Islamic parties gaining power in Turkey. In other words, Islamic resurgence can be interpreted in the context of the democratisation process in the Muslim world as a social movement for broader political participation, though it does not mean that Islamists have fought for democracy, or established democracy once they are in power. The issue of compatibility of Islam and democracy has been a matter of debate for scholars around the world in the past few decades and views are divided among those who see some form of compatibility between Islam and democracy (see, e.g., Beinin & Stork, 1997; Eickelman & Piscatori, 1996; Entelis, 1997; Esposito & Voll, 1996; Kramer, 1993; Salame, 1994), and others who find Islam and democracy at odds and contradictory of each other (see, e.g., Fukuyama, 1992; Huntington, 1984, 1991, 1996a, 1996b; Lipset, 1994).¹

In spite of lack of democratic experiences in Islamic history and the fact that Islamic governments from the beginning ruled on the basis of religious legitimacy rather than approval of people, the Islamic literature is full of references that can be interpreted in favour of both views on compatibility of Islam and democracy. If we let Islam talk with the historical experiences of Muslims, then contradiction of Islam and democracy can be the dominant view, but if we try to provide liberal interpretations of Islam, we can find enough sources in the Islamic literature to justify democracy. However, it seems none of the views are investigating deeply into the Islamic history, theological literature, sources and the contexts those literature and sources were created and developed to find out whether Islam is compatible with democracy. Both sides' views are based on the manifestation of Islam as an ideology and on modern political Islam, often in the context of local cultures in the past half a century, rather than Islam as a religion. For instance,

the case of the Taliban in Afghanistan cannot be a good example of the incompatibility of Islam and democracy due to the fact that the the Taliban version of Islam was deeply influenced by their local tribal culture.

The majority of scholars finding Islam incompatible with democracy view Islam as a uniform ideology that is inherently against democratic and liberal values. Francis Fukuyama writes:

It is true that Islam constitutes a systematic and coherent ideology, just like liberalism and communism, with its own code of morality and doctrine of political and social justice ... And Islam has indeed defeated liberal democracy in many parts of the Islamic world, posing a grave threat to liberal practices even in countries where it has not achieved political power directly.²

Similar views are expressed by other scholars such as Lipset and Samuel Huntington who compare Islam with Marxism and find it an impediment for development of democratic ideals.³

The pro-compatibility of Islam and democracy scholars' main argument is that Islam and Islamic theological sources and scriptures are open to interpretation and there is no monolithic view of Islam. Based on the interpretability of Islamic theological sources and jurisprudential concepts such as ijma (consensus), shura (consultation), and ijtiḥad (informed, independent judgment), the scholars who believe in the coexistence of Islam and democracy find evidence in the Qur'an, Hadith (narrations about sayings and deeds of the Prophet Mohammed) and Sunna (sayings and deeds of the Prophet Mohammed) to support their claims.⁴ These scholars refer to a limited numbers of sources in the Qur'an such as Verse 2: 25 that say: "Let there be no compulsion in religion," and in the Hadith, for example, "Differences of opinion within my community is a sign of God's mercy"⁵ and the above concepts. The political experiences of Islamic movements and parties

engaging in democratic processes are empirical evidence that scholars think can demonstrate compatibility of Islam and democracy.

Both sides of the argument are confined to an essentialist view that democracy should be produced through Islam and, therefore, if they find Islam compatible with democracy Muslims will have democracy, and if they do not, democracy and democratic ideals will not grow in the Muslim world. The pro-compatibility scholars try to pick and choose the limited sources in Islam, in some cases out of context, to prove that democracy is compatible with Islam and bypass the abundant number of sources in Islam contradicting democracy. On the other hand, the scholars who do not believe Islam can accommodate democracy consider Islam as a monolithic religion that is invariably against democracy. They do not see the interpretability of Islamic concepts and diversity among Muslims in the form of different schools of thoughts and jurisprudential doctrines and some sources in Islamic scriptures such as verse 99 of Younus, 29 of Kahf, 28 of Hood and 25 of Baqarah that forbid the Prophet to impose his religion on others and give people the choice to become faithful or not as evidences of co-existence between Islam and democracy.

Moreover, what is missing here is the fact that religion is not the absolute determining factor in human life and behaviour. It is growing human needs and constantly changing demands that make religion reform and adjust and not the content and dogmas of a religion that define and determine the needs and form of life of people for ever. Some religious dogmas are like other obstacles to the establishment of democracy in human history and the liberal democracies of the world have not become established in a short period of time and without challenges. The fact of the matter is that the challenges for democracy in the Muslim world are similar to challenges in other societies in the history. The difference is the rigidity of cultural and religious mechanisms in the Muslim world that have made these challenges tougher rather than Muslims being a different type of people who are inherently against democracy. A study authored by Steven Ryan Hofmann from Indiana University to empirically examine the relationship between Islam

and democracy in eight countries and Muslims and Christians undergoing democratic changes indicates that the level of support for democracy among Muslims is higher than that among Eastern Orthodox Christians.

The question is: was or is democracy the first choice for human beings? Why did it take two thousand years to reappear and hundreds of years to establish, though with serious challenges? In fact, unlike Francis Fukuyama's vision of democracy as a first choice,⁶ it has not been and will not be human beings' first choice if absolute power could be achieved, as in the past. Those in power have the tendency to hold more power and influence than they already have and democratisation has not taken place by rulers giving up their power voluntarily. Even in the intellectual realm, as David Held argues, "from ancient Greece to the present day, the majority of political thinkers have been highly critical of the theory and practice of democracy. A general commitment to democracy is a very recent phenomenon."⁷

In spite of the fact that democracy is a contested idea and political system; that there are numerous conflicting interpretations and definitions of its key terms, political participation and representations; and that democratic thought has expanded, in terms of its scope, the basic content of all definitions is the same. There is a variety of definitions of democracy such as: the rule of people, the rule of the majority, the rule of the representatives of the people, a multiparty political system. Soroush defines it as follows: "democracy is the way of governance that considers the rule of people as their human and non-religious right".⁸ Whatever the definition, democracy has something to do with people, the vote of people, the political participation of people, and the decisions taken based on their consensus or majority consensus. From Athenian democracy (where the concept of people had limited meaning and did not include women and slaves and when we had few advocates of democracy except those like Pericles, the Athenian politician who was quoted by Thucydides as saying in his famous funeral speech that "our constitution is called a democracy because power is in the hands not of a minority but of the whole people")⁹ to the present day, the democratic literature and definition of

concepts such as democracy and people have expanded extensively; democracy is about people and protection and respect for the rights of minorities, individual rights and life style, and equality of rights before the law.

Samuel Huntington well summarises the scope of the debate on democracy in the twentieth century:

In the mid-twentieth century three general approaches emerged in the debate over the meaning of democracy. As a form of government, democracy has been defined in terms of sources of authority for government, purposes served by government, and procedures for constituting government.¹⁰

Huntington believes that the first two meanings are ambiguous and imprecise and the dominant approach became the procedural idea of democracy:

By the 1970s the debate was over, and Schumpeter had won. Theorists increasingly drew distinctions between rationalistic, utopian, idealistic definitions of democracy, on the one hand, and empirical, descriptive, institutional, and procedural definitions on the other, and concluded that only the latter type of definition provided the analytical precision and empirical referents that make the concept a useful one. Sweeping discussions of democracy in terms of normative theory sharply declined, at least in American scholarly discussions, and were replaced by efforts to understand the nature of democratic institutions, how they function, and the reason why they develop and collapse.¹¹

There are some differences of approach and discourse regarding the debate on democracy in the developing Islamic countries like Iran and in the Western democratic countries. The predisposition of the Western scholars is not the definition of democracy in an idealistic, classic and normative type – for instance, whereby democracy is the rule of

people or people are the source of authority for government. That people as citizens, regardless of their ethnicity and religious beliefs, are the sources of authority for government is taken for granted and what is at stake is the process of how the government is constituted and functions, unlike the Islamic countries where the challenges are basic and still trying to establish who should govern and who are the sources of authority. In other words, the scope of the debate in the Islamic countries is not about the nature and function of democratic institutions yet. Samuel Huntington elaborates:

[...] this study (*The Third Wave*) defines a twentieth-century political system as democratic to the extent that its most powerful collective decision-makers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote. So defined, democracy involves the two dimensions: contestation and participation.¹²

The challenges of the debate in Islamic countries such as Iran is whether the people should rule and who are the people: are they the Muslims only, the Shia or Sunni Muslims only, the Arabs, the Persians or the Punjabis only. In other words, the debate on democracy is still a classic and normative pre-twentieth century debate that is struggling to come to a consensus on what groups constitute the people: are Baluch and Kurdish or Sunni people part of the Iranian people with equal rights like the majority Shia, or do Shia have any rights at all in Saudi Arabia? One of the implications of an Islamic democracy or religious democracy can be that this democracy assumes a duty, as Soroush puts it, “to protect religion”.¹³ In doing so, would this democracy apply measures to protect the religiosity of the government and would that entail infringement of human rights of those of other religions, nonreligious people, and those with other interpretations of the same religion? What can be the definition of people in such a democracy and it is self-evident that the debate on democracy should be centred on the sources and purpose of authority rather than the procedural aspects of the formation of government?

One of the other specificities of democracy is its strong bond with pluralism, human rights and justice and the fact that a political system cannot be called a democracy if it does not maintain basic human rights and diversity of faith and culture. According to Carol Gould:

the protection of individual rights as a requirement of justice and the protection of minority rights against the potential injustices of majority rule are seen to be essential constraints on democratic decision-making, constraints embodied in a constitutional framework and in the process of judicial review.¹⁴

Democracy, from the beginning of its creation as a political system, was accompanied by the above values and elements; in other words, pluralism, human rights and justice were entwined with the fabric of democracy. Pericles said:

When it is a question of settling private disputes, everyone is equal before the law; when it is a question of putting one person before another in positions of public responsibility, what counts is not membership of a particular class, but the actual ability which the man possesses.¹⁵

Evolution in democratic thinking and the emergence of new challenges for democracy has enhanced the flexible and responsive nature of democracy to adapt and accommodate the emerging modern democratic demands. David Held explains that:

for any engagement with the contemporary meaning of democracy has to explain additional questions – questions not only about the ‘internal’ or ‘domestic’ character of democracy, but also about its ‘external’ qualities and consequences. This is so because one of the most conspicuous features of politics at the turn of the millennium is the emergence of issues which

transcend national democratic frontiers. Processes of economic internationalisation, the problem of the environment and the protection of the rights of minorities are increasingly matters for the international community as a whole.¹⁶

It is not only human rights and the rights of minorities at the national level that matter for democracies, but issues like environmental and human rights at large are also areas of concern and, accordingly, political systems that do not recognise these concerns, will lack the essence of democracy.

In addition, pluralism as a diverse and tolerant form of life is the essence of democracy and the pluralist conditions of democratic societies highlight the fact that the growth of reason has left little room for incontestable truths. The claim of incontestable truths and monopoly of those truths is an aspect of every religion and due to this nature, religions, as Soroush claims, cannot be pluralist because they all claim to have the truth, or rather, the absolute truth, though he claims that we can have religious pluralism.¹⁷ Believing in plurality of religions entails accepting the relativity of truths, while the unmitigated claim of each religion is that only it holds the truths. Mohsen Kadivar, one of the other Iranian scholars says: “faith comes about when there is an unrivalled individual transcendent truth present. Lack of the possibility of distinction between truth and falsehood will be the logical conclusion of religious pluralism.”¹⁸ If a religion concedes that it does not hold the whole and absolute truth, then it has opened the gate for relativism. Despite the religions’ claim to hold incontestable truths, the growth of reason and the practical necessity of modern life have enforced pluralism as a means of coexistence between people of different faiths and those without any faith.

Pluralism provides the necessary atmosphere in which competing groups and parties can interact without violating the rights of others. As William E. Connolly says, in the case of America, “pluralism portrays the system as a balance of power among overlapping economic, religious, ethnic and geographical groupings. Each ‘group’ has some voice in

socially binding decisions...”¹⁹ Democracy cannot sustain itself if it does not uphold and protect pluralism and with the existence of genuine pluralism, the concerns that facilitate the incentives for a ‘democratic religious government’, a government that claims to provide the condition where religion can function and exist and have a role in public life, will be isolated. According to Alexis de Tocqueville:

a viable pluralism encourages among its citizens a widespread participation in politics “which originate in the lowest classes ... and extends successfully to all ranks of society.” Such widespread involvement is necessary because “no one will ever believe that a liberal, wise and energetic government can ever spring from the suffrages of a subservient people.”²⁰

Democracy has evolved through realisation of the fact that the number of human beings as individuals who would risk their life for freedom, equality and participation in power has gone up dramatically and gaining absolute power is impossible. The great sociopolitical changes that have established democracy and the above notion have occurred in England, the United States and France in the past few centuries, during which time, “the French Revolution had more impact on democratic ideas than any other single movement.”²¹ The French Revolution was the end of struggle for recognition or end of “the ‘contradiction’ inherent in the relationship of lordship and bondage”, according to Hegel.²² Modern liberal democracy that was institutionalised after the French Revolution grants this recognition as a universal value to all human beings and Francis Fukuyama explains how it does this:

[...] it does this by granting and protecting their rights. That is, any human child born on the territory of the United States or France or any of a number of other liberal states is by that very act endowed with certain rights of citizenship. No one may harm the life of that child, whether he or she is poor or rich, black or white, without being prosecuted by the criminal justice system ... And finally, when this child reaches adulthood, he or she will have

the right to participate in the very government that establishes these rights in the first place, and to contribute to deliberations on the highest and most important questions of public policy. This participation can take the form of either voting in periodic elections, or the more active form of entering into the political process directly, for instance by running for office.²³

The historical evolution of democracy and the fact that it has been open to change and formed on the basis of flexibility to institutionalise this recognition is well defined by John Keane. He says:

the exceptional thing about the type of government called democracy is that it demanded people see that nothing which is human is carved in stone, that everything is built on the shifting sands of time and place, and that therefore they would be wise to build and maintain ways of living together as equals, openly and flexibly.²⁴

Despite the fact that democracy has become a global feature, its history, as Keane puts it is “still being made”²⁵. The challenges democracy is facing in the Islamic world are yet to emerge simply because, according to Keane:

democracy required that people see through talk of gods and nature and claims to privilege based on superiority of brain or blood. Democracy meant the denaturing of power. It implied that the most important political problem is how to prevent rule by the few, or by the rich or powerful who claim to be the supermen.²⁶

Perhaps a good characterisation of why democracy has resonance for the people of the world is contained in the observation by the Nobel-Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen that democracy has become its own justification.²⁷ As Rorty thought, according to Keane, democracy is valued in all corners of the world “because it gives hope to human

beings that their lives can be freed from the course of violence and cruelty. Persuasion rather than force, compromise and reform rather than bloody revolutions, free and open encounters rather than bullying and bossing.”²⁸ It seems that the Islamic world has remained not only unaffected by these changes in human history, but also, due to the dominance of religion, Muslims have been prevented from exercising their desires as natural beings, for instance, the desire for freedom. The human being as an individual has not been allowed to be born in the Islamic world – an individual that has the freedom to think and investigate and choose and agree or disagree with the dominant religious beliefs.

Islam as a social movement emerged in the primitive society of the Arabian Peninsula, initiated by an orphan from a strictly tribal system in Mecca fourteen hundred years ago (610–632 CE); an orphan who was not destined to be a slave, as the fate of a person of his position usually was. Through his travels, personal and spiritual experiences and insight, Mohammed felt that his religion and monotheism, in belief and in social life, was the answer for the scattered Arab tribes. The structure of Arab society before Islam was tribal and as Ebn-e-Khaldone says, “there was no central neutral power there.”²⁹ Mohammed’s movement began in Mecca, but it did not find favour there and therefore he migrated to Medina where he found strong support among the two main tribes of Aws and Khazraj who, as Max Weber argues, were mainly attracted to the conquest and booty collection of this movement.³⁰

In Medina, he emerged as a charismatic leader who established a political system. For ten years of his life in Medina, he was a political as well as a religious and military leader, who actively participated in wars, while at the same time, he was the lawmaker. Together with the Qur’an, his sayings have been the sources of Sharia law in the Islamic world. However, after capturing Mecca and in the last two years of his life in this city (630–32), once the inter-tribal conflict was over, he finished his mission of establishing an Islamic state. From then on, the new Islamic state began challenging not only other powers but also other religions as well by claiming that it had the final words of God and therefore

no other religion, except Islam, was valid anymore.³¹

After Mohammed's death and following his shadow of legitimacy as a charismatic leader during the first four Caliphates, the Islamic political system changed to dynasticism and monarchy, which sought its legitimacy through religion. Islam, as a source of law, politics, faith, economy and every aspect of human life, has not left even the secret corners of personal and private life untouched ever since. Even in the realm of knowledge and acquiring knowledge, Islam has been a condition, which means that if knowledge is supposed to develop in the Islamic world, it should not contradict Islam and therefore should be compatible with it, as a result of which we have had Islamic philosophy, Islamic sciences, and Islamic astronomy and so on. The term 'Islamic' distinguishes the Islamic products, or anything to do with Islam – the Islamic community, the Islamic world, Islamic civilisation, culture, economy, banking and so forth – from other human communities and highlights the authority of Islam on anything that has happened in the Islamic area of influence. Moreover, the language of the Qur'an is that of guidance, obedience, collective address and collective punishment. God has sent Apostles for each people (*Qawm*) to guide them in the right path and those people who have not followed or obeyed their Apostles have been punished and destroyed by thunder, earthquake or other means.³²

Indeed, demand for obedience is entwined with religions, which is based on the philosophy that human beings out of the remit of religion are spiritually weak and their reason is not sufficient to lead them to salvation without the guidance of God. Nonetheless, since human beings are weak and in need of guidance for ever, they should follow God, his Apostles and the authorities associated with them.³³ The Bible says:

let every soul be in subjection to the superior authorities, for there is no authority except by God; the existing authorities stand placed in their relative positions by God. Therefore he who opposes the authority has taken a stand against the arrangement of God; those who have taken a stand against it will

receive judgment to themselves.³⁴

In Islam, unlike Christianity, this anthropology has been institutionalised through Sharia law, as Sharia law has been the main legal system in the majority of the Muslim world, which has also shaped the political structure of these people. A rational, earthly and man-made alternative legal and political structure has not been proposed or even had the chance to emerge. That is why rationalism and human-centred institutionalism have been an alien phenomenon in the Islamic world. Human beings in the Islamic world have not dared to come out from the rubble of centuries of laws and regulations that constantly encourage them, in the name of God, to obey and tell them that they are weak and should be guided. They have not stood once as independent human beings, which does not necessarily contradict a belief in God: they have been just followers.

The fact of the matter is that if religion is so embedded in our personal life that it forms our course of actions, the scenario of a religion-free politics is not relevant anymore. Religion and the legacies of religion are there and, depending on the extent of religiosity of a society, they will determine the secularity of that society. Even the secular societies of today are not religion-free societies and their secularities are shaped by their religious literature. Bruce Ledewitz writes:

[...] the boundary between the political and religious life can be viewed in three ways: historically, theologically, and philosophically. Historically, many of the concepts used in politics are basically borrowed from older religious traditions; theologically, politics sometimes serves as the realm where different concepts of God, and the relation between God and man, are worked out; philosophically, political theory and religious insights can be seen as addressing the same basic questions of human life.³⁵

In Carl Schmitt's words, "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularised theological concepts."³⁶ Therefore, the challenges of the idea of an Islamic

democracy are not that it will have Islamic concepts and values in its organisation, but, rather, that it is Islam as the official ideology of the state and application of Sharia law, for instance, that will contradict democracy. The turning point towards democracy in Western history happened when this transformation from following religious decrees to making rational choices took place. Charles E. Butterworth argues; “by the late fourteenth or fifteenth century, we Westerners began to turn away from the notion that political authority is divinely inspired.”³⁷

Democracy in the West has evolved and been accompanied by the struggle for freedom and humanism: religious freedom in the form of religious reformation and civil freedom in the form of the French Revolution. In his lecture on the history of philosophy Hegel highlights the Reformation as “the all-illuminating sun, which follows that daybreak at the end of the middle Ages.”⁵⁸ Unlike this great experience in the West, the cloudy skies of Muslims did not allow even the moon to be sighted in the dark nights of the Muslim societies. Religious reformation has been one of the main factors of capitalism’s development in the West and, as Max Weber argues, the majority of capitalists in Europe have been Protestant and the majority of economic development centres have been the Protestant areas.³⁹ The question is why there have not been any such movements in the Islamic world. Why is it that the humanism, rationalism, and independent reason that flourished during the Enlightenment in Europe centuries ago and spread around the world have not found ground to thrive in the Muslim world? The answer is exclusively, at least before the colonial period, the domination of religious beliefs, the belief system that demanded conformity in all aspects of human life with religious definitions of life and values and left no independent reason and humanism to emerge. Perhaps this could be mirrored from the earliest description of England by a Muslim in the eighteenth century, quoted by Bernard Lewis, who was astonished to see divine law was not the only law for human beings and people could make their law based on their reason and requirements:

The earliest detailed description of England by a Muslim traveller is a fascinating account by Mirza Abu Talib Khan, a Turko-Persian resident of

Lucknow who was in England between 1798 and 1803. He watched the House of Commons in action, and his comments are enlightening. The government and the opposition MPs setting on their benches facing each other across the chamber reminded him of trees full of parrots squawking at each other, a common sight back home in India. When he learnt that the purpose of the noisy assemblage was to make laws, he was shocked. The English, he explained to his readers, had not accepted a divine law and so were reduced to the expedient of making their own laws, in accordance with the experience of their judges and the requirements of their time.⁴⁰

Domination of religious beliefs and divinity in the Islamic world and its close link with politics has prevented any form of humanism and, above all, freedom of belief in God and divine love. For example, the Persian mystic Mansoor Hallaj was executed by Abbasid caliph Al-Muqtadir because he believed in the union with the divine; and Muslims are not allowed to convert to other religions and apostasy is punishable in Islam. Different interpretations of Islam, to some extent, have been tolerated, which has created different jurisprudential schools of thoughts, but not freedom of thought and belief in God that could challenge the official religion. That is why democracy is facing serious challenges in the Islamic world and freedoms of all sorts, such as freedoms of thought, expression, belief, and political activities, have been an alien phenomenon. Freedom in its modern sense, as Bernard Lewis explains, has had “only legal and social connotations, and meant simply the condition of not being a slave.”⁴¹ Perhaps this assertion from Rached al Ghannouchi – “man would not have obtained his freedom had it not been for the revelation, for man was not born free but to be free”⁴² – is the typical understanding of freedom in the Islamic world: to be free, not to obtain freedom. In this religious discourse, human should be and is set free by God, revelation, God’s apostles, and those who inherit the authority from them, not by their own efforts and personal endeavour and reasoning, since humanity is not considered what Protagoras was claiming it to be 2500 years ago: that “human is the measure for everything.”⁴³

Nonetheless, it is the above concept upon which liberal democracy has flourished and has been established as a form of life during the process of democratisation. As James Davison, the American sociologist, argues in the case of the US: “public schools’ curricula tend to reflect an emphasis on the individual as the measure of all things and on personal autonomy, feelings, personal needs, and subjectively derived values – all of which are independent of the transcendental standard implied in traditional theism.”⁴⁴ Advocating for or even debating about democracy in the Muslim world has not been a welcomed phenomenon as the theoretical backbones of religiosity, its anthropology and philosophy of life have not been seriously challenged. Democratisation in the Muslim world is not taking place because of the prevention of liberalisation of thought and religious dogmas: it is more or less being imposed en masse in the streets and globalisation.

However, whether religious dogmas are challenged or not, since religions, especially Islam, are closely associated with power, they have no choice but to secularise. In other words, religions and religious people have no other options but to relinquish their practice of absolute divinity and accept a nonreligious arrangement of political affairs that can accommodate diversity of beliefs and political opinion. A good example of this is the Islamic Justice and Development Party (AK Party) in power in Turkey that has accepted the secular constitution of the country. Turkish democracy would not work if this party stuck to its Islamic identity and remained loyal to Sharia law, though probably it cannot remain loyal to its identity with the presence of the Turkish army as guarantor of the secularity of the political system. There is nothing wrong with the activities of such parties and in fact it would be undemocratic to prevent them from competing for power but only if they accept the democratic process, as in the case of Turkey. The challenge is that these parties remain committed to their religious identities and as soon as they come to power they might stop the democratic process. In fact, democracy in the Muslim world cannot be fully established if Islamic thought is not critically challenged and rationally examined. It will otherwise remain as a source of mobilisation of the mass and destabilisation of the democratic governments. Based on Islamic thought and Sharia law,

as Fatima Mernissi puts it: “the regimes that draw their legitimacy from Islam (Saudi Arabia for example) brand their opponents who advance the cause of democracy unbelievers, infidels.”⁴⁵

One of the factors, perhaps, in the contemporary Muslim world that has had a devastating impact on democratisation and liberalisation of these societies has been colonialism, which drove people to stick to the very basic religious dogmas as their identities. Religion has been a source of identity as well as unity against the Western colonisers and occupiers. In most cases, as Mernissi argues, struggle for freedom of thought was sacrificed by nationalist politicians to save unity,⁴⁶ probably for the benefit of dominant religious beliefs. This has created a kind of culture in the Islamic literature that no independent rational movement has been innovated, and Islamic belief has found modern theorists and ideologues glorifying the religious obstacles of thought, while at the same time advocating for democracy in the past few decades. The project is doomed to failure, since it tries to build democracy on religious foundations. In other words, the project endeavours to convert democracy into Islam to adjust to the religious dogmas, while there are instances of conflict between Islam and democracy – for example, the conflict between Islam and the freedom that is enshrined with the very notion of democracy, which cannot be circumvented easily. Mernissi writes:

Shirk, “the freedom to think and choose a religion ... or the opposite of *islam*”, is the most appropriate word for translating the word ‘freedom’ in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is posed as an ideal to be attained: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion...” This article is the very definition of the *jahiliyya*, the chaotic pagan world before Islam ... It is in that brief Article 18 and the concept of *shirk* that the conflict between Islam and democracy lies as a philosophical debate...⁴⁷

She is right about the conflict between Islam and the word ‘freedom’ in the Universal

Declaration of Human Rights but there is little similarity, though, between freedom defined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the primitive tribal condition of Arabs before Islam.

It is illuminating when Paul E. Corcoran says that:

from the perspective of twenty-five hundred years of Western political thinking, almost no one, until very recently, thought democracy to be a very good way of structuring political life... [T]he great preponderance of political thinkers for two-and-a-half millennia have insisted upon the perversity of democratic institutions, the disorderliness of democratic politics and the moral depravity of the democratic character.⁴⁸

However, this is not limited to Western political thinking. If a simple definition of democracy is to be the rule of people over their social and political affairs, then nowhere have the absolute owners of power surrendered it voluntarily to the people. It is not only the absolute owners of power but also some of the intellectual leaders of mankind who have not believed in democracy; or, as Karl R. Popper puts it in different words and in a radical way: “our civilisation has so often been betrayed by some of the intellectual leaders of mankind,”⁴⁹ some of whom, in his view, have been on the eternal offensive against freedom and reason.

Opposition to democracy has not stopped the struggle for it, and highlighting the contradictions of religion and democracy in general, and Islam and democracy in particular, would enhance the democratisation cause in the Muslim world, which in turn signifies the private and personal nature of religion as a way out of this contradiction. If we are not transparent and do not take the risk of stressing the contradictions of democracy and Islam on the one hand and do not have the courage to criticise and refute the dogmatic interpretations of the religious dogmas on the other, we will not be able to have a real debate about Islam and democracy in the Muslim world. It is the lack of a real

debate that has driven the modern intellectuals and thinkers of the Islamic world, the theory of one of whom will be the subject of this research, to close their eyes to those dogmas and contradictions and speak of liberal democracy but cover it with an Islamic veil, which further complicates the democratisation process. There is no religious solution, or, rather, religious defence for democracy, since there is no instance in Islamic history to provide a source of reference for justifying democracy religiously. Democracy should be defended on its own merits. It “is the world’s new universal religion”, as Paul E. Corcoran says, that has its own “dogmas of liberty, equality, self-determination, and human rights”.⁵⁰ Certainly a real debate on democracy in the Islamic world needs to confront the religious dogmas, but surely it has to engage religion and cannot be a purely secular debate.

The debate on reform in Islamic thought and Islam and democracy in the Muslim world and world academia has not been serious to the extent that we experience today, as if a real encounter is emerging, on the one hand between Islam in its traditional form as a solid and frozen belief with its dogmas and Sharia system and Islamic modern intellectualism headed by scholars like Dr Abdulkarim Soroush, in the case of Iran; and on the other, the liberal way of thought and life. The importance of the event is that it is Islam that is on a course of transition, facing grave challenges internally and on the external front, following passively the debate on its core relevance to modern life and desperately endeavouring to catch up with modern debates on democracy, human rights, women’s rights and so forth. It is not Islam or Muslims who have chosen the debate or the terms of the debate; it is rather modernity as a package that finds its supporters and speakers in every corner of the Muslim world. The issue of compatibility of Islam and democracy is in fact only one aspect and perhaps the most important aspect of the encounter between Islam and modernity or rational and secular interpretations of the universe. This inevitable encounter is also highlighting the absolute urgency of reformation and surgery in the Islamic thought that could facilitate the easy access of the coming generations to the real messages of Islam that, as Allama Iqbal Lahori has said, is nothing but “loyalty to God”.⁵¹

Islamic fundamentalism and extremist views among the Muslim communities are nothing more than a panic as a result of feeling the danger of losing the battle – between Islam as a religion, a faith, and a form of life dominating Muslim societies in the past fourteen centuries; and modernity, secularism, and democracy with its secular characteristics trying to replace the Islamic way of life. The real messages of Islam are heavily entangled with the chains of dogmas and jurisprudence that cannot be opened with the inexperienced hands of the new generations tempted constantly with modern products. Those who cannot get to the real messages of Islam, due to the complicated structure of the religion and in the meantime cannot cope with losing the battle, go to the extreme and become destructive. This volcano might not last long and could subside, especially after some of the political grievances are tackled. The real danger is the rigidity of an Islam that is not meeting the demands of the new generations and the bewildered Muslims exposed to the dominant assertive materialist liberal culture. Whether we find compatibility between Islam and democracy or not, democracy and secularism will make their way through and find their supporters in the Muslim world while, by not reforming the religion, we diminish its relevance for new Muslim generations and maintain religion as unfit for its confrontation with secularism.

Chapter 2

The Iranian Islamic Revolution

Revolutions have been the common themes of great political and social changes in the lives of nations, some of which, like the French and the American revolutions, have had wider global impacts. This method of political transformation became a stereotype for mainly developing countries with leftist predispositions in the twentieth century. What the world had not experienced in the past was an explicit religious revolution, or rather an Islamic revolution, despite the religious dimensions that existed in some other revolutions such as the English Glorious Revolution of 1688. The Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran was a unique phenomenon in the modern era that was claiming to establish a political system based on Islam and the means of this revolution was not the clerical establishment only, but rather the Islamic intelligentsia and groups of urban citizens headed by clerics. This chapter looks at this revolution from different aspects: its possibilities and challenges in Shia thought, its effects on Iranian society and Shia communities at large and whether it was a blow to the process of secularisation in Iran or an unintended force for good for an open society.

Contemporary Iranian history has been entwined with religion, one way or another, especially since the Tobacco Protest of 1891–92. Historically, the Ulama (the religious leaders) have always been mindful of how state and political affairs are run in Iran. However, until the 1979 revolution, they had not attempted to establish an Islamic state. The Ulama and the Shia establishment have not had a political ideology or a closely defined set of political beliefs and philosophy and organisation for gaining power and the political theory of Ayatollah Khomeini was rejected by almost all the grand ayatollahs, for example Ayatollah Al-Khuie in Najaf.¹ The Ulama's engagement with politics has been minimal except in the Tobacco Protest and the Constitutional Revolution (1905–11) in which they had a significant role. All that they have expected from the existing governments has been that the laws and regulations not be opposed to Sharia. They have

been largely concerned with religious education, scholarship and religious guidance of the people and, periodically, had raised their voices when they received complaints from their followers regarding certain sociopolitical issues.² Even the religious guidance handbooks that each grand ayatollah authors for their followers and calls *Towzeh al-Masael, Explanation of Questions* have had no reference to politics or invitation to involvement in politics.

In addition, Iranian nationalism never accepted Islam in its entirety and in its Arabic context and identity. The Iranian sources of national pride come from its pre-Islamic era. The Ulama, especially before the revolution, have been significant mainly when their rare political religiosity had something to do with Iranian nationalism. They were not looking for some form of Islamic Ummah or Caliphate system, for instance, but, rather, they have been part of the Iranian civil rights movement's processes when engaged in politics, and otherwise stayed away from politics as a whole, like those of Ayatollah Mohammed Musavi Behbahani and Ayatollah Burujirdi.³ As a matter of fact, Mohammad Reza Shah was not pursuing a pure secular system like that of Turkey before the revolution, nor was the Ulama demanding an Islamic government like the one after the revolution. A de facto area of influence was recognised by both sides; the government maintained a respectful position towards the Ulama and took their concerns into account and the Ulama was content with their apprehensions being noticed by the political elite. The Ulama had a firm belief that it was not their duty to establish an Islamic government since in their view it was only the twelfth Imam who is in occultation that can establish an Islamic government. They were of the view that they were not allowed to establish an Islamic government as they could not do it justice, given that they were not innocent and only an innocent person who was the twelfth Imam could found an Islamic system. Khomeini's innovation was in fact a deviation from the Shia traditional religious thought and did not attract the backing of the respected grand ayatollahs.

Indeed, Ayatollah Khomeini, despite his theory of Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists, or *velayat-e faqih*, did not advocate for an Islamic government led by the clerical

establishment. In his earlier writings, Khomeini was critical of the political system but he did not go as far as to condemn the monarchy as a whole.⁴ Ayatollah Khomeini himself mentioned when he was in Paris that after the removal of the Shah he would return to Qom, where the Shia clerical establishment's spiritual and theological base is located, especially after the decline of the Najaf Theological Centre in Iraq over the past few decades. He reiterated to the then Hojat Al Islam Ali Khamenai, when he was elected as the Iranian president, that he would approve his presidency because there was no other appropriate person to run the government. The clerics were not supposed to run the government; all that they needed was the judiciary system, the system that the Shah modernised. Khomeini reiterated several times in France with *The Economist*, Reuters and other news agencies that the role of the Ulama after the revolution would involve guidance only and not running the government.⁵

The apathy of the Ulama regarding politics was not because they accepted the legitimacy of temporal political systems, but rather for the reason that they believed that nobody could establish a just and real Islamic government except the twelfth Imam, who will emerge one day from concealment to bring justice to the world.⁶ This perception of the temporal governance had dominated the Ulama's understandings of politics and therefore they had not attempted to establish an Islamic government. Ayatollah Khomeini was initially reluctant to allow the clergy to be in executive positions in the government, since people expected the governments to deliver services and if they failed to do so it would reflect badly on the clergy: it was better that others be blamed for the failures. It was the modern Islamic intelligentsia led by Dr Ali Shariati who wanted Islam as an ideology and nevertheless advocated for the establishment of an Islamic government, though not one to be led by the clerics only. Ultimately, it was the modern Islamic intelligentsia together with the Hujatul Islams, as Oliver Roy puts it, and not the grand ayatollahs who supported Ayatollah Khomeini and orchestrated the revolution.⁷

The concept of waiting for the twelfth Imam to re-emerge and bring justice to the world and Shia communities had crippled Shia communities around the world. It was the

political culture among the Shia communities that they were not supposed to attempt politically to bring justice, since they were not in a position to bring justice to their communities and partly because they had been minorities everywhere and preferred quietism for survival. In the case of Iran, the representation of the hidden Imam by the Ulama had been transferred to the kings under the notion of 'king, the shadow of God on earth'. Other rulers could not bring justice either and the injustices that have existed during the occultation of the twelfth Imam, not only in the Islamic world but also in the world at large, are due to the fact that the rulers are not deemed to be innocent. The rulers are influenced by greed, sin and self-interest; in other words, they are not innocent and could not bring justice to humanity. Shia were not supposed to attempt to seize power and establish political systems; they were, rather, content with the belief that they were not allowed to struggle for power and should have waited for the twelfth Imam to emerge and establish a just system and they even let injustices flourish since that was interpreted as the sign of the emergence of the twelfth Imam. This was the dominant perception among the Shia communities around the world and there was no sign of serious Shia movements for political participation before the Iranian Islamic Revolution. For example, despite the significant size of their population, the Shia of Lebanon were one of the poor and marginalised communities of that country inspired by the breakthrough offered by the Islamic revolution in terms of active engagement in politics and struggle for power. They are the dominant force in Lebanon now.

The theoretical basis of revolution and reform in Iran was mainly introduced by Islamic intellectuals led by Ali Shariati, who interpreted the concept of waiting for the twelfth Imam to introduce a revolutionary ideology against the injustices rather than waiting for his emergence. In his view, waiting was "the religion of protest" and "a philosophy of history where the unjust and discriminatory systems and class divisions will be destroyed". He thought that whenever the people revolt against injustices and fight for justice, then the Imam would emerge, not vice versa. In other words, the Imam is waiting for us rather than that we should wait for him.⁸ Shariati dismissed the dominant perception that Shia were not supposed to struggle for power and maintained that in fact

it was their duty to struggle for justice. This was the attractive and dominant discourse among the religious intelligentsia and clerics like Ayatollah Khomeini and it was this discourse that changed the course of history for Shia forever and provided the theoretical basis of the Islamic revolution. Until then the clerical establishment believed in the concept of waiting and that was one of the main reasons why no political movement emerged among the Shia communities, especially among the clerical establishment.

Ayatollah Khomeini's struggle for political power and the Islamic revolution have made a great change in the system of Shia clerical structure, though this has been unwanted by the main body of the clerical establishment, especially the traditionalist clerical elites. Khomeini was not a prominent figure in terms of religious knowledge and influence compared to those such as Ayatollah Khuie in Najaf. His religious knowledge and skills of delivering speeches and presentations and publications was not even comparable to those of his juniors such as Ayatollah Motahari and Ayatollah Beheshti. Khomeini was in fact a rebel inside the clerical institution and changed the direction of the Shia clerical system for ever. Since he did not have the support of the clerical system dominated by the conservatives, Khomeini, did not favour the clerical institution and tried to break it.⁹ The idea of establishing an Islamic government itself was a deviation in the thoughts and minds of the clerical conservative establishment and against the theory of waiting for the twelfth Imam to emerge and establish a just political system. Khomeini's concept of 'government of the doctor of law' was a revolutionary theory in the clerical system of thought and a negation of the Shia concept of waiting for the emergence of the twelfth imam to establish a truly Islamic government. His theory that there will not be an Islamic society without an Islamic state was very close to the feelings about and understandings of Islam by modern Islamic intelligentsias and their anti-clerical positions.

The modern Islamic intelligentsias were advocating an ideological Islam for a variety of reasons. Their aspiration for a just and Islamic society through democracy and a democratic society was not their ultimate goal indeed. They were not clear about the type of political system they wanted and, under the influence of socialist movements around

the world, the Islamic intelligentsias were pursuing an internationalist concept of justice in harmony mainly with the anti-imperialist movements of the world. Even Islamic concepts like Imamate and religious imitation were defined under the influence of anti-imperialist revolutionary literature. (Shariati Ali, *Writing collection (Majmoa Asar)* No. 7, pp. 208–209, No. 9. p. 260, No. 19. p. 347) The concept of revolution had an attractive resonance for the Islamic intelligentsia and, like the socialist movements they embraced, revolution was regarded as an instrument for fundamental changes in their society. All the efforts of Shariati, as the iconic figure of the Iranian religious intellectualism, were devoted to sincere attempts at raising awareness among the religious intellectuals for justice and resorting to Islam as a revolutionary ideology to achieve that. What Iran lacked was a strong movement for the establishment of a democratic system before the revolution. Certainly the political system with which the Islamic intelligentsia wanted to replace the authoritarian regime of Shah was not a democracy. It can be argued that democracy was not yet a priority. The political system that was admired by Ali Shariati was a democracy that was committed to a revolutionary ideology that could come into power with a majority vote but could not be removed from power by a majority vote.

There are two kinds of democracy: liberal democracy and committed or guided democracy DEMOC ENGAJEE or DIREGEE. The non-committed democracy is a liberal government that comes to power by the votes of people and has no commitment except that the people demand from it, though with the existing traditions and values they currently hold. The committed democracy that is a government born by the majority vote but which cannot be removed by the majority vote is committed to achieving the goals enshrined in the ideology and not to approval of society ... If there are people who do not agree with this method and their behaviour and votes corrupt the society... those traditions and beliefs must be condemned ... This is the committed democracy.¹⁰

It seems as if a Marxist revolutionary figure is talking rather than a Muslim scholar and it was this revolutionary atmosphere that provided the necessary means for the Islamic revolution in Iran.

Revolutions are very complex events that gain momentum during a very long period of time but occur unexpectedly under the influence of various factors. In fact, revolutions have taken place in societies with capability for mass mobilisation, where the majority of people are deprived of their basic rights and in most cases they adhere to the ideology of a charismatic leader. Revolution is the highest demonstration of mass movements. The potential capability of mass movement among Shia communities remained unutilised and untouched before the Islamic revolution in Iran, since relations between the clerical establishment and the people was based on clerical religious influence, undefined and unregulated. In other words, due to the spiritual relations between the people and the clerics, especially the grand ayatollahs and *marjas* (sources of emulation) and the fact that the quality of this relation was mostly defined and judged by the clerics and not by the people, it was the clerical leaders who had influence on people and, vice versa, Shi'ism and its clerical establishment could remain a serious challenge for an open society. The relation between the clerics and the people has been that of guide and followers established and institutionalised over the centuries and mainly operated through decrees issued by the clerical leaders, such as that of Ayatollah Shirazi's fatwa against the use of tobacco, and a concession on tobacco granted to Great Britain by the Shah of Iran in 1890 that caused the Tobacco Protest at the end of the nineteenth century.

This relation between the people and the clerics and their religious influence could remain a challenge for democratisation in Iran, since on the one hand the clerical establishment would not reveal their potential political influence through attempting to gain direct overt political power, and on the other, the people could not have a sense of a cleric's holiness in running the government. In other words, by not playing politics, the clerics could stay isolated and out of the sphere of the government's influence, but with a big influence among the religious and traditional sections of society, who could be

mobilised by the clerics against any development project as long as the people did not have an understanding of the clerical political system in power. This could remain a big issue for democratisation and secularisation in Shia communities for the near future. However, the Islamic revolution has revealed this potential by bringing the clerics into power and under the scrutiny and judgement of the people and, therefore, diminishing their mass mobilisation potential. This has made the prospects for a real democracy better in Iran.

In a democratic society, the relations between the people and its institutions, whether religious or secular, are regulated and bound by the rule of law. For example, the church in a Western democratic country like France cannot rally mass support for disruption of law and order based on their religious convictions against a law passed by parliament or a decision taken by the government since, on the one hand, the church is one of the democratic institutions and its functions are defined and predictable and, therefore, it would not act undemocratically. On the other hand, the people and the followers of the church will not act unlawfully, even if they are asked by the church to do so; as citizens of France, they would not recognise any role for the church above the law of the land. The religious and clerical establishment in Iran has now become politically and spiritually ineffective like a church in a democratic Western society, whereas it was above the law or potentially above the law of the land before the revolution. The clerics could obstruct modernisation of the country and challenge the democratisation and secularisation of Iranian society. The clerics kept their own constituencies that could be easily manipulated by a fatwa that, on the one hand, prevented the government bringing in reforms and being fearful of the reactions from the clerical establishment to any innovative and modern projects and, on the other, disrupt the process of law and order, and the government could do little about it. The Islamic revolution has changed the dynamics of the relation between the clerics, people and politics and initiated the process of integration of the clerical system into mainstream Iranian society.

Certainly the Iranian revolution was one of the intricate revolutions and puzzling in terms

of the sources of influence and role of the big powers in allowing the revolution to succeed. There are numerous unanswered questions concerning the revolution's origins. Iran was considered to be an island of peace and security in the region and evolved as a nationalist regional power with great oil and gas reserves and potential for growth. Iran was also a strong ally of the West especially the United States. It is a fact that oil has been the main driving factor in US foreign policy in the Middle East and, as Senator Gary Hart has said, "it is the American oil under their sand".¹¹ Was the Iranian revolution orchestrated or at least allowed to happen because of the control of energy reserves in the region? How can a cleric live in exile, from Turkey to Iraq and France, and return safely to Iran to lead and establish an anti-American revolution and system? Likewise, with all the complexity of the intentions behind the revolution that are mainly political, can it be academically considered an Islamic revolution? The answer to the last question is that the Iranian revolution was not a purely Islamic one and therefore we cannot explain it in an Islamic context only.

Despite the fact that Ayatollah Khomeini's theory of Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists (*velayat-e faqih*) was rejected by the grand Ayatollahs, it found support among the young clerics even if they were the followers of other ayatollahs and from other nationalities, such as Sheikh Fadlallah of Hezbollah in Lebanon, who was a follower of Ayatollah Al-Khuie. His voice was heard by all around the political and intellectual spectrums, including the Islamic modern intellectuals. However, Khomeini's Guardian Jurist (*vali-e faqih*), as defined by Ayatollah Montazeri, is in fact an Islamic superman that in reality cannot exist. He is somebody who is equipped with all possible good qualities and talents of human beings such as, "being wise, just, aware of the political affairs, able to execute the law, believe in Islam and be more knowledgeable than others in Islam."¹² This superman has the absolute power and there is no sacred area and forbidden zone for the *vali-e faqih*; he can suspend any practice of Islam or change any arrangement even if it was set up by the Prophet, if he considers that to be in the interests of Islam and Islamic government. The *vali-e faqih* can "suspend the Hajj pilgrimage, destroy a mosque or disregard the Islamic contracts between the people and the Islamic government."¹³

This theory left little space out of politics for the clerics, the space they enjoyed before the revolution and, for the first time in the history of Shia, the political aspects of religion acquired the highest significance and religion became a political ideology. Perhaps due to this transformation, Ayatollah Khomeini's political philosophy was admired by the Islamic intelligentsia and other political activists. Given the extent of power and authority that was recognised for the *vali-e-faqih*, there was no need to wait for the twelfth Imam anymore and the clerics were divided into two categories: the clerics that became secular with their professional duties and engaged with politics, and those who remained loyal to their traditional practice and have become insignificant. In other words, the position and amount of power that was predicted for the Hidden Imam was granted to the *vali-e-faqih*. If the *vali-e-faqih* can do everything that the Hidden Imam could then the notion of waiting for his emergence was not an issue anymore and with the level of power and resources the *vali-e-faqih* has had after the revolution, especially during the charismatic leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, pro-political engagement has become the new approach for the clerical establishment and little influence has been left for the traditional clerics.

The modern Islamists in Iran affected by the Marxist ideologies and left-wing revolutionary sentiments in the third world had been fighting on two fronts. On the one hand they had to keep their distance from the very powerful Marxist revolutionaries, even the Islamo-Marxists, and on the other, they had to be critical of the clerical establishment's lack of revolutionary commitment and claim to have monopoly of Islamic knowledge. The Islamic intelligentsia in Iran has been defining itself as owning or rather representing the soul of Islam. This movement, initiated by Dr Ali Shariati, was the most outspoken and yet was ineffective in terms of political changes and the process of democratisation in Iran, simply because it lacked any form of political organisation. They were the masterminds of politicisation and turning Islam into ideology for political change and revolution but had not tried to gain the social and political leadership of the Iranian opposition.

The alliance between Ayatollah Khomeini and modern Islamists was an unwritten deal between the two; the modern Islamists found their ideologue and political leadership as well as a partner among the clerical establishment that was closer to them than the clerical system, and the clerics wanted the modern Islamists and their understanding of Islam for social mobilisation and establishment of their system. Dr Abdulkarim Soroush was one of the modern Islamists that joined the revolution and was appointed as a member of one of the undemocratic institutions of the revolution, the Cultural Revolution Council. However, the position of the Islamo-nationalists who were politically organised and experienced and led by Mehdi Bazargan, the first prime minister after the revolution, was different and their alliance with Khomeini was not to establish an Islamic system, but rather to create a democratic republic.¹⁴

As was explained earlier, the clerical establishment did not have political organisation and experience of governance. They were deeply troubled by the Shah and his modernisation programmes especially in the judicial system. The growing modern judicial system that was enhancing the civil rights of the people, especially women and ethnic and religious minorities, together with wider brutal political repression and gradual exclusion of clergies from the system, provided a great opportunity for Khomeini and his followers to rally support through their strong network against the Shah regime. Comparing Khomeini's position before the revolution – especially during the 1960s when he was appointed as a *Marja* by the seminary teachers of Qom and began challenging the Shah's regime on some very democratic steps taken by the government in the form of the white revolution that granted equal rights to women and political rights to the religious minorities and considered them un-Islamic – with his position after the revolution, when he sanctioned fairly democratic rights to the Iranian people in the constitution, it becomes evident that his concern had not been religion only, but rather political power.

Despite the fact that there were numerous reasons for the clergy to feel excluded and furious with some of the Shah's actions, like sanctioning the extravagant 1971 event of

the 2500 years Persian festival while Iran was suffering from drought and when the festival itself was considered to be an apparent disrespect to religion and the religious establishment, it was Khomeini who took a political stance against the regime, not the clerical establishment. Khomeini did not know that his actions would be self-destructive for the clerical establishment and would remove the religious obstacles of democratisation and secularisation, not only in Iran but also in the wider Shia communities.¹⁵

However, the clerical system was not considered as a political alternative after the fall of the Shah, neither by the Americans nor by the religious-nationalists, who believed Ayatollah Khomeini was one of their own. The nationalists that inherited the legacy of Dr Mohammad Mossadegh, the former prime minister of the Shah, who nationalised the Iranian oil industry, were of the view that Ayatollah Khomeini was a moderate religious person who could be contained by them after the fall of the Shah. It seems the nationalists' understanding of the situation and their view of Ayatollah Khomeini as a moderate person determined the thoughts and made up the minds of the Americans about the political changes in Iran.¹⁶

Nevertheless, regardless of the nationalists' understanding of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Shah was convinced that the Americans had decided to make alliances with the revolutionary Islamists in order to prevent the spread of communism and the former Soviet Union in the region. He was troubled by the remarks made by Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former US President Carter's national security adviser, regarding the threat of revolutionary Islam in the former Soviet Union due to the great numbers of Muslims living in its territory.¹⁷ Ultimately, the Shah sensed the change of hearts and minds in the United States about his Government and therefore did not show any resistance to the demands of Sullivan and Anthony Parsons, the American and British ambassadors in Tehran, for not using force against the opposition.¹⁸

However, in spite of the outcome of the revolution and the complexity surrounding it,

there had been a common consensus that an Islamic government was not expected from the revolution. Although the influence of Ayatollah Khomeini in the establishment of the Islamic system was undeniable, it was the creation of all Islamists: clerical, modern and nationalist. Ayatollah Khomeini never ceased to be seen as the defender of the interests of the deprived people of the world and sounded like yet another third-world revolutionary leader rather than just an Islamist leader.¹⁹ Ayatollah Khomeini's popularity and his position as the leader of the revolution was due to four factors:

1. His personal courage and charisma, which no other opposition leader, religious or nonreligious, had before or during the revolution. From 1963, despite the fact that he was a junior member of the clerical establishment, he became well-known for being outspoken against the Shah's regime.²⁰
2. The time and the social conditions of Iranian society were other conditions that made him the leader of the revolution; charisma only was not enough. Failure of the Iranian society in a safe transition to a modern society and the incompetence of the Shah's system to deliver and respond to the new demands of the Iranian people, such as democratisation of the system, created the conditions for the emergence of a great opposition leader in the eyes of the Iranian people. One of the obvious reasons for the Islamic revolution was the failure of the modernisation project in Iran and the intellectual reaction of all backgrounds against the westernisation and 'western intoxication' or acceptance of the West and modernity without critique and adoption of modernity with the Western culture. The Iranian revolution that was neither Islamic nor modern was the meeting point of the dichotomy characterised on the one side by the Shah regime and on the other the clerical establishment. The first one adhered to the Iranian nationalism rooted in the pre-Islamic history of Iran, ignoring the Shia Islamic and religious elements of the Iranian nationalism, and the second has promoted religion and overlooked the pre-Islamic Iranian heritage. Khomeini's main criticism of the

Shah regime was not because it was not Islamic, but rather because it did not serve the interests of the Iranian people, perhaps.

3. Khomeini's position to revolt against the political system as well as the clerical establishment had no precedence in the Shia clerical system in the past. Unlike the clerical establishment, he was not one to wait for the twelfth Shia Imam to emerge and establish an Islamic government. He was the product of his time or rather the Imam of his time.
4. Khomeini's representation of the Shia disposition of the dispossessed: all the glorifications of the Shia as a minority in the history of Islam who fought for justice and the rights of the dispossessed, by religious intellectuals like Ali Shariati, were unfolding through a charismatic leader. Khomeini did not only speak of the dispossessed people of Iran, but he was also claiming to be representing the will of the dispossessed people of the world.
5. Khomeini's alliance with the modern Islamic intelligentsia: those who were on the opposite side of the clerical establishment before the revolution.

However, modern Islamists like Soroush soon distanced themselves from the system and have been critical of the Islamic government, not because a political system based on religion cannot be democratic but rather because it was not Islamic in the way they expected and therefore they proposed other Islamic models. These Islamists that defined themselves in opposing and discrediting the clerical system ultimately became a tool for the revolutionary clerics. Whatever differences they might have with the mainstream conservative clerical establishment, the contents of the political system they want to deliver would also be a Sharia-based Islamic system. Despite the fact that people like Soroush have adopted the modern Islamists' traditional position of divergence with the clerical system, mainly with the section of the clerical establishment in power, they have suffered an identity crisis. Although they have been insisting on their divergence with the

clerical establishment, they have been instrumental for the clerical system and have not yet been able to establish their credential as an independent movement significantly different from the clerics.

The Islamic intelligentsia as a whole acted as a counter-establishment against the clerical system and defined itself as purer, more genuine and more committed to the real messages of Islam. Although, the alliance between the clerical establishment and modern Islamists did not last long after the revolution, and some like Mohammed Khatami, the former Iranian president, and Mohsen Kadiwar have distanced themselves from conservative clerical interpretations of Islam and politics and have become closer to modern Islamic intelligentsia, modern Islamists have contributed to the clerical system through advocating religious discourses on politics, democracy and so forth. Given the fact that they were the only group of intellectuals tolerated by the clerics and bound by the red lines of that tolerance, they either did not want to or could not initiate critical rational debates on politics, religion and democracy. In other words, they filled the gap between the clerics in power, who did not know much about the modern politics, institutions and governance needed to establish their political system, and the people of Iran who wanted democracy and freedom.

The contention between the two and the demonising approach of the modern intelligentsia towards the clergies was initiated by Dr Ali Shariati, the most controversial modern Islamist that advocated for an Islam without the clerics. Shariati was the most radical critic of the clerical system and his outlook differed fundamentally from the clerical understanding of Islam. He thought that Shia were the real followers of the Prophet Mohammed and his son-in-law Ali after him, though a very small minority. They remained critical of the unjust Islamic Caliphates throughout the Islamic history. They were tortured and massacred by Islamic Caliphates but never gave up their wish for establishing a just Islamic system. This rebellious minority became polluted and corrupt when the Safavide Dynasty took over in Iran in the sixteenth century and spread Shia all over Iran. The pure rebellious minority became the ruler and created a clerical

establishment like their counterparts in Christianity. Shariati tried all his life to be the just voice of that minority and revive it and therefore never recognised the clerical establishment as pure Shia or Alavite Shia, but rather the Safavide Shia. He differentiated the minority pure Shia from those of the Safavide Shia, represented by the clerical establishment and it became the topic of a series of speeches by Shariati. He termed these differences as Red Shi'ism (the religion of martyrdom) against the Black Shi'ism (the religion of mourning); that was the title of his article on this subject.²¹ Shariati was in fact the ideologue of the Iranian Islamic Revolution since it was he who revolutionised or, rather, cracked the Shia understanding of Islam.

The political philosophy that dominated the Shia understanding of Islam throughout history – that during the occultation of the twelfth Imam nobody could bring real justice and Shia were not supposed to form a government and were advised to wait for the emergence of the Imam – had in fact, hindered a very potentially powerful revolutionary philosophy of martyrdom enshrined in the massacre of the third Imam, Imam Hussein, and his seventy-two family members and followers in Karbala by Yazid, when Imam Hussein refused to surrender and accept the legitimacy of his government. What the clerical establishment of Shia had been doing was to mourn that tragedy every year and shed tears for the sacrifice Imam Hussein made. This interpretation of the Karbala tragedy by the clerical establishment was under the influence of their passive understanding of politics and what Shariati did was to rediscover and revive the martyrdom philosophy of Imam Hussein's revolution as a modern ideology for the Shia communities, and inspired millions of young intellectuals and even clerics.

Shariati initiated a political culture, for the first time in the history of Iran, that religiously justified revolt for justice and as Mehdi Bazargan, one of the other Iranian scholars and the first prime minister after the Islamic revolution has said, Shariati had created all the pillars of the revolution. If we consider three pillars for the revolution as being martyrdom, religious leadership or Imamate, and struggle for the oppressed and poor, Shariati created all of these pillars, according to Bazargan.²² However, Shariati's

contributions were never acknowledged by the leaders of the revolution due to his bitter anti-clerical approach.

Nonetheless, a more moderate approach has been introduced by Soroush after the revolution, though it is still identical to the pre-revolutionary mainstream modern Islamist position. For instance, one of Shariati's criticisms of the clerical establishment is that it is not financially independent and uses religion as a business for earning their livelihoods: "you want to know how he thinks? First see who feeds him".²³ This is still one of the outstanding charges that Soroush makes against the clerical system today in a very moderate manner.²⁴

The Islamic Government

The revolution in Iran was not a pure Islamic revolution generated in the thoughts and minds of the clerics and their establishment and was not even considered a welcome change by the traditional clerical leaders. However, regardless of what factors and parties were involved in establishing the Islamic system, what I am going to explore in the rest of this chapter is to firstly find out to what extent we can call the Iranian system an Islamic one, and secondly to find out how the modern religious intelligentsia convened a space for addressing their understanding of Islam and to see how different Soroush's model of a 'democratic religious government' is from the current Iranian Islamic Government.

The Islamic revolution has been a unique phenomenon with no precedence in Islamic history. It has been unique for a variety of reasons; first, it combined religion and state, which had been a taboo for Shia Muslims since the beginning of Islam. Second, it shared some characteristics with all other Iranian sociopolitical as well as civil movements in the past and therefore it was the means for ordinary Iranian people to gain a better life.²⁵ Third, like any other revolution, the Islamic revolution began to shift from its principles when faced with the practical difficulties of social and political management.

Soon after the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, who had already presented his ideal political system, which was more religious than political, in the form of *velayat-e faqih*, began to be a pragmatic political leader. For him, since the state was in their hands, it was the success of the state that mattered; in other words, religion should be sacrificed for the sake of the pragmatic requirements of the state. The Islamic government could decide what was Islamic and what was not in the light of new challenges. The Islamic government can destroy a mosque or suspend basic religious duties if it finds it is for the benefit of the Islamic state.²⁶ He was treading on a dangerous path that no other clergy dared to in the history of Shia Islam and made the sanctity of religion conditional to the requirements of political power.

Fourth, freedom and a democratic society have been a long desire for the Iranian people and since the beginning of the twentieth century they have tried on various occasions to achieve that, initially during the constitutional revolution, later during the national movement led by Dr Mohammad Mosaddeq and finally during the Islamic revolution of 1979. In the Islamic revolution it was Islam that became instrumental for this goal. Finally, despite the fact that in the Iranian constitution, being Iranian is not a condition for the supreme leader, the Islamic revolution has not ceased to adhere to the Iranian nation's state integrity. The Islamic revolution has observed all aspects of Iranian nationalism even more strictly than the previous governments. It is as difficult for a Persian-speaking Shia from Afghanistan to marry an Iranian as for a Frenchman, as Olivier Roy explained. For instance, Jalaluddin Farsi, one of Ayatollah Khomeini's closest followers, could not run for presidency because his father was born an Afghan.²⁷

The components of the Iranian government are not Islamic with precedence in the past. The best attribution for the Iranian system may be what Olivier Roy termed "constitutionalist theocracy"²⁸, a theocracy that has all the procedural elements of a liberal democracy though lacking the contents of an open society, mainly due to the totalitarian political Middle Eastern tradition than the Islamic aspects of the system. The

function of the Iranian political organisation is based on the constitution, and the divinity of the system is a complement to its function and not a determining factor. It is the state and constitution in Iran that define the position and role of Sharia and clergies and not vice versa; in other words, it is a secular system that takes the religious aspects of the Iranian culture into account.

Despite the fact that no caliph in power in the history of Islam after Ali was Shia and the Sunni caliphs, who claimed to be the embodiment of the Qur'anic verse: "O believers, obey God, obey the messenger and those in authority among you"²⁹, had not practised their power on the basis of a written civil contract like the Iranian constitution, the Iranian model can technically be considered non-Islamic. The Iranian Islamic system is more or less the continuation of the same political tradition in Iran since the emergence of Islam, with the difference that this time it is practiced by the clerics, based on a fairly democratic constitution. The story is the same; what is different this time is that religion is destroyed by the clerics who claim to be the advocates of religion. The arrangement in the past was that the state and the religious establishment had their own principles and red lines that they would not compromise. The great change after the Islamic revolution was that the religious establishment was stripped of its authority for the benefit of the state; in other words, politics was favoured at the cost of religion via secularised clerics that would put Shi'ism in a completely new phase of political experience for ever.

Iranian society, like that of its neighbour Turkey, received modernity and modernism in a very active manner in spite of the challenges faced from the religious establishments. Iranian literature and social movements in the twentieth century representing modern civilisation had been impressive. Iran had one of the most sophisticated leftist movements after the former Soviet Union in the world. The Iranian intellectual corpus was not only open to modernity and modernisation, but was also critical of that and a force for nationalisation of modernity and modernisation as well as dismissing opposition to an open society.³⁰

The Iranian revolution was supported by all sections of Iranian society from Islamists to secular nationalists and leftists. The revolution is called Islamic and it is often thought that it was a reaction of the Iranian society against the modernisation or rather secularisation of their country and is even considered to be a big blow to the trend of secularisation in Iran. This perception is indeed based on contemporary theories that in most cases are supported by the empirical realities that religious communities have not only survived but also flourished without feeling obliged to conform to the requirements of secular societies.³¹ It is quite evident that religiosity and religious awareness is on the rise in the world, from evangelical Christianity in the US to Islamic communities in Europe, whether for spiritual reasons or as a means of identity. The Islamists are on the rise in the Islamic world too, especially in the Middle East and, following the Islamic revolution in Iran and Shia communities across the world, political Islam with strong militancy components is spreading all over the Islamic world. In fact, the Islamists are all identical in one thing: that is, using Islam as a political means for their legitimate aspirations, except Al Qaida, which is mainly disimbedded and has gone to the extreme. There is no constituency left for the seculars in most of the Islamic countries after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the US and, despite the setbacks in the relations between some of the Islamic governments and Islamic movements in their countries, these movements seem to be the only credible path to some form of democratisation in these countries. However, can the Iranian revolution be categorised as part of this global reality?

The answer to the above question is no. First of all, the Iranian revolution was not against modernisation and secularisation, since the instrument of the revolution was the religious as well as the secular movements of the Iranian society. Secondly, the majority of those who fought for the revolution were ordinary Iranian people, who felt that they had not benefited from modernisation and wanted a fair distribution of the country's modernisation turnover. Thirdly, the system and structure of Shia religious thought and Persian civilisation is very different from the rest of the Muslim world and therefore the Iranian case needs to be looked at separately from the global mood of religious

remobilisation. The Islamic revolution has blown up Islamisation as a social movement in Iran and has set the country in a different direction from other Islamic countries where people are more religious than governments, unlike Iran where people have become secular but the government maintains it is Islamic. Iranian society is much more secular, as Olivier Roy explains, than that of secular republics like Turkey.³²

The fact of the matter is that secularism has been on the rise in the past few centuries. Modernity has been intertwined with secularism and both have developed on the basis of the philosophy that human beings are rational beings and can individually choose what is good and what is bad; as this individuality evolved and had become widespread, the domination of collective beliefs has become weaker and weaker. This critical voice and aspiration of the modern human being is well explained by Karl Popper in his book, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. The main message of Popper in his book is that if our civilisation is to survive and flourish, we should revolt against the domination of the great figures of mankind of our thoughts and beliefs, some of whom have been at the forefront of attacking freedom and reason.³³

In other words, the modern human being is not supposed to be a blind follower of collective institutionalised beliefs or schools of thoughts but rather to endeavour to pioneer new ways of life. Religious and ideological establishments throughout history have always tried to cast their monopoly over human beings' life; however, modernism and the fast trend of secularisation have been the dominant reality of our life. The clear example of this transformation and change has been the experience and militant response of the Roman Catholic Church in the wake of the Enlightenment. The Church, in fear of losing ground to the waves of Enlightenment revolutions, took a defiant position against the modern changes while insisting on the dogmas that it believed in. The most evident act of defiance came at The First Vatican Council in 1870, at which the Church insisted on the infallibility of the Pope and immaculate notion of Mary, naively presuming that it could preserve these beliefs and stop the process of secularisation.³⁴

The Second Vatican Council exemplified an evident setback and a great deal of conformity with the secularised world. The church confirmed that society was not reconquerable and took a stance that can be well explained by this Persian expression: “if the world does not put up with you, you put up with the world”.³⁵ This has been more or less the position taken up by all religious establishments including the Islamic ones, though, in some cases, very slowly. Iran could be considered one of the leading societies among the Muslim world that opened up drastically before the Islamic revolution but the religious establishment did not give up acting as a state inside the state – not in a political sense but rather through obstructing modernisation of Iranian society.

The Iranian mullahs have tried to re-conquer Iranian society after the revolution but like all other dynasties (mainly Turkish and the Mongols) in the history of Iran who have captured Iran and have not only adopted the Persian language and culture but also expanded it, the mullahs have become inadvertently instrumental for the process of secularisation in Iran. It is true that religious movements and, as Peter Berger illustrates, “the conservatives or orthodox or traditional movements are on the rise almost everywhere”³⁶, the Iranian reality is different and does not fit into this generalisation. In other words, the religious or traditional movements are not on the rise in Iran at the social level and the impediments for democracy are not posed by the people or religious establishment anymore; it is the authoritarian conservative minority in power that is opposing democracy there.

The fact of the matter is that religion was sacred to the Iranian people and had a very strong spiritual dimension before the revolution, and people were listening to the clerics, who were mainly critical of Iranian modernisation and secularisation and would attempt to extract any verse from the Qur’an or Hadith (the Prophet’s deeds and sayings) and the Rewayat (the deeds and sayings of the twelve Imams) in order to contest modernisation of the country. After the revolution the situation has become the opposite. The politicised or rather the secular clerics that are holding power in Iran and who are representing the clerics, but acting out of the clerical traditional context, are inventing interpretations of

the Qur'an, Hadith and Rewayate if they cannot find enough in the Islamic literature in order to justify modernisation and, unintentionally, the process of secularisation of Iranian society. They soon realised that the modern Iranian society and politics required a modern approach and, in order to stay in power, they needed to use the very instrument and methods that they were criticising before the revolution, like universal suffrage and birth control.

The Iranian revolution has secularised Iranian religious intellectualism as well, to the extent that, unlike their predecessors before the revolution, their concern is not returning to their religious self, Western intoxication or rescuing religion anymore. Instead, their concern is to remove the religious barriers to democracy honourably and provide interpretations of Islam that are compatible with democracy and secular society. They are moving with the times and expectations of the Iranian people and have been touched by their own ideals of a religious system in power. The religious intellectualism is only a step ahead of the clerical establishment, and those among them who can go a step further to meet the democratic needs of the Iranian people achieve the position of a national champion for the Iranian society. What is in common for the Iranian society as a whole, except for a very tiny minority, is that the current political system is not sustainable. The core of Iranian society has become exceptionally secular: even a radical president like Mahmoud Ahmadinijad, against the wishes of the radical clerics, sanctioned the presence of Iranian women in football stadiums, who are not allowed to attend and watch while men are playing football, in order to gain the support of the secular majority for his re-election. The Iranian religious intellectuals are not debating things that are unfamiliar to the Iranian people; they are rather echoing the growing thirst of the Iranian people for an open society.

Basically, the Iranian constitution is also a secular constitution that overrides the message of the Qur'anic verse mentioned earlier that has been the defining guidance for the Islamic governments and caliphs in the past. It is the constitution that defines who is in authority among the people, or rather those who are elected through universal suffrage

can have the authority. In a very demonstrative manner, Ayatollah Khomeini publicly asserted the supremacy of the state over Sharia on 7th January 1989 in response to the then president of Iran, Hojat al-Islam Ali Khamenei, who announced the primacy of Sharia over other laws of the land.³⁷ The notions of Iranian citizenship, recognition of universal suffrage, and equality among men and women based on article 20 are not Islamic concepts. With the existing position of the Iranian system, how far Soroush is right to claim that the Iranian government is based on Sharia rather than the Islamic faith needs to be explored at a later stage.

The Iranian constitution is a genuine charter that is based on popular will and bypasses Sharia law and settles on the function of the government institutions. According to the constitution, power resides with universal suffrage and the popular will is recognised and exerted on all aspects of the system. For instance, although the supreme leader is not elected directly by the people, he is elected and monitored by the ‘Assembly of Experts of the Leadership’ (*Shoraie Khobragane Rahbari*) who can also remove the leader if they find him to be unable to fulfil his duties or to be incompetent. It is appealing to know that, as John Esposito defines it, the Islamic system in Iran is the closest thing to democracy Iran has ever had.³⁸ The very basic elements of democracy such as universal suffrage and the notion of people are affirmed by even the hard-line clerics around the political spectrum and recognised by the Iranian constitution; the rationale that makes the Islamic republic different from a liberal democracy is not much due to the constitutional or rather structural content of the system, but rather is due to the status of the mentality of elites, whether intellectual or clerics. For example, ‘people’ does not mean all those with differences of faith, ethnicity, gender and so forth, who live in a defined political structure that we call a nation. They are rather only certain sections of society that conform with the legitimate definition of people provided by the minority hardliners. Those who fit into this definition or even conform to it – for example when Iranians grow beards to be seen to be religious and committed to the Islamic Republic, especially in the bureaucratic system in order to reach better positions, or attend Friday prayers in order not to be rejected by that narrow definition of people in the system – enjoy being treated

as people and enjoy the democratic aspects of their system.

It seems the definition of people in the thoughts and minds of the majority of religious intellectuals like Soroush in Iran is not much different from the existing view in the Islamic Republic. It is quite evident when Soroush says; “in a religious society, a secular government is undemocratic”, that either in a religious society, all people are religious or those who are religious are called people. The elites, whether clerics or intellectuals, are not way beyond the current constitution; in other words, the challenges of democracy in Iran lie in the thoughts and minds of the Iranian elites rather than the structural obstacles of the Islamic republic. However, the contemporary intellectual debate on religion and democracy and the role of religion in politics in Iran and Shia communities at large, and the fact that Iranian intellectualism has convened a role in this debate, is the outcome of some serious changes and transformations in the history of Shia religion.

The main slogan for the Shia has been that “the state can put up with profanity but not with tyranny”. Shia were, as Bernard Lewis puts it, in a modern sense, “the supporters of a candidate for political office”³⁹ and were created at the beginning of Islam just after the death of Prophet Mohammed. For Shia, all caliphs after the Prophet, except Ali, and the dynasties inheriting power from the Islamic caliphs, have been illegitimate. Those who supported Ali as the just and fair person to inherit power from the Prophet believed in power remaining with the Prophet’s family and this belief became a deep religious principle for them. Ali and his family did not inherit power and throughout the history of Islam, Shia felt excluded from power and as an opposition party lived with this sense of exclusion and they were punished for that. However, the Shia religious establishment, especially after the sixteenth century, advocated for an Islamic government established by the twelfth Imam who is in seclusion. They remained loyal to this principle and, therefore, considered the present situation as temporary and as transitional to the last Imam’s government, hoping that the Imam would re-emerge at any time and bring justice. This created theoretical as well as religious hurdles for Shia towards an open society and, given that the Shia clerical establishment was deeply rooted in the Shia

communities' social structure, the struggle for a secular system was very challenging.

Moreover, the origin of the Shia religious intellectuals' opportunity of being in a position – or rather, having the legitimacy and competence – to interpret religion, is embedded in the history of Shia religion. Islam in its current Shia face that is exposed to interpretation as a human product and knowledge is the outcome of two revolutionary transformations in the history of this religion. The first transformation was the victory of Usuleien (Scholarly) over the Akhbareien (Traditionalists) in the Shia thought.⁴⁰ Usuleien were advocating for the right of interpretation of Islam (Ijtihad) and the fact that the Ulama had a share in the interpretation of Islam, according to their time and social contexts. Akhbareien, on the contrary, believed that the gate for the interpretation of religion was closed after the seclusion of the twelfth Imam. The victory of Usuleien was a great step in the history of Shia Islam and a clear distinction from other factions of Islam. The idea that Islam is not a pack of frozen ideas and guidance that was delivered by the Prophet, was a new or rather a modern phenomenon in the history of Islam and it was a great step forward to believe that we human beings, even if limited to the Ulama, have a say in terms of how and what Islam should be like, according to our time and requirements.

This was perhaps one of the fundamental reasons that created the possibility of the Shia clerics becoming an institution independent from the state. No official interpretation of Islam was observed among the Shia and the Shia Ulama have had freedom to re-interpret almost anything in Islam. In other words, a *Marja* should be a source, innovator and an interpreter of Islam and consider himself as having a role to play to be supported by the people and become the source of emulation. People are free to choose which interpretation to emulate beyond any geographical boundaries and pay their religious taxes to their source of imitation, as for instance most of the Afghan Shia were imitating Ayatollah Al Khuie in Iraq and paid their religious taxes to him. However, you should demonstrate distinct and appropriate quality, such as understanding the requirements of the time and changing environment, in order to be a source of emulation.

The victory of Usuleien transformed the Shia religion to a democratic form of belief, in which people can choose freely their source of emulation, shift from one source to another, stay loyal to the thoughts and guidance of a deceased source or opt a new one and no consequences if you decide not to have a source of imitation.⁴¹ A source of emulation or a *Marja* was neither necessarily a political figure nor a national one. Ulama had been nearly always against a direct involvement in politics and found themselves higher than the realm of politics. This resentment of involvement of Ulama into direct politics continued even during Ayatollah Khomeini's leadership of the Islamic revolution by Ayatollah Shariatmadari, for instance.⁴² However, this anti-politicisation shield had kept Shia religion away from the sphere of social interaction to be assessed and critically investigated by the public and intellectuals and preserved the clerical establishment's monopoly on the interpretation of religion. Nevertheless, this democratic practice has kept Shia thought susceptible to constant and democratic changes.

In fact, the Shia clerics, or rather Shia understanding of Islam, has been progressive and responsive to the constant changing demands of its followers. The Shia Ulama are open to and familiar with the ancient as well as modern Western philosophy, culture and values and engage with it, though in most cases in order to simply refute it in the face of their claimed superior Islamic values and ideology. For instance, Ayatollah Motahari, one of the distinct and respected scholars of the Islamic revolution, said in an interview with Iranian national TV that:

The Western freedom is the freedom of animal desire. Our democracy offers the real freedom for human beings. Cyrus (the ancient Persian king), when he captured Babylonia, respected religious freedom and left the people free to practise their own religions ... but Abraham questions these ideas and says we should not respect these dreadful beliefs. By Western standards, this is anti-freedom. The Prophet Mohammed did not act like Cyrus when he entered Mecca and, by breaking the idols, he freed the people and their humanity.⁴³

Despite the fact that the Shia clerics usually engage with Western philosophy and culture to conclude that the Western values are inferior to the Islamic ones, they have progressive dialogues with Western civilisation, the outcome of which has been constant susceptibility to change and modern demands.

Even though the Shia clerical establishment has been the most progressive in the Islamic world due to the openness of the Ijtihad gate and victory of the Usuleien over Akhbareien, the establishment of the clerical system as an independent institution that sought its financial support directly from the people and had been acting as a state inside the state became a danger to democracy, democratisation and secularisation. The Shia clerical establishment evolved during the centuries and became a force that could not have been bypassed by any secular political movements such as the Turkish model. The clerical establishment in Iran has all the time acted as a political force or pressure group in Iranian politics and at least demanded the conformity of the states' laws to Sharia law. This institution was so self-sufficient and entrenched in the Iranian society that no state could ignore it and the idea of a secular democracy with the existence of the clerical establishment seemed far-reaching and gloomy for the Iranians. Nonetheless, the breakthrough should have come from inside the establishment. This breakthrough that was the Islamic revolution constitutes the second revolutionary transformation in the Shia thought.

Ironically, the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 has been the second great transformation of Shia Islam that eliminated the institutional monopoly of the clerics on the interpretation of Islam. The victory of the Usuleien over Akhbareien opened the gate of interpretation of Islam to the jurists but ended up as a giant clerical establishment institution that could remain a hurdle for a secular and open society in the long term. The Islamic revolution was not only a political revolution but also a revolution in the thoughts and minds of Shia in the world. It destroyed the sanctity and theological domination of the clerics gained through centuries of evolution and consolidation and opened the realm of religious interpretation to the level of the layman. In other words, religious knowledge

became part of human temporal knowledge. It has been as a result of this transformation, however, that scholars like Soroush have been able to convene a space for themselves in theology, Islam and politics and claim the reward of being nominated the Luther of Islam, while it was in fact Ayatollah Khomeini who unintentionally became the Luther of Shia Islam. Khomeini removed the enduring obstacle for democracy and open society in Iran and, as Olivier Roy describes it, “broke the rule that had been established among the clergy over two centuries.”⁴⁴

Challenges of the Iranian Islamic System

Ayatollah Khomeini himself was aware of the uniqueness of his movement in the history of Shia Islam. He was ambitious and revolutionary and knew that he would not reach the highest theological position amongst the clerical establishment and therefore rebelled against it and destroyed it. He was a grand ayatollah and no grand ayatollah had dared or even attempted in the past to revolt against the establishment. Khomeini did not recognise a role model for his movement in the Shia history except the Prophet and the twelve imams and neither had he admired a political figure in the history of Iran.⁴⁵ His understanding of the situation was quite accurate given the fact that the Shia religion at large and in Iran in particular had never experienced such an event, and based on the rationale behind the function of the Shia clerical establishment and politics in Iran, it was not even predictable. However, Khomeini was under a big illusion and naive about the understanding of his time. He did not intend to be the Luther of Islam and thought that returning to the time of the Prophet was feasible.⁴⁶ In other words, he, under no circumstances contemplated the fact that he would become the biggest force for secularisation in the history of Iran.

Shia religious authority has been transformed into political authority and politics is performed not by secular politicians but rather by the secularised clerics; the clerics who were dealing with the religious life of people became politicians and it was not religion and Sharia law that determined their courses of actions, as before, but rather political

pragmatism and the constitution. In other words, the clerical establishment, which was anti-political or rather stayed out of direct politics, and had not attempted to gain political power, remaining conservative and threatening to any government promoting further secularisation beyond the scope of clerical tolerance, is now playing politics in the name of religion. The clerics and their institution cannot return to their status before the Iranian revolution and have entered a realm that has different sets of principles and rules, and are exposed to numerous temptations. The Islamic revolution took not only the clerics but also the Shia religion into the realm of politics and the clerics have recognised the fact that they should observe the rules of the game and be conscious of the fact that this will strip them of their religious authority.

The Islamic revolution of Iran has diminished the Shia clerical establishment's religious authority and influence to a political level that is not ethically and divinely binding for the people and can easily be disputed and disobeyed by them. There will hardly be any religious decrees or fatwas like those of Ayatollah Shirazi during the Tobacco Protest or Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie, which can be religiously obligatory for Muslims, and any such decree will be considered as a political request or even as a political request for Iranian national interests in the eyes of Muslims, including the Shia around the world.

However, the Iranian clerics after the revolution have been suffering from the same anxiety as the Islamists at large; that is, dislike of spiritual religiosity, the religiosity of the peasant, the mystics and so forth instead of the Islam of resentment that is entwined with their political aspirations.⁴⁷ In fact, they do not find moderate Islam instrumental for their political purposes and religiously convincing and, with political religiosity, they become susceptible to secularism. The ambiguity and fluctuation of Iranian foreign policy toward the West after the Islamic revolution has been due to this mental dichotomy where, on the one hand, they want to remain religious and stick to their religious rhetoric, and on the other, they are bearing the pressure of coming to terms with the secular nature of playing politics. As they have wanted politics for religion ever since

the Islamic revolution, politics has not had its real function. The political power and resources of the country have become the possession and monopoly of the radical minority to deploy it for their ideological purposes. Due to this fact, in order for the Iranian system to operate as a secular system, a political change is needed in the Iranian government. In other words, the potential for the Iranian system to emphasise either its Islamic values or secular qualities depends on the political will of the Iranian elites and growing need of the Iranian people for democracy and therefore the difference between a religious system and a secular one is political and not in substance.

The national upheaval after the June 2009 election proved that the problem in Iran is not religion or the constitution anymore. It is rather the challenges of the tyranny of the minority in power who are deeply embedded in the Iranian tyrannical political culture, and who are ready to violate religious principles as well as the constitution in order to stay in power. None of the measures taken by the Islamic regime are either legal or religious; from massacre of peaceful protestors to mass detention of opposition figures. The authoritarian minority, mainly centred on the military establishment, is joined with the very conservative part of the clerical establishment, at whose hands Ayatollah Khomeini suffered all his life and by whom he was not favoured when he was alive. The line of communication between the middle class of Iranian society and the conservative minority in power has broken down. The religious discourse that the legitimacy of the government comes from God and not the people, as preached by Ayatollah Yazdi, one of the conservative clerics, and the conservative minority in power in Iran, is not comprehensible to the majority of the Iranian people anymore.⁴⁸

The fact of the matter is that religion, historically, as a force against modernity and democracy has become insignificant and the battle of the Iranian people will be the struggle against authoritarianism rather than religion. The emergence of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the current Iranian president, and his minority conservative allies as the second wave of the revolution does not fit in the rational calculation of the evolutionary phase of the revolution. The expected rational outcome of the sequence of events was to

see the reformists hold on to power and increasingly democratise the Islamic system towards a secular democracy. This has not happened, not because the rational calculation is wrong, but because an unpredicted event has taken place – that is, the appearance of the authoritarian conservative minority, but this time against the will of the Iranian people, and based on that rational calculation, it cannot become part of the evolutionary phase and soon should disappear.

The conservative religious minority in power might sense that their reformist counterparts' position of convergence of Islam and democracy might open the gate for a secular democracy and leave no role for religion and the religious establishment. That is why they have decided to impose the Islamic government, not the Islamic republic government, on Iranian people through an iron fist and not through the legal framework enshrined in the Iranian constitution. The dichotomy is quite sharp since, on the one hand there are the Iranian people with their ever-expanding middle class and demand for democracy, much more progressive and confident beyond the scope of the constitution of 1979, and, on the other hand, the very sluggish conservative minority in power that do not put up with the democratic rights recognised in the existing constitution. The debate is not the compatibility of Islam and democracy anymore, and even the reformist Islamists openly acknowledge that they adhere to the existing constitution, temporarily, not because of the Islamist aspects of the constitution but because of the democratic rights recognised by the constitution against the conservatives, who do not believe in those rights.

The Islamic republic can be considered one step forward towards democracy in Iran since a country like Iran could not bypass the clerical understanding of Islam and politics and yet establish a democracy. The clerical establishment could remain a source of threat and impede the process of democratisation and creation of an open society in Iran if they stayed out of direct politics. They could also emerge sometime in the future to challenge the process of democratisation in Iran like their counterpart Islamists in Turkey today, that hold power after nearly a century's domination of the secular system. In Iran,

secularisation is taking place via its enemies who are finding its religious justifications, and religious intellectuals like Soroush are feeding this process in the name of modern or rather democratic religiosity.

Chapter 3

Soroush and Islam

A Thorough Analysis of Soroush's

Religious Beliefs

This chapter is dedicated to Soroush and his religious beliefs. Soroush does not deny that he is religious; he is not only a Muslim but also a Shia Muslim. His main argument is that there is no pure Islam in existence; all that we have are interpretations of Islam. As a young Muslim, Soroush was, at least in theory if not in practice, an Islamic fundamentalist. The young Soroush was not deploying the art of hermeneutics to hide his intentions as he is doing today. He was not only straightforward and mindful of the incompatibility of his religious beliefs with modernity and the modern world but also openly critical of modernity and liberal tradition. He seemed very genuine and uncomplicated, believing in Islam as a school of thought, which had a stronger grounding in morality than the existing schools of humanism and existentialism, and adhered to what he calls today the “Islam of identity”.¹

I will begin by looking at Soroush’s intellectual life during his younger age when he was a follower of Islam, which he believed to be a superior belief, and he believed all those who were not a follower of Islam were going astray. Even our humanity in his view was not complete if it was not directed by the order of God. I will then examine the reasons why Soroush claims to have turned against the type of religious belief he was advocating and whether he has really distanced himself from those views or he has pioneered a smarter method to redraft them to serve modern audiences. The question that this chapter is going to answer is: how genuine and sustainable is his current approach? In other words, is it a cosmetic transformation or a revolution in content in his intellectual life? Is he the same Soroush that has deployed modern methodology and terminology to promote his religious beliefs and dogmas to a modern audience? In fact, the preliminary answer to these questions is that despite the fact that Soroush has contributed more than anyone else to the debate on liberalisation of Islamic thought in his country, he has offered little and has not gone far enough to be significantly different from his radical younger position. In other words, Soroush’s religiosity and interpretation of Islam is not much different in content from his younger radical resolve.

Soroush began his intellectual career as a faithful and committed Muslim, who was inspired by the simple message of Islam as it appears to an ordinary Muslim in which the distinctions and divisions among Muslim and non-Muslim, us and them, and believer and non-believer are clear-cut. Soroush was an intellectual follower of Islam and still is; however, initially, especially at the beginning of the Islamic revolution, he was a very consistent Muslim, who expressed his religious beliefs as he found them in the Islamic literature – a genuine, simple and a rather intolerant version of Islam. He was not trying to please everybody and every audience as he is doing today; to be liberal with the liberal and religious with the religious.

Soroush was actively advocating for a God-centred world, a world where everything and all duties are defined by God. The highest position that human beings can achieve is to be perfect followers of Islam. Humans' humanity is preserved only in relation to God, his actions and deeds are also justified and valued only in relation to God. The world that religions are offering to us is a God-centred, not human-centred, world, in which all routes end in God, all activities are performed towards God, everything finds its interpretation through God and every action finds its meaning through God and loses its meaning as soon as it disconnects from God.² The young Soroush believes that the Islamic world that is a God-centred world has a focal point that is God and has a language that is religious. He encourages Muslims to maintain this language as purely as possible and try not to mix this language with others.³

Soroush's world is a simple traditional world of an ordinary religious man who is calm, certain and confident that the world is as it is defined by religion. There is a God who has created the world including human beings and has sent prophets to guide them through the path of God. He thinks that as "we become certain, whether in science or philosophy, only when we reach the final answer"; a similar analogy can be made for the God-centred world where you can address questions like: "Why does the world exist? Why do these events take place? Why do human beings exist? And why have religions come about? You can only get to the bottom of these questions through relating them to God."⁴ In the

God-centred world, not only existence come from God but also values and ethics pour from God and all actions find interpretations and justifications only if they are for the sake of God.⁵ In such a world, a human being is accountable only to God and not to other entities like community and people.

Democracy and the idea of people as the source of legitimacy and authority were alien to the young and revolutionary Soroush. He was part of the Iranian Islamist revolutionary movement for establishing an Islamic government and was unaware of the consequences of his, or to a certain extent, the existing revolutionary Islamists' ideology that advocated for the accountability of human beings only to God:

We do not rise up for the sake of people, class, race or nationality, but rather we revolt for God since the path of God is the path of evolution and not vice versa ... We do not base our values on people and idols like these, we go a step further to reach God and reaching God includes reaching all of these.⁶

There is no role recognised for people in this ideology while the interpretation of this mentality in politics can be nothing less than an authoritarian regime, a political system that Iran has experienced since the Islamic revolution of 1979. The theory of 'Absolute Guardianship of the Jurist' of Ayatollah Khomeini was not an abstract theory and in fact it was preached in a different sense by other revolutionaries, whether clerics or religious intellectuals including Soroush. Despite his theory, Khomeini did not consider democracy against Islam, though he was talking of 'Islamic Democracy' before the revolution. However, he adopted a harder line against the West and democracy. He said in a meeting with the Islamic Republic Television and Radio Committee in Qom on December 10 1979 that: "In the revolution that was achieved in Iran, people were screaming that they wanted Islam; these people did not rise up so their country could have democracy."

It was evident that, in line with the hard line against democracy represented by Khomeini, the revolutionary Soroush was not concerned with democracy and did not yet feel the

constraints of the God-centred world that he was passionately struggling for. His understanding of life and existence was and to some extent still is very simple; the world including human beings are created by God as explained by the Islamic literature, God is there at the top and we human beings and other beings in the world are there to worship him, “live for him”, “die for him”, and see and interpret everything through him. The world without God for Soroush is a dark world and the desperate attempt by other schools of thought such as ‘humanism’ and ‘existentialism’ that are trying in vain to exert the light of human beings into this dark world, are worthless.⁷ Human beings’ humanity is complete only when it is based on God.

An uncompromising young Soroush, who was fighting for an eternal interpretation of life, was not reasoning or interpreting Islam but rather accepted it like an ordinary Shia follower and propagated it as an ideology. He was not alone in understanding and applying Islam literally in his life, especially before the Islamic revolution in Iran, and considering life and sociopolitical institutions without aims and missions, or at least without aims and missions that were prescribed by Islam, was inconceivable. There was no serious debate on democracy or even religious democracy among the Islamic intelligentsia and the dominant perception was to establish a political system based on an ideology and bring real justice to the people. The political discourse was not the struggle of people for the establishment of a government that they wanted but rather a political system with a mission established by some elites and, in the case of Soroush, by a God-centred ideology. The seeds of an authoritarian government were already there in the thoughts and minds of even the religious intelligentsia.

The style and format of Soroush’s intellectualism was a junior copy of his role model Ali Shariati. Following Shariati, Soroush also picked and chose the elements in Islam that fitted into his sceptical perception of the modern world. Without an understanding of the practicality of the application of those idealisms and their social contexts and the political consequences of the ideologies based on these idealisms, Soroush echoed them as part of his religious beliefs. Comparing the God-centred world with the human-centred one,

Soroush has said:

In the human-worshipped and human-centred schools of thoughts, human beings are their own God, neither has anybody sent them nor is anyone waiting for them, no one. They are thrown in this blind and wild world of nature, to see if they could find the light with their own hand and creation, otherwise they will remain in the dark. But the Quran says: if someone does not get light from God, he/she shall not have light.⁸

The same religious views are active in Soroush's political theory today. His main criticism of liberal societies and liberal democracies is that the rights of God are ignored in these systems. The religious democracy that he is proposing aims to put this right and reinstate the rights of God and his role in running our political life:

The problem of religious democratic government is threefold: to reconcile people's satisfaction with God's approval; to strike a balance between the religious and the nonreligious; and to do right by both the people and by God, acknowledging at once the integrity of human beings and of religion. The task of religious governments is, obviously, much harder than that of democratic or religious regimes ... If God exists and has rights, must those rights be upheld? Surely, those who are mindful of human rights cannot be indifferent to God's rights, if such exist, nor can they neglect His existence and rights in the conduct of human life. It is by no means less significant to be concerned with the rights of God than with those of human beings.⁹

Soroush has not come to terms with some of the preconditions of a democratic society where you are expected to advocate for your rights and human rights because democracies are for people. Religious beliefs are personal matters in a democratic society. There is nothing wrong with advocating for a political system where Soroush can put his understanding of a religious God-centred system into practice and call it anything

but a democracy. The fact of the matter is that despite Soroush's assertions that it is religion that should adjust itself to democracy and not vice versa, his religious beliefs cannot support his democratic political position.

Soroush considered the Iranian Islamic revolution a God-centred revolution that was going to put God at the centre and any attempt to interpret or explain the revolution through human beings and their central role was decreed by Soroush to be betrayal and deceit, since the revolution was only for the sake of God.

If our revolution in this country has one specification that makes it superior to other revolutions it is that it is God-centred and not human-centred. Any attempt to interpret this revolution in a human-centred language is betrayal and deceit, in my opinion. This revolution is a revolution for the sake of God. In other words, it is God who is at the centre and when you give centrality to God, everything else proceeds from that.¹⁰

It is evident that Soroush was a passionate defender of the religiosity of the Iranian revolution rather than a democratic voice in the revolution, even in the form of a democratic religious scholar. The fact that he is advocating for a 'democratic religious government' today is a great step forward as compared with the young revolutionary and fundamentalist Soroush.

Politics was the subordinate element of Soroush's religious beliefs and an instrument for his ideology. Not only he did not believe in democracy but he also did not recognise the needs of human-centred political systems. Democracy has no golden aims and ideals other than those that the people expect of it and bestow on it, but this is not acceptable to the Islamists like Soroush since, on the one hand, the government is not created just to manage sociopolitical life but is, rather, established to ensure the dominance of God in society; and on the other, the dominant notion in the Qur'an and among the Islamists is that the majority are ignorant and "do not think".¹¹ This lack of respect and recognition

for the rule of the people goes far beyond Islam to the thoughts and political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece, who had a great impact on philosophy in general and on political philosophy in particular in the Islamic world. If the government has some sacred missions to accomplish and should have revolutionary planes to establish a desired society, as Shariati thought¹², it cannot be achieved with the ignorant majority. The young revolutionary Soroush did not even compromise on the Iranian revolution being interpreted based on the legitimate aspirations of the Iranian people for a just and democratic political system that they were deprived of during the authoritarian regimes of the past. The revolution succeeded with the help and sacrifices of the Iranian people but the elites, including Soroush, denied the democracy that they fought for and, instead, they were sidelined from the centre for the benefit of God.

Soroush was not alone in this sentiment; it was the dominant position of nearly all Iranian Islamists during the Iranian revolution. This also demonstrated the immaturity of the debate on democracy along the entire political spectrum in Iran. In fact, democracy as a product of liberalism in the West was not thought to be compatible with Islam and, therefore, it was not debatable. The current debate on democracy and compatibility of Islam with democracy headed by Soroush is the antithesis of the Islamic idealism of Islamic intellectualism and the challenges this idealism has encountered in practice. Soroush's idealism was not only political, it was based profoundly on his religious belief and the religious mentality of us and them, God-worshippers and human-worshippers, believers and non-believers (Kafer).¹³ Soroush was profoundly religious and was promoting the type of Islam that Islamic fundamentalism has adhered to for the past few decades, which would reinforce the polarity of us and them and friend and enemy. In his view, not only do beings find their existence through God but also obligations come from God; all beings get their life and existence from God and "what must be done and must not be done find their authorisation directly from the orders of God."¹⁴ In other words, there is no room for independence from God, since all those who are following paths other than the path of God are going astray.

The difference between the young Soroush and the mature one is great, though not so much in content. He is a scholar, a theologian and known as a philosopher, mainly in the West, not as that innocent young Muslim believer who was neither trying to hide his religious beliefs nor attempting to please everybody. He is still a practising Muslim, who prays five times a day, fasts during the month of Ramadan and observes other Islamic practices enshrined in the Sharia law. Like other Muslims, he believes that there is a God, who has created the universe including human beings and has sent us the prophets to guide us free of charge on the right path and, had it not been for the involvement of the prophets to pick up the pure messages of God and pass them on to us, who have no direct access to God, we human beings could not find the true path of God.¹⁵ This is the dominant belief amongst the religious communities that had it not been for the prophets, people would have gone astray. That is why Soroush insists on the application of Sharia law, since the prophets' messages and the true paths that they have offered should be applied in a legal context in the form of Sharia law. Despite the distinction that the pro-religious-democracy Soroush makes between the main messages and the essence of Islam and Sharia law in order to justify his political theory, he still believes that without Sharia law, the essence of Islam cannot survive.¹⁶ Whatever arguments Soroush provides to support his theory of democratic religious government, his religious views clearly do not adhere to his political aspirations. This also demonstrates how adulterated his political accounts are, especially for a foreign audience who do not know much about the deep religious beliefs imbedded in his earlier fundamentalist approach, and which are present in his current softer religious beliefs.

We need the revelations, according to Soroush, since we cannot figure out everything through our reason and need a source that is connected beyond human reason.¹⁷ Soroush is a Sufi and deeply influenced by Persian mystical literature, part of which is critical of reason or even anti-reason.¹⁸ One cannot believe in the assertion that reason is not a capable means for finding the truth and rights and wrongs of human's actions and in the meantime, advocate for a political system that is rational and can only function on the basis of collective rational consensus. The Muslim Soroush seems to be far away from

the democratic political debate and much closer to the traditional mainstream Islamic understanding of power and politics that is predominantly religious and undemocratic.

Soroush and the Prophet

Soroush's understanding of the philosophy of life and the universe is that of the understanding of other religious people that God has created the world and we human beings are obliged to worship him. We cannot find him with our reason and without the guidance and sacrifice of those who are appointed by him to channel his messages in different times and languages to different people. The world outside of this structural mapping of the universe, including the secular and liberal world, exists in vain with no divine moral content and faith in life after death. These appointees, initially, had been ordinary people with no knowledge of reading and writing but when chosen as the prophets they became the direct associates of God and ascended dramatically from the level of ordinary people to the level of direct friends of God, who were communicating with God and had first-hand divine knowledge, though still lived normal lives like other people.

Islam had formed or rather unfolded in a historical process and evolved gradually. Prophethood was a kind of experience and wherever you have experience, you have the evolution of experience. Islam unfolded during the daily experiences of the Prophet Mohammed and through the challenges he faced in his society, such as hostilities among the Arabs and towards his movement and the faith and mentality of his people.¹⁹ Like a teacher at school, a professor at the university, or a religious and sociopolitical figure in a society, who face constant questions and find answers, the Prophet Mohammed formed Islam through facing questions and issues. Soroush's innovative contribution to this debate is that, firstly, Islam took form through a historical process of facing challenges and questions and answering them and, secondly, it could have expanded and evolved even further had the Prophet lived longer, since so many things did not happen during his time.²⁰ What is obvious here is that the formation of Islam, in Soroush's view, was

question- and challenge-driven and not a set of revelations beyond historical contexts for all people of all times, as most other Muslims understand. In other words, Islam was formed in response to the Prophet's social challenges, and since different societies have their own challenges in different times, the response to the challenges of one society cannot be fit for the challenges of other societies especially in different times. It seems that Soroush intends to open a space for reform in Islamic thought or to find a position for reinventing or reinterpreting Islam in response to the challenges of today.

The above approach puts Islam in a very unsafe and unstable position, though at a glance, it manifests a revolutionary approach that intends to liberalise Islam and reinvent it in response to the challenges of today. If we assume that Islam is formed through a historical process in response to the challenges of the Prophet's time and society and believe that if the Prophet had lived longer, Islam could have expanded further, we can deduce that Islam is not complete and we are free to have our own Islam in response to the demands of our time. Soroush stresses that the religion that had formed in response to historical events has no choice but to continue changing and reshaping following encounters with emerging challenges; Islam has evolved after the Prophet Mohammed and scholars like Ghazali, Hafez and Balkhi (Rumi) have added to Islam, according to Soroush.²¹

This particular preaching of religiosity can open the gate for a liberal society and Soroush could get credit for championing such a theory. What is at stake here is the viability of Islam as a religion. If Islam was formed historically and through the challenges and questions the Prophet faced, like a professor at the university, it should be incomplete and limited to the time and society of the Prophet, and since the prophet could not live forever, in theory, Islam cannot be a perfect religion, as the majority of its followers believe it to be. The questions and issues of each generation in a society are different and indeed its answers, let alone the challenges of other societies and cultures.

The implications of Soroush's theory are not only these, which are supported by further

arguments he presents that other Muslim scholars have added to Islam, but also leaves Islam exposed to disintegration and fragmentation in terms of its cohesion and structure. This can be a good empirical and secular analysis of how Islam was created historically, but the fact is that, as a religious theory, it displays a very instrumental understanding of Islam that is subject to our interpretations and manipulations to the extent that our countless versions of Islam in response to modern challenges take precedence and find no need for compatibility with Islam as it was revealed. The majority of Muslims might find this theory alarming, since the dominant view among Muslims is that Islam is a complete religion and was completed before the Prophet passed away based on the Qur'anic verse that: "this day I (God) concluded your religion for you, completed my favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion".²² Islam was not formed based on the challenges and questions put to the Prophet and the answers he provided to those questions; it was Allah who used any occasion to reveal messages to the Prophet that are for all human beings of all times.

Conditioning the revelations to the type of questions and challenges posed to the Prophet and claiming that, had the Prophet lived longer, the Qur'an and Islam could have been longer in their evolution and more comprehensive, not only undermines the sacredness of Islam, but also does not reflect the reality of how Islam was created, based on the understanding of the majority of Muslims. God revealed Islam to the Prophet Mohammed in a limited period of time that has all the spiritual messages human beings need for ever and, had he not finished his messages to the Prophet, he would have extended the life of the Prophet. To say that Islam could expand had the Prophet lived longer, since so many things did not happen during his time, means that God has not completed his message because the Prophet did not live longer to face those other challenges. However, whatever the implications of this theory, a scholar with these sets of beliefs and theory, can feel comfortable advocating for a religious democracy; but is it really Islamic and is this the real Soroush?

The fact of the matter is that Soroush is not consistent and the dominant theme in his

religious theory is that we cannot get anywhere with our reason and therefore we are in constant need of the revelations. At this stage Soroush closes the chapter of reasoning and becomes a devoted follower of the Prophet and, surely, the debate on democracy will be redundant on such occasions. This demonstrates that Soroush speaks his mind when he is not discussing politics. He clearly does not believe in independent reasoning and claims that there is no independent reason in religion.²³ He is right in this assertion that there is no independent reason in religion, since it cannot be contained inside the religious structure and preferences. Recognition of independent reason in religion will ultimately disintegrate religion from within and officially opens the gate of secularisation in that religion.

However Soroush's intellectual life is full of contradictions and, while the dominant thought in his religious theory is that we should follow the prophet one hundred percent and believe that he is the final messenger of God and also accept that we are 'sinful', 'ignorant' and 'unclean', whereas the prophet was immaculate, he turns a hundred and eighty degrees when he discusses politics in Islam or Islam as an ideology. Contrary to his above religious beliefs, his advice to Muslims in order to rescue Islam and Islamic civilisation is to resort to independent reason and rationalism and only through "exerting independent reason, not religious reason and not jurisprudential reason, we can save Islam and the Islamic civilisation that has had the final nail hammered to their coffin by modern civilisation, from the path of extinction".²⁴ Provisionally, I am going to stay with Soroush's mainstream religious beliefs and will not go deep into his world of contradictions at this stage.

The Prophet Mohammed was not only immaculate and at the highest level, in terms of divinity and closeness to God, according to Soroush, but he was also the source of truth; in other words, all his words and deeds were divine and we are not able to find out why. For example, the Prophet had nine wives, while no more than four wives are allowed for other Muslims and we should accept that simply because he knew what was right and what was wrong. There are things that we do not comprehend in the Prophet's personal

life; however, since he was the source of truth, we are not in a position to question them.²⁵ Nonetheless, our duty is to follow his general life to the extent that we can, since we cannot reach the position of fully comprehending and implementing what he has asked us to do. The prophet himself or rather his personality is the reason for his words and deeds to be believed in; for example, “accept this argument because I say it, not, accept my words for this reason” or “we sell truth and the bases of truth and you can only find them here”.²⁶

Soroush believes that we should follow the Prophet without looking for reasons or justifications, since the nature of the prophetic argument is different from the scientific and philosophical ones. The Prophet was not reasoning with people and did not convey his messages through philosophical arguments; he was the source of truth and was asking the people to not only listen to him but also obey him if they wanted to be human beings, otherwise, they would remain human-like beings or animals. According to Soroush, “only those who accept being animal can ignore the messages of the Prophets”.²⁷ Referring to Balkhi’s poems, Soroush explains that the non-believer (Kafer) is a “sick person, mentally ill and ill at heart, or has an illness of not accepting the truth or they are blind and deaf and the Prophet runs behind them free of charge to heal them and give them medicine”.²⁸ That is why the Prophet even despised the material world and non-believers, in order to shake them into knowing that he had burning truths; what he was saying were not ordinary arguments and if they refused to listen and accept them, then “they were worse than animals and out of the realm of humanity”.²⁹

As we can see above, there is no trace of reasoning and rationalism in Soroush’s arguments. He well reasons that a democratic society cannot be built on the above religious beliefs and these beliefs will contradict every aspect of democracy. Soroush is right in revealing parts of the very essence of Islamic beliefs and his faith, and the fact that religions are not inclusive and tolerant and have their own verdicts, but he forgets that he also advocates for the project of rationalism in Islam in order to, on the one hand, justify his political theory and, on the other hand, rescue Islam from the path of

extinction. Regardless of the incentives behind his rationalism project, Soroush fails to prove how he can deduce a viable rationalist discourse out of such a religious belief. He is not only a follower of the Prophet, but also a theological advocate and preacher of the above beliefs. Soroush believes that “we value ethical principles and values, do not support cruelty and aggression, openly and do not worship idols because of the prophets”.³⁰ In other words, we are human beings because of the prophets and he clearly repeats this slogan that “those who are running away from listening to the Prophet are like the donkeys that are fleeing from lions”.³¹

The implications of these beliefs are that there would be no shared human morality and values, common sense of humanity or respect for ethical principles among human beings had it not been for the Prophet. He dehumanises those who are not religious and destroys the line of communication with everyone unless they are Muslim. He is clearly preaching the content of some of the verses in the Qur’an that say “and whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of him and in the hereafter he will be one of the losers”³² that are openly contradicting democracy and a tolerant society. Soroush is not shy about expressing such extreme beliefs, since a great deal of his conviction is to keep religion alive in modern societies and challenge liberalism.

Soroush’s religious beliefs, unlike his rational liberal vision, which are presented mainly in politics and when he addresses a foreign audience, are like that of his cleric mentor Ayatollah Motahari, whom he often refers to as a reference to corroborate his religious theory. Motahari openly opposed freedom and tolerance. In his view, Islam was not to recognise any form of belief and faith in the name of tolerance if they were considered to be anti-Islamic or superstitious. In one of the series of his interviews with Ali Paya that has been broadcast several times on the Iranian TV channels (and most of these interviews with Ali Paya and Soroush are accessible on YouTube), Motahari says that when Queen Elizabeth II of Britain went to India and visited one of the temples, she took her shoes off out of respect to Hindus’ religion, but Islam’s approach is not like that. Islam’s position is like that of Abraham’s, who entered the temples where idols were kept

and destroyed all idols, except the biggest one, with his axe and left his axe with the bigger idol to indicate that the bigger idol destroyed all. This is the way Islam deals with superstitions and beliefs considered to be inhumane.

There is no difference between Motahari's beliefs and Soroush's elaboration of the Prophet's deeds whereby those who were fleeing from him were worse than animals and were like donkeys that were fleeing from lions. The fact of the matter is that Soroush's religious beliefs are in line with the mainstream Islamic position that all those who are not Muslims are on the wrong path. We live with them because they are there and the offensive jihad to impose our religion on them, at least among the Shia after the prophet and the twelve imams, is forbidden; they can live under Islamic authority but they have to pay special taxes (Jizia) for the protection that the Islamic authority provides for them. They are not considered clean and on the right path and, therefore, not equal to Muslims.

What is significant is that regardless of the fact that an Islamic authority like those of the Islamic caliphs of the past does not exist anymore, the belief and the perception is there. Muslims like Soroush might be pragmatic and in the real world; they seem to be tolerant, but this tolerance is not backed by their religious beliefs and convictions. The central argument of the religious establishments, including Soroush as a leading figure and unrecognised member of the Iranian clerical establishment, has been that human beings are weak, incapable, sinful and in need of guidance and therefore we need somebody to show us how to be human beings and rescue us from the dangers of the secular world. Soroush is the modern face of this establishment and the modern ideologue who has learnt modern science and philosophy to find the right tools and equipment to sell the above beliefs to modern audiences. What he is doing, no clergy can do; that is, fighting modernity and rationalism with modern tools and methodology. He believes that we should be aware that "history would go in the wrong direction had there not been the prophets" and, hence, we are privileged and honoured by God to have been guided by the Prophet.³³

Thus, it is the Muslims' responsibility, or rather ours as modern Muslims, to equip ourselves with modern theories for three reasons: first and foremost, we cannot comprehend fully the Prophet's demands to follow him and get to the bottom of his arguments without modern theoretical approaches; second, "our time is the time of secularism", when the role of religion for managing our sociopolitical life has decreased and where we cannot see any role for the prophets and it is up to Muslims to reinvigorate their role; and, third, modern philosophy and philosophers have replaced the prophets and challenged them and in fact this challenge, according to Soroush, is quite serious.³⁴ Modernity and modern philosophy are based on human reason and the premise that human reason and collective reasoning are the only way forward to create a humane civilisation, in which human values and dignity are respected. This civilisation has created a universal legacy and, while taking into account the cultural differences, it has created common universal values, and at the centre of this civilisation is humanity. This is what Soroush cannot come to terms with and it has troubled him and he tries to challenge that, through reinstating the religious version of a humane civilisation.

Soroush is worried that human societies are getting secular. He is equipped with modern scientific and philosophical theories that liberalism and secularism have offered him and deploys them to serve a religious and illiberal form of life. His religious belief is built on the centrality of God in human life, where human beings can, at best, be good followers of Islam. Soroush does not explain his stereotype of an Islamic ideal society and in most cases he has the modern secular liberal society in mind, though he describes who can be the best Muslim, since he has the role model of the Prophet. However, the dominant view in his career, especially when he talks to internal and Muslim audiences, is that a good Muslim is a good follower who is enchanted by the glory of God and the Prophet. Under the influence of mystical literature, especially that of Mawlana Jalaluddin Balkhi (Rumi), Soroush negates independent reason and philosophical reasoning for a faithful person, since philosophical reason is considered to be deprived of the ability to enable us to reach faith certainty forever.³⁵

It is very difficult to guess the real intentions of Soroush, since he cannot be categorised into any school of thought. On the one hand, it sounds as if he is not sure about his beliefs and life after death. He constantly refers to Louis Pasteur's logic that assumes there is life after death, asking who will be the winner or the loser; a believer or non-believer. We are told by religions that there will be life after death and our life will not terminate with our death. Those who are faithful to religions will be the winners if the assumption of life after death comes true, and if it does not and it turns out to be false, nobody will be the loser. In other words, we believe in religion that gives us assurance about life after death and that there is a God, whom we should worship in case these things are all true, as and if it is proven to be true, then the non-believers will be the losers.³⁶ On the other hand, it sounds as if Soroush has no real thoughts of his own to add to human knowledge but rather interprets the thoughts and poems of Balkhi. He is a Muslim because Balkhi was a Muslim, he is a Sufi because Balkhi was a Sufi, and he attacks independent reason because Balkhi discredited reason and, as Balkhi called Shams Tabrezi, his spiritual mentor, "my Shams, my God", we can say that Balkhi has such a status for Soroush. He is a modern scholar but adheres to Sufism and mysticism that considers reason to be a nuisance in pursuit of the knowledge of God.

The story of opposition of modern and mainstream Muslim scholars, including the reformists in the Islamic history of Sufism and mysticism, is a long story. Each side opposes mysticism for different reasons. Modernists blame mysticism and mystical literature for the prevention of rationalisation of Muslims and a rational approach to organising life and social and political systems. Not only have the great mystics like Balkhi been role models, but they have also dominated Persian and Islamic literature. Balkhi says "reason is there only to ambush the heart of human beings to remove the hidden treasure imbedded there."³⁷ The Islamists, however, are disturbed by the anti-Sharia nature of mysticism and the fact that mysticism has, in effect, deconstructed Islam as a religion and advocates for a relaxed form of religiosity. However, Soroush is one of the exceptions in this debate and, while he is a follower of Balkhi and a mystic himself, he is occasionally pro-Sharia too.

Soroush is pro-Sharia as well as anti-Sharia depending on the occasion and audience, and sometimes a liberal. He believes that the soul or rather the ‘nucleus’ of Islam, that is, the content and mystical aspect of Islam, cannot be preserved without the protecting skin that is Sharia law. In fact they have the same value and without a well-preserved shield, the nucleus will be destroyed too. In other words, you cannot have an Islamic society without observing Sharia law.³⁸ Soroush sounds reasonable and realistic when he claims that Islam, without Sharia law, cannot continue to exist. He is not a jurist, however, and he knows the implications of the rule of Sharia law in society and that those who determine the application and interpretations of the laws are the jurists and not Muslim intellectuals. He also knows what would happen to individual freedom and human independence.

However, a Sharia-run society or rather an Islamic society formed on the basis of Sharia laws is not what Soroush would like to be established. Soroush establishes his critical theory, or rather his critical approach of Islam, on the basis of liberal society, though he is mindful of the implications of acknowledging that. To do this might have grave consequences either for his constituency at home or the authenticity of his religious beliefs. I will look into this part of Soroush’s beliefs in depth in the fourth chapter but it suffices here to say that Soroush does not fight for an open society but rather attributes the values of an open society to his own ideal religious society.

However, the major specificity of Soroush’s religious beliefs is his need for guidance. He constantly acknowledges that if there were no Prophets, we could not find our humane way of life. The analogy of the relation between the Prophet and the followers is that of the doctor and the patients: as the patients must obey the instructions given by the doctor in order to recover, we should obey the Prophet, since the Prophet is even more concerned about us than we are for ourselves.³⁹ He sees normal reasonable people and their need of the Prophet as akin to patients in their relation to doctors; as doctors have the monopoly of medical knowledge, the Prophet has the monopoly of divine knowledge, where our position should be absolute obedience. He claims that the problems of

humanity do not settle down unless we refer to the Prophets.⁴⁰ The principal need that we have from the Prophet, according to Soroush, is that we are weak and in need of support and cannot handle the temptations of this world alone and, therefore, we need the Prophets to help us fight these temptations and teach us things that we cannot understand alone.⁴¹

One can be sure that Soroush knows about the contradictory messages of different religions and the sources of conflicts embedded in religions. The idea of the Promised Land for the Jews and the hostility of the Qur'an towards Jews are some of the simple examples of religious hostilities.⁴² However, he wants to bypass these differences, where in reality this cannot happen and, therefore, he lives with the nostalgia of premodern and pre-secular religiously dominated social structures, where God had a role in the people's life.

The other specificity of Soroush's religious view is that religions and the Prophets' messages have been mainly for the middle group of people, not for the elites like those of the philosophers. These messages have been very simple to understand and that is why they have spread so easily around the globe.⁴³ Nonetheless, this is not the mainstream view and he does not specify himself or any other figure in Islamic history as being an elite who can make his or her own way without listening to the simple messages of the Prophets. He does not stop short of demonstrating his loyalty to the Prophet's message and confirms that he follows the Prophet without any hesitation as explained earlier, though he does not clarify his intention or in fact whether he is looking for a way out of the religious structural faith. It seems that he is not. It sounds as if he has a static understanding of human beings, or rather human nature, and in response to the question of why we need religion, Soroush's view is that religion merges with the personality and existence of the person and, as one cannot separate from his or her personality and life, he or she cannot split from his or her religion either. "Religion is not like clothes or shoes that, when they get undersized, you throw them away. Once you believe in it, it becomes part of your existence and remains with you forever".⁴⁴

The Qur'an as the Direct Words of God

Soroush's understanding of the content of prophetic experiences is circumstantial; the predominant view in his thoughts has been that, first and foremost, he accepts that they were experiences embodied in the Qur'an, though occasionally he acknowledges that it was the direct words of God given to the Prophet by Angel Gabriel and the Prophet did not manipulate them. By confirming the Qur'an to be the direct words of God, as other Muslims do, Soroush puts himself under the spotlight to deal with all obvious contradictions associated with the Qur'an and other Islamic literature. Moreover, Soroush contradicts himself by calling the Qur'an, on the one hand, the experiences of the Prophet that were formed over a long period of time and in response to the events in the Prophet's life, and, on the other, the direct words of God.⁴⁵ It could either be the direct words of God and, as he claims, for all peoples of all time and therefore independent of a particular social context, or it is the experiences of the Prophet that were formed based on the capacity of the events that could happen in his society. The dominant theory in his belief is the second one; however, he believes that through jurisprudential practice, the jurists can draw the relevance of the revelations to their time.⁴⁶ In other words, the Qur'an is the direct word of God and it is the jurists who can make it earthly and relevant to the needs of the time. His main emphasis is that the Qur'an is a historical entity.

Accordingly, Soroush believes that, and is in fact obsessed with the idea that, since the Qur'an was formed during a historical process and in the context of the life and events in a period of the life of the Prophet, in another sense it is a historical miracle that occurred and was formed during a natural life, it could be longer and contain or rather cover much wider issues, had the Prophet lived longer. Soroush thinks that the Qur'an was created naturally like the poems of Balkhi that were written over a period of time based on his mystical experiences:

Revelation is 'inspiration'. It is the same experience as that of poets and mystics, although prophets are on a higher level. In our modern age we can

understand revelation by using the metaphor of poetry. As one Muslim philosopher has put it, revelation is higher poetry. Poetry is a means of knowledge that works differently from science or philosophy. The poet feels that he is informed by a source external to him; that he receives something. And poetry, just like revelation, is a talent: A poet can open new horizons for people; he can make them view the world in a different way... But the Prophet is also the creator of the revelation in another way. What he receives from God is the content of the revelation. This content, however, cannot be offered to the people as such, because it is beyond their understanding and even beyond words. It is formless and the activity of the person of the Prophet is to form the formless, so as to make it accessible. Like a poet again, the Prophet transmits the inspiration in the language he knows, the styles he masters and the images and knowledge he possesses.⁴⁷

The common understanding in the Qur'an and among Muslims is that the messages of God were delivered by the Angel Gabriel on every occasion to the Prophet Mohammed. At the first encounter, there was a conversation between the Prophet and Gabriel when the Prophet was asked by Gabriel to read but he could not. The Prophet was squeezed by Gabriel a few times and asked to read in the name of God and then the Prophet recites behind him. This is not like the inspiration of a poet, and considering the messages delivered to the Prophet as inspirations and in response to the challenges of his lifetime will diminish the divinity of the Qur'an.

In addition, the question is this: how can a book that is the outcome of the experiences of one person in a very limited period of time, which could be longer if the person lived longer or even be different if he was in another culture and society, be fit for all peoples of all time? Soroush's response is that it is fit forever and will remain unaffected. What will make it fit for different times and cultures is our understanding of it. According to Soroush, all that we have in the name of Islam are interpretations of Islam; there is no pure Islam. It depends on what we expect from

religion and, based on our expectations, we read the religious literature and interpret it based on our needs and, therefore, as our needs change over time, our interpretations of religion change as well.⁴⁸ However, Soroush gives an obscure picture of Islam by describing it as a series of experiences of the Prophet that stopped at some point.

He backs up his view by objective analysis of the format of the Qur'an. He explains that there are three discourses in the Qur'an: the first one is the caravan or convoy discourse that matches the experiences of the Prophet when he was working for the business of Khadija, who later became his first wife, and when he was travelling a lot with caravans. Some of the language of the Qur'an, such as "guide us in the right path" or Satan's pledges to deviate Muslims from the right path, are from this discourse. . The second and the third ones are the trading and kingdom discourses that matched the Prophet's experiences at the time.⁴⁹ Ironically, Soroush comes to the edge of saying something new but, like his master Ghazaly, who could not find a rational justification for the existence of religion, surrenders to mysticism;⁵⁰ he changes direction and does not treat the Islamic literature as experiences that need to be revised in accordance with requirements of times and societies. The idea of religion as the experiences of the Prophet can be traced in the thoughts and minds of Mohammed Iqbal Lahori, who explains in more depth the evolutionary emergence of the Qur'an in his book *The Revival of Religious Thought in Islam* and it seems that Soroush, like his predecessor Dr Ali Shariati, has been influenced greatly by Mohammed Iqbal.

In addition, in explaining the content of the Qur'an, there is no trace of a critical rationalism in Soroush's thoughts. He is like any other traditional cleric who believes in the Qur'an as it is written. What is important to know is that Soroush is not a critical thinker regarding Islam; he is a believer, who makes every effort to explain whatever is in the main Islamic literature. For instance, he is not critical of the position of Islam on slavery and says that slavery was imposed on Islam and the Prophet could not change the world order; he had slaves and slaves were taken from Muslims .⁵¹ In reference to the

Qur'an, (Surah 55. Ar-Rahman), Soroush says that we should thank God for everything he has provided on earth for us; for instance, God has created the seas and pearl and coral inside them and the ships that are sailing on those seas. He has also created two heavens in which there are trees and two fountains and beautiful women. God has also created animals for their meat to be used and for us to keep warm in their skin and carry our loads on them and also he placed the mountains on the earth so that if the earth shakes, you will not be thrown here and there.⁵² Soroush quotes these verses and explains them like a cleric in a mosque to make his points.

Soroush acknowledges that the Qur'an does not give any indication that by believing in Islam, believers will get anything in return in this world but they will get everything in the other world. God even provides a better life for non-believers but he (God) is worried that everybody will become a non-believer; otherwise, God would make the ceilings of the non-believers from silver.⁵³ It sounds as if working for a better life in this world is not encouraged by God and it looks like the main reason that philosophy and rationalism have not evolved in the Muslim world and, as Soroush says, jurisprudence and mysticism have found a fertile ground instead is the lack of emphasis on reason embedded in the Islamic main sources and literature. Shariati was also a Muslim scholar and has influenced Soroush to a great extent, despite being different from Soroush and, in fact, much more open and critical than Soroush, who has said that the religion that does not serve our life in this world will not serve us in the other world either.⁵⁴ However, Soroush's view of Islam seems to be much more mystical and theological and, therefore, less critical than that of Shariati's revolutionary and ideological understanding of Islam.

Soroush is very cautious and does not highlight any contradictions in the Islamic sources or, probably, he believes in all of them and does not see any contradiction. He believes that the language of the Qur'an is the language of duties and not rights. However, Soroush acknowledges that this is not attractive to people anymore and is rivalled by modern schools of thoughts that are speaking about the rights of people rather than duties.⁵⁵ The fact of the matter is that the demands made by religions of their followers in

observing their duties rather than rights do not appeal to a growing number of people of all religions, some of whom are not practising their religion anymore. Soroush's assertions, and the type of language that he is using, that are mainly mystical when explaining the relation between the Prophet and people who do not listen to him, or listen but do not obey him (that they are "worse than animals"), are unfair to those who disagree with the Prophet and his religion, especially in the modern era. Some of the basic specificities of modern human beings are reasoning, questioning, analysing, choosing and so forth and they do value their rights, as Soroush rightly says, more than their duties and judging them through a very narrow mystical religious discourse might not reflect the realities of the modern era.

Soroush also thinks that "after the Prophet, the doors of the sky were closed to the face of the earth".⁵⁶ This is a very big assertion and, at least, the logical conclusion for modern human beings can be that they cannot have any direct spiritual relation with God.

Soroush claims that two of the important messages that the Prophet was giving to the people were, first, to target their humanity, speak to them about their humanity and even call them animals or even worse if they did not listen to him and accept his messages; and second, to target and discredit their knowledge and tell them not to depend on their knowledge as they would remain in darkness and uncertainty. They should listen to the Prophet and follow him and, if they did not, they would be punished by God. There is no indication of an independent humanity mentioned or at least referred to by Soroush in the Islamic literature. What is humanity? Do people have humanity before being targeted by the Prophet and if they do, would they be stripped of their humanity after being exposed to the messages of the Prophet and not accepting them? Soroush does believe that the Prophet's messages are appealing, fresh and relevant forever and those who do not listen to these messages, or listen but do not accept them, are worse than animals.⁵⁷ Soroush is not a modern thinker who claims to be a philosopher. He is a devoted Muslim on this occasion and does not feel obliged to be rational or even be a critical analyst since he is not talking politics. As soon as he finds himself in society and facing the challenges of

living in his society and the consequences of the ownership of those beliefs by the people in power and their implications in politics, he becomes a rational liberal scholar.

There is a clear distinction between the religious Soroush and Soroush as a political theorist, compared with the revolutionary Soroush, who was not only religious, but also an activist who was endeavouring to apply his religious understanding to politics. For example, he was an active part of the project for the Islamisation of the Iranian universities as a member of the Cultural Revolution Organisation. He said that they should not only make the universities Islamic, in line with the Islamic revolution, but also train faithful lecturers for that purpose.⁵⁸ The current Soroush is, perhaps, the product of the complexity of his society that has made him an occasional figure; he is a rational and secular scholar where he needs to be, mainly when he speaks about politics or addresses a foreign audience, and a religious preacher where he feels comfortable. However, his religiosity is deep rooted in the traditional Islamic literature and one cannot extract any sign of secularity and liberalism from his beliefs when he talks religion.

The contemporary Islamic militancy in the Islamic world, or rather the Islamic fundamentalism that is the product of the Islam of identity and not the Islam of content and is a sign of the crisis of identity in the Islamic world, according to Soroush also has a deep root in the main sources of Islam. Soroush accepts the German sociologist Max Weber's view that "the role model of a Muslim is a fighter". A fighter (jihadist) is someone who is free from the temptation of material life and who is ready to sacrifice his life for a great cause.⁵⁹ Soroush also finds jihad to be a uniting factor in Islam and describes the Qur'an's insistence on unity, one of its miracles. However, it sounds inconsistent with such a belief to call Islamic fundamentalism and militancy the symbol of the crisis of identity; the political and military actions of Islamists have some roots in their religious beliefs. In fact, Soroush is not comfortable with the manifestation of jihadist aspects of religion and finds it violent and intolerant, especially in his country, Iran, though he acknowledges that it is an integral part of religion.

Soroush contradicts himself by responding to a question of whether religions have caused hostilities and saying that yes, religions have caused hostilities and the cause of these hostilities has been God himself, not only among the religions but also in one religion – for instance, among the different factions of Islam.⁶⁰ He also believes that the other cause of hostility and disagreement is Satan.⁶¹ Soroush does not explain how, on the one hand, one of the miracles of the Qur'an is bringing an invitation for unity to Muslims, or, in other words, God wanting to unite Muslims, and on the other, he himself creates disagreements and hostility among them and leaves Satan to be the eternal cause of hostilities and disagreements among Muslims.

The Student of Ghazali but a Follower of Balkhi (Rumi) (Conflict of Reason and Love)

Conflict between reason and love is not only one of the specificities of Soroush's intellectualism, but rather the dominant theme in the whole history of Islam. We have not had the privilege of exercising our independent reason and all that we have had in the name of reason has been a limited application of reason only to understand the intentions of the main sources of Islam and draw practical measures to apply them in the daily life of Muslims. Yet, even that much reasoning has not been tolerated by the mystical schools of thought that have dominated the Islamic literature, let alone independent reason. Mysticism is a spiritual way of life and a method of acquiring knowledge through spiritual love and veneration rather than reasoning and logic. This school of thought has had a challenging and controversial history, in terms of discrediting the authenticity and validity of seeking the truth through jurisprudential and rational ways and, throughout Islamic history, mystics have squabbled with the Islamic scholars, jurists and philosophers over the right way of finding the truth and have accused them of ignorance.⁶² While the dominance of the mystical culture in the Islamic world, especially in the Persian civilisation area, has produced a unique and astonishing spiritual literature, especially in Persian poetry, the heavy weight of this anti-rational tradition on Islamic thinking and intellectualism has obstructed the emergence of reason in the Islamic world.

In fact, we have not had legitimate independent reason, except a limited instrumental reason for justification of religious arguments. However, the hostility of mystical literature against even this level of reasoning has been indiscriminate. The two Islamic scholars mentioned above are the mystic stars of the Islamic civilisation and none, in fact, represent independent reason. Both had more or less similar beginnings and began their careers as Muslim theologians in the mainstream Islamic literature. Ghazali advanced high up the ladder of jurisprudential, philosophical and theological tradition in the Islamic world but transformed to a mystical way of life through personal endeavour, while Balkhi drew a cult of followers behind him as a well-known jurist and theologian, though he gave up his career via a blow to his intellectual authority by Shamsuddin Tabrezi, whom he called “my God”.

Muhammad al-Ghazali was born in 450/1058 in Tous, Khurasan near the current north-eastern city of Mashhad in Iran. He lost his father when he and his brother Ahmed Ghazali were little children and, based on his father’s will, they both remained under the care of a Sufi friend until they joined a school in Tous. Becoming a student at the Nishapur Nezamiyyeh College was a great step for Ghazali and opened the door of opportunities for him to be the highest intellectual figure in the Islamic world as he was soon invited by the Vazir (Minister) of Saljuq, Sultan Nizam al Mulk, to head the most prestigious Islamic centre, the Nezamiyyah College of Baghdad. Ghazali was on the course of a fresh transformation in Muslim thinking and was expected to establish a new academic centre for dialogue and thought exchange in the Islamic world, but he could not afford to tread on the dangerous path of reason and soon left the centre.

Ghazali retreated a few years after leaving this position due to personal crisis and the fact that he found the Islamic sciences that he was teaching threatening to his faith and belief.⁶³ It was, he says, due to his realisation and conclusion that there was no way to certain knowledge or the conviction of revelatory truth except through Sufism.⁶⁴ Ghazali’s retreat to Sufism was, as a matter of fact, a retreat for the Muslim way of

thinking, since he not only withdrew from championing the theological and philosophical debate, but also turned his emphasis to discrediting those branches of knowledge. The Islamic civilisation that was enjoying a period of honeymoon proved to be unable to keep another talented figure engaged in exploring wider philosophical debate and freedom of thought, as if this civilisation were potentially not only incapable of opening up but also had a spirit of restriction of modernisation of religion and knowledge. Perhaps Ghazali was the last hope for Muslims and Islamic civilisation before the renaissance and modern era began to offer an earthly and human form of civilisation. Ghazali could have changed the course of history for Muslims, given the immense scholarly credentials he had, and established a tradition of critical dialogue. He not only failed to face the challenges of reforming Islamic thought and putting Islamic civilisation on a dynamic course, but also undermined the possibility of a rational approach towards religious debates for generations to come in the Islamic world.

Jalaluddin Balkhi (Rumi), on the other hand, was a legend of a different nature, compared to Ghazali, in terms of driving Islamic civilisation deep into mystical culture. Balkhi, as he is known in Persian, was born on 30 September 1207 in Balkh, one of the current northern provinces of Afghanistan. His father, Bahawalad, was a jurist as well as a theologian and Balkhi was already destined to learn the existing Islamic theology and to become a theologian. He migrated, together with his father, from Balkh to Ghonieh city, part of what was then Eastern Rome and is currently Turkey. He became a well-known theologian and was teaching Islamic sciences and had a great number of followers when he encountered Shamsuddin Tabrezi, an inspiring unusual Sufi, who was a burning fire of love, and inflamed Balkhi with that love and turned his life in a completely different direction. All the outstanding poetry we have today from Balkhi, especially *The works of Shams of Tabrizi (Diwan-e Shams-e Tabrizi)* are in fact the heat of that fire of love that can warm anybody who comes across it.

Yet this astonishing and unique achievement in the history of mankind and other mystical heritages in the Islamic world have come about with socio-intellectual implications for

Muslims. The sole purpose of a Sufi has been to be in love, live in love and find the truth through personal spiritual experiences. This has meant to be and remain personal, since those spiritual experiences cannot be transferred to others. However, this tradition has been translated into a socio-intellectual movement in the Islamic world and the first and last thing affected by this social movement has been reason and the sheer human specificity that is reasoning. Balkhi did that before moving to a higher stage in regards to the philosophical and theological debate in the Islamic world, but Ghazali was even remorseful of the time that he was a theologian and philosopher and was worried that his reasoning during that time would affect his belief certainty at the end of his life.⁶⁵

Both Balkhi and Ghazali, as part of the mystical discourse, were the driving force behind the recession of the Islamic civilisation after the twelfth century and, in spite of the fact that this discourse has been anti-institutionalist and there have been dogmas in internal disputes among the Islamic discourses, Muslim mystics are to be blamed for the freezing of Muslim minds and reason. Ghazali not only considers philosophy to bring blasphemy and deviation for Muslims, but also finds reasoning and theological debates poisonous.⁶⁶ He believes that theology has only one benefit, which is to be like a guard to prevent thieves from entering homes, in his words; that means, to be there to answer people's questions as they arise and not to let them be there unanswered to spread doubts among Muslims and destroy their faith. The findings become alarming when we see both Ghazali and Balkhi finding reasoning and asking for the cause and reasons of things to be dangerous and harmful to people's religious beliefs.⁶⁷ People are not even allowed to ask for the reasons behind simple actions and arguments about religion, let alone other reasoning. Ghazali even forbids Muslims to learn sciences and says that "it is an obligation to prevent Muslims from research in those sciences and refer them to Sharia".⁶⁸

Ghazali and Balkhi are the two most influential figures in Soroush's intellectual life and we can see where Soroush is coming from, in terms of his deep religious beliefs, though he is reformed and smartened up due to modern constraints and confused due to being

pulled in different directions. Soroush moves in the footsteps of Ghazali and his mission is similar to that of Ghazali rather than Balkhi; in other words, with the modern knowledge that he has, he retreats to religiosity and Sufism and does not remain committed to the principles of modern knowledge and yet claims that Islam is compatible with modern institutions.

Soroush acknowledges that he is a student of Ghazali and it seems also that his reasoning does not go beyond the scope of Ghazali's logic, since Ghazali was neither a philosopher, nor a jurist, a theologian or a mystic only; he was rather all of them.⁶⁹ Ghazali was a philosopher and tried to find a rational basis for religion but he could not and therefore criticised philosophy or, rather, sacrificed philosophy for the sake of religion.⁷⁰ Ghazali's criticism of philosophy and rationalism in the Islamic world was a blow to the trend of philosophical thinking and yet another surrender of rationalism to a more dominant and safer mystical approach. Soroush has followed the path of Ghazali and been inspired by Balkhi. Despite the fact that modern rationalism and civil arrangements have enforced themselves in nearly all societies' legal systems, Soroush, either as a believer Muslim or under the influence of those like Ghazali and Balkhi, still thinks that Sharia law must be applied to preserve the content of religion.

Traditionally, there have been long rivalries between the believers of Sharia and those of mystical schools of thought in Islamic history and both sides have accused each other of not following the true path of Islam. The mystical schools have separate rituals and some differences of religious practice from the mainstream Muslims and have built their own worship centres (Khanagha) beside the mosque.⁷¹ Soroush, however, is observing and following both traditions and figures like those of Ghazali, Balkhi and Ayatollah Khomeini, though with an obvious mystical domination in his thoughts. He believes, like Balkhi, that we cannot have an absolute human being without observing both dimensions of religion and not sacrificing one for the benefit of the other.⁷² Nonetheless, Soroush does not remain loyal to this belief when he wants to make his political points and the dominance of the mystical approach becomes even more noticeable in his life.

Mysticism in Islam, in another sense, is an Islamic rationalism, though this might seem odd and ironic to Muslim scholars or an expert on Islam because the whole literature of mysticism in Islam has been revolution against reason. How could a spiritual movement that has been devoted to discrediting reason be considered rationalist? The answer can be discovered when we understand the position of reason in Islam as a religion. Soroush is absolutely right to claim that we do not have pure or rather independent reason in Islam.⁷³ We have not had independent reason in Islam and reason has not had the legitimacy to emerge. This means clearly preventing human beings from conducting even their daily life rationally and forcing them to be subservient living creatures. For the traditional Shia religious communities, for instance, it is a jurisprudential question, even today, whether to put their right foot or left foot first when entering or coming out of the bathroom. However, human beings cannot live without practising their reason and they will express their humanity to the extent of the system's tolerance. Mysticism in Islam is the expression of reason or, rather, the expression of legitimate reason in the name of love and spiritual comprehension of the relation with God and of disobedience to religious dogmas and compulsions. Revolt against a dogmatic system and strict laws and decrees and disobedience to those rules and arrangements alone is a rationalist conduct. The sheer struggle to be different from the mainstream Muslims (followers of the main Islamic schools of thought: Hanafi, Maleki, Shafeei, Hanbali, and Jafari) and have their own praying centres (Khanaghas) instead of mosques and not abide by the Sharia rules is in itself is a rational disobedience of Sharia dogmas. Additionally, mysticism has a very strong universalist dimension because it clearly does not accept Islam's exclusive truth claims. Hafez, one of the greatest Persian poets and mystics says in one of his poems: "forgive the war between 72 nations (religions, sects, or faith); they have adopted mythical ways because they haven't found the truth".⁷⁴

One can look at the story of Moses and the shepherd in Balkhi's spiritual collection of poems and see how this rationalism is portrayed indirectly against religious dogmas.⁷⁵ Moses one day encounters a shepherd and notices that he prays and communicates with

God, saying:

Where are you to become your servant, fix your shoes and comb your hair, wash your clothes and pick your lice off, offer you milk oh you glorious, kiss your hands and give massage to your feet, clean and sweep your bed when it's time to go to bed, sacrifice my goats for you oh God, oh my hei hei and hai hai in your memory.⁷⁶

Moses questions the man and accuses him of blasphemy and asks him to close his mouth, otherwise the fire of his sin would burn the people. The shepherd repents and says, “Oh Moses, you sewed my lips, and burned me with regret”, then “he ripped his clothes, sighed with grief and wandered out into the desert”. Revelation comes to Moses from God that he was appointed to connect people to him not to separate them; “I have given everybody a different way of seeing things, I have given everybody a different language, Hindus have their Indian praying, those from Sind have their own way of praying, the nation of love is free from all religions, the lovers’ nation and religion is God”. Moses traces the footsteps of the shepherd and looks for him in the desert; “ultimately he found him and met him; congratulations that I received an order, do not seek any norm and regulation, say whatever your heart says, your infidelity is religion and your religion is your light, you are safe and the world is safe with you”.⁷⁷ Pray in whatever way you want to pray and never mind any rules and dogmas; you are free to say and pray, observe and practise whatever you think is right for you. This is nothing less than some form of rationalism in the scope of the Islamic tolerance. Seeking and finding a legitimate way not to obey the religious dogmas has been part of mystical religious practice. Soroush finds mysticism a more tolerant version of Islam and a way out of the intolerant structure of Sharia law and exercises his legitimate rationalism in the scope of mystical Islam.

In addition, you should show your loyalty to Islam and God even more than those of the mainstream Islamic scholars and clerics in order to disobey a Sharia-based Islam. Modernity and rationalism are not phenomena that a religious scholar can bypass and not

engage with. Soroush, as one of the modern religious scholars seems to be well aware of the inevitability of the spread of rationalism in Muslim societies and endeavours to accommodate that in his religious theory. He might also be aware that if he recognises the legitimacy of independent reasoning and rationalism, the religious dogmas and compulsions might not be sustained, which can be paradoxical to his main thesis of securing a space for religion in the growing secular societies of today. Soroush partly believes in mysticism and partly adopts mysticism to deal with the inevitability of modern rationalism. However, he knows that rationalism, in its modern sense, does not exist in Islam and believes that Greek civilisation was the civilisation of philosophers, Western civilisation is the civilisation of scientists and Islamic civilisation is the civilisation of jurists and mystics. Soroush also confirms that mysticism, with one hand, has crushed the reason of scientists and the other obliterated philosophers.⁷⁸

Soroush is part of Islamic civilisation and despite the fact that he is trying to build bridges between the Islamic civilisation that he believes in and the modern civilisation that is breaking the precincts anyway, he wants to manipulate the second for the benefit of the first. That is the dilemma for Soroush, since he is a Muslim and deeply believes in Islam and Islamic literature, though he tries to take advantage of liberalism and rationalism to promote his ideology. Apart from the interreligious projection of mysticism as a rationalist move against the dogmatic institutionalism (institutionalisation of Islam in the recognised Islamic schools of thought with Sharia law as the key part) in Islam, mysticism has been the strongest force against rationalism in the Islamic civilisation and Soroush is in no way different from his predecessors.

The developments in the Islamic world and Islamic civilisation, especially in the premodern time or rather the glorious period of Islamic civilisation, were due to the fact that Islam as a movement provided a relatively secure environment and, to the extent of its tolerance, art and freedom of thought improved. However, the main argument is that Islamic civilisation could not go further than that because it had not recognised the independent position of reason; a position where reason is not a tool to find the intentions

of Sharia sources only, but a status whereby it can investigate and research truth, including religious truth, and approve or refute it. Islamic civilisation is potentially incapable of and cannot compete with modern civilisation as a result of not recognising independent reason as the main arbiter and, therefore, it is doomed to failure and exposed to the influence of independent reason and, nowadays, to liberal ways of life. Soroush is aware of the danger that the religious heritage and way of life is facing from independent reason.

One of the reasons that he gives for termination of the process of Prophethood after the Prophet Mohammed is that humanity has reached its maturity and, referring to Iqbal Lahori, he reiterates that the Prophet Mohammed was the last because, after him, humanity does not need any Prophet as it has evolved from the level of instinct to the level of reason.⁷⁹ Since people can now reason and discover the rights and wrongs through their reason, they do not just accept any order and dogmatic sets of beliefs but also feel capable and valued enough to define their spiritual destiny. If humanity has become mature and reasonable enough to be in no need of the prophets, why do they need religion in its classic defined structure and format? Soroush does not accept this logical conclusion and argument and endeavours to secure some form of adaptable rationalism in religion or a position for religion in rationalism.

The relation between reason and revelation is an interesting and yet a very delicate area of debate in Islam. There are numerous accounts of the definition and interpretations of each concept, and the controversy and criticisms sparked after Soroush's interview on the Qur'an, where he commented on the nature of revelation and claimed that "revelation is inspiration" and "revelation is a higher level of poem", highlights the diversity and delicacy of the debate. The dominant view about revelation and reason among the Islamic scholars is that revelation is the direct words of God, as Ebn Arabi, one of the leading mystics of Islam believed, that were sent to the Prophet through Gabriel in Arabic.⁸⁰ However, there are many more diverse views on the position of reason in religion, though the widely accepted view is the theological definition of reason in Islam, as expressed by

grand ayatollahs, like Ayatollah Montazeri. Montazeri's view is that reason is an imperfect means of looking for truth and due to this imperfect nature of reason, revelation was sent to the prophets to guide us to the right path of God.⁸¹ There are also philosophical definitions of reason and religion in Islam that are more balanced, in which reason is not just an instrument to know the intentions of God and revelations; it is a credible and reliable means of discovering the truth, more or less similar to revelation. "They are complementing each other", according to Iqbal Lahori; "one gets the truth piece by piece and the other one at once, one is paying attention to eternal aspects of truth and the other to the timely dimension of truth."⁸² Despite the depth and favourable definition of reason in this discourse, it is isolated. The fear of independent reason equal to revelation not being contained is, probably, one of the main reasons why the theological understanding of reason is the predominant understanding in Islam.

If we could summarise Soroush's mission as a scholar, we could argue that he is someone who has mobilised all his efforts to reconcile reason and religious narration. Reason and revelation, in his view, are like two eyes of a human being and if one of them is not present, it is as if he or she is blind in one eye.⁸³ This is not a new thought in the Iranian intellectual community and is known to be advocated by figures like Albert Einstein in the West. The irony with Soroush is, as was mentioned earlier, that he does not see any room for independent reason in religion. He is a mystic and shares the mystical anti-reasoning approach. Soroush is apologetic for that and accepts the blame that he has contributed to the anti-reason mystical movement in his society. His recommendation for a way out of this anti-reasoning atmosphere, is the "anti-toxin of reason".⁸⁴ However, he does not elaborate his intention by explaining what he means by reason, what kind of reason. He neither accepts having independent reason in religion, nor recognises a religious reason.⁸⁵

Soroush also finds reason (certainly independent reason) a monstrous phenomenon that needs to be impeded and checked and one of these impediments is religion, since all religions or rather all religious civilisations are scriptural and not rational.⁸⁶ It is

confusing to see that in a speech of an hour and half Soroush makes contradictory remarks about reason; on the one hand he calls reason “a monstrous thing” to be controlled by hurdles such as religion and, on the other hand, he encourages the spread of rationalism. If it is a monstrous phenomenon that needs to be counterbalanced by barriers like religion according to him, then why does he insist that “I have no doubt that the only way to prosperity is reliance on reason and demonstration of critical reason and I have no doubt that the only path we should follow is encouragement and spread of rationalism (aghlanyiat)”?⁸⁷

In spite of the fact that Soroush periodically adheres to reason as a means of salvation, he seems to be inconsistent about this. It was mentioned earlier that Soroush is a mystic, and mystical thinking and way of understanding is the dominant approach in his intellectual life and, in that discourse, reason is not a credible mechanism. The highest position that reason can achieve is “the stick of a blind person” as Balkhi believed and, with reference to Balkhi’s treatment of reason, Soroush elaborates that it is capable of ascending to a certain level, just as a blind person can walk up to a limited distance and, beyond that, needs eyesight to go further, reason also cannot go further than a certain limit and needs the guidance of the prophets.⁸⁸ Soroush cannot come to terms with secularism, since it adheres to reason and this, therefore, highlights the fact that Soroush either does not believe in reason as the “only means of salvation”, as he said earlier, or he seems not to be transparent when he underlines the significance of reason mainly for foreign audiences.⁸⁹

Mysticism as the Only Religious Sanctuary Left

Soroush is the symbol of the complexity of Islamic literature. He is pulled in different directions and, depending on the occasion and relevance of the concepts, like his predecessor Ghazali, he adopts fragments from all elements in Islamic literature. There is no doubt that Soroush is a mystic and believes in mysticism and mystical Islam rather

than rationalism and “jurisprudential Islam” – Islam that insist on rituals and duties rather than faith. However, this is the last resort and, mainly on a personal level. Soroush is also a religious reformer and his fundamental contribution to the religious debate, in the Islamic world in general and Iran in particular, is his theory that all that we have in the name of Islam are nothing more than interpretations of Islam.

Soroush is a modern Muslim reformer and his theory is well thought out and targets several goals at the same time. The key elements in his theory are that we have religion on one side and knowledge of religion on the other. Religion itself is silent and directionless and it is we who make it talk and show the direction; in other words, the revelations and Sharia that are sacred are there like nature – it is we human beings, who should make it earthly, exploit it, interpret it and understand it, and indeed our understandings and interpretations are by no means sacred.⁹⁰ Religion and revelation does not change but our understandings are in constant transformation and, therefore, there is no such a thing as pure Islam and nobody can claim to have the pure Islam; all that we have are timely and periodic interpretations of Islam.

The treatment of Islam as our interpretations and knowledge has offered Soroush the ammunition for seeking to achieve three goals at once. On the one hand, Soroush opens a space for debate on Islam. He thinks that, since what we have in the name of Islam is human knowledge of Islam, this knowledge should abide by the rules of conjectures and refutations and principles of analytical philosophy. In other words, there is no difference between our knowledge of religion and other human sciences and it is as man-made and worldly as other sciences. In this space, Soroush feels free to critically analyse Islamic literature and theoretically remains committed to the theory of conjecture and refutation. His controversial book, (*The Theory of Evolution of Religious Knowledge or Text in Context*), is the introduction to this theory and it is mainly this theory that has put Soroush in opposition to the conservative clerical system in Iran. He does not follow in the footsteps of Muslim theologians who mainly deployed philosophy to prove the authenticity of Islamic beliefs. To the extent and in the context of his interpretation of

Islam, he is a philosopher, and frank and committed to the principles of critical philosophy. However, Soroush's critical philosophy has limits and red lines where he slips back to being a theologian rather than a philosopher. He accepts that religion and Sharia are sacred and will not change through time, though he does not explain what those sacred elements in religion are and what are the limits are of that sacredness.

Soroush is preoccupied with his theory and knows that he can challenge anybody with this methodology, and in fact he does challenge those who claim the monopoly on religious interpretation and knowledge, mainly the clerics in Iran. He is not a politician but a deeply politicised figure, to the extent that one can get suspicious as to whether he speaks his mind or has a political message to convey. One wishes that he lived in a different society where he did not have to constantly justify himself. He is a different person with different sets of beliefs on different occasions despite the fact that he is conciliatory everywhere in fear of political repercussions. In practical theology, he is more clerical than the clerics in terms of showing his loyalty to Islam and Islamic social presence.

Soroush is a scholar who is looking for recognition but does not fit into the existing Iranian sociopolitical and intellectual categories. On the one hand he is desperate to be recognised as an influential figure in Iranian religious circles and in most cases he makes his points to achieve his desired position. However, he has not been accepted into the religious club despite the fact that he has gone the extra mile to prove that he is as loyal to Islam as the clergy. Challenging the clerical establishment is the second target that his theory aims to achieve; that is, to revolt against the domination of the clergy in Iran and destroy the system that denies him breathing space. He is not a cleric and argues that there is no recognised religious class in Islam, like that of Christianity, to have the monopoly of religious interpretation. He is also aware that the clerics' religious domination can easily be ripped apart at least in theory and that has put him in collision with the clerics in power.

Soroush's definition of religion is also politically motivated. His definition is that "religion has come to prevent man from claiming to be God."⁹¹ Religion is there to remind human beings that they are not God, that they are not to claim to be God, either in public or in private and "they all the time need a guide to remind them that they are there to worship God and not to play God."⁹² Soroush links his definition of religion to power and politics and the dominant theme in his intellectual life regarding religion is that he is fearful of using religion as an ideology; in other words, he is uncomfortable with the fact that religion is used as a political ideology. For him, a religious person is one "who believes that the universe is fairly created and well designed and its management is not allocated to human beings."⁹³ However, an ideologist is not content with the world as it is and would like to change it and make it as desired. He is not happy with the existing arrangements, whether religious or nonreligious. Soroush inherits a great deal from Ali Shariati who has been the main mentor of Islamic intellectualism in Iran but he is critical of Shariati's ideological understanding of Islam. Shariati wants Islam to be an ideology that can help Muslims to launch reform in the Muslim world and was very frank and straightforward in saying that a religion that does not serve this world of Muslims will not offer any salvation in the other world either.⁹⁴

Shariati was a realist and pragmatic and wanted to make religion relevant to Muslims' lives, though he was glorifying religion to make it an attractive ideology to serve that purpose. His ideology had a very strong anti-imperialist and anti-Western-domination element and thought that believing in Islam had to have the same revolutionary connotation as Marxism had for Marxists. Shariati never denied the spiritual content of Islam, while at the same time he has negated Islam in the spiritual form that was only promising Muslims rewards in the other world. Shariati believed that "Islam exists not only as a truth, but also as a reality in our culture, conscience, social conscience and social relations."⁹⁵ Soroush, on the other hand, is troubled by this interpretation of Islam and given the fact that Islam as an ideology has been practised in Iran after the Iranian revolution and has been used as a political means by the clerics to fight against Muslim scholars like him in the name of Islam, he has become preoccupied with discrediting the

notion of Islam as an ideology.

Moreover, even though Soroush does not accept the idea of separation of religion from politics and claims a significant legacy in the debate on Islam and democracy, as a Muslim scholar he is against religious politics. For him the religions' main message is to offer us a vision and accounts of the other world, the world after death, that we cannot experience in this world.⁹⁶ In other words, religion, in Soroush's view is not there to deal with human issues in this world and using Islam as an ideology is, in fact, a deviation from the real messages of Islam. "Ideology is the theory of Godless man, who is rebellious against all orders of the universe", according to Soroush, while religion is there just to prevent human beings from going that far and claiming to be God.⁹⁷

The third and main goal that Soroush is trying to achieve, which gives him the position of a reformist scholar in the Islamic world, is the aim of finding a role for religion in the growing secularised world. One does not need to be concerned that Islam is not meeting their needs in the modern world; it is rather a certain interpretation of Islam that does not match his or her demands and he or she can look for as many and modern interpretations as possible to find the one that address their concerns. Islam itself is safe and protected and as the Qur'an says: "We (God) sent the Qur'an and we will protect it."⁹⁸ What is coming and going in the name of Islam, whether affected by new developments in the world of science and philosophy, accepted or rejected by Muslims throughout the history, becomes hardline or moderate, calls for unity or negates other Muslims and faiths are all interpretations of Islam. On the one side, Soroush keeps religion safe and eternal, and on the other he opens a space to understand your religion according to your needs and time. You can take advantage of all new human developments for better understanding of your religion without the fear of deviation from the religion itself. This flexibility and adaptability, or rather interpretability, brings religion out of its rigidity and makes it easy for religion to remain a civil spiritual way of life alongside other civil institutions. Therefore, you do not need to worry about the existence of religion in a secular world; it can continue to exist as long as we are able to adjust it to our growing needs. This

adjustability and testability throughout history is one of the factors behind the success of a religion, according to Soroush.

The idea of testability of religion that Soroush is gripped with is another method that he adopts to demonstrate the durability and validity of religious beliefs in the modern time. The criterion that he considers for the testability of religions is history: if a religion is successful or has become victorious throughout history, it has passed the test, and if not, that means that its historical relevance and life period has terminated.⁹⁹ This view encourages Muslims to, on the one hand, look at and assess their religion like any other social and human phenomenon and examine it in the mirror of history; and, on the other hand, to find the successful elements and compare them with the unsuccessful ones and draw their own conclusions.

This historical assessment deconstructs the rigidity of religion and makes it increasingly civil and interpretable. In contrast, considering the history of a religion as the field of testability and accepting that those that are successful and have emerged victorious from the historical conflict for existence are valid and authentic and those that have not developed and have not been able to attract a great number of followers are considered to be invalid and not genuine, is a naive and ill-thought-out belief. Soroush cites the fate of Zoroastrianism and Baha'i religions as examples of failed religions that have not been able to evolve and, therefore, their historical life and significance have come to an end.¹⁰⁰ It seems that Soroush does not recognise the fact that the spread of religions is not dependant on their authenticity and the credibility of their arguments; in other words, it is naive and unscientific to attribute the historical victory of religions and schools of thoughts to testability of their authenticity and arguments. He does not acknowledge the relevance of victorious religions to the power establishments in history. What could have happened if Constantine the Great had not converted to Christianity, and Muslim Arabs were defeated when they attacked the Iranian Emperor more than one thousand years ago? However, the idea of testability of religions is yet another modern element in his theory; though, as it was mentioned earlier, Soroush applies modern methodology to

achieve his desired religious purpose while he does not find modernity itself an encouraging development in human beings' life.

Soroush's understanding of modernity is not of an evolutionary process and continued change in human beings' social, cultural, intellectual and epistemological life. It is true that the modern human being is different from the premodern; the premodern human being was religious but the modern human being is not. She/he was a captive of nature in the past but now dominates it; he/she was preoccupied with theoretical science but now enjoys the fruits of practical science. Perhaps the best articulation of the difference between premodern and modern human beings is the view of Karl Marx, according to Soroush, that people of the past were trying to interpret the world but the modern human is aiming to change it.¹⁰¹ Soroush recognises two types of modernity or rather two understandings of modernity. The first is the type of modernity that has evolved and emerged out of human premodern understanding, reasoning, culture and tradition and has not detached itself from the past and contains some premodern elements. He believes that this is not the reality of what has happened in the world and the kind of modernity we witness is rather different and has no connection to the past.

The second form of modernity is the existing one that has gone beyond the premodern mentality and distanced itself from the past, according to Soroush.¹⁰² We talk about tradition because we have come out of it, we discuss religion and question it like other areas of human knowledge because it does not determine our way of life anymore whereas, in the past, people would not endeavour to understand the limits of human understanding and philosophy of religion and knowledge. "They were submerged in religion but were not attempting to understand it, they worked with reason but would not try to question it and, in one word, the essence of modernity and the modernisation of today's world is the second-stage knowledge that terminates with the suffix of (logy)."¹⁰³ This second-stage knowledge is the specificity of modernity that separates the modern time from the past. Modern reason is one of the other factors that are different from their premodern counterparts; premodern reason had reflected the truth and reality as it

appeared to it without adopting a critical position, while modern reason not only looks at things as objects to be critically examined but also critically examines the ability of reason as well. There was a time when God was at the centre of the world, but he was replaced by reason in the modern era. The postmodern time is a period with no body in the centre; relativism has driven both God and reason out of the centre.¹⁰⁴

Human beings had a very simple life in the past and lived with certainty defined by religion. They took the religious account of truth and ethics for granted and, as a fish in water does not appreciate or question the existence of water, premodern human beings had not known the importance of their religious beliefs and the certainty that their religions offered. They did not face diversity of faith and mainly felt that their beliefs and ways of life were the only natural ways of life. However, this certainty began declining as the modern era unfolded and the reason that was a container of truth became mischievous and critical and brought about a diversity of certainties, and has left human beings in confusion and limbo.¹⁰⁵ Despite this diversity of rational certainties in the modern era, human beings still had something to adhere to: reason itself.

Nonetheless, reason has become increasingly fluid and has given up its rigidity and certainty, since numerous answers for each question have emerged but none with the level of certainty of religion. On the one hand we have come out of the era of certainty and religious assurances and caught up with the painful reality of relativism and, on the other, we cannot and do not want to return to that neglectful period of certainty, certainty that was not derived from our research and investigation.¹⁰⁶ According to Soroush there was still some hope that reason could offer a breakthrough as Descartes' and Spinoza's rationalism conveyed, but this glimmer of hope has been shattered by postmodernism. In other words, postmodernism has hammered that last nail in the coffin of humans' hope for a way out of uncertainty and relativism and has recognised the relativist destiny of human beings in the postmodern era.¹⁰⁷ What is the way forward for human beings today? Is there any spiritual sanctuary left for them anymore? Soroush's answer is: positive. He thinks that the only option left for human beings is to refer to the system of

belief that raised doubt about reason in the first place in the premodern era. This unconquered sanctuary is mysticism.¹⁰⁸

Chapter 4

**Soroush and his Theory of Religious
Democracy**

This chapter is devoted to Soroush's political philosophy and given the fact that it follows chapters one and two with their thorough background analysis of the context and sociopolitical atmosphere of Iranian society and the Islamic revolution and his religious beliefs, this chapter will be in a position to provide a fairer and meticulous account of Soroush's political theory. Soroush is neither a politician nor a political philosopher; he is a theologian, who has contributed a great deal to religious and philosophical debates on politics and the relation between religion and politics. He is one of the leading scholars in the Islamic world advocating for religious democracy and believing in the compatibility of Islam and democracy.

Soroush's political accounts are very diverse and ranging from political systems based on Sharia law to democracy based on modern liberal values. His readers can easily get confused as to whether they are facing a utopian ancient-Greek-style philosopher, a religious reformer like Martin Luther, a modern rationalist philosopher, a student of Ghazali, a jurist, a Sufi or a disadvantaged and disembedded Iranian figure looking for recognition. This makes research on his political theory even harder and demands a comprehensive study of his publications and other sources of his political thoughts. In this chapter all elements of Soroush's political theory will be discussed to see what kind of political system he is advocating in the centre of the political debate in the Islamic world.

The theory of 'democratic religious government' proposed by Soroush and his efforts to find some form of compatibility between Islam and democracy has been one of the main controversies of his intellectual career. I will argue that it is the natural product of his religious theory. Soroush's definitions of Islam and democracy are diverse and it is immensely exigent to conclude a monistic understanding of the concepts. He is a master of hermeneutics and has endeavoured to open a vast theoretic area of manoeuvre where he can inject modern spirit into religious concepts and, equipped with modern

methodologies, outmanoeuvre the clerical establishment, and through these methodologies, apply modern logic and rationalism to the debate on religion and understanding of religion.¹

The other important element in Soroush's political theory is the social context in which a religious democracy can take place: that is, religious society. A religious society is the precondition for a democratic religious government and in such a society no other form of government can be democratic except a religious government. However, Soroush does not explicitly define his religious society, but occasionally defines the specificities of this society. He says; "a religious society is not completely different from other societies; on the contrary, it is completely identical to other societies, except in some exclusive specificity."² Those exclusive specificities are, probably, the religiosity of people, "whether elite or common people" and the "religious politics" in the case of Iran in his view.

The religious society is the only condition that Soroush considers for a democratic religious government and the content of the religious society needs to be critically explored. Is it a society where only religious people live, and, if so, do they all have the same religion? Is it possible to have a society where only followers of the same religion and with the same interpretation of that religion exist? If not, what happens to the followers of other religions and minorities and those who do not believe in any religion? Soroush also believes that a democratic religious government is a government like any other democratic government and being religious does not differentiate it from other governments.³ If there is no difference between religious and nonreligious democratic governments, then why is it that a religious government can only take place in a religious society? Soroush contradicts himself as soon as he explains the elements of his democratic religious government and reveals the differences between his defined religious democracy and democracy.

The status of Soroush's political theory as a theory is another area that needs to be

explored fully. One can find interesting arguments and genuine efforts in his political theory to satisfy everybody, whether religious or nonreligious, and as the research starts to comprehensively explore all that he has said and written about politics and a democratic religious government, sketching a skeleton of his theory becomes harder and harder. However, this chapter is devoted to providing a clearer picture of Soroush's political theory and political philosophy and ultimately examines the authenticity and sustainability of his political accounts.

The Status of Soroush's Theory

Soroush's theory of democratic religious government is a genuine and yet nostalgic effort by a modern theologian, who cannot cope, on the one hand, with the modern, secular, and (especially) liberal world, and endeavours to find a space for religion; and, on the other, issues a warning about the unsustainable position of the traditional Islamic discourse of not taking on board modern democratic developments. He is nostalgic about the time that God mattered and had a role in human beings' sociopolitical life. His presence was felt and people would look for his approval or disapproval in managing their life, including their political affairs, just as they sought his endorsement for right and wrong, correct and incorrect and scientific or unscientific. He was present and alive and was interacting with human beings in their daily affairs. Human beings could not handle the various challenges they faced in their life and nature without God's support.

However, modern science and modern humanity, or rather modernity, came out of the blue and disrupted this harmony between God and humanity and revealed that human beings can handle their affairs and manage their life alone and that living under the eyes or perceived eyes of God was rather a hindrance to human beings' independence and a restriction of their potentials. Soroush is concerned with this development and starts his theory of democratic religious government with this paragraph:

Modern science explains the world as if it were not created by a god, not denying his existence, but rather finding no need to postulate it. In other words, it is assumed that even if there were a god, science would nonetheless be able to explain the world without relying on his experience. Nowadays science seems to have left its imprint on the behaviour of the individual and the conduct of the government as well. In the political culture of liberal secular societies, governments and individuals act as if there is no god, proceeding in utter indifference to his existence or non-existence, never weighing his approval or disapproval of their politics and behaviour. Political struggles and deliberations are designed to satisfy human beings alone.⁴

The key argument is that Soroush is a Muslim and comes from a society where the political discourse and political debate is still struggling to resolve the relation of religion to politics and therefore the type of arguments and concerns he puts to secular liberal democracies are mainly coming from that background. In addition, the implications of Soroush's political theory is that God is put aside, not because of social evolution and human beings' capabilities to manage their life based on his own knowledge and collective rational consensus, but by intentional political decisions to oust him from sociopolitical life. If God is sidelined by political decisions, then he can be brought back by a political system based on his theory. The mission of his political endeavour is to reinforce the position of religion in society and politics. Having said that, I would argue that the ultimate role he finds for religion is in fact no role for religion in politics and the democratic religious government that he is looking for is not different from that of secular liberal democratic systems.

Soroush is critical of the secular liberal political systems of today for being indifferent to God's existence or non-existence and the fact that they are designed to only satisfy human beings to the exclusion of God; in other words, they are there to serve the rights and satisfaction of human beings without recognising God's approval. He sees modern liberal democratic governments as the other extreme from the religious governments of

the past (Catholic popes and Muslim caliphs).⁵ Soroush believes that a religious democratic government has three difficult responsibilities to fulfil: “to reconcile people’s satisfaction with God’s approval; to strike a balance between the religious and the nonreligious; and to do right by both the people and by God, acknowledging at once the integrity of human beings and of religion.”⁶ He pleads for a compromise that can uphold both satisfaction of human beings as well as approval of God and, for this, he considers the possibility of a democratic religious government.

In spite of the fact that Soroush acts like a modern Muslim scholar and his entire endeavour to reconcile Islam with democracy is as a result of the urgency he feels for keeping some of the religious and traditional values alive and, ultimately, initiating a different way of modernity and modernisation that upholds the spiritual values he believes in, he finds this unachievable and constantly moves from one extreme to another, becomes confused and leaves his reader in the middle of nowhere. One of the difficult responsibilities of his democratic religious government, mentioned above, is to make people satisfied to the extent that can be approved by God. The language and idea in this theory is so simplistic and naive that it cannot resonate for a modern audience and the mentality is based on the autocratic political tradition in Islamic history that treats people as objects to be formed in the models and guided in the ways that the state wants.

In addition, the type of political thought and political system that Soroush is preaching for demonstrates the fact that he is not only deeply traditionalist and lives in the premodern era, but also misunderstands modernity and the modern human being. He cannot accept the fact that the line of communication between modern political systems and God, due to what Friedrich Nietzsche phrased “the death of God”, has been replaced by direct contact between political systems and people. There is no space for approval or disapproval of God in modern politics and democracy is a modern political system. People are free to observe their gods’ endorsements in their personal lives, as, for example, the American people do, but, political systems are free of any ideological mission. According to a survey, 90% of the American people believe in God and around

80% of them believe in miracles and more than 50% of them are practising religious people.⁷ Yet, the political system is secular and democratic with no religious ideology, though with a great amount of opposition by various religious groups, like the Moral Majority in the 1980s. The context and literature that Soroush utilises to present his political theory is so old and premodern that it puts him in line with the conservative clerics, who do not believe in democracy.

Soroush is not happy with secular thoughts that advocate for human rights, but is indifferent to God's rights. He explores the secular arguments about God's rights and highlights the challenges of considering God's rights and approval in politics. The fact that, as soon as we enter into this realm, we encounter the diversity of gods and beliefs and monopoly of truth by each of these beliefs and gods, the different interpretations of each god and belief by their followers, the expectation of each god from their followers and clashes between the expectations and accounts of different gods, makes it almost impossible to reconcile the numerous religious claims.⁸ Modern secular democracies have reached the accommodation of tolerance based on human beings' historical experiences, while respecting each religion in its own right so far as it does not interfere with others' human rights.

Despite the sound arguments that Soroush makes on behalf of secular thinkers and secularism, he tends to disagree with them and returns to his nostalgic feelings for the world of certainty, the world that valued human beliefs more than life, while he well knows that secular democratic governments, for the reasons he outlines in his theory, are not fighting certainty, but rather preventing any particular certainty being imposed on others.

These are the arguments of today's secular thinkers, who are, indeed, blameless in their scepticism. Western science, philosophy, and technology have so shaken the foundation of human reason and mind, historicism has raised such a storm, and scientific and philosophical theories have advanced

so swiftly that no latitude has been left for stability and certitude... The difference between the old and the new world is the difference between certainty and uncertainty, a distinction that accounts for the modern tendency to value human lives more than beliefs, in the old world beliefs always superseded respect for human life.⁹

The secular systems do value human lives more than beliefs and given the immeasurability and diversity of beliefs and impossibility of the domination of one particular belief, disputing such a basic rational arrangement will not sound credible from a theologian like Soroush.

In his theory, Soroush also challenges the authenticity and credibility of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through the words of “truly committed religious people”.¹⁰ He thinks that the declaration only preaches “the freedom of flexible opinion, not of absolute conviction”. Soroush also believes that the type of human rights that the declaration introduces is compatible with certain definition of humanity. The religious definition of humanity requires a different understanding of human rights.

For its followers, religion yields a definition of humanity and a description of human rights that are compatible. Changing human rights requires changing the definition of humanity, not a trivial and easy affair. One definition of humanity makes religion necessary and another makes it dispensable. Therefore, religiosity is compatible only with a particular definition of humanity and its rights. The slightest breach in this definition will destroy the edifice of traditional religion – hence the understandable resistance of religious scholars and leaders to the new definition of humanity and its rights.¹¹

Soroush does not clarify his intention as to what he means by religious human rights and whether, in his religious democracy, religious human rights will be observed. However,

despite the reference Soroush makes regarding religious human rights, he is consistent on observation of human rights in a democratic religious government:

A religion that is oblivious to human rights (including the need of humanity for freedom and justice) is not tenable in the modern world. In other words, religion needs to be right not only logically but also ethically. The discussion of human rights is hardly cosmetic, superfluous, blasphemous, or easily dismissed. Nor is it merely grist for scholastic and casuistic discussions within seminary walls. Simply put, we cannot evade rational, moral, and extrareligious principles and reasoning about human rights, myopically focusing on nothing but the primary texts and maxims of religion in formulating our jurisprudential edicts.¹²

In spite of the fact that Soroush is pulled, occasionally, in the direction of mainstream conservative Islamists, his main concern is to find a balance between the role of religion and rights of human in politics. In the article in which he initially introduced his theory of democratic religious government, he is deeply religious and the democratic aspect is the secondary component of his democratic religious government. However, in his subsequent intellectual career, Soroush becomes more liberal and religiosity becomes the less important element or even not a factor at all in his democratic religious government. For example, in the article in which the democratic religious government theory was introduced, he is more ideological and believes that the democratic religious regimes should “establish religion as the guide and arbiter of their problems and conflicts”, while later, on numerous occasions, he says that independent reason should be the arbiter.¹³ This shows some form of evolution in Soroush’s theory of democratic religious government, though for the benefit of democracy rather than religion, and occasionally no trace of religion can be found in his subsequent works on democratic religious government. However, despite pushing the boundaries to the limit, Soroush does not break the shield of religiosity and fails to produce a cohesive theory to combine Islam with democracy; at the times when he explains the democratic aspects of his theory, he

portrays a political system that is no less than a secular liberal democracy, and when he illuminates the religious specificities of his democratic religious government, he presents a system that is no more than a religious government based on Sharia law.

Soroush's theory of democratic religious government and intellectual contribution in advocating for the idea of reconciling between Islam and democracy contains some key elements that need to be discovered first. Soroush is a religious intellectual and acknowledges that the religious intellectuals' reference for critics is modernity and not religion.¹⁴ He is also a Muslim and senses the grave challenges that religion is facing: either to reform, 'rationalise' and adjust to the realities of modern times and therefore continue to exist, or stick to its dogmas and fail to survive. Soroush believes that the truths that God has sent to us through the Prophet must materialise and become a reality for the religious in their daily life.¹⁵ He claims that he has discovered or rather pioneered a clever theory for materialisation of those truths in a 'religious society', while avoiding the contradiction of those truths with human reason and a man-made rational political system of democracy.

The Religious Theory

The theological debate has never been rich and serious, at least in Iranian society to the extent that Soroush has pioneered in the past few decades, especially after the publication of *The Theory of Evolution of Religious Knowledge or Text in Context*. The main message of this theory is that all that we have in the name of religion are our interpretations of religion and our interpretations of religion constitute religious knowledge. Religious knowledge is separate from religion itself and it is religious knowledge that is evolving like any other human knowledge. This theory has penetrated deep into even the clerical establishment's institutions as well as the religious intellectual circles and has become the dominant discourse in Iran on religious theological and political debates. Religious discourse before the revolution and before Soroush began contributing to the debate was divided into two classic and rival interpretations of Islam,

the clerical discourse and the religious intellectuals' interpretation, that were negating each other and competing to portray the existing religious corpuses in a shape and format to be attractive to their audiences.

Soroush's innovation in the debate has been epistemological and has touched the authenticity and sustainability of religious arguments in the face of modern rationalism and has challenged the traditional religious accounts that were indoctrinated in religious idealisms, whether in the form of clerical isolationism or intellectual populism. Soroush is enjoying the advantages of the legacy of the Iranian revolution that brought Islam into the public domain as a subject for debate and he has highlighted this historic event and transformed it into a deeper epistemological occurrence. He has become a force for secularisation in Iran since he is taking advantage of the legacy of the Islamic revolution and, therefore, his religious accounts and religiosity have become politically orientated. He is a theologian and is seen as a theologian among the religious community, who is expected and claims to offer a better and true interpretation of Islam. However, Soroush interprets and explores religion as a secular philosopher, an approach that disturbs the sanctity and absolute aspects of the religion for the religious. Despite the fact that he is concerned about the existence of religion in society, he is one of the leading scholars putting religion on trial to adjust it to the political demands of growing secular Muslims, though he does that in order to find a role for religion in today's life.

Soroush's theory of considering religion as the interpretations of religions and separating religion from the interpretations and, in the meantime, feeling free to have endless interpretations of religion, raises questions about his intention of saving religion and highlights his conviction that, in order to have a democracy, one has to first remove the theoretical hurdles. Separating religion from the knowledge of religion and, consequently, putting the knowledge of religion onto the level of other human knowledge, has served two purposes: an intentional goal and an unintentional one. Soroush's intentional purpose has been to bring Islam out of its rigid dogmatic traditional and jurisprudential format and make it more relevant to the life and concerns of Muslims

today and play the role of a reformist like Martin Luther (1483–1546) in the West or at least follow in the footsteps of Muslim reformists like Sayed Jamaluddin Afghani (1838–1897), though not only at the political level but rather in a deeper epistemological sphere. He considers himself part of the reformist movement in the Islamic world, championed by Sayed Jamal and followed by Muhammad Abdoh (1849–1905) in Egypt, Allama Iqbal (1877–1938) in the subcontinent and Shariati in Iran.¹⁶ He shares the concern of the movement to deal with the causes of the backwardness of Muslims and to return to their Islamic identity. In Soroush's view, this movement has come a long way and evolved a great deal to the level of well-established, diverse, sophisticated and non-clerical intellectualism that is concerned about the failure of Muslims and is looking for political and intellectual reform in the Islamic world.

The Islamic movement has grown and transformed since the time of Sayed Jamal, especially in our society, where, in my opinion, the Islamic intellectualism is well established now. When I say Islamic intellectualism, I mean an Islamic intellectual movement separate from the clerical establishment that is concerned about the backwardness of Muslims.¹⁷

Like other reformers Soroush believes that it is not Islam that has caused the failure of Muslims; it has rather been the stagnation of Muslims themselves that has caused their failure. He argues that understanding of religion depend on expectations of religion.

Understanding of the religious texts depends on our expectations of religion and not vice versa. For instance, if someone believes that he can find in the Qur'an and Hadith the answers for all his questions and issues in life, then the religious texts will have different meanings for him and he will try to extract from any hint in the religious text the answers about the laws of light, the movements of stars, the effects of medicine and breaking of atoms.¹⁸

Those who expect religion to provide scientific knowledge, for instance, read religious

sources like the Qur'an and Hadith and extract scientific knowledge and those who expect religion to equip them with atomic knowledge can find enough sources in religion to feed them with this knowledge. Religion is like a rope that can be used to go down the well or come out of it; in other words, religion should be given the desired direction. If there is the desire to move on and come out of the well, then religion can be used to help one to move in that direction.

One of the other instrumentalist ideas Soroush applies in his religious theory to ultimately serve his political theory, is that religion is silent, like an object, and it is we who make it talk and exploit it to “come out of the well”. The initiative is in human hands and, depending on our expectations, religion can be interpreted and become vocal and relevant. Religion is not a set of beliefs and duties that are introduced by God to the Prophet and his followers to follow. It is up to Muslims to pick and choose and take advantage of religion, according to their expectations. This interpretation of religion can provide enough space to introduce a secular democracy and call it an Islamic democracy. But this understanding of religion, on the one hand, does not reflect the common understanding of religion by Muslims as a set of divine guidance that Muslims are obliged to follow, and on the other hand, it establishes human needs and expectations as the driving force and basis of interaction with religion. It is religion, therefore, that should follow the footsteps of humans and their expectations that can open the gate for justification of any political system.

Soroush argues that Muslims were superior, dominant and respected when they had better understanding of their religion. However, the same religion that was giving them vision and salvation has been exploited to validate intolerance and hostility. Whatever the reasons, flawed understandings of Islam, the very inspiring spiritual power that brought Muslims unity, prosperity and success, have become a chronic hurdle and exposed Muslims to Western domination and colonial ambitions. Soroush quotes pieces of Sayyed Jamal Al Afghani's nostalgic writings about the period of history in which Muslims were prospering and had strong kings, brought captives from the West, slaves from Ethiopia

and destroyed idols and idol-temples in India; but now they have capitulated and are caught in poverty and weakness.¹⁹ Soroush might have some sympathy with this ideological position, though; the way he is pursuing the revival of that golden age is completely different from the mainstream revivalist movement. Muslims are fighting for justice and dignity like the Iranian people who fought for a democratic government through the revolution of 1979 led by Ayatollah Khomeini; however, this will not be achievable if Muslims fail to provide dignified interpretations of their religion. His instrument for dignified interpretations of religion and transformation is reason or, rather, pure reason, and only then will the theoretical conditions for a rational political system that is democracy be paved.

Soroush is critical of those, like Shariati, who believe that “religion that does not serve us before death, will not serve us after death”. Soroush is disturbed by using Islam as a political ideology and has endeavoured to reduce the heavy load on Islam as a religion. Soroush’s resentment against ideological interpretations of religion is not limited to Islamic intellectualism. Fighting against clerical or rather jurisprudential Islamic ideology is the other main part of his intellectual career.²⁰ In his view, religion is not a ‘supermarket’ where everything is found; religion exists for otherworldly prosperity and worldly affairs should be handled by reason.²¹ He makes every effort to strip religion of any ideological role while at the same time he talks about a democratic religious government that envisages a role, one way or another, for religion in public life. How far reason as an arbiter recognises a role for religion or coexists with religion in managing public life needs to be explored further.

In his interview with Michel Hoebink of Radio Netherlands Arabic Service, Soroush mentions that Muslim scholars in the past did not express their opinions regarding Islam and Islamic literature openly, and it looks as if Soroush confines himself by the same constraint and avoids clarifying the context of his debate whether he really argues inside the Islamic discourse or discourses or speaks liberally in the form of a theologian. For instance, he believes that worldly affairs should be handled by reason and religion is for

otherworldly matters, while at the same time he does not appear to believe in the separation of religion and politics. He states that worldly matters should be dealt with by reason and at the same time he emphasises that we do not have independent reason in Islam. In fact, by putting reason as an arbiter, Soroush on the one hand contradicts himself epistemologically and on the other disregards the context of the debate in Islamic discourses.

Soroush's main contribution to the debate in the Islamic world is that Muslims are backward because they have ignored the role of reason in managing their life and the only way to prosper and rescue the Islamic civilisation is to inject "independent reason, not prescribed reason (*aghlaneiat naghli*), not jurisprudential reason, and the reason that looks to understand what happened in the past and confined to the events of the past" into the blood of Islam and Muslims; "otherwise the collapse of this civilisation is inevitable".²² However, Soroush adopts a completely opposite stance on other occasions by claiming that "we do not have independent reason in Islam ... we need the revelation, since we cannot get anywhere with our reason ... and narration (religion) and reason are like two eyes of human beings".²³ Regardless of the contradictions in Soroush's thoughts, and given the fact that rationalism and articulation of reason for understanding of Islam and managing Muslim political life is the dominant position in his intellectual career, he encounters the second stage of contradiction and challenge in his theory; that is, epistemological aspects of his theory versus his humanism.

Soroush, epistemologically, puts reason as an arbiter and gives a veto right to humans to rationally and critically acquire knowledge and treat religion as the knowledge of religion and, therefore, rationally examine this knowledge in the form of historical products and validate them based on scientific principles and methodology. This approach to reason and epistemology is not considered an interreligious approach or a religious approach at all in Islamic discourse, since reason as an independent arbiter is not recognised in Islam and is treated, as Soroush himself explains on a different occasion, as a monstrous entity that needs to be limited by other means like religion.²⁴ In Soroush's correspondence with

Ayatollah Montazeri, one of the leading clerics in the Shia Muslim World and yet one of the most liberal ones, he clarifies the position of reason in Islam that is more or less in line with the dominant understanding of reason in Islam. He clearly says that “human reason is imperfect” and since it cannot offer a perfect understanding of the past, present and future, God has sent the prophets to complete this imperfect entity and guide humans towards salvation.²⁵ Reason in Islam is not an arbiter or the main subject for acquiring knowledge; it is, rather, an instrument to find out the intentions of God and the prophet. There is no space for Soroush’s independent reason in Islam and this reason as arbiter is, in fact, the product of modernity and liberalism that has emerged from the ruins of religious and traditional methods of acquiring knowledge. It seems that Soroush is determined to convert this reason to Islam, or Islamise reason, or perhaps, convert Islam to liberalism and modern rationalism.

However, the contradiction between Soroush’s rationalism and mainstream understanding of reason in Islam is understandable. The irony is the contradiction between the core elements of his own theory. He, on the one hand, believes in independent reason and tries to rationalise understanding of religion – in other words, he expects the subject to adhere to his reason and rational organisation of his life, including the political system – and on the other, he expects the same subject to look for his rights through his duties. His rationalism provides the basic steps to the rational political system that is democracy, but binding the person to his religious duties denies him the very ability to act rationally.

The reader of Soroush’s works needs to be extra flexible and patient and bypass the contradictions in his scholarly accounts and find the dominant ideas in his theories and the real arguments in his peculiar political and intellectual life. Regardless of the contradictions, it is evident that Soroush is heading towards providing the needed elements of his democratic religious government. He is well aware that a democracy cannot be established without some form of rationalism and involvement of independent reason and, since reason cannot become religious, then religion should become rational.

Soroush's religious theory entails some unintended consequences that could be devastating and end up in the deconstruction of Islam in the minds of those who see Soroush as a guiding figure. Considering religion as the knowledge of religion, and treating that knowledge like any other scientific knowledge that is not absolute, and as conjectures that are not yet refuted, destroys the sanctity of religion. Divine knowledge that has come from God can be inspiring for the faithful. Any religious practice is religion in its entirety for any particular group of people and one cannot treat any specific understanding of religion as the knowledge of religion separate from religion; in other words, in the eyes of the faithful their religion is not an interpretation of religion, it is the whole of religion. Therefore, putting that knowledge to the level of refutable human knowledge and under the scrutiny of reason is no secure territory for the existence of religion, though it will certainly sacrifice religion for the sake of democracy. The faithful do not see any separation between their religion and knowledge of religion.

In his recent interview with Michel Hoebink, Soroush claims that the Qur'an is the creation of Mohammed: "revelation is inspiration that is the experience of poets and Sufis".²⁶ However, there are numerous verses showing that the Qur'an is the direct word of God and Soroush acknowledges this himself on another occasion and says that the "Qur'an and revelation was revealed exactly as it was announced to the Prophet without being manipulated by the Prophet".²⁷ Soroush is a Muslim theologian and well aware of the verses mentioned above. What he is demonstrating, either intentionally or unintentionally, is an amalgamation of various discourses. His approach to the debate on religion is an interreligious approach but the logic and methodology he uses is extrareligious. He tries all the time to corroborate his arguments through mystical logic and literature and sticks to instances drawn from Islamic mysticism that are not traditional in Islamic religious interpretations; in other words, they are extrareligious accounts and independent mystical experiences that were formed mainly in isolation rather than through theological debates and cannot be considered as evidence equal to mainstream Islamic sources like the Qur'an and Hadith.

Soroush has every right to introduce his own interpretation of religion, even though Islam is not susceptible internally to pure philosophical or independent mystical interpretations. You do not need to adjust the Qur'an or Islam to human scientific developments. No religious group, Sunni, Shia, or other sects consider their religious belief to be just a fraction, or interpretation of Islam; they believe that their religion is the perfect religion in its entirety, inspiring and offering certainty to its followers. Their religion is not a set of fluid beliefs like philosophical schools of thought exposed to timely philosophical and academic debate. Religion does not need to be necessarily right or wrong as it is not this specificity and content of religion that inspires and offers faith to its followers; it is rather up to the individual whether they believe in that religion and find it telling the truth or not. When they fight for their religion, for instance, they do not fight just for an interpretation of religion; the faithful consider their religion as a perfect faith. What Soroush is doing is in fact putting religion on unsafe foundations and depriving it of its certainty.

The Religious Society

A government is either Islamic or has other forms, including democratic, though it cannot be Islamic and democratic for a variety of reasons. A democratic government, as Soroush has rightly said, is founded on principles like human rights, justice, limitation of power, and collective reason. Democracy is the rule of the people and based on the independent choices of people. However, this choice and will is fluid and in constant change and, due to this fluidity, the moment you sign up to the free and independent choice of people, you commit to a circumstantial mutability that will be taken over by individual rational judgements, desire, interests, feelings and challenges and enter into a process that will end up in a secular and liberal society.

Ironically, Soroush does not believe that it is Muslims who choose but, rather, 'religious society' and 'liberal society' who choose.²⁸ The liberal society, in his view, faces

constant and unending tests and choice. A good analogy of liberal society here might be science; in science you conjecture, and conduct experiments to test your conjectures, and uphold the results until they are refuted through different experiments over time. You never get to an absolute answer where you should stop. The same process takes place in your sociopolitical life, where trial and error is the reality of life.

Things are different in a ‘religious society’, according to Soroush; such a society has already chosen and tested and found the answer and, therefore, wants to live with it. Free will, in such a society, is not a process of trial and error; it is rather an apocalyptic single choice that a society adopts and thus becomes religious. However, there will be differences of choice in a religious society where people will be free to choose the content of their religiosity.

Yes, liberal society is a society that is constantly going through the process of choosing and testing and never considers this process as coming to an end, but a religious society is a society that has passed the test and found the answer. It has chosen religion and would like to live under the auspices of religion after this. However, this initial choice opens the gate of countless subsequent difficult choices, questions and tests that theology needs to address to take the difficult steps of reformation of religion.²⁹

The question is whether human beings’ freedom of choice can be evaded or contained and limited to a certain moral and religious definition; in other words, can a ‘religious society’ be religious forever? Soroush is silent about that and does not acknowledge the fluidity of the people’s choice that might end up in a secular liberal society, or perhaps he is under the influence of his religious faith and cannot recognise the fluidity of people’s choices, even if they are religious.

Soroush’s theory that the faithful have passed the status of choice and they have chosen religion and want to live under its guidance, unlike liberal societies, where people are in

constant transformation of seeking to making the best choices, is deeply embedded in the autocratic culture in Iran that prevents constructive dialogue in society in order to find the best social arrangements. Rather you should accept the option that is chosen for you by those in power or religious authority; diversity of choice is a liberal value not an Islamic one. Thus the solutions for social challenges in the Islamic societies are mainly introduced through decrees rather than productive dialogue and debate among the civil society institutions as well as governments. It also shows how Soroush, as a religious intellectual, entrenches the undemocratic culture imbedded in religious thought and prevents society from debating human affairs and finding collective consensus based on collective reason. How can a society and political system be democratic if it recognises ultimate religious red lines for free will and sociopolitical debates? The answer can be that that is the reality of a religious society and religious people have chosen to observe those red lines, unlike the liberal societies, where people learn through experience how to regulate their lives and manage their political affairs. Then the question needs to be why it would be necessary to seek an Islamic democracy.

Islamic government stands at the other end of the spectrum and cannot be based on the principles mentioned above, since Islam has its own values to inject into a political system. Soroush confirms this on numerous occasions and reiterates that the religiosity of a government means to act and practice on the basis of religious values and specific rights that it recognises for people, rights that might be different from other societies.³⁰ Despite the fact that Soroush tries to distance himself from jurisprudential Islam and insists that his democratic religious government will be based on the independent faith of the religious people and not on Sharia, and the readers of his works can sense a strong tendency in his intellectual career to bypass Sharia, he cannot manage to find a way out of this dilemma. Soroush's explicit reference to Sharia on some occasions jeopardises the whole project of his religious democracy. Without Sharia law, he says, "the construction of a democratic government will be incomplete and fails".³¹ He continues to say that "Sharia and its laws, without any doubt, will strengthen the religious democracy and if a religious democracy (contrary to the views of its opponents) is theoretically and

practically possible, this cannot take place without respect for Sharia law”³².

Soroush considers the religious democracy based on Sharia as a system based on the rule of law and finds an analogy between a jurisprudential system and democracy. One of the specificities of democracy is that it is based on the rule of law, and since a religious democracy is run by the rule of Sharia law it is identical to other democracies. He is aware that religious and jurisprudential laws are based on duties rather than rights and they are adopted to regulate society according to the will of jurists derived from the sacred religious sources.³³ The rule of law also exists in a dictatorship since dictators do not act in a vacuum and implement their will through their laws. The difference between the rule of law in a dictatorship and a democracy is the content of law and how the law is provided: in a democracy the law is provided by the people or elected representatives of the people based on the equal individual rights of the citizens, but in a dictatorship, the law is provided by the will of the dictator and the dictatorship apparatus; certainly the rule of law in a dictatorship is not identical to democracy.

The jurisprudential laws that Soroush treats on the same footing as the laws in democracies, are, as Soroush himself believes, provided to define Muslims’ duties and not their rights. Muslims do not have the right to make those laws and change or eliminate them; they, according to Soroush, look to their duties to find their rights and not vice versa.³⁴ Putting duties before rights is a violation of the basic principle of democracy that concerns individual rights. It is evident that, based on the fundamental elements of Soroush’s theory and beliefs, his project of democratic religious government lacks the very basic elements of a democracy, which are: recognition of rights for people, not duties only; application of civil laws sourced in the collective consensus of the people rather than Sharia law; ‘satisfaction of the people’ without the need for the ‘approval of God’; and the primary principle of democracy – that is, the rule of the people as the citizens of a country without ideological commitments.

Despite the clashing points between religious duties and individual rights, in other words,

religious opposition to human rights or modern discourse on human rights, we can notice a great deal of evolution in the religious discourse in favour of human rights. We can see this evolution and shifting from strict religious principles to a human rights approach in the lifetime of Soroush and in his thoughts. Another good example of this evolution can be noticed between the First Vatican Council in 1870 and the second in 1962–65 when an entire chapter of its constitution on the church in the modern world was devoted to human rights. John Paul II's whole preaching to the world was based on human rights.³⁵ However, the religious opposition to human rights as a discourse that is indifferent to religious duties needs to be acknowledged in the debate on religion and human rights. The Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Rowan Williams's sympathy and some degree of support for some Muslims in Britain, in his interview with BBC Radio 4, to have the option to adopt Sharia law instead of the British legal system is, in fact, recognition of religious opposition to human rights as a discourse. The complication that we notice in Soroush's thoughts and his insistence on religious duties on some occasions, and on individual rights on some other occasions, is a reflection of the nature of the debate on religion and human rights.

Soroush acknowledges that there cannot be a democracy without upholding individual rights.³⁶ This consideration of individual rights as one of the key elements of democracy remains restricted to isolated remarks by Soroush, and in principle, in his Islamic democracy these individual rights should always be reconciled with Muslim duties. These two notions have different sources and two opposite directions that are practically impossible to reconcile. Soroush offers no practical model for the reconciliation of individual rights and Muslim duties enshrined in the Sharia. He only proposes theoretical efforts to reconcile the two based on the fact that "Muslims look for their rights through their duties". According to Soroush, the individual rights he is preaching are different from the way this term is commonly understood in the secular and liberal world.³⁷

Whatever the specificities of Soroush's religious democracy, his political theory is based on the notion that having an Islamic or secular democracy depends on the amalgamation

of a society: if a society is religious, the government there will be religious too and if a society is secular, the government there will be secular; in other words, the political system is the natural product of the make-up of a society.³⁸ Soroush does not explain what he means by religious society. If he means that the majority of a society are from a particular religion, or that the majority of people believe in a religion and are faithful to that, then a political system based on the values and rights defined by that majority would not be able to accommodate the rights and values of the minority. Soroush may be right to assume that if the majority of people in a society believe in Islam, for instance, an Islamic government is the natural product of such a society. However, he cannot expect this government to be democratic as it has not occurred in the history of Islamic societies; the Islamic government was not democratic during the time of the Prophet Mohammed and there has not been a democratic Islamic government since.

Soroush's definition and reference to religious or nonreligious society seems very unscientific and ill thought through for three reasons. First of all, it sounds as if he considers society to be a unique and cohesive entity that can adopt an exclusive identity, whether religious or secular, as if no other individual, group, faith, and minority with opposite values and consideration of rights exist. In the history of Islamic governments, these minorities had existed but not been recognised as equal to Muslims simply because the Islamic governments were established on the basis of the will of the Muslim rulers claiming to have religious legitimacy; in other words, the Islamic governments were the natural products of Islamic societies.

Second, Soroush does not address who defines religion and which interpretation of religion can be accepted as the official and politically applicable reading of religion. Soroush gives religious politics in Iran as an example and says that "since the people in our own society, whether the ordinary or the elites, are faithful to Islam, their politics are religious and this will remain the same so far as the society remains religious".³⁹ The politics and government in Iran are religious but is Iran democratic too? Do the moderates, the Bahai sect, the Christians and Jews, the Sunni Muslims and other

minorities have a voice in the Iranian system? If not, is it because of the political culture and unreadiness of the Iranian people for democracy or religious politics having a role in that?

Third, in a democratic secular society, religion and the religiosity of the communities are recognised and protected, always alongside the rights of those who do not believe in any religion. In other words, the diversity of faith, race, gender and the rule of law that is derived from collective reasoning and consensus is applied equally to everybody. However, in a society dominated by a religious majority, there is no recognition for equal rights of those who do not only adhere to the dominant religious values and rights but also actively struggle for their democratic rights and justice. Soroush's argument is that religious knowledge is a historical phenomenon that can be adapted to accommodate the differences. Nonetheless, even if we accept the historical aspects of religiosity and the fact that religion is constantly transforming and, therefore, we can provide interpretations of Islam that can accommodate democracy, due to the diversity of interpretations of Islam in Soroush's 'religious society' practically Muslims cannot agree on a single interpretation of Islam. Thus, the establishment of an Islamic democracy faces practical challenges to the extent that it becomes practically impossible, while, in the meantime, compatible interpretations of Islam will remain alien to the core orthodox Islamic establishments in the Islamic societies. The problem with Soroush's theory of democratic religious government is that he believes that, since he has managed to draw a theoretical model, this means that such a model has been translated into practical political reality.

There are grave discrepancies in Soroush's theory in terms of the religiosity of his society. The most important of all is that he assumes that in his religious society everybody is faithful and religious and everyone has chosen their faith with knowledge and without coercion.⁴⁰ A society in which everybody is religious and has chosen their faith voluntarily is a utopian society that has not existed and highly unlikely to become a reality.

It is valid to argue that in a secular society a democratic religious government is impossible because religious governments are not answerable to people. In such a society, the best form of government would be a secular democratic regime. However, it is not valid to argue that nowhere and under no circumstances may one perceive the desirability of a religious democracy, even in a religious society. The truth of the matter is that a religious government can be an appropriate reflection of a religious society. Indeed, in such a society any purely secular government would be undemocratic.⁴¹

Soroush is adamant that religious societies like the Iranian society do exist and, in these societies, politics will be religious and, if not, the government will not be democratic.

Soroush is strict about his religious society, where the faithful are not allowed to try everything in order to find the advantages and disadvantages of their practice and then to choose the best. For example:

In religious thought, trying everything is not allowed. The faithful must not try everything to see what the result will be. For instance, allow free relations between men and women or legitimise drinking alcohol to see whether they are good for them or not. But in a liberal society education takes place through constant and gradual trial and practice. In a liberal system there are no ultimate perfect role models to be followed forever throughout history; there are temporary role models who get corrected in practice. Unlike religious societies, there are no unique eternal role models there so that people can follow them and be like them forever.⁴²

In Soroush's religious society, the faithful were allowed only once to choose their religion freely but they are denied this freedom once they have chosen. Soroush does not compromise with freedom of choice and liberalism, since liberal discourse and dialogue are not limited to religious boundaries and could undermine the authenticity of religion.

He preaches a certain type of freedom authorised and legitimised under the scope of religion and clearly says that he has problems with liberalism, and, in his religious democracy, undermining the sheer existence and authority of religion is not accepted.⁴³ He acknowledges that in a liberal democracy a human being is considered, by nature, to be free and diverse and all should respect this diversity; neither can they eliminate these differences and diversity, nor it is desirable to remove diversity from society. The potential and need for diversity in a religious society, according to Soroush, is “a thousand times” more than in a secular society.⁴⁴ This diversity has existed in the Muslim world, in his view, and his evidence for this diversity is the various Islamic schools of thought. Soroush does not pause for a moment to see that he is denying human beings the very basic characteristic of humanity – that is, the fluidity and unpredictability of every individual’s potential choice and state of mind, which cannot remain religious or secular or anything else in perpetuity.

Conflict Between Faith and Jurisprudence

Soroush does not remain loyal to the specificities of his religious society and, in order to justify his democratic religious project, he presents religious faith as a driving force for the enforcement of his religious democracy. He knows that a religious democracy cannot be founded on Sharia and that Sharia law cannot be democratic and, therefore, he tries to diminish fear of the autocratic nature of Sharia law through highlighting the significance of religious faith in Islam rather than Sharia. He constantly refers to the message of the Qur’an verse that says, “there is no compulsion in religion”⁴⁵, and Soroush concludes that, since the essence of religion is to choose your faith without compulsion, a society formed of those who have chosen their faith freely cannot be undemocratic. This conclusion is, indeed, not representing the views of the conservative and orthodox Muslim scholars, who do not see this verse as making it a matter of choice for people to be believer or non-believer. In addition, this is just the first part of the verse and it continues; “the Right Path has been distinct from the wrong path ... and believers have grasped the most trustworthy handhold that will never break”. Even a liberal

interpretation entails that you can choose, but if you choose the wrong path, you will see the consequences of that, according to the subsequent verses.

If religion is a matter of free choice and believers have chosen their faith without any compulsion, then the religious government, first and foremost, according to Soroush, is governing over hearts and minds; it is not a jurisprudential government that by nature is governing over bodies and can take place in a religious as well as unreligious society, though a religious government too can only take place in a religious society.⁴⁶ In other words, a religious government is different from a jurisprudential government. The craft that teaches us the course of action and laws and regulations is the craft of jurisprudence. But what represents beliefs and faiths are theology and mysticism. Therefore, the religious government, due to its religiosity, will be based on people's faith and religious experiences more than regulations and the religious government's foundation is religious faith and not jurisprudence and religious regulations; in other words, the religious government is other than the jurisprudential government.⁴⁷

Yet at the same time, Sharia law is deep in the heart of Soroush's political theory. He believes that, although the religious democratic government is to observe the content of religion and should be based on the spiritual messages of religion, in practice, these contents cannot be sustained and survive without the application of Sharia law that Soroush calls 'the skin':

[...] the nucleus (Islamic faith) cannot survive without its shield (Sharia law). It is true that one is less valued than the other, but it is the first one that protects the second one. Therefore, if we want the nucleus, we should have it in its shield. Breaking this shield and throwing it away and considering it unnecessary, will gradually deprive us of the nucleus ... In fact if we do not protect the shield and society just looks for the nucleus, that society will not remain religious ... If you see those who are indifferent to the religious shields, do not trust them.⁴⁸

The Messengers are sent for some concrete truths, according to Soroush, and these truths should be implemented. For the implementation of these truths, we should be mindful of the above two aspects of religion; without one, the other cannot exist.

The dominant perception among the mystical and, nowadays, the secular Muslims has been that religion is formed of personal spiritual inspirations and experiences that touch your heart without necessarily observing any rituals or binding rituals. Religion does not need to interfere in your social life and define the status of personal conduct in society. Human beings are rational beings and can rationally organise and manage their social and political life. In other words, there is no need for a system of law and duties that are not sourced in human beings' collective reason and historical experiences but are said to be divine and derived from divine sources to determine how society should be managed. Soroush believes that this approach is dangerous for religion, since it ignores the role of Sharia law that is the structural and institutional aspect of religion, without which those spiritual inspirations and experiences cannot be sustained.

Jurisprudence and religious decrees that are inspired by theology and expand and contract along with changing material needs, worldly considerations, and human knowledge are the laws of the religious society and, as such, play a pivotal role in consolidating and calibrating the scales of religious democracy. Without them, the design of a democratic government would be incomplete and unrealised.⁴⁹

Treating religion as personal spiritual experiences without social ritual and legal systems will inevitably end up in a secular system, which Soroush does not wish to happen.

Soroush is well aware that even if it is possible to have a society where all the faithful choose their faith with free will, it is impossible to keep it that way, since people tend to become relaxed about their faith and adopt different sets of faith or ways of life if religion

is not materialised in social contexts. One of the ways that Sharia, according to Soroush, can help the establishment of a religious democracy is to maintain society as religious through applying sociopolitical measures so that, on the one hand, the faithful cannot become relaxed about their faith and are persuaded to remain committed to their faith and, on the other, they stay exposed to the symbols and presence of religion in society as a reminder to remain faithful.

It is true that a majority of the religious people seem to care more about ritual obligations (such as ablutions, prayers, and pilgrimage) than about ethical duties (such as truthfulness, patience, and abstinence from derision, intrusion, and avarice) or about the principles of the faith (such as the attributes of the almighty, the nature of evil, and the wisdom of the Prophet). They perceive the glory of religion in meticulous observance of its ritual minutiae and seldom inquire about the origins and principles of religiosity. They fancy the husk of religiosity as the master rather than the servant of the core. Thus, they gauge religiosity according to the degree of compliance with the religious rituals. Still, it is also true of all religious societies that, if the husk of religiosity deteriorates, the core will sooner or later perish and religion will wither away, except in rare circles of the wise.⁵⁰

Despite the fact that Soroush does not want to bind his religious democracy to Sharia, and articulates the role of faith in order to bypass Sharia law and insists that a religious democracy is different from a jurisprudential government, he fails to substantiate his religious democracy without Sharia. It is in this dichotomy of producing a religious democracy based on faith and a democracy based on faith and Sharia that the democratic nature of Soroush's whole religious democracy project is determined.

Soroush believes that the mission of a religious democracy is to create the conditions for freedom of faith, where the faithful can choose their faith freely.⁵¹ This cannot be a unique specificity of Soroush's religious democracy, since the condition of freedom of

faith is available in any other democratic system. What is the difference between a religious and nonreligious democracy? Soroush's answer is that there is no difference. The religious government deals with the worldly affairs of the religious people and "opens the chains from the feet of their souls to fly".⁵² This government has the same function as in other societies, though it is called religious because it serves the religious people. In other words, "a religious government is religious only ostensibly and not in content".⁵³ It is obvious that so far there is no contradiction between this definition of a religious and a secular democracy. However, Soroush knows the danger of such a theory and senses the liberalisation and secularisation of his religious society if religion is not permitted to meddle with power and step in to prevent liberalisation. He believes in the directionality of history and therefore his attempt at pioneering a theory for democratic religious government might not seem to be supported by his view of history.

One of the realities of history for Soroush is the battle between religion and science, in which religion has been the loser.⁵⁴ The implication of this view is that religion has been a naturally evolved feature of history based on supernatural or nonhuman sources but it has relinquished the space to human reason and scientific knowledge. Humans have not resorted to sources beyond their reason and scientific knowledge where this evolution has taken place. Soroush's struggle seems to be a premodern or pre-evolutionary attempt to prevent human beings' sociopolitical evolution and rationalisation. It mainly applies to Islamic societies, where religion still has a current grip on people's intellectual life. It sounds as if Soroush has taken two hypotheses for granted: the first is the idea that democracy is the best political system and inevitable and, therefore, religion should adjust itself to this political system. The second is that religion is an ever-constant factor in human life and, as a result, he has pioneered a theory in order to accommodate Islam in the constant evolving realities of human political life.

Soroush sees history, mainly in the West, as the ground for rivalry and the battle between science and religion, in which science has become victorious. Religion has also lost the battle on the political front and the establishment of secular democratic systems has

grown naturally without any coercion and bloodshed.⁵⁵ Soroush explains that Christianity was sidelined by science that paved the way for separation of religion and politics. Separation of religion from politics was not dictated from the top by elites or through a constitution; it occurred simply because religion did not have the grip on power anymore.⁵⁶

This view implies that history has a direction, in which, as human beings become equipped with scientific knowledge, other forms of pre-scientific knowledge, faiths and beliefs become insignificant in the sociopolitical lives of human beings and, ultimately, shelter more and more in private and personal circles. Soroush's attempt to reconcile religion and democracy and find a role for religion in public life does not seem to fit into this historical evolution. Although this historical transformation has taken place only in the West and cannot happen in the Muslim world, on numerous occasions Soroush emphasises how Muslims should welcome the modern rational and democratic achievements of rational people:

The fact of the matter is that we should not expect that the religious government should necessarily be obviously different in form from other governments. The religious people are not supposed to walk on their head if the rational people of this world walk on their feet...Why should we think that when we discover the components of the religious government, they should be different from those that the rational people have discovered through reasoning and debate?⁵⁷

Nonetheless, if this historical transformation is unavoidable and can spread worldwide, it could discredit the whole project of Soroush's theory of democratic religious government. The dominant theme in his political views is that he does recognise this transformation and does not try to adjust democratic values such as human rights to religion; on the contrary, he believes that it is religion that needs to rationalise and adjust itself to democracy.

Whether we consider democracy a successful method for limiting power and providing justice and human rights or principles that guarantee these values, in both cases it is the religious understanding that needs to adjust itself to that, not democracy to religion because justice cannot be religious.⁵⁸

However, Soroush makes no effort to provide evidence in Islamic history and literature in support of democracy. As he endeavours in his religious theory to rationalise religion in order to open the space for a discourse on Islam and democracy, he enters into the debate on democratic religious government through extrareligious means and ‘nonreligious rights’ of the faithful such as justice, human rights and limitation of power.⁵⁹ This methodology gives Soroush the opportunity to sketch and define the specificities of his democratic government, which is, in fact, identical to modern secular and liberal democracies, and call it democratic religious government or, rather, invite religion to adjust to it to make it religious.

However, despite all the references that exist in his writings regarding the growing favourability of democracy and the trend of secularisation even in Muslim countries, Soroush believes that the idea of religion becoming weaker is proven to be false. “Everywhere religions are becoming stronger and the theory of secularism as being the destiny of history is a whitewashed conjecture.”⁶⁰ Soroush even predicts that the religious governments of the past will re-emerge. Moreover, despite his efforts to found his democracy on religious faith, he ultimately accepts that the crown of faith cannot survive without the shield of Sharia. It is in this acknowledgement of the role of Sharia that the fate of his religious democracy is determined and it becomes evident that, despite all that he preaches regarding the differences of a government based on faith and a jurisprudential government and how a jurisprudential government is not necessarily a religious government, he sacrifices democracy for the benefit of Sharia. Soroush says “the faithful have surrendered their legislation rights to God and this is exactly what religiosity and the rights of the faithful are and that is why the laws of the religious

society come from the sky”.⁶¹

If we accept that there are three main centres of power in a democracy that are the executive, the judiciary and the legislative, a religious and especially an Islamic government has serious issues with the legislative power, according to Soroush.⁶² He believes that parliaments in Islamic societies cannot have the real function of a parliament, since legislation should be approved by the jurists before becoming law.⁶³ Laws in democratic societies are the reflection of the people’s will through a majority consensus that is adopted to regulate their social life and is conditional on their efficiency and susceptible to changes and amendments, according to the evolving demands of the people and emerging challenges. The laws are legislated by the representatives of the people and generated by the free will of the people. People observe the laws not because they are said to have come from the sky or they are sacred and derived from sacred sources; they observe them because they are rooted in their independent rational decisions – in other words, they observe their own pledges and social contracts. What would happen if people, or at least those who do not believe in any religion or have a different perception of the dominant religion, are denied this right and a few masterminds, like the Council of Guardian in the Islamic system in Iran, filter the laws and approve only those that do not contradict Sharia laws?

The contradiction of democracy with Sharia law is the very obvious and immediate contradiction that even an ordinary person can notice, and Muslim scholars like Soroush put forward theories to bypass this contradiction. However, whatever the sophistication of Soroush’s theory, the contradiction of Islam and democracy surfaces as soon as he tries to address the role of Sharia law in his religious democracy. Soroush says:

[...] it is as if the power and law that do not come from the people, and are not changed and interpreted by them to suit their purposes, and the details and implications are not known to them, will be an autocratic power and law and will not leave any room for democracy.⁶⁴

Perhaps Soroush ignores the fact that one of the fundamental dilemmas of democracy with Islam is exactly this understanding of law and power. In a democracy the legitimacy of power must come from the people and people should know why laws are passed or why some laws should be abolished.

The argument that Soroush puts forward for addressing jurisprudence is that jurisprudence and the Sharia system are not a rigid and inflexible system. He applies the same methodology that he uses for understanding religion. Soroush believes that what we have in the name of religion is nothing more than our knowledge of religion that is exposed to our critical analysis and can be approached like any other knowledge. Jurisprudence is the same as religion that, despite coming from the sky, has earthly application and, therefore, becomes a historical phenomenon that evolves and changes, over time.⁶⁵ Jurisprudence is part of religion and as religion can become rationalised, jurisprudence can follow suit and work better than a secular legal system in a religious society.⁶⁶ He tries to combine religious laws with democratic principles and under the influence of Ghazali's view that, were there no conflict among people, jurists would be out of work, and given the fact that these laws are not sacred and eternal, Soroush believes that they can be adjusted with democratic principles. The limit of jurisprudence, in his view, is "the history of jurisprudence", where even if you could find a single jurisprudential decree amongst the Shia or Sunni jurists that could justify a law, that law could be ratified in a democratic religious government.⁶⁷ Soroush does not explain, though, what happens if a law is passed by the representative of the people and supported by the people but the jurists cannot find any instance in the history of jurisprudence to ratify it.

Soroush's ideal model is the Council of Guardians in the Islamic Republic of Iran; however, he thinks the institution has gone astray and, instead of looking for references in the history of jurisprudence to ratify laws, applies strict measures and interpretations of Islam and Sharia to infringe the democratic rights of the Iranian people. The Council of

Guardians was not meant to be the way it is today, according to Soroush.⁶⁸ However, whatever the conduct of the institution, the fact of the matter is that ratification of all laws is bound to Sharia justification. He says that the scope of jurisprudence is wide enough to the extent that even the theory of caliph system in Islam can be eliminated, “but not to say everything and achieve all desires; Sharia prevents us from doing some things at the end of the day”.⁶⁹ The Islamic civilisation, as Soroush puts it:

is a jurisprudential civilisation and jurists, really, have the first priority and say the first word. In a democratic government, the legislator is the people but in a religious government, Sharia is the legislator.⁷⁰

Whatever the interpretations of religion and emphasis on the Islamic faith rather than Sharia law in Soroush’s theory of democratic religious government, he, in fact, does not move a step further than those like the clerical establishment in Iran, who advocate for an Islamic government and do not believe in compatibility between Islam and democracy. Soroush enjoys the freedom and space he creates through secular interpretations of Islam. However, Sharia is an integral part of Islam and regardless of his ability to theologially manoeuvre and provide democratic interpretations of the Islamic faith, sooner or later, he finds himself trapped in the boundaries of Sharia law. Soroush provides no convincing argument to demonstrate how democracy and Sharia can absorb each other and his reference to the view that Sharia law is not only incompatible with democracy, but also supports democracy, is a literal confession of the contradiction between Islam and democracy.

The Ideology of Soroush’s Democratic Religious Government

Soroush believes that the debate on religious democracy is not a religious but rather an extrareligious debate. He does not investigate Islamic literature to find the theoretical basis and political examples such as advisory assemblies (*Shora*), consensus (*Ejmaa*) and allegiance (*Baiaat*). His position on the debate concerning democracy is parallel to that of

a secular nonreligious person who borrows the principles for his theory from modern liberal democracies. He believes that you do not need to be secular to make a democracy, since a democracy, whether religious or nonreligious, needs to be based on the same principles of justice, human rights, limitation of power and collective reason.⁷¹ Once you have a clear vision of democracy, then you need to make efforts to adjust your understanding of religion to that; in other words, it is not religion that is the foundation of a religious democracy but, rather, it is democracy itself that is the basis of a religious democracy and, therefore, religiosity is not a factor in the content of a religious democracy.

Soroush argues that government is a nonreligious institution and has come into being as a result of collective living and human needs for social order, prevention of crime and protection of the people's rights. Government is a human need like any other needs, such as food, shelter and partnership.⁷² Religion does not create this need; it arises as a natural product of human social life for provision of the very basic needs of human beings such as security. Soroush maintains that the Prophet established a government because he was admired by the people for doing so, not because it was a religious requirement. He quotes Imam Ali as saying that the Imam did not make any attempt to become the leader of the Muslim community after the Prophet because, despite the fact that it was his right to be the next leader, the time was not right, since the people did not want him. He accepted the people's demand to be their leader when they rushed to him after the death of the third Caliph, Uthman.⁷³

Thus, there is no difference between a religious and nonreligious government, and theoretically it is understandable to expect people, in a normal situation, to manage their collective sociopolitical life in a way that provides a better life for everybody. Government in this sense is there just to serve the people and it will be democratic if the people are the sources of power and legitimacy and have the right to observe the function of the government, not because they are religious, but because they are human beings.⁷⁴ Soroush explains that governments, including religious governments, will not be

democratic if they are not run on the basis of collective reason. Collective reasoning, however, is not a religious phenomenon and a democratic government based on collective reason cannot be religious in form or in content. The outcome of such a theory will eventually end up in a secular and even liberal political system and Soroush defends his position by saying that “the fact of the matter is that the religious people are not supposed to walk on their heads if the rational people of the world walk on their feet”⁷⁵, which means that Muslims should not oppose the good achievements of rational people of the world simply because they are not created by Muslims.

Nevertheless, Soroush does not apply the same logic in his theory and becomes ideological when he defines the specificities of his democratic religious government. If we recognise the legitimacy and arbitration of collective reason, then it is impossible to impose some specificity in the name of religion on the formation of the government, since collective reason has its own principles and constraints and will not be compromised by religious principles and Sharia law. We are also aware that Soroush makes every effort to imprint religious legitimacy on collective reason and deploy religion as a means for justifying democracy and call the result a religious democracy. On numerous occasions he says that there are no differences between a religious and nonreligious democracy in form and in content and yet he says that a nonreligious government in a religious society is undemocratic. In other words, even a secular democracy in a religious society is undemocratic because government, to him, is like the fruit of a tree; the fruit of the tree of a religious society is a religious government, or religious democracy.

It is rather a logical deduction that since there are societies that are religious, the governments in those societies must represent the will of religious peoples and should be religious too. If they are not religious, then it is not democratic even if it is a democracy. But, what would a religious democracy do that a secular democracy infringes? If a nonreligious government in a religious society is undemocratic because it limits religious freedom, then it is undemocratic everywhere, and if it advocates for a particular

interpretation of a religion, it will not be democratic, by Soroush's standard, even in his religious society. He says that the duty of the religious government is to provide the atmosphere for free choice.⁷⁶ This applies to all democratic governments and is already provided in liberal and secular societies and yet, if we respect free choice for people, there might be no room for a defined set of beliefs and law in the name of Sharia.

Nonetheless, the secular and democratic Soroush advocates for no less than a secular liberal society. He says that whether a religious government is democratic or not depends on two specificities, which are the extent to which it upholds collective reason and respect for human rights.⁷⁷ It is now evident that despite Soroush's references to religious definitions of the above concepts, his understanding of the concepts is in line with the common understanding of people in democratic societies. Soroush is apologetic for the fact that Islam is not fit for purpose and cannot uphold collective reason and respect for human rights. However, he does not consider Islam as contradicting the above concepts and introduces a new version of Islam that can uphold some elements of Islam and does not contradict collective reason or human rights.

Soroush is in constant struggle between two aspects of his beliefs and thoughts. One aspect that makes him revolt against Islam is its Sharia law and he expects it to become rationalised and respectful of human rights if it is to continue to be viable. The other aspect of his belief is his concerns about the existence of religious spirituality in society. He probably knows that the ideal society, where people are free and enjoy freedom of choice and, in the meantime, all are practising religious people, is highly unlikely. He is a liberal when he is tired of religiosity and he is a Muslim when he cannot stand liberalism. He enters into the debate on Islam and democracy but he seems to be encountering grave challenges coming out of it.

By putting Soroush's religious and political beliefs into perspective, one can find out that his problem with democracy is epistemological and deeply embedded in his understanding of humanity. He says, "I am a student of Balkhi (Rumi) and cannot accept

this world without God and a house owner”⁷⁸ To put it in simple words, he believes in a God that has sent truths through the Prophet and those truths must be implemented. His role and that of thinkers like him are to reconcile those truths with modern human beings’ demands and translate them into sociopolitical systems. It is Soroush’s fundamental and inextricable belief in religion and the presence of God in society that make him ideological. Therefore, to whatever extent he widens the scope of religion in order to accommodate democracy, he fails to contemplate the independent and man-made nature of democracy.

It seems that Soroush finds it difficult to come to terms with the notion of free and independent human beings, as we see in liberal societies, and in this sense he is in line with the clerical understanding of freedom in Islam. Ayatollah Motahari, who was one of the leading clerical theologians of the Islamic revolution, explains that in Islam the human is respected and free to choose only if that freedom is in line with humanity and all his rights and freedoms are respected in so far as they do not contradict humanity. Human beings are not free to choose whatever they want and if they choose something that is not compatible with humanity, then they should be helped to become truly free, in line with the balanced view of humanity, and if they don’t, they should be removed from the way of others.⁷⁹ In a speech to university students, Soroush says: “clarify the lines between the dogmas and non-dogmas. Enter into the arena of non-dogmas and be brave enough to discuss and research and transfer the courage to others.”⁸⁰ He highlights on another occasion that the conditions to be religious and faithful are twofold: first, to refer to the Prophet for judgement and second, to accept the verdict.⁸¹ In other words, the debate is about the faithful and the freedom of debate is in the non-dogma arena, and one can easily sense where Soroush is heading as the ideological aspects of his religious democracy unfold.

Soroush’s Political Theory on Trial

The interference of religion in politics was the norm in the premodern history of the

world and it is still the norm in the Muslim world. There is no developed Muslim country in the world and poverty and lack of higher education, economic prosperity and civil society have contributed to maintenance of the Islamic countries as undeveloped in the premodern era. The dominance of religion on politics has crippled political development in these countries and Islam has become a political instrument for dominant tribes, religious groups and clerical establishments to perpetuate their supremacy on Muslims. No serious debate has ever taken place among Muslims to reassess the political literature in the Islamic world and depoliticise Islam. There are sporadic failed and unconfident attempts by scholars like Soroush to break the strong bond between religion and politics, but none has ever either fully believed they can break this bond or dared to devote their intellectual life to drawing a clear distinction between religion and politics.

For example, in the following assertion, Soroush demonstrates a revolutionary step in tackling religion's authority on all aspects of Muslim life. He says that:

once the status of reason, particularly the dynamic collective reason, is established; once the theoretical, practical, and historical advances of humanity are applied to the understanding and acceptance of religion; once extrareligious factors find an echo within the religious domain; and finally, once religion is rationalised, then the way to epistemological pluralism – the centrepiece of democratic action – will be paved.⁸²

This is the highest peak that Soroush can climb to weaken the role of religion in politics, but, because he strongly believes in religious politics, he provides a religious political theory and constantly rehearses it to prove the relevance and validity of a religious political system.

Soroush has a significant place in the debate on Islam and democracy, but his epistemological position of binding democracy to be conditional to religious regulations, namely Sharia law, has complicated and misdirected the debate. The dominant theme in

Iran during the past decade has been one of debating on the compatibility of Islam and democracy without considering that democracy without the interference of religion or any other forms of collective beliefs and ideologies can be a subject for debate; I assert that Soroush, as one of the leading figures in the debate on Islam and democracy, is partly to blame. What Soroush fails to recognise is that a serious debate on democracy can only begin when we can open a space for the debate beyond religious contexts with the very proposition that he negates; that is, to put human beings with their rights in the centre, and we ask God, whom Soroush insists on having in the centre too, to stay away temporarily, while we form a political system based on the human rights of individuals. Individual rights include religious rights as well, and the right that people can bring God to the centre of their individual life, act based on their Gods' recommendations, vote according to their Gods' satisfaction, and so forth. The fact of the matter is that democracy has problems with the collective beliefs, collective orders and collective obedience that are the prevalent understanding of Islam.

The problem with a conservative Muslim human being is that not only is his/her individual space his/her area of influence and manipulation, but also the spaces of other individuals and society are the realm where he/she should interfere and enforce or prevent things from happening. In other words, not only should he/she be a certain type of person and believe in certain things, but, also, others should be the same type of people, wear the same kind of clothes and behave in a way that is acceptable to him/her and his/her understanding of religion. There is no private and individual sphere recognised for others and the religious person can take the law into his/her hand at any moment to exert religious standards. For example, if a woman uncovers her hair in Iran, she will be stopped or dealt with by religious men and women in the street before the law enforcement authorities get involved. These types of actions are not taking place without theoretical support and encouragement of Islamic beliefs.

One of the methods of religious practice mentioned in the Qur'an, though propagated for different purposes by Muslims, and considered to be helpful to democracy by Soroush, is

the idea of spreading good deeds and preventing wrongdoing.⁸³ This religious principle is mostly interpreted as a social responsibility for Muslims and a permission to interfere in the affairs of others. In other words, the rights of the individual are an inseparable part of the rights of society, and individual rights are respected to the extent that is compatible with the religious understanding of good deeds or else the individual will be harassed. The political complication in Soroush's thoughts and mind, in terms of coming to terms with democracy without the interference of religion, is not just a theoretical miscalculation; it is deeply seated in the religious culture that he admires and adheres to. He talks in modern terms through religious politics with the manner of a religious person in society who considers the individual and private sphere of others an area for manipulation and interference. To this degree Soroush argues that Islamic jurisprudence is compatible with democracy and provides laws for our social and private life.⁸⁴

The craft, which provides a base for action and teaches us the relevant rules and regulations, is the craft of jurisprudence, and what provides us with the insight of faith and belief is theological philosophy (*kalam*) or mysticism. Therefore the religious government as a result of its religious nature is based on the people's faith and religious experience rather than practical duties and therefore the religious government is not founded on jurisprudence and practical duties – it is based on faith; in other words, the religious government is other than a jurisprudential one.⁸⁵

However, Soroush does not find jurisprudence helpful to his democratic religious government project and tries to isolate the contradictions between Islam and democracy to the jurisprudential aspects of Islam. He negates the jurisprudential government in Islam and claims the Islamic government should be founded on the Islamic faith not jurisprudence.

Soroush operates in a society with a despotic political tradition and lack of freedom of speech and part of the reason that his theory is full of contradictions, to the extent that it

cannot be called a theory and each aspects of his theory looks like sporadic intellectual assertions of conflicting figures on politics, is that he likes to talk indistinctly to avoid confrontation with the conservative religious establishment in power and his religious constituency. However, he fails to hide himself behind his theory and the hermeneutic approach of interpreting religion also does not bear him any results but, rather, diminishes his credibility as a scholar, as his theory lacks rational sequence and cohesion. For instance, here Soroush tries to assure his religious audience that his religious democratic government will not be a secular government that will treat all religions, believers and non-believers the same:

if religious democracy is (despite its detractors) feasible and reasonable at all, it would be unattainable without respect for religious regulations. The protection of religious ordinances [Sharia] strengthens religious democracy.⁸⁶

He even goes further and makes it absolutely clear that in a democratic religious government nobody can question the authority of religion.⁸⁷ On other occasions he says that Islamic civilisation is in crisis because it is not rational and he proposes that, in order to rescue this civilisation from annihilation, Muslims should exert independent reason in Islamic civilisation, or else the destruction of the civilisation is inevitable.⁸⁸

However, Soroush should be well aware that exertion of independent reason in Islam is either not accepted in Islam, due to the fact that, at most, reason is considered to be an instrument to reflect the intention of the revelations, or it will render Islam as an object for study and secularise it; in other words, it will destroy the very existence of Islam as a religion and divine institution. Soroush knows the dangers that independent reason will pose to the existence of religion and he corrects himself by claiming that “We do not have independent reason in Islam”.⁸⁹ He even goes further to say that reason is a monstrous being that needs to be contained by various means, including religions.⁹⁰ In this respect he is exactly in line with the clerical establishment in Iran who argue that reason can only be helpful if it truly reflects the intentions of revelation. Thus, despite his

assertions that religion should become 'rationalised' and that "a government is government be it in a religious or nonreligious society and has a similar nature and being religious or nonreligious does not change its form and conduct"⁹¹, he prescribes that his democratic religious government is to be based on both reason and Sharia law. "A combination of democracy and religion would entail the convergence of reason [aql] and revelation [shar`]. Every theoretical achievement will have to become practically viable."⁹² Soroush fails to prove that an Islamic democracy is possible.

In Soroush's theory of democratic religious government, the whole project of an Islamic democracy, and the attractive demonstration of the compatibility of Islam and democracy, is found to be neither theoretically sustainable nor practically possible. Soroush's endeavour does not only seem to be genuine and well thought out, but also changes based on the type of audience, being religious with a religious audience and liberal with liberal, rather than having a truth-based philosophical approach; in other words, it does not add anything to human knowledge but, rather, deflects the course of debate on democracy to a religious debate on politics.

One of the contemporary challenges that the world at large, and the Islamic world in particular, has been facing, is the emergence of a resurgent political Islam. The responses to this challenge have been diverse. In Iran it established a political system and in other parts of the world, it is arguably at its climax. This can be a symptom of the crisis of identity in the Muslim world or a civil struggle for democracy. Scholars like Soroush are inspired by the wave of this Islamic resurgence and try to theorise this new phenomenon into modern contexts and introduce it to modern audiences as an alternative to democracy.

Whatever the resonance of the project to find compatibility between Islam and democracy, Soroush fails to provide a viable theory, regardless of the authenticity of the arguments he presents. Instead of a theory, one discovers some scattered, confused and contradictory arguments whose different elements seem hard to join. Despite the

attractions that his theory and arguments have received in the West, he is the counterpart of the conservative clerics in his country and a religious man who cannot come to terms with freedom and open society. His mission is no less than the mission of the clerical factions in power for the endurance of the Islamic system in Iran, against the wishes of the Iranian people who are fighting for democracy.

The debate on democracy in the Islamic world can only become serious when scholars seriously challenge the collective aspects of their beliefs, or else change the discourse of the debate from a religious context to a secular one. This is going to be imposed on the street, as we have experienced in Iran after the presidential elections of 2009. The events after the elections in Iran have also highlighted the end of the debate on Islam and democracy that was championed and perpetuated by Soroush and the religious discourse that endeavoured to find out whether the government gets its legitimacy directly from God or the Muslim people. The debate is not relevant anymore, at least in the case of Iran. Soroush's reactions to the events have been in line with his usual religious and occasionally liberal approach. He lives in exile and has been in a position to demonstrate some genuine thoughts regarding the project of a religious government. He does not talk about a religious democracy anymore and even challenges the plausibility of a religious government.

Soroush said in an interview with the BBC Persian Service that:

It can be mentioned that a religious government cannot be established for two reasons; one is that you cannot create faith and love through power, and second, a religious government is based on religious duties while our time is the era of rights.⁹³

He clearly finds a sharp contradiction between a religious government and the needs and requirements of modern human beings. The time that people could become content with their religious duties has passed and now is the time of the people who want to live based

on their rights; in other words, living under the authority of religious duties is not relevant anymore. He says that:

the modern man is the man of rights, who look for their rights. Basically the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is written during this time that has opened the eyes and it is the foundation of all constitutions, while the religious thought in all religions, especially in Islam, is based on religious duties.⁹⁴

Soroush does not hide his delight in the events after the election in Iran and expresses his pleasure for the movement for Iranian rights against the official position of the government of imposing religious duties. In an open letter to Ayatollah Khomeini, the supreme leader of Iran, he states “we will celebrate the disintegration of the religious tyranny. An ethical society and an extra religious (nonreligious) government are eminent for our green people.”⁹⁵

He negates the application of Sharia law by the government, unlike his previous positions of defending the role of Sharia law in his religious democracy, and says:

when you raise the volume of the lights of some of these laws, the lantern of religion become smoggy and puts the whole of the house on fire. Therefore, in a multireligious (where all forms of religious people and even those who do not believe in religion exist) we must lessen this light so that everybody can breathe.⁹⁶

By denying any role for Sharia law in government, Soroush refutes the basic principle of his democratic religious theory that makes his form of government a religious democracy.

However, despite some indications of revolt against his prior understanding of the role of religion and Sharia law in politics and his theory of democratic religious government,

Soroush takes the mainstream line in his intellectual career and cannot draw a clear line between politics and religion. Along with the above remarks he has made after the elections, he highlights the role of religious duties.

I do not say that we should put aside the religious duties or they are meaningless. But sometimes we interpret rights in light of the religious duties and sometimes the religious duties in lights of rights. Sometimes the priority is with duties and sometimes with rights. In a religious government, the priority is with religious duties.⁹⁷

Soroush does not distance himself from the dominant political discourse among the conservative clerical circles and still debates in the context of whether the government's legitimacy comes from God or from the people. In spite of the fact that "the lantern of religion will become smoggy" if Sharia law is applied by a government and can set the whole society on fire, he does not come clean and still insists that "I do not say that we should put aside the religious duties"⁹⁸. Soroush is, perhaps, facing the question, after the emergence of the Iranian green movement in the aftermath of the presidential election, as to what is his legacy and where does he stand on the discourse and literature he has created on Islam and politics and, specifically, the discourse on Islam and democracy? It seems that he is missing the opportunity to catch up with the time and demands of "modern man", who is "the man of rights", as he puts it, and not the human of religious duties.

Conclusion

The debate on Islam and democracy is very complex for a variety of reasons and this research could not contend with all of them. There are those like Soroush who think that Islam is compatible with democracy and others like the conservative clerics in Iran and Sayyid Al-Qotb in Egypt who believe that it is not. Whatever the resonances of the arguments on either side, what is at stake is that Islam as a unique religion with a sociopolitical model is facing grave challenges: a religion that has dominated Muslims spiritually and politically is now in a position of having to compete with other forms of life, schools of thought, and political systems on its own territory. The debate on Islam and democracy is in fact a reaction to this fundamental transformation in Muslim societies and a struggle by the religious to reform their political system and political philosophy.

The political experience of Muslims until the late twentieth century had been that of rule by caliphs, kings and authoritarian states that sought their legitimacy from Islam. The political debate had been centred mainly on how the rulers should rule; for example, rulers should be just, wise and so forth and the ruled were to obey “God, the Prophet and those who represent him”.¹ There is no trace of the notion of the people, in its modern sense, in Islamic literature, and the references to Muslims have been in the name of Islamic Ummah which is a religious concept that signifies a community of believers. The Islamic countries that emerged after the disintegration of the Islamic empires had either been colonised by the Western powers or ruled by authoritarian regimes, kings and ethnic dynasties. Modernity and modern social movements have not been generated inside these societies, and the movements for some form of democracy are not older than a hundred years, and are not as social movements but, rather, sporadic political struggles among intellectuals inspired by Western civilisation.

In Europe, however, the raw ingredients of the concept of the people, in its modern sense, were initially created by liberal movements. The independent individuals whose freedoms were to be respected and protected by the state and the organic relation between these individuals have provided the very essence of the concept of the people. The state is not there to impose its will on the people; it is, rather, created by individuals to guarantee and protect individual freedoms and rights. In other words, the state is instrumental to the welfare and interests of the individual and has no mission other than protection of the interests of the individual, and, even if the state holds a mission, as John Stuart Mill believed, it is for the sake of the very individual whose freedoms are hampered by unintended hurdles beyond his or her will.² It is the individual that is principal and considered to be rational and capable of distinguishing his or her interests. The collective demonstration of the will of these individuals and their organic existence in society has made the concept of the people.

Muslims have not experienced any such liberal movements and, therefore, the state has been the principal and sacred entity that had been created to govern Muslims in the name of Islamic Ummah, bypassing their ethnic and religious diversities. This community of believers collapses as soon as it becomes the community of believers and non-believers or the community of different religious and ethnic groups. The people, in its political sense, is a modern concept and democracy will not work in a society where the people is not formed. For example, in a tribal society, it is not the individual member of the tribe who can choose or vote; he is part of a bigger entity called the 'tribe' that has a head and it is, rather, the tribal leader who decides for everybody. One cannot have a dream of democracy in a society like Saudi Arabia in the near future, where one tribe holds the whole power and wealth of the country. The people, in its modern sense, do not exist there to have a political system based on the rule of the people. People and an individual or, rather, an independent human being, who can have his or her own rights, vote and opinion, is yet to emerge in such a society. A tribal society can be a good analogy of a society run by religious institutions, where human rights and individual freedoms of those

against the institutions are to be sacrificed.

In a society run by religious institutions, the people cannot exist either, since it is the religious establishment that determines who can run for power. The Iranian Islamic system is typical in this regard. The challenges that the Islamic government of Iran is facing in Iran is that people do exist and, despite the democratic rights already recognised by the constitution, Iranian people are troubled by the religious elements in the Republic. The Iranian Islamic system is the only model where elements of democracy and Islam come together: recognition of universal suffrage, constitution, an elected president, and parliament are democratic elements coexisting with Islamic concepts such as the Supreme Leadership and Council of Guardians. There is a constitution sketching the power structure and rights of the people, which is a civil contract and has no precedence in Islamic history. However, this civil contract and the democratic contents in it have, in fact, been curtailed by the religious elements.

The ideal of an Islamic democracy encompasses two different notions: Islam as a religion and democracy as a political system. Islam is widely understood to be based on the direct words of God enshrined in the Qur'an and, despite manoeuvring hermeneutically to provide liberal interpretations of Islam, one cannot cross red lines. Logically it is not possible for Muslims to agree upon a single interpretation of Islam, especially a liberal one. In addition, an innovative interpretation by a scholar like Soroush that could possibly accommodate democracy, at least in theory, can only be a theory among others and even success in theory does not necessarily mean success in practice. Essentially, in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the debate on Islam and democracy and whether they are compatible or not, we need to follow at least the following steps:

- I. A thorough and critical investigation of Islam's principles that are not reconcilable with democracy and can be considered the jurisprudential red lines that a political system based on the fluid rule of people cannot observe. Consider the following verses of the Qur'an:

And fight them until there is no more *Fitnah* (disbelief and worshipping of others along with Allah) and (all and every kind of) worship is for Allah (alone). But if they cease, let there be no transgression except against *Az-Zalimun* (the polytheists, and wrong-doers). (V.2: 193)

And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of him, and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers. (V.3: 85)

- II. A comparative analysis and understanding of democracy and democratic principles that cannot compromise with anything less than the rule of people and the liberal foundations of democracy that entail respect for human rights, individual freedom, and equality of people before the law regardless of their faith.
- III. A good understanding of the position of those advocating for an Islamic democracy and whether they are genuine efforts or desperate attempts to demonstrate their discontent with political Islam and political tradition in Islam in the Islamic world and the fear of democracy with its liberal philosophy.

Those who believe that there are no contradictions between Islam and democracy mainly refer to verses in the Qur'an and favourable views in the Islamic literature that can support their theories. There are several verses in the Qur'an, for instance, that can be the basis of religious tolerance and even a liberal democracy. For instance, verse 99 of Yunus, where God asks the prophet if he was forcing people to become faithful and says that all people would have been faithful if God wanted. The implication of this verse is that God himself did not want to make everybody faithful. There are several other verses like verse 29 of Kahf, 28 of Hood and 25 of Baqarah that imply that it is a matter of choice for everybody to be a Muslim or not and nobody including the Prophet is allowed to force anybody to become a Muslim.

However, there are a great number of verses in the Qur'an, like verse 32 of Yunus that are not compatible with democracy and certainly cannot be bypassed by pro-religious democracy scholars. Perhaps, as Soroush believes, the religious intellectuals' movement should have their own jurists and new jurists, and intellectual or jurisprudential movements are needed to speak out and to deal with the dogmas that are not compatible with democracy and human rights. Unless this transformation takes place or sound interpretations of Islam are provided to justify a secular democracy, democracy will all the time face challenges coexisting with Islam.

Dealing with the above principles and providing tolerant interpretations of those principles together with removing sacredness from Sharia law and adopting laws by human collective rational consensus will secularise Islam. Only then can democracy function. This can be an analogy of the experiences of Christianity in Europe and North America, where the scientific and rational interpretation of politics found support over the divine interpretations of the church among the people, partly because of the transformation in biblical scholarship through the reformation movement and lack of a rigid religious legal system in the form of Sharia law.

One of the troubling effects of pro-religious democracy theories on the process of democratisation in the Muslim countries is that they obscure the visibility and irrefutability of the contradictions between reason and religious dogmas by attempting to rationally justify religious dogmas. The contradiction between Sharia law and human rights, science and religion and between a mechanical social model prescribed by religion and an organic social system built upon human collective rational consensus is easily noticed before coming across theories that argue they are compatible. The scientific revolution in the seventeenth century in Europe put Christianity in a defensive position and the church punished those scientists who undermined the holiness of Christianity and authority of the church.³ In Islamic history, however, Muslims have not experienced a scientific revolution and the clash of science and religion. All the time throughout their

history there has been something in the middle that has prevented this clash, either in the form of Sharia law, on the legal front, or Islamic philosophy, or the modern face of this tradition in the form of pro-religious democracy theories. In other words, the modern religious scholars are rephrasing religious concepts in order to make them hard to refute, at least in the eyes of Muslims, and to harness scientific methodology and modern political systems to apply religious authority in sociopolitical life. As Rached Al Gannochi, the Tunisian scholar, argues, we need the structural aspects of democracy to fill with Islamic content.⁴

Despite the positive aspects of the pro-religious democracy theories that can help reconcile democracy with religion and traditional values in a transitional period, it is necessary to highlight the points of tension between democratic values and religious ideological principles. These are pinpointed in human rights such as freedom of speech, individual freedom and freedom of faith and their compatibility with religion and Sharia law. The content of secular democracy in an Islamic state will not differ from the social values of an Islamic country, though the application of religious politics by a religious government will entail some form of coercion and imposing a set of values on people who might disagree with them. Soroush claims that:

you can manoeuvre with jurisprudence to the extent even of dismantling the Islamic caliphate but not so far as to say anything and do whatever you desire; at the end of the day Sharia and religion prevent you from doing some things.⁵

Sharia and religion in power will prevent those who would openly refute the authenticity of religion from doing so and, like the Christian church that set Bruno on fire in 1600; the guardians of Sharia law could execute anybody who came with scientific evidence to refute the Qur'an's teachings about life and the universe. In a secular system, religious domains are respected and protected whatever their arguments and the spiritual aspects of religion will function without being manipulated by the state for political reasons.

However, the idea of a religious democracy can neither keep religion in the public domain, nor can it help religion to function spiritually. In the meantime, establishment of a government that is to be democratic and religious will put religion in the spotlight of contradiction and confrontation with science and emerging challenges that religion cannot handle.

The second point to be made is the articulation of the democratic principles that will be sacrificed in any political system that is not based on collective rational consensus of the people. Democracy is secular by nature because it is not an ideological system and has no commitment to any particular faith, and it is liberal by destiny because it respects individual freedoms that will end up in some form of liberal society. The basic presupposition of democracy is that everybody is right in their faith; or at least it does not judge who is right and who is wrong, and there is no recognition for superiority or inferiority of any particular people and faith. Most religions are not tolerant, per se, since each one claims to hold the absolute truth and, as Soroush himself believes, the prophets were not and could not be pluralist because they had one product to offer and it was the only product ever that was available to mankind.⁶

As Soroush claims, a religious or Islamic democracy is possible only if the people are religious. This will mean that they do not choose, vote or act based on their rational judgements but rather according to their religious duties. The dilemma is that such a religious society is utopian and impossible: a society where all people act on the basis of their religious obligations and agree upon a single interpretation of Islam has never been witnessed. . Even if a government is possible, based on the religiosity of society, it will be a religious government and not a democracy, since diversity and the recognition of differences and tolerance of diversities, including respect for the rights of minorities, other faiths and equal rights and opportunities for all citizens are the core values and requirements of a democracy. Either the Islamic democracy recognises equal rights and opportunities for those who disagree with the religiosity of the government, or the religious society is so free of diversity that no opposition party or individual exists there.

Soroush and scholars like him do not explain how the rationality of humans works in a religious society and whether people choose and judge their rulers on their merit to manage their society and economy or how well they apply the religious laws. Even if we accept that a society is religious, do the religious people in such a society reason differently or does the society operate mechanically to the extent that the majority decide based on their religious duties rather than considering their religious duties a personal affair and acting politically to deal with their worldly and daily challenges?

The precondition of democracy is tolerance – tolerance of other faiths, cultures and political opinions. Islam’s movement towards democracy is the first step to acknowledgement of the fact that it does not possess the absolute truth and other faiths have equal rights to exist and, therefore, a democratic government cannot claim to have the mission of observing and protecting a particular faith. This highlights the paradox in the thoughts and minds of the advocates of a religious democracy, such as Soroush, who believe that religious government has a mission to protect religion.⁷ The Islamic literature and political experiences, including the pro-Islamic democracy scholars’ intellectual accounts, are full of arguments and instances that negate the above views and do not compromise on the monopoly of possession of truth by Islam. In spite of some verses in the Qur’an that demonstrate some understanding to other faiths, the dominant notion in the Qur’an and other Islamic literature is that no other faith is acceptable to God other than Islam.⁸ The translation of this notion into political reality in Islamic political history has been that people of other faiths have not been treated as equal citizens. If Islam is going to remain political and, in the meantime, endeavour to become compatible with democracy, it has to grow to be more tolerant toward other faiths and non-believers.

Despite the positive approach of the pro-Islamic democracy scholars trying to neutralise Islam to ensure it is compatible with democracy, nobody has the jurisdiction to remove the dominant features of Islam for the sake of political purposes. My argument is that the only option left to Muslims is following in the footsteps and political experience of people of other faiths, especially in the West; that is, the separation of religion from

politics and building political and legal institutions based on collective rational consensus. This might happen through a time-consuming gradual evolutionary process but the irony is that the pro-Islamic democracy scholars are attempting to theorise the emergence of Islam into politics in the form of religious democracy. They are well aware that religions demand collective compliance and conformity with their principles once in power, whatever the interpretations of the religion; in other words, they will not tolerate individual freedom and freedom of expression and scientific challenges of the authenticity of the religion.

In addition, people do not vote or make choices based on their religious beliefs only. There are a variety of incentives that drive an individual to act politically, such as self-interest, political and philosophical opinion, ethnicity, economy, respect for human rights and freedom and so forth. The pro-Islamic scholars not only expect an individual to choose and vote within the limits of Sharia law, but also anticipate that people act the same way and decide based on their religious faith within the boundaries of religious principles. The fact of the matter is that if these expectations are not met, the political system will not be Islamic and as soon as these expectations are enforced by the religious democracy, they will clash with democratic principles and human rights. In effect, in a democratic system, religion can survive but a religious political system will entail some form of coercion and violation of human rights.

It is hard to understand the incentive behind the efforts of the pro-Islamic democracy scholars occurring despite abundant evidence in the Qur'an and in Islamic literature as well as the political experiences of Islamic governments in the past refuting the notion of an Islamic democracy. What is wrong with religious governments that the scholars endeavour to replace them with religious democracy? What is good in democracy that these scholars attempt to find compatibility between their religion and this political system? If democracy is good, why it is not good in its own right rather than filling it with Islamic content, as Gannochi believes?⁹ Why have Islam and Muslims failed to offer a political system that is acceptable to Muslims? If Islam's and Muslims' political

experiences are failed ventures, then why are the pro-Islamic democracy scholars not brave enough to acknowledge their failure and step in the direction of those who have already fought against the religious and ideological models and established democratic political systems? What is superior about Muslims that democracy is not fit for their purposes and needs to be Islamised, while they have not been able to generate a Sharia-based political system to respect their human rights? Clearly there is something wrong with their Sharia-based Islamic governments and the Islamic political experiences for democracy, which is not an Islamic concept, to have some attraction for the pro-democracy Muslim scholars to the extent that Soroush recommends that his religion, Islam, should become rational and adjust itself to democracy and not vice versa.¹⁰

There is no doubt that scholars are aware of the social contexts in which democracies have flourished and that they exist based on the fluidity of human nature, constant trial and error and desire for change. People in a democracy and, in fact, in any political system are not making solid choices; or, as Soroush claims, religious people live in a society that is formed in the aftermath of choice. In other words, religious people have already made their choice and have found the answer and chosen their religion and, therefore, do not live on the basis of trial and error like a liberal society; their trial and error will occur in the areas where religion can find the answers and do not reach beyond the areas designated by religion.¹¹

It is evident, however, that the theory of a religious democracy is formed on the basis of essentialist predicaments that humans choose once and for ever before closing the chapter of trial and error in their lives and reaching the dreamed-of era of certainty. The fact of the matter is that human beings are unlikely to reach the final answer collectively, especially in their daily political life with constant emerging challenges; founding a political theory on such a perception of human beings cannot materialise into political reality. The pro-Islamic democracy scholars inevitably recognise the fact that human beings cannot be contained in one preference made in a particular moment of time. Soroush specifically resorts to this argument to combat liberalisation of Islamic societies.

He explains that Muslims are not supposed to try to find the answers through trial and error; for example, Muslims should not try free relations between men and women to see how it works and find the advantages and disadvantages and then decide whether free relations between men and women are good for society or not. In certain areas, Islam has offered the answers and Muslims should obey their religion rather than taking the matter into their own hands.¹²

Inevitably, there will be some form of prevention, containment and coercion involved in preventing people from trying other forms of life. Consequently, the political system will have a mechanism in place to prevent those who do not want to stay committed to their first choice and punish those who try other ways of life. Education in certain areas is not allowed and there are no-go zones where Muslims are permitted only to consume pre-packaged divine products provided by religion. Sharia law is there to ensure that nobody is avoiding heading to heaven, therefore the religious democracy, in order to remain religious, should enforce Sharia law. Ironically, Soroush does not find any contradiction between democracy and Sharia law, since democracy is a system based on the rule of law, and Sharia is a legal system that provides regulations even for the personal life of Muslims. Application of Sharia is therefore not in contradiction to the establishment of a democracy.¹³

It is evident that religious democracy will not be immune from the constraints of Sharia law and, whatever the interpretation of Sharia law, a level of compulsion will be required for the application of the law. Soroush does not find this contradictory to his religious democracy, since democracy in itself cannot deliver religious aspirations. A secular democracy will, ultimately, end up in a liberal society where there are no permanent role models for people to follow. In a liberal society, people choose temporary role models and constantly change for the better, but in a religious system people have permanent role models like the Prophet.¹⁴ Disputing the validity of the religious role models can have grave consequences. It has precedence in the Islamic system of Iran when Ayatollah Khomeini ordered the death penalty for the broadcaster of a radio programme about

Fatima Zahra, the daughter of the prophet and wife of Ali, after a female member of the audience claimed to have preferred Oshein, a Japanese film star, as her role model.

When we accept Sharia law as the arbiter, then those who are qualified in that law will determine the terms and conditions, rather than the secular pro-Islamic democracy scholars. Clearly, one can trace the seeds of religious coercion in the pro-Islamic democracy discourse and, however far it could go to rationalise religion, it will not be able to do so without Sharia law. It is crystal clear that the project of religious democracy is a failure, even in theory, and therefore we should see what other factors are involved to convince the pro-Islamic democracy scholars advocating for the project. Given the compelling arguments against the possibility of a religious democracy, there are two reasons left: either the scholars, especially Soroush, do not really believe in the compatibility of Islam and democracy but are too mindful of their social positions to openly promote a secular democracy; or they truly believe in a religious system but find it difficult to see it established for modern Muslims and, therefore, upload it onto a democratic structure. This research has highlighted that Soroush, the ideologue of this discourse in Iran, has failed to offer even a successful theoretical model and, depending on the occasion, he is pulled into one of two opposite directions: he is secular and liberal when he defines the specificities of democracy, and a religious Muslim when he illuminates the religiosity of his religious democracy. This is very ill thought through and, while it seems attractive to modern Muslims, it will institutionalise the role of religion in politics. Democracy cannot operate with a religious content and advocating for a religious democracy can only postpone the establishment of fair democratic systems in the Muslim countries.

It is fairly easy to understand that the pro-democracy Muslim scholars and even the reformists in contemporary Islamic history have been in a delicate position in terms of mirroring themselves in the lights of the modern world and witnessing the significance of reason and rational human beings. Surely they sense that rational human and modern products like democracy did not emerge from the rubble of the traditional religious God-

centred world to undergo yet another phase of subjecting humans to political and legal systems sourced other than from the collective reasoning of people? The appeal for democracy is in recognition of the fact that Islamic political systems are not viable anymore and also that Muslims have not yet been able to pioneer viable political systems based on their religion and Sharia law. The fact of the matter is that those who believe in the centrality of God in sociopolitical life cannot come to terms with democracy for a variety of reasons. First, because democracy is a human-centred political system. Second, the belief that upholds an absolute position, lacks the necessary tolerance needed for a democracy, not with regard to other faiths and beliefs, but also for different interpretations of the same belief. Third, this form of religiosity does not contain any self-critique mechanism. The line of scientific communication and debate is blocked and the very open spirit and relativist condition of a democratic society is restricted.

The pro-democracy Muslim scholars are inspired by democracy and cannot wait to see it applied in their own societies. They are fully aware of the political stagnation of the Muslim societies and know that, if Islam is to continue existing in the modern era, it should seek some form of compatibility with democracy. Soroush's assertions that "Muslims are not supposed to walk on their heads if the rational people of the world walk on their feet" – in other words, Muslims should not irrationally oppose achievements of rational people of the world because they are not religious, or, the collapse of the Islamic civilisation is inevitable if Muslims do not resort to reason ("not religious reason", "not jurisprudential reason" but "independent reason") – are examples of the above awareness in this discourse.¹⁵ The question, despite a sense of urgency and despite understanding the fact that democracy is the only political system that offers a fair representation and political participation of the people and recognition of equal rights for each individual, is on what basis do these scholars insist, against the abundant historical evidences, on deconstructing democracy to fit their divine principles knowing that it will hamper the functioning of democracy as a political system?

The scholars are either concerned about their religion and want it to have a role in

shaping their political systems and, therefore, do not believe fully in democracy and suffer a lack of understanding of the true nature of democracy as a man-made, unholy political system; or, due to their social constraints and fear of their position in their communities, cannot advocate for a nonreligious democracy. One can understand their position, since the level of tolerance in their societies is not greater than that of nineteenth century Europe and transition from a God-centred world to a human-centred and man-made world needs transitional political theories. However, the pro-religious democracy scholars do not consider their theories as transitional efforts towards the actual rule of the people. They have issues with liberal societies and liberal ways of life and, therefore, honestly believe in the role of religion in politics. Soroush is one of these scholars who, on the one hand, struggle against the clerical establishment of Iran for not taking modern democratic achievements on board and advocate for an intellectual movement in Iran, separate from the clerics.¹⁶ On the other hand, Soroush is resentful of liberalism and the inevitable liberal consequences of democracy, though he does not think that a religious democracy faces the ethical consequences of a liberal democracy. Whether the scholars believe in a religious democracy or they are mindful of their positions in their societies, the political model they offer is practically impossible and it can only become practically achievable with violation of democratic values and human rights.

The fact of the matter is that a secular democracy is not made in one generation, especially in the Islamic countries, where a transition from authoritarian, religious and tribal governments to a secular democracy will not be easily achieved. Religion has all the time been a factor in politics in Muslim countries. But the contemporary challenges show that religion's role in politics can be reduced to accommodate diversity and that the emergence of humans' desire to manage their affairs is serious; offering abstract theoretical solutions will not tackle these challenges.

The question is that if a religious democracy model is not viable, then what is the way forward for Muslims? Certainly religion is there, especially in the current climate where religion is an ideology, an identity, a force for justice and democratic rights of the people.

If religion is there with all its institutions and in the meantime the people's demand for political participation is on the rise, what kind of political system can reconcile these political forces? The idea of a religious democracy seems attractive since it gives the puzzle a quick solution and can reconcile the conflicting forces and offers a system that can contain some elements from religion and the rest from democracy to satisfy both the religious and the democrats. On the one side we have the democratic demands that are evolving and, on the other, we have religion that has a shield that cannot be broken and, therefore, the evolution of democratic rights will collide with the unbreakable shield of the religion. The democratic rights of the people cannot be preserved, including their religious rights, without recognising the shield that would hinder the evolution of those democratic rights. It is this challenge that the scholars in the Islamic world need to find resolutions for, and they need to offer the political models that do not close avenues for further democratisation.

There is no magic solution for the challenge and there are two fundamental principles that need to be preserved in order to find the answer through a long process: guarantee of and respect for democratic process; and a balanced approach towards religion and traditions and the democratic rights of the people, though it is extremely hard to find that balance. A good example of such a system could be the Afghan Constitution after the removal of the Taliban from power, where the religious and the secularists have some of their demands met according to the capacity of the traditional society of Afghanistan. The constitution forbids any law that is against Islam and in the meantime it recognises the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and equality of men and women. Certainly no anti-religious law can pass in parliament and the society at large will not allow the parliament to contemplate a law that would be openly contradictory to Islam. However, there is no recognition for the implementation of Sharia law as well, and the secular can find enough legal basis in the constitution for there to be debates and constant campaigns for democratisation of the country, while the Islamists can oppose that using the same constitution with the support of their religious constituency. The most important point is that in the context of the constitution the debate and dialogue as a process can take place.

This research project has unwrapped numerous challenges that Islam and Islamists are facing in terms of compelling demands for democratisation and the threat to Islam as a set of dominant beliefs throughout the history of Islam on Muslims by modern secular, liberal and scientific interpretations of life and human rights. The research has revealed that Muslim theologians like Soroush who feel the pain of their religious discourses not coping with the democratic aspirations of Muslims are in fact the transitional elements and bridges from closed societies to secular democratic countries. In other words, these scholars are making this transition painless and gradual from within the discourse without intending to be a force for secularisation. This research has also shown that there is a grave vacuity of an active scholarly movement from within the Islamic societies for secular interpretations of religion and politics.

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