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Abdolkarim Soroush’s Pluralistic Philosophy of Religion

Abstract

The pluralistic philosophy of religion of Abdolkarim Soroush, whose neo-rationalist thought represents a genuine epistemological turn within Muslim reform discourse, is the central issue in this paper. Abdolkarim Soroush, as a contemporary Muslim thinker, brings a completely new understanding of the issue of religious pluralism *and by incorporating analytical philosophy, contemporary hermeneutic tradition and Sufi metaphysics, contributes to the creation of a characteristically distinct philosophy of religion within the Muslim intellectual circle. Issues of* expansion and contraction of religious knowledge*, as well as the* expansion of prophetic experience*, are inseparable elements of his philosophy of religion.*

Keywords

pluralism, Abdolkarim Soroush, pluralistic philosophy of religion, theory, expansion of religious knowledge, contraction of religious knowledge, expansion of prophetic experience

1. Introduction

Philosophy of religion, which is a kind of attempt to illuminate the phenomenon of religion and the religious from the perspective of philosophical thought, is inseparable from the nature of the thinking subject, which can be traced back to the earliest days of the Greek philosophical tradition. Interest in the nature of religion and the phenomenon of the sacred, which is “imprinted” as an essential category at the centre of all religion, has accompanied human efforts to discover/decipher the mystery of the world and life throughout history. Nevertheless, the philosophy of religion as a scientific discipline has developed only in recent times, the basis of which we associate primarily with the works of the main representatives of the philosophy of classical German idealism. Although Immanuel Kant’s *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* is the cornerstone of such a foundation, Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* should also be considered, as well as the works of some of their predecessors, most notably David Hume’s and Baruch de Spinoza’s work in relation to both classical German idealism and philosophy of religion.

In the contemporary context, philosophy of religion can be divided into two basic modes, the continental or phenomenological approach to philosophy of religion and the analytical approach characteristic of the Anglo-American philosophical tradition. Of course, it is important to point out that such a division does not encompass all the major expressions of contemporary philosophy of religion, and it is possible to talk about approaches that cannot be subsumed under the above terms.

Continental philosophy of religion, which developed mainly in Germany and France, owes much to the phenomenological tradition and especially to the

philosophy of Heidegger, whose emphasis on language, interpretation and understanding gave a strong impetus to the establishment of philosophical hermeneutics and what we call the linguistic turn in philosophy. In this context, one should read Jacques Derrida's deconstructivist approach, whose primary impulse comes from Heidegger's thought, and the work of Emanuel Levinas, who, despite his "abandonment" of Heidegger, remains bound by the nature of the thought from which his thought was fundamentally constituted. The deconstructive thought of Jacques Derrida stimulated the development of new tendencies in contemporary continental philosophy of religion, which we associate with the names of John Caput, Jean-Luc Marion, Paul Ricœur and Mark C. Taylor.[1] However, one should add Karl Jaspers to Martin Heidegger who with his works and tireless insistence on the concept of *transcendence*, *encompassing* and *philosophical faith*, made a huge contribution to the later development of philosophy of religion. Jaspers' philosophy of existence, which we could conditionally use as a label for his idea of philosophy, is inconceivable without the concept of boundary situations, the transcendence of immanence and the symbols of transcendence, which open up new perspectives of the philosophical understanding of Reality and our relationship to Reality.

Analytical philosophy of religion, which is primarily concerned with the philosophical analysis of fundamental religious concepts and the question of the truth of theistic belief, owes its fundamental inspiration to the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who, above all through his work *Philosophical Investigations*, made possible a different reading and understanding of the meaning of religion. This was the reason why one of the directions within contemporary analytical philosophy of religion is called Wittgensteinism or "Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion", whose main representative is D. Z. Phillips. This is a direction that, following Wittgenstein's concept of *language games*, focuses research on the workings of religious language, which in turn requires insight into the religious practices in which language is used. The ultimate goal of such an engagement is to understand religion and the philosophy of religion as an understanding of the grammar of religious belief. In addition, one can talk about various other directions within contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, e.g. Richard Swinburne's probabilistic natural theology, Alvin Plantinga's reformed epistemology, John Harwood Hick's pluralist philosophy of religion, Don Cupitt's non-realist philosophy of religion, and feminist philosophy of religion, of which Pamela Sue Anderson and Sarah Coakley are among the most important representatives.[2]

2. Pluralistic Philosophy of Religion

The pluralistic philosophy of religion, primarily expressed in the works of John Hick, refers to the fact of religious plurality and the emergence of a new religious consciousness that seeks to realise its connection with the transcendent in relation to the concept of the Axial age and post-Axial religions. The plurality of religions brings with it a plurality of religious experiences that bear witness to the diversity of approaches and relationships to Ultimate Reality. But for John Hick, all religions are equally valid ways of understanding and responding to transcendent Reality. Even if the mode of experience itself is different in different religions, there are also elements that religions share and which Hick describes with Wittgenstein's term of *family resemblance*.[3] The

central concept common to all post-Axial religions is the *belief in the transcendence* and the recognition of the existence of Salvation-enabled Reality. In this sense, Hick's pluralistic philosophy of religion criticises Christian theology for its Christocentric soteriological concept, demanding a kind of "Copernican turn" that would mean accepting the theocentric model and abolishing the exclusivist understanding of the question of salvation. If God, the Absolute, the Reality, the Transcendence is what enables salvation, it is an attitude shared by all other religions, and Christian theology should also move towards respecting this principle.

To make his understanding of transcendent reality acceptable to members of all religions, John Hick sought to pay attention to terminology. Instead of the classical term *God* or something else, characteristic only of one form of theistic narrative, he opted for the *Real*. Hick considered it as a concept that does not belong exclusively to one religion or tradition, but is present to a considerable extent in many religious discourses as a sign of ultimate divine reality. A similar approach is found in Karl Jaspers, who draws on the concept of *Transcendence*, avoiding classical terminology and concepts that are "worn out" or clearly significantly "burdened". And again, as one would almost expect from a philosopher of existence, distinguishing transcendence as it is in itself from how it is revealed to us through ciphers,[4] Hick points out that there is "the Real in itself" and "The real as humanly experienced". Hick has found an argument for such differentiation in many religious traditions, suggesting that the Real in itself remains unmanifested, while in its second mode it shows itself in a way that we can "reach". This showing of the Real is nothing but its "giving" to us in the space-time framework, which allows humans to decipher some of its signs, while the Real in itself at the same time remains hidden. These manifestations are nothing but multiple manifestations in various religious forms. Finally, all that is irresistibly reminiscent of Kant's distinction between noumenon and phenomenon, with the first term denoting a "thing in itself" that eludes all cognition, while the second indicates the spatio-temporal framework within which things are given for us.[5] The Real, in this way and in accordance with its many revelations and self-revelations,

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On the history of development of contemporary philosophy of religion see in more details: Eugene Thomas Long, *Twentieth-Century Western Philosophy of Religion 1900–2000*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht 2000.

2
For more, see: Danijel Tolvajčić, *Suvremena analitička filozofija religije* [*Contemporary Analytic Philosophy of Religion*], Katolički bogoslovni fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, Zagreb 2016; Dewi Zephaniah Phillips, Timothy Tessin (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion in the 21st Century*, Palgrave, Houndmills 2001.

3
See John Hick, *An interpretation of Religion. Human Responses to the Transcendent*, Palgrave, Basingstoke 2004.

4
"The reality of Transcendence for us as an object is present only in the language of ciphers, and not in the way it is in itself." – Karl Jaspers, Rudolf Bultmann, *Pitanje demitologiziranja* [*The Question of Demythologising*], transl. Željko Pavić, Zagreb, Naklada Breza 2004, p. 42.

5
For more complete insight into Hick's interpretation of this issue see his article "Towards a Philosophy of Religious Pluralism", *Neue Zeitschrift fur Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 22 (1980) 2, pp. 131–149.

becomes "accessible" through the religious experience shared by all seekers within different religions.

Hick believed that despite religious diversity, there is an internal unity in that diversity that is differently thought of and seen by different traditions. It is a concept that we encounter in the thinkers of the traditional school, above all in Rene Guenon and Frithjof Schuon, under the name of the 'transcendent unity of religions'. Essentially, Hick pursues the same idea and just does not name it in the same terms. Hick's pluralistic philosophy of religion finds its full expression in the work *An Interpretation of Religion*, which will prove very appealing to many philosophers and theologians, but will also be the subject of strong criticism. It will nevertheless contribute to the popularisation of his pluralistic hypothesis. Hick previously published several other works, such as *God Has Many Names* (1980), which was on the trail of developing the same idea.

Pluralistic philosophy of religion has its proponents among Muslim thinkers who have developed the concept of religious pluralism and a very distinctive philosophy of religion, drawing inspiration from their own religious tradition but also receiving impulses from the philosophy of John Hick. So did Abdolkarim Soroush, one of the most important contemporary Muslim thinkers. His understanding of the nature of religion and the concept of religious pluralism is a central theme explored in this paper.

3. Abdolkarim Soroush: The Philosophy of Religious Pluralism and the Nature of Religion

Abdolkarim Soroush's philosophy of religion represents a real epistemological turn in contemporary Muslim reformist discourse. Following the rationalist tendency within the Muslim intellectual tradition, Soroush calls for a re-reading and setting out of the principles of the religion Islam. Moreover, his thought represents an unusual synthesis of rationalism and mysticism. In addition, the diversity of the sources he uses, which is one of the key features of his methodology, includes different dimensions of philosophical hermeneutics and contemporary philosophy of religion, analytical philosophy and poststructural philosophy. This is quite evident if we look at his references not only to Immanuel Kant, Willard Van Orman Quine, Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, John Hick and Muhammad Iqbal, but also to Ibn Arabi, Jalal al-Din Rumi, Mullah Sadr Shirazi and many others.

Soroush's idea of the historicisation and plurality of religious knowledge is a call for epistemological evaluation, on the one hand, and the rejection of only one "true" or "expert" reading, on the other. The theory of the essences and accidents of religion, as well as the distinction between minimalist and maximalist understandings of religion, are real contributions to modern philosophy of religion within the Muslim tradition, while the ideas of expansion of religious knowledge and of expansion of prophetic experience are the cornerstone of his philosophy of religion.

3.1. Philosophy of Religious Pluralism

In his work on pluralism, Soroush distinguishes between positive and negative pluralism. At the outset, Soroush points out that the idea of pluralism is immanent to religion (Islam), as we can testify to the plurality of our understanding

of religion and the plurality of interpretations of religious experience.[6] These two elements are the cornerstones of his interpretation of positive pluralism.

In his explanation of this phenomenon, Soroush begins from a very simple premise that our understanding of the religious text (perforce) is always pluralistic and diverse, and that diversity and plurality are irreducible to one final concept. Therefore, fluidity is one of the fundamental features of human understanding, which is always open to a new "fusion of horizons". Although we could only conditionally accept Soroush's thesis that the Text is "silent", and that through our understanding we contribute to its "speaking", we have no reason not to accept his position on the changing and fluid character of human knowledge which is in constant motion, with its growth primarily determining our every understanding.

In this regard, Soroush's theory of expansion and contraction of religious knowledge, previously thought of as *movement*, is undoubtedly reminiscent of the theory of substantial movement (*harakat al-jawhariyyah*) within the Sadrian philosophical discourse to which Soroush refers in places, leading us to the possibility of different interpretive insights encountering different semantic levels of the Divine Text. This semantic multi-layeredness is a quality that primarily protects the freshness of words and discourse. According to Soroush, the richness of religions is collected in their penetrating, deep, and eternal words that always have something to say to everyone, without which they would otherwise be exposed to decay and metaphysical death.

In order to legitimise the diversity of our interpretations and understandings, Soroush refers to the well-known sayings of the Prophet of Islam, which speak of seven levels of reading and understanding the text, while elsewhere speaks of the external (*zahir*) and internal (*batin*) dimensions of the Text and about the boundary fields (*hadd*) and the ultimate divine intention (*muttala'*) as being deeply imprinted in the words themselves. It follows that each text, thanks to its multi-layered nature, can be understood from within different interpretative fields, which means that our understanding has always been and always will be pluralistic. Such an attitude requires the rejection of anyone who wants to impose themselves as the final and irrevocable interpreter. There is no final understanding and interpretation. Such an attitude determines the essence of Soroush's understanding of religion as such. All religions, according to Soroush, are nothing but the history of a series of interpretations in which we are immersed and whose systematisation in various forms leads to the establishment of a particular theology. And finally, there is no religion in history that is devoid of that plurality.[7]

Regarding pluralism in understanding the Texts for this philosopher will have a very clear and incontestable outcome, and that is that "there is no single or official interpretation of religion and no official interpreter".[8] Or, perhaps, more clearly: there is no sacred and incontestable understanding. What is only unquestionable for Soroush is the plurality of interpretation and plurality of understanding. No religion in history, Soroush points out, is devoid of that plurality. This is evidenced by the history of theology. Yet what has

6 Abdulkarim Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience. Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, Brill, Leiden – Boston 2009, p. 119.

7 Ibid., p. 121.

8 Ibid., p. 123.

historically been lacking is a willingness to take this fact of plurality seriously and analyse it.[9]

Another element of pluralism Soroush recognises within the diversity of interpretations of religious experience as being individual, one's own, and irreducible. Our religious experience consists of the experience of "transcendence", which is revealed and manifested in various modes and "forms". All forms of such "appearance" of transcendence, which are nothing but forms of our relations to transcendence – such as feelings of closeness, ecstasy, love, awe, spiritual excitement and metaphysical ecstasy – despite their diversity, can be classified as religious experience. Soroush's reference to the experiences of Jacob Bohme, Alauddawlah Simnani, Hafiz Shirazi and Jalal al-Din Rumi speaks of his strong reliance on the mystical tradition, especially that developed which within Islam. On the other hand, translating these unique spiritual experiences – which are nothing but "touching" the *numinous* – into very characteristic statements (*shatahat*) is a certain interpretation of them that resists any reduction and uniformity and consequently postulates diversity and plurality as primary modes of "appearance" of Transcendence.

In other words, not only do we have a diversity of religious experiences, but we witness a diversity of interpretations of a particular experience. The diversity of interpretations is a consequence of the diversity of perspectives or what Rumi designates by the term *manzar*, which Soroush uses as an appropriate way to explain the given phenomenon. Soroush goes a step further by arguing that there is no difference or disagreement among the truths followed by believers within some religions, but there are actually differences in their perspectives. Moreover, there is a difference in the perspectives of the prophets themselves, to whom the Ultimate Reality was shown in different ways.

"... the difference between these three (Muslim, Zoroastrian, Jew) does not lie in any disagreement over truth and falsehood, but, precisely, in the difference between their perspectives; and not in the perspectives of the believers at that, but in the perspectives of their prophets. There was only one multidimensional truth and the prophets viewed it from three different angles. Or it manifested itself to them in three different ways and through three different apertures. Hence, they presented three different religions. The existence of different religions is not, therefore, just a matter of changing social conditions or of one religion being distorted and then being replaced by another. In fact, just as the different worldly manifestations of God have imbued the natural world with diversity, so they have lent diversity to religions. The diversity of viewpoints will lead to a diversity of views. And these viewpoints are in fact nothing but the individuals themselves. In this instance, the view, the viewer and the viewpoint are all one and the same, and this is the exact heart and core of the contention that is being made here."[10]

By sending various prophets, each of whom represents the culmination of religious experiences and interpretations, God himself "sowed" the seeds of pluralism.[11] By revealing himself to each of them in a certain and very characteristic way, God "imprints" in them a certain interpretation, which reflects their own experience of "meeting" with Transcendence, and a unique way of "reading" the symbols of Transcendence. The multiplicity of interpretations corresponds to the multiplicity of Reality itself, which is revealed in countless ways and "resists" any attempt to reduce it to one mode of "reading" or metaphysical "tasting".

Following Hick's acceptance of the difference between noumenon and phenomenon, which he uses to point out the difference between what God is in itself beyond all manifestations and what is shown to us, Soroush points to the "colourlessness" of truth which in its purity lies beneath all colour and naming, thus building a third approach to understanding the plurality of

religions.[12] Soroush believes that intra-religious and inter-religious disputes and rivalries regarding the Truth are pointless, since in its unmanifested mode, which is beyond all confinement in the shackles of form and objectification, it is always the same and equal to itself. The denials of the truth, its "snatching" from others and declaring it one's property are mere deceptions, which show that the participants in such a play have no serious knowledge of its real character. Thus, Soroush's approach suggests a strengthening awareness of what is as formless hidden within form, while others argue about forms, names, and colours.

The concept of "immersion of truth in truth" figures as the fourth pillar of Soroush' plurality of religions: he argues that the division and subdivision of religions is not a matter of accumulation of certain deviations or anomalies within religion itself, but primarily the result of "the labyrinthine nature of truth and the immersion of truth in truth".[13] It is a kind of "accumulation of truths" whose interconnectedness, as Soroush sees following Rumi, and the challenge of their choice necessarily leads to diversity and plurality. Therefore, the right path is made up, not of one straight line but of a set of overlapping straight lines. Knowledge of and fascination with one segment of truth that so influences us that we emphasise it over other segments of truth don't entitle us to deny other elements of the same reality, but at the same time they allow us to recognise the plurality of these segments, true in its totality. Truth in its fullness encompasses all segments of its self-statement (manifestation), while their "fitting" into each other, most often eludes the naked eye.

In the context of negative pluralism, which speaks of the existence of different paths to God and the always same ultimate goal, Soroush emphasises that the question of the seeker's sincerity and ultimate salvation is much more important than insisting on the absolute validity of a particular religious teaching. Multiplicity of different paths to God is the opening of space for the Other. However, Soroush points out that religions consider all believers or spiritual seekers as their own, regardless of their names and statements. While for Karl Rahner all others are covert Christians or Christians in all but name, for Muslims others can ultimately only be Muslims, because – according to this understanding – "the only religion in God is Islam". It is about inclusivism, which is nothing but apparent pluralism, and it stands in opposition to real pluralism. Although incomplete, following John Hick, Soroush sees such a form of pluralism as a much better option than exclusivism, which eliminates any possibility of salvation for another.[14]

The question of God's guidance, Goodness, and His mercy that transcends His anger is the next pillar of Soroush's interpretation of negative pluralism.

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For more details about understanding and role of the idea of plurality in Muslim thought, see Pegah Zohouri, "Pluralism in Contemporary Islamic Thought: The Case of Mohammed Arkoun, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Abdolkarim Soroush", in: Mohammed Hashas, *Pluralism in Islamic Context. Ethics, Politics and Modern Challenges*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2021, pp. 149–170.

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A. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 127.

11
Ibid., p. 130. Ibid., pp. 133–134.

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Ibid., p. 136.

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Ibid., p. 139.

14
Ibid., pp. 141–142.

He points out that acceptance of the attitude that only a few or a chosen group are saved and deserving of God's mercy, while all others are lost, would mean neglecting and marginalising God's name *al-Hādi* (the Guide) as well as his attribute which in God's speech proves to be "dominant" over others, promising His favour and mercy on those who seek Him. In other words, it would mean accepting the view that Satan has won this "battle for souls" and that the constellation of God's messengers is on the losing side. How the name of God *al-Hādi* is manifested in general and where His mercy will be manifested if not over His creatures. Pluralism of this type does not aim at the validity of theological teachings, but draws attention to the power of human deeds and their longing for the Holy. Also, seen from another perspective, it is pluralism that acknowledges the infinite mercy of God and the triumph of the Prophets.

Referring to the Qur'anic verse "He sent down water from the heavens, so the canals flowed according to their capacity, and the flood carried bulging scum." (13:17), Soroush concludes that there is no phenomenon that is absolutely pure, which means that it is a dance

> "… of truth and untruth, where the dirt of the latter disturbs the purity of the former. However, untruth like the dirt is not immanent to the essence of divine religion or the Holy Text, but to human understanding, which both affects and misses, and sometimes leads and sometimes seduces."[15]

This would mean that we cannot be sure of the truth and correctness of our understanding, which ultimately leads us to the conclusion that neither Sunnism nor Shiism are signs of absolute purity, just as neither the Ash'aris nor the Mu'tazilites are entirely right about their understanding. Neither the Hanafis nor the Malikis are devoid of shortcomings in understanding and neither the Jafaris nor the Zaydis are. Also, such an attitude is applicable to the relationship between religions themselves, which means that "impure identities" are not the property of just one or some religions, while on the other side lies pure truth. Accepting such a view means further opening up space for spreading the idea of plurality.

The idea of the "compatibility of all truths" is an additional element with which Soroush establishes negative pluralism. Soroush believes that all truths are interconnected and one concept can be true only if it is compatible with another true concept.[16] Therefore, all of us participate in the construction of the castle of truth and no one has the priority position regarding the presentation and validity of views.

Also, determining the nature of religiosity for Soroush seems particularly significant in the context outlined above. Namely, Soroush believes that religiosity is not the result of certain rational calculations and of questioning a series of complex arguments. On the contrary, our religiosity is mainly caused by external elements that fundamentally determine our religious orientation. Simply put, people most often "choose" to belong to the religion to which other members of society belong, respecting the previously made "choice", and in a sense "harmonise" their attitudes and orientation with those with whom they share culture, tradition and living space. Although it is possible to talk about exceptions, especially in the context of researchers who analysed different religious teachings and finally came to their own cognitive conclusions and decided to act differently in relation to the environment, the religiosity of the majority is rooted in the afore-mentioned experience. In practice, this would mean that in Muslim societies majority "become" Muslims, while in Christian societies, majority "become" Christians. Furthermore, if we

consider that priests and theologians themselves act in this way, and that religions are fundamentally based on certain theologies or theological opinions that entail a certain degree of doubt and uncertainty – as the history of inter- and intra-theological debates and conflicts shows – it follows that, because of the multiplicity of different theological views, of which we do not know which are correct and which are not, we accept the fact of "epistemological pluralism", which gives others the possibility of their own understanding and self-understanding. And while we witness the constant flourishing of this plurality, we remain aware of the fundamental causal nature of our religiosity, which consequently opens up the space to better understand the religiosity and religious orientation of others.

The whole of Soroush's interpretation of pluralism in its ultimate intention should serve the purpose of pointing out two facts; first, that plurality is a reality immanent to our nature of understanding, being, behaving, and thinking; and second, that a society that cultivates this kind of value – that is, a pluralistic society – stands in opposition to an ideological society that seeks to establish control over thought, freedom, and worldview orientation.[17] A pluralistic society cultivates tolerance, freedom of opinion, and the possibility of realising individual rights in the broadest sense of the word.

"It comes into being when the rulers and the ruled all confess that the natural and social world is fundamentally a world of plurality, not unity, a world of differences, not similarities. And that wishing to establish a unified model for everyone's life and religion and language and culture and morality and customs and habits is to wish the impossible and to shoulder an onerous and oppressive burden. Purging the world of its plurality is neither possible nor desirable. If there are ten arguments for the acceptability and desirability of religious pluralism, there are a hundred arguments for the acceptability and desirability of cultural and political pluralism."[18]

3.2. On the Nature of Religion and Religious Knowledge

Abdolkarim Soroush's philosophy of religion is based primarily on two principles, the expansion and contraction of religious knowledge and the expansion of prophetic experience, which gives rise to the thesis of the essentials and accidentals of religion. His theory of the expansion and contraction of religious knowledge insists on the concept of understanding and history, i.e. historical action, and emerges as a result of reflective reading and new insights into the problems of jurisprudence, hermeneutics, philosophy of science and sociology of knowledge. Although Soroush will argue that he was influenced by W. V. Quine's but not Gadamer's theory, the basic concept, the nature of the content and the ultimate intentions of the text inevitably point to the philosophical hermeneutics of the German philosopher who developed thematic ideas and concepts in *Truth and Method*.

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Ibid., p. 146.

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On the importance and recognition of pluralism within classical Islamic scholarship but also its return to contemporary Islamic discourse, see: Mohammed Hashas, "Reclaiming Pluralism in Contemporary Mediterranien Cosmopolitanism", in: Fabio Petito, Fadi Daou, Michael Daniel Driessen (eds.), *Human Fraternity & Inclusive Citizenship. Interreligious Engagement in the Mediterranean*, Ledizioni LediPublishing, Milan 2021, pp. 119–131.

17
A. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 152.

18
Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam. The Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. 31.

Following in the footsteps of Heidegger and his existential analytics of being-there, Gadamer insisted on the notion of "understanding" as a constitutive element of human being, making it almost the cornerstone of his own philosophical theory. Any understanding, Gadamer argues, is temporal and that means historically conditioned. Therefore, history must not be bypassed or skipped, but it must be entered in the "right way". In this regard, hermeneutic theory speaks of a "different understanding" of the same content accrued in the tradition. This different understanding is a "new reading", as the discovery of the previously hidden meaning and significance, which is possible only with respect to the principles of temporality and historical action. No interpretation is final, and no interpreter gives a final interpretation that would legitimize them as the ultimate possessor of the ultimate meaning and truth. This game of understanding, which for Gadamer is a strictly ontological category is the highest thing an interpreter can engage in. More precisely, it is a kind of "attraction", not indulgence, where the revealed truth does not depend on the interpreter but takes place as a self-presentation.

With this in mind, it will be easier for us to understand what Soroush wants to say with his theory of the expansion and contraction (*qabd wa bast*) of religious knowledge. He believes that the earlier reformers of religion overlooked to underline a very clear difference between religion and religious knowledge, that is, human understanding of the very contents of religion. Religion as such is discovered and founded by God and it is not subject to change or shortcomings. However, our understanding of the content of religion, which is seen as religious knowledge, is temporal, and as such subject to error. It cannot have the status of the immutable because it arises within historical action/agency and it is necessary to distinguish it from religion itself.

"It is true that sacred scriptures are flawless. However, it is just as true that human beings' understanding of religion is flawed. Religion is sacred and heavenly, but the understanding of religion is human and earthly. That which remains constant is religion (*din*); that which undergoes change is religious knowledge and insight (*ma'refat-e dini*). Religion has not faltered in articulating its objectives and its explanations of good and evil; the defect is in human beings' understanding of religion's intents. Religion is in no need of reconstruction and completion. Religious knowledge and insight that is human and incomplete, however, is in constant need of reconstruction. Religion is free from cultures and unblemished by the artifacts of human minds, but religious knowledge is, without a shadow of doubt, subject to such influences."[19]

Soroush believes that our understanding of religion, as one of the categories of human knowledge, evolves, expands, contracts, completes, and that it cannot have the character of the sacred, since it is temporal and subject to change. What survives after a possible reform or renewal is *religion itself* as an immutable *constant*, from which it is necessary to distinguish religious knowledge as an added category.

His theory emphasises the importance of establishing this distinction, and at the same time warns of the danger of identifying personal knowledge of religion with religious knowledge. Unlike the former, religious knowledge is endowed with a "collective and dynamic identity", and is empowered to survive through various historical changes and remain usable within the professional discourse among theologians. Although it has a higher epistemological position in relation to what someone (un)groundedly thinks or assumes about religion and its principles (personal knowledge), it is still subject to errors and shortcomings, which are only a reflection of human efforts to discover meaning and establish principles. Therefore, Soroush says that it is precisely on the trail of acknowledging this fact and accepting the possibility of error

in understanding and interpretation that religious scholars are not legislators or founders of religion (*shari'an*), but exegetes (*sharihan*). Soroush admits that scholars undertake serious intellectual engagement but their effort to deal with the ultimate meaning and content of the Text does not give birth to sacred knowledge.[20] The consequences of such an approach are obvious. Thus, there is an obligation to approach a "new reading" and to distinguish the changeable from the immutable. What is changeable cannot be immutable because the approach that identifies it disables a further process of understanding what has been given to us through tradition.

Finally, Soroush's theory of expansion and contraction of religious interpretation – as a predominantly interpretive-epistemological theory – continuously refers to human knowledge and achievements that include science, philosophy, mysticism, art, but also the material and intellectual needs of people.[21] The reason for such an attitude becomes clear when we realise the implications of these areas of human knowledge for the understanding and temporal character of religion and religious knowledge. The theory of expansion and contraction points to the ever-changing character of our knowledge and to the fact that our understanding of any content, and thus also of the religious, is always open and complementary. No one has the last word and therefore "the door must remain open". The last religion is here, but the last understanding is not. There will come a day when religion has reached its fullness, Soroush emphasises, but not the day when our understanding will reach the same.

Another important element of Soroush's philosophy of religion, which represents the central theme of his work *Bast-Tajrubeh-e Nabavi* (*The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*) is a question of *prophetic experience* and the character of the *revelation*. Soroush considers that the Qur'an is "prophetic interpretation of God's Speech" ("Islam is not concentrated around the Qur'an but around the personality of the Prophet."). which is undoubtedly the most controversial theological hypothesis put forward in post-revolutionary Iran. One of the key points of contention between Soroush's theory of revelation and the generally accepted view of Muslim orthodoxy is that the Prophet, according to Soroush, did not hear God's words, but those written on his heart. This will lead him to claim that the Prophet received the revelation through inspiration, thus denying the difference between revelation (*wahy*) and inspiration (*ilham*). Such degradation of the Qur'an's place as the primary source and elevation of the Prophet's personality as the core of Islam was a serious stumbling block in the wider acceptance of Soroush's ideas and more often the reason for rejecting him as a serious authority within the interpretation of Islamic religion and science.[22] The assertion that Islam is the totality of the Prophet's historical actions, that his personality is the core and all that God has given to the Muslim community, and that religion is the inner and outer

19
Ibid., p. 37.

20
On Soroush's theory as a dominant epistemological turn within Islamic reform discourse, see the recent study by Heydar Shadi, *The Philosophy of Religion in Post-Revolutionary Iran. Abdolkarim Soroush*, Routledge, London – New York, 2019.

21
A. Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, p. 25.

22
Ibid., p. 16.

experience of the Prophet, was too much for the Muslim mind, which strongly protects the inviolability of the basic principles of Islam's teachings.

Soroush believes that what the Prophet experienced as "receiving revelation" is nothing but a kind of religious experience and that we tend to interpret and define this kind of unusual experience as "receiving revelation". In his opinion, the Prophet had a very important role in delivering the revelation, much bigger than the mere mediation one and it is this so-called "prophetic discourse" according to Soroush be the best way to solve the theological problem "as God speaks" (*kalam-e bari*).

One of the important elements of the subject theory is what Soroush calls the essentials and accidentals of religion. The Arabic language as the language of the Qur'an, the fact that the Prophet was an Arab, the Arab culture which permeates the content of the Qur'an, are in fact all accidentals, local and temporal and by no means something universal and eternal. However, what is called the *essentials of religion* never appears alone and unveiled, independent of the accidentals themselves. On the other hand, the Qur'an, according to Soroush, was created gradually and had its own historical genesis. Different people came to the Prophet with different questions, some supported him and others denied him. The Jews did one thing and the Christians something completely different. These are all accidentals to which the Prophet reacted and against which he took certain positions. Thus, although these are accidentals, they have an undeniable influence and a fundamental role in shaping the content of the Text itself, Soroush argues. Soroush is therefore of the opinion that religion is a human thing and that the Qur'an could have been much more extensive or had a different scope if the Prophet had happened to live longer and experience more events or challenges. This would have increased his experience, but it could have been different and some other coincidences could have taken up more space in the Qur'an.[23]

Finally, having established a distinction between historical Islam and the spirit of Islam, Abdolkarim Soroush argues that religion has a historical, evolutionary, interlocutory and dynamic character, which in fact made by accidentals. Removing that veil of accidentals or deconstructing the historical body of religion is the only way to get to the essentials of religion itself. Accidentals will never get us there. In fact, it is more likely that they can deceive us in their "guidance". It is therefore important to point out that Islam as a belief system is in itself essential, while historical Islam is fundamentally accidental. There is no alternative to distinguishing essentials from accidentals. Otherwise, we will have more and more indicators of the irreconcilability of Islam with the modern age, failed governments in the Muslim world and the abolition of freedoms and critical thinking.

Rusmir Šadić

Pluralistička filozofija religije Abdolkarima Sorousha

Sažetak

Pluralistička filozofija religije Abdolkarima Sorousha, čija neoracionalistička misao predstavlja stvarni epistemološki obrat unutar muslimanskog reformskog diskursa, središnje je pitanje kojim se bavi ovaj rad. Abdolkarim Soroush, kao suvremeni muslimanski mislilac, donosi sasvim novo razumijevanje pitanja religijskog pluralizma *te uz uključenje analitičke filozofije, suvremene hermeneutičke tradicije i sufijske metafizike, doprinosi stvaranju upečatljivo karakteristične*

filozofije religije unutar muslimanskog intelektualnog kruga. Pitanja širenja i sužavanja religijskog znanja*, kao i* širenja poslaničkog iskustva*, neodvojivi su elementi njegove filozofije religije.*

Ključne riječi

pluralizam, Abdolkarim Soroush, pluralistička filozofija religije, teorija, širenje znanja, sužavanje znanja, širenje poslaničkog iskustva

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Pluralistische Religionsphilosophie Abdolkarim Soruschs

Zusammenfassung

Die pluralistische Religionsphilosophie von Abdolkarim Soruschs, dessen neorationalistischer Gedanke eine genuine epistemologische Wende innerhalb des muslimischen Reformdiskurses abbildet, ist das Kardinalthema dieses Beitrags. Als zeitgenössischer muslimischer Denker bringt Abdolkarim Soruschs eine gänzlich neue Auffassung der Frage des religiösen Pluralismus *ein und trägt durch die Einbeziehung der analytischen Philosophie, der zeitgenössischen hermeneutischen Tradition und der Sufi-Metaphysik zur Schaffung einer charakteristisch eigenständigen Religionsphilosophie innerhalb des muslimischen intellektuellen Kreises bei. Die Fragen der* Erweiterung und Kontraktion des religiösen Wissens *sowie der* Erweiterung prophetischer Erfahrung *sind untrennbare Elemente seiner Religionsphilosophie.*

Schlüsselwörter

Pluralismus, Abdolkarim Soruschs, pluralistische Religionsphilosophie, Theorie, Erweiterung des religiösen Wissens, Kontraktion des religiösen Wissens, Erweiterung der prophetischen Erfahrung

Rusmir Šadić

La philosophie pluraliste de la religion d'Abdolkarim Soroush

Résumé

La philosophie pluraliste de la religion d'Abdolkarim Soroush, dont les pensées néo-rationalistes représentent un réel tournant épistémologique au sein du discours réformateur musulman, est la question centrale traitée dans ce travail. Abdolkarim Soroush, en tant que penseur musulman contemporain, offre une lecture entièrement nouvelle du pluralisme religieux et, en intégrant la philosophie analytique, la tradition herméneutique contemporaine et la métaphysique Sufi, contribue à la création d'une philosophie de la religion spécifiquement distincte au sein du cercle intellectuel musulman. La question de l'expansion et du recul des connaissances religieuses*, aussi bien que l'expansion de* l'expérience *prophétique, sont des éléments indissociables de sa philosophie de la religion.*

Mots-clés

pluralisme, Abdolkarim Soroush, philosophie pluraliste de la religion, théorie, expansion de la connaissance religieuse, recul de la connaissance religieuse, expansion de l'expérience prophétique