

Notes, Débats et Commentaires/ *Notes, Debates, and Commentaries*



Abdolkarim Soroush: The Neo-Mu‘tazilite that Buries Classical Islamic Political Theology in Defence of Religious Democracy and Pluralism

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Introduction

The “search for beauty in Islam” seems to be occupying the attention of scholars “within” and “without” this faith.¹ Muslim majority societies have been the most concerned with such a search, especially for the last two centuries characterized by a turbulent encounter with (Western) modernity, because they have experienced the ugliness that replaces such a beauty, ugliness that deprives them of liberty, equality, and social justice. As notable examples, the Islamic

1 Amidst the vast literature written in English, few examples suffice here: Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam: A Conference of the Books*, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006; Ziauddin Sardar, *Desperately Seeking Paradise: Journeys of a Skeptical Muslim*, London: Granta, 2005; Abdenmour Bidar, *Self islam: Histoire d'un islam personnel [Self Islam: Story of a Personal Islam]*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006; Fred Dallmayr, “Islam and Democracy: Reflections on Abdolkarim Soroush,” 2001, http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/On_Dr_Soroush/E-CMO-20010407-Islam_And_Democracy-Reflections_On_Abdolkarim_Soroush.html. Dallmayr says “It is time to recuperate the meaning of Islam as a summons to freedom, justice, and service to the God who, throughout the Qur’an, is called ‘all-merciful and compassionate’ (*rahman-i-raheem*).”

State of Pakistan, or the *Muslim Zion*,² and the Islamic Republic of Iran have forcefully read the modern state into Islamic sources to keep the binary of religion and politics, or religion and state (*dīn wa dawla*), bound together. The fact that they have managed to name and establish themselves as Islamic States does not convey much when it comes to what a modern state achieves and realizes for its individuals, society, and the global community. The same could be said about the Arab States and monarchies that have oscillated between either stressing religion in their constitutions and laws or demurring it and leaving society to deal with it, and thus opting for not solving the issue of what form the state takes, on what legitimacy to be grounded and what laws to be enforced. The delicacy of the matter becomes clearer if examples of states currently experiencing waves of the so-called Arab Spring are kept in mind (e.g. Egypt and Tunisia). The place of religion in politics is still being substantially discussed.

For some, the “Islamic State” is simply impossible.³ Marring the beauty of a universal revelation with the narrowness of politics is not the way for treating revelation. Accordingly, renewing the understanding of religion becomes pivotal for any discourse of change for individual, social, and cosmic wellbeing. Such is the general context in which a radical reformist emerges, from “within” the Islamic State institutions, and the Islamic tradition, i.e., the Iranian philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945, Tehran).

The aim of this paper is to examine a leading project of reforming theology and politics for renewal and pluralism in Muslim majority societies. The ongoing debate over whether Islam can be a state religion or a mere religion within the state makes reading the (Islamic) past into the present or vice versa a controversial endeavour in prospecting future solutions. Due to this fact, engaging with theology politically and with politics theologically appears a requisite in contemporary Islamic thought. The importance of theology stems from the fact that Muslim societies are religious, and their main references for what concerns political governance and cultural life originate from religious texts,

2 Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Idea*, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2013.

3 Wael Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012; Abdullahi An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Sharia*, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.