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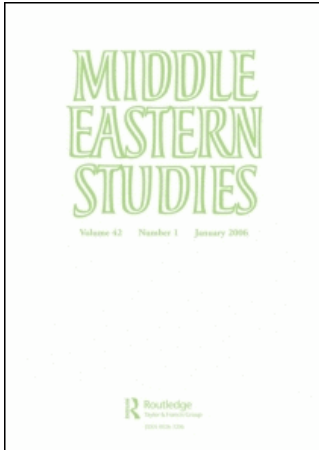
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The Changing Approach to the Text: Iranian scholars and the Quran

KATAJUN AMIRPUR

My points of departure for this study are the following questions: how have Shiite scholars been reading the text – that is, the Quranic text – during the past 50 years? Is it possible that they were guided by a particular cognitive interest? Can it be assumed that they may have projected certain intentions onto the text? Is there a chance that the point of view chosen by them as interpreters has predetermined the outcome? And, last but not least: has the approach to the text changed since the revolution of 1979? I will argue that it has changed a lot. Having experienced a theocratic system some scholars intend to give the Quran another standing in life and society.

The first scholar I wish to discuss in regard to this issue is Ayatollah Mahmud Taleqani (d.1980).¹ He was one of the fathers of the Islamic revolution. In the 1960s, together with others he founded the *Nehzat-e âzâdi*, the ‘liberation movement’ which brought many liberal religious intellectuals together. Many of these were prominent figures during the revolution and held important posts in the early days of the Islamic republic, but were quickly pushed to the margins afterwards. The *Nehzat-e âzâdi* still exists today, but, after having had a semi-legal status for years, it was outlawed in March 2001. The movement still has high popular appeal, though.²

In the context of Iran, Taleqani stands for the so called ‘scientific interpretation of the Quran’.³ Exegetes who practise this kind of interpretation have tried to prove that modern scientific discoveries like the existence of micro-organisms, or modern political ideas, do not contradict the Quran, but can even be deduced from it. Taleqani saw the Quran as a book of great importance for contemporary issues; this is why he found in it answers to topical problems like social justice and political action. According to him, the Quran demands social justice, promotes political action, and regards the establishment of a soviet republic as advisable.⁴ Taleqani’s modernist interpretation of the Quran had a strong influence in Iran namely on leftist groups. By the year 1939 he organized sessions of Quranic commentary. This series of Quranic exegesis is Taleqani’s chief contribution to the making of ‘the Islamic Ideology’. He wanted to extend the Quran’s area of activity into a political agenda, the Quran had to be rearticulated into a programme of action. In this he was influenced by Muhammad Abduh’s (1849–1905) idea that the Quran should become a living proof, an inspiration for life and guidance. Taleqani was extremely critical of the way the book of God had been neglected by other clerics and the people. In the years prior to the Islamic revolution Quran and exegesis were not even taught in the

theological seminaries. For Taleqani it was a shame to make of the Quran a mere ritualistic object. In his Quran commentary 'Partovi az Quran' (A Ray from the Quran) he wrote:

A book which has been the proof of our religion and has governed every aspect of [our] life, has [now] merely assumed a sanctifying role, like antiquarian objects and bodies of sorcery. It has been pushed aside from the boundaries of communal life and livelihood and pushed to the frontiers of the world of the dead and the ceremonies of salvation, its tonality that of the proclaiming death.⁵

It was quite clear how he wanted the Quran to be approached:

For God's sake let's rescue the Quran from the graveyard chanters ... This book is the Book of life, Book of movement, Book of power, Book of guidance, Book of faith.⁶

A very similar attitude was formulated in the works of Ali Shariati and Mortaza Motahhari, two other important ideologues of the Islamic revolution. Shariati stated:

The mighty criminals, the caliphs, the kings, the evil clerics, the inner and outer enemies have done everything to abolish the Quran. They tried but they did not succeed. They tried to reduce the Quran only to the beauty of its cover or the beauty of its recitation. Our endeavour must be to take the Quran back into society.⁷

Motahhari's criticism has the same direction:

The young and the old generation, the two of them have done wrong to the Quran. They still do. In leading the new generation two things have to be done: First we must understand what the new generation suffers from. Then we must find a solution. And the older generation must mend its ways. They must repent their biggest sin: having separated themselves from the Quran. We must go back to the Quran, carry the Quran before us and move – under the cover of the Quran – move towards happiness and perfection.⁸

Mehdi Bazargan (1907–1995) was another notable representative of the particular method of Quran interpretation Taleqani used.⁹ He, too, was a passionate fighter against the Shah. Together with Taleqani he was one of the liberation movement's founders, and, after the revolution, became the first prime minister of the Islamic republic. Bazargan was by training an engineer, but wrote a number of books on Islam, and at the beginning of the 1960s, he was the only non-clerical member of a group called *gofâtâr-e mâh* (monthly assembly) which dedicated itself to the discussion of topical issues from an Islamic point of view. Taleqani also was a member of this group. Its most important project was the publication of a book entitled *Bahsi dar bâre-ye ruhâniyat va marjâiyat* (a discussion on the clergy and the 'source of emulation'), which offered suggestions for reforms of the clergy in its

institutionalized form.¹⁰ Bazargan too was very critical of the place the Quran had in the Iranian people's mind. After the revolution Bazargan together with Taleqani and Ayatollah Khomeyni had a television series called 'ba qoran dar sahne' (Entering the scene with the Quran) to bring the Quran into people's minds again.

In his reading of the Quran Bazargan focused his attention on the question of the compatibility of Islam and democracy. Not surprisingly, he answered the question in the affirmative: Islam as a rational and enlightened religion could not possibly be against democracy; not a single one of the contemporary elements of democracy like liberalism, parliamentarism, and state legitimacy are in fundamental contradiction to it.¹¹ His assumption of the compatibility of Islam and democracy is based on a modern interpretation of Quranic passages. For example, he took the Quranic summons to seek council among one another (Sura 3,159) to mean that the Quran favours parliamentarism, and interprets the Quranic dogma of *al-amr bi-l ma'ruf wa an-nahy an il-munkar* (to bid the good and to forbid the bad) as an injunction for citizens' participation in politics.¹² Bazargan also took as a precedent the early Islamic period and the reign of the first caliphs, which he interpreted as having been democratic.

The next scholar whom I wish to discuss in this context, Ayatollah Seyyed Mohammad Hoseyn Tabatabai (1903–1981), called the Most Learned, *Allameh*, is, together with Taleqani, the most important representative of modern Shiite Quranic interpretation.¹³ Tabatabai was another member of the *goftar-e mâh*, but he used a different method than the other scholars already referred to. In his commentary on the Quran *Al-mîzân fî tafsîr al-Quran* (The Scales of Quran Exegesis), written between 1954 and 1972, he started out with the assumption that 'all passages of the Quran can be explained by other passages [inside the Quranic text]'.¹⁴ This approach to the text was supposed to guarantee that no external factor would influence the interpretation of Quran. In order to exclude this possibility, Tabatabai, prior to interpreting a certain passage, checked if it was in accordance with other Quranic passages. If it turned out that it was not, Tabatabai took the interpretation to be proven wrong.

Iranian studies scholar Hamid Dabashi is of the opinion that Tabatabai's method of Quran interpretation is the exact opposite of Taleqani's, seeing that the latter was constantly imposing preconceived notions, politically and ideologically charged interpretations, and concepts influenced by Darwinism, on the text. He sees Tabatabai, on the other hand, as having at all times been aware of the archetypal nature of the Quranic discourse.¹⁵

I return to the initial questions. They did not, in fact, originate with me. Hermeneutics has been quite popular in Iran over the recent years. And thinkers dedicated to its practice voice their criticism of the above-mentioned scholars from a hermeneutic point of view. One of them, Abdolkarim Soroush, originally trained to be a chemist, but has done intensive study on cognitive theory, and is the author of a number of writings on Islam written over the past years.¹⁶

I will give a fairly detailed insight into his biography because that might help to answer the last question I raised: whether the approach to the text has changed after the Islamic revolution and due to people's experience under an Islamic government.

Sorush was born in southern Tehran in 1945, hailing from a religious and simple family which upheld traditional values, as his birth name Farajollah Hajj Hoseyn Dabbaq indicates. The day of his birth coincided with the religious holiday of *Ashura*, so he was called Hoseyn. His alias Abdolkarim Sorush derives from a combination of two of his sons' names.¹⁷

Sorush began his education in *Qā'emiye* school; after six years there, he entered 'Alaviye school in 1959. This institution was founded by conservative but pragmatically inclined *bâzâris* as an alternative to both the state's secular educational system and the traditional one of the theological academies. The *bâzâris'* goal was to educate their children in both modern and traditional sciences. The 'Alaviye school quickly became one of Iran's most important centres of education. Sorush remained affiliated to the school after graduation; while studying pharmacy at Tehran University, he gave chemistry lessons; after the Islamic revolution, he taught religious dogma there. The foundation for Sorush's later scientific research was laid as early as his school days. It was his physics teacher, who called his attention to an inquiry which was quite popular at the time. Iranian scholars tried to reconcile modern science with religion.

Their solution – to prove that the discoveries of modern science did not contradict either the Quran or the traditions of the prophet and the imams – did not satisfy Sorush even then. At only 17 years of age, he took up the study of classical Islamic philosophy as well as that of the classical disciplines *fiqh* and *usûl al-fiqh* (exegesis). Sorush studied the Quran commentaries of the scholars Fakhroddin ar-Razi, at-Tabarsi, Tabataba'i, Sayyid Qutb, Taleqani, and Feyz Kashani. The diversity of their interpretations of the Quranic revelation fascinated him, and he started to search for the reason of this diversity.

During this period, Sorush also dedicated himself to an intensive reading of the *Nahj al-balâgha*.¹⁸ The *Nahj al-balâgha*, the High Road of Rhetoric, is a compilation of Imam Ali's sermons. His teachings are considered to be guidelines for the interpretation of Islamic law and are studied in a department of theological academies called *usûl al-fiqh*, the fundamentals of jurisprudence. After graduation, Sorush began to study pharmacy at Tehran University. Eventually, in 1973, he went to Great Britain; he hoped, to quote a homepage dedicated to his works and activities, 'to become familiar with the modern world'. His motivation, as can be seen, corresponds to that of nineteenth century travellers driven by intellectual curiosity.

In London, Sorush registered for an M.A. course in analytical chemistry at the University of London. At the same time, he studied philosophy and epistemology at King's College Chelsea Department of History and Philosophy. He stayed in Great Britain for five and a half years, concluding his studies with a doctorate in chemistry. In Iran, at about this time, conflicts between the Shah and the country's population intensified. Iranian students living in the USA and in Europe also became politically active and held meetings.¹⁹ Sorush first became a member of the Muslim Youth Association (MYA) in London. After differences of opinion arose, he moved to another meeting place of Muslim students. From then on, Sorush used it as a political speaking ground. In the months prior to the Islamic revolution's victory, this meeting place became the centre of the opposition's activities; here, politicized Iranians living in the United Kingdom came together. It was there where, other than

the then relatively little known Soroush, well-known men like Mortaza Motahhari (d. 1979) and Khomeini's aide Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti (d. 1980) spoke about Iran's political situation.

Soroush's speeches from the period before and during the revolution were published in a book or pamphlet form. He started out by commenting on the so-called 'dialectical antagonism' (*tazâd-e diâlektiki*). This series of lectures was aimed at diminishing the growing influence of left-wing groups, specifically that of the *Mujahedin* (*mojâhedîn-e khalq*). These lectures were published in Iran even before the revolution under the title of *Naqdi bar tazâd-e diâlektiki* (The Critique of Dialectical Antagonism). Soroush was still in Great Britain at that time. In the lectures, Soroush accuses the Iranian left-wing groups of misinterpreting Marxism; according to him, they blended their false interpretations with Islam, trying to develop through this mixture an ideology which would serve to accomplish their grasp for power.²⁰ Soroush makes his stand against the *Mujahedin* by adapting Karl Popper's line of argument from *The Open Society and its Enemies*. Soroush thus became the Iranian left wing's fiercest critic. During the first years after the revolution, he frequently appeared on television as the revolution's ideological spokesman.

Soroush's book *Nahâd-e nâ-ârâm-e jahân* (The World's Restless Constitution), first published in 1978 in London, found the appraisal of Ayatollahs Motahhari and Khomeini in particular, thus laying the foundation for Soroush's later career. In 1978/79, Khomeini granted Soroush an audience during his exile of several months in Paris.²¹

After the revolution, Soroush returned to Iran in 1979 and joined the teaching staff of *Tarbiyat-e mo'allemin* University, a teacher's training college, at Teheran. In 1981, he transferred to *Anjoman-e hekmat va falsafe*, the Society for Philosophy. This institution had been founded by Ayatollah Khomeini and dedicated itself to the study of western philosophy. Soroush also became a member of the newly founded *Setâd-e enqelâb-e farhangi*, the Headquarters of the Iranian Cultural Revolution. The committee's job was to islamize Iranian universities by drawing up new curriculae.²² In 1984, the Headquarters was renamed High Council of Cultural Revolution. Members of the opposition still hold Soroush's long membership of the committee – from 1980 to 1984 – against him. Soroush tries to justify it by explaining that he wanted to work towards the universities' being reopened; he argues that what he had in mind as an 'islamized' university, in the vein of the Prophet's teachings, had been the introduction of additional disciplines.

The High Council of Cultural Revolution was responsible, among other things, for purging the universities of counter-revolutionaries. When questioned on these activities, Soroush maintains that, from the beginning, he upheld the Socratic principle that faith cannot be taught. His aim had been to save the humanities from being Islamized. When it became apparent that he was about to fail, he immediately resigned from the High Council of Cultural Revolution. When I interviewed him, he gave a very positive account of his activities. The same is true of the Seraj homepage, which claims that certain personages – no names are mentioned – intended to close down universities for the next 20 years. This was prevented only by Soroush's and his colleagues' intervention, who brought the case to Ayatollah Khomeini's attention. Soroush claims that the reopening of universities was due to his personal intervention.

After his resignation from the Council, he dedicated himself principally to research. Soroush also taught at Tehran University, was visiting professor at several independent universities and even lectured at Qom's theological academies. His lectures on the mystic Jelaledin Rumi were shown on Iranian television. In addition to mysticism, Soroush taught philosophy of religion, epistemology, comparative philosophy, and philosophy of the empirical sciences at university level. Between 1988 and 1994, he also gave lectures in mosques to believers and students. His lectures at Imam Sadeq Mosque in Tehran became quite well known. He uses a highly literary style of speech, embellished with quotations from the Quran and Rumi's *Masnavi*. His air of authority and self-assurance marks his public appearances in front of large audiences at mosques and universities as much as those at specialists' conventions on the subject of, for example, Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and Molla Sadras's theosophy.

In his scientific oeuvre, Soroush paid close attention to the west's scientific and spiritual development. In his own words, he tries to meet the challenge of western thought. According to Soroush, what is called for is that the scientific theories and philosophical concepts are to be received and debated. Unfortunately, he states, the traditional religious authorities do not share this point of view; for them, anything western in origin bears by definition the mark of a-religiosity. Soroush on the other hand avails himself of western methods in his own research: for example, he studies from an epistemological point of view how the diversity of Quran interpretation came about. Philosophy of science supplied him with an explanation of the plurality of exegetic variants. His fundamental approach to the West is manifest in his own works: he advocates a productive exchange.

Soroush states that his years in London have opened his mind to new frontiers. According to him, starting with the renaissance, the West has focused on life in this world, whereas in his own culture, influenced by mysticism, withdrawal from worldly matters is taught. In oriental thought, earthly fortunes are perceived to be less relevant than salvation in the life to come. Confrontation with the western attitude, diametrically opposed to his own, opened up a new dimension. From that time on, he concentrated on studying the function of religion; he started thinking about what modern man asks of his religion. His study of modern Christianity gave additional strength to his hypothesis that the interpretation of religion changes in time: 'How else can a modern human being call himself a "faithful believer"?'²³ At this point, his interest in the relation of modern rationality to religion arose. It became the focus of his studies for the next several years.

Soroush's major scientific theory *Qabz va bast-e terurik-e shariat* (literally, the theoretical extension and concentration of religion or – as he himself translates: The Hermeneutical Expansion and Contraction of the Theory of Shari'ah) treats of the changeability of religious knowledge.²⁴ Since human cognition is changeable, man's cognition of his religion changes as well, because all cognition depends on the period and the state of the art of the sciences. Soroush maintains that in time, ever new interpretations of faith appear; they are made to fit the circumstances in which the

interpreters live. Consequently, the interpreter plays a major role in shaping the interpretation. With this, I return to this essay's initial questions. They originated with Soroush. Starting from a hermeneutic point of departure, he has formulated his criticism of the scholars mentioned above and of their method of reading the text.

Soroush claims that even Tabatabai's method of interpretation does nothing to diminish the essential role in interpretation played by the interpreter's preconceptions. The interpreter's preconceptions have tremendous influence on the direction an interpretation will take.²⁵ Tabatabai, he argues, had a specific cognitive interest just like other interpreters. Like Habermas, Soroush argues that due to the interpreter's cognitive interest, the scientist's inner disposition is an inherent factor in the cognitive process. He calls it *savâbet-e zehni va ettelâ'ât-e khareji* (preconceived ideas and ideas of external origin).²⁶ Soroush's mentor Karl Popper held that 'all cognitive processes are saturated with theory'. Popper renounces the theory that 'nothing in our mind exists which has not entered through sensory perceptions'.²⁷ Soroush takes up this idea by explaining that an interpretation is overshadowed by the interpreting person, and that the same is true of a person's world view. This has a formative on that person's use of language.²⁸ In the case in question, it is Tabatabai's philosophical and rationalistic outlook which plays the decisive role. To give an example of what Soroush means to say by that: according to Tabatabai, there does not exist even the smallest essential difference between man and woman. He advocated this concept for rationalistic reasons. It was imperative that, in consequence, an interpretation of Quran had to concur with modern rationality. Now, it is nothing new in Shiite exegesis that the Quran does not make irrational statements. But Tabatabai went beyond traditional exegesis by his acceptance of modern rationality. It does seem to appear that Tabatabai's method cannot be said to be the exact opposite of Taleqani's openly ideological method.

Soroush arrives at a similar judgement of Taleqani's method. He claims that it is not possible to prove that discoveries made by modern science were already referred to in the Quran; there is no logical way, for example, to deduce the discovery of micro-organisms from it. What can be proven is that Taleqani's method itself shows that he was among those who blended their interpretation with knowledge which did not form an intrinsic part of religious science. Taleqani interpreted the Quran making use of insights from politics and social theory. Political theory taught him that social justice was valuable, and it was in the light of this insight that Taleqani formulated his exegesis. Soroush calls this proof that the scientist's inner disposition, and his particular cognitive interest, are of vital importance to interpretation.²⁹

But Soroush does not stop at this point. The fact that the Quranic interpretations of scholars such as Tabarsi, Razi, Tabataba'i and Qutb differ so substantially from each other is to him proof that all exegesis can be classified as *tafsir bi-ray*, i.e. interpretation according to personal opinion and enthusiasm. Whereas Soroush deems it to be totally natural that all exegetes have a specific interest in interpreting and consequently subjugate the text to this intention, most other Shiite theologians consider *tafsir bi-ray* to be damnable. In their opinion, the interpreter has to follow the text to the letter. According to Soroush, the mere fact that there are philosophical as well as mystical or theological commentaries proves that interpretation as such

can be called *tafsir bi-ray*. Had not one interpreter been a philosopher and another a mystic, they would not have been writing a philosophical or mystical commentary. The Quran, by containing the *mutashabihât* (passages that demand interpretation) ['dark', or doubtful, passages], practically gives an incentive to interpret; at the same time, this predisposes the difference between interpretations. This explains how Tabataba'i could locate the principle of causality (*elliyat*) [cause and effect] in the Quran with the same single-mindedness that led the mystic Rumi to deny it.³⁰ This is another argument that derives from Popper's epistemological argument, he used to refute Newton. Popper was of the opinion that it was impossible to obey Newton's dictum: 'I do not feign hypotheses'.³¹ Soroush follows Popper's lead; according to him, there is no perception without preconception;³² the human mind is not a *tabula rasa* or, in Soroush's words, no mind is free of ideas (*zehn-e khâli*).³³

Soroush's approach is fundamentally different from that of Taleqani, Bazargan, and Tabatabai. He also takes a different line of argument from that taken by many of his Sunni colleagues, people like Hasan at-Turabi, Muhammad Amara, and Muhammad al-Ghazali, who deduce democracy from *shûra* or other Islamic principles.³⁴ Soroush does not pay any attention to this method of Quranic interpretation. This means that his approach to the Quranic text is an absolute novelty, at least in Iran.

Soroush's line of argument differs fundamentally from the liberal Islamic discourse for another reason.³⁵ Arguing apologetically, liberal Islamic thinkers try to show how tolerant Islam has been throughout its history towards other religions. Encroachment towards apostates is belittled, its scarcity and political, non-religious motivation stressed.³⁶ In contrast, Soroush does not touch even once upon the question whether Islam has shown itself to be tolerant in its history or not. The argument often used in this debate, that Islamic rulers in *Andalus* granted Jews more freedom than the Christian *reconquistadores*, does not appear in his works. Likewise, he makes no effort to belittle the facts of higher taxation and lower blood-money for the non-Muslim population. All of these arguments are of no relevance to Soroush. The human being by nature has no way of knowing with certainty what God really expects of him; God's intentions are unfathomable. Hermeneutics have proved, or so Soroush maintains, that the sense humans make of the Quranic text can never be taken to be one and the same as the text itself and its real intentions. Soroush says that the one thing humans can know and understand is God's final aim, and that this final aim of religion (*amr-e din*) could in no case stand in contradiction to philanthropic concepts.

Soroush uses yet another argument which allows him to disregard many Quranic rules which arguably might stand in contradiction to democracy or human rights. He distinguishes between essential (*zâti*) and non-essential (*arazi*) parts of religion.³⁷ Following from this differentiation, only a handful of Islamic principles are really unchangeable articles of faith: the imamate (*imâma*), Muhammad's prophethood (*nubûva*), God's justice (*adl*), God's unity (*taihid*) and resurrection [after Judgement Day] (*ma'âd*). They are the classical *usûl*, the Shiite articles of faith. Everything beyond that – regulations, laws, and aspects of religious phenomenology – in his opinion is not of essential importance. These facets of

faith are important, but the essence of Islam would not be touched if, for example, women were to discard the veil or the injunction to pay blood-money were to be abolished. All of these regulations are due to nothing but the historical context in which Islam developed. In Soroush's opinion, however, these regulations are not completely unimportant or worthless; they are the skin (*puste*) that holds the core (*maghz*) of religion together. He maintains that the elders, with their distinction between *puste* and *maghz*, as well as with that between *haqīqa* (truth) and *shari'ah* (religious law), have always assumed the existence of two fundamentally different parts of religion. By making this distinction, Soroush draws heavily on the authority of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, the first to claim that the *sharia* does not form part of the essence (*zât*) of religion.³⁸ And because that's the way it is, it is hardly necessary to be constantly turning to the text for answers. Soroush sometimes interprets certain Quranic passages, but he stresses right from the beginning that he interprets the passage in question in a particular way because he wants to interpret it in this way. But why then does he interpret at all any more? Is this not contrary to his hermeneutic arguments? He says:

Messages coming from Heaven are more acceptable for humans: it strengthens the values and writes them deep into their hearts. A society's religiosity can be taken to mean, for most parts of its meaning, that its members know these values and act according to them. But seen from a purely rational point of view, these are meta-religious values, which is why all religions preach them.³⁹

Soroush makes it quite clear from the beginning that he has a specific interest, an unanimously formulated *cognitive interest*, when reading and interpreting. In contrast to Taleqani and Tabataba'i, both of whom he criticizes, he admits to having a way of reading 'saturated with interests'. But he considers his cognisant interest to be legitimate and of service to the religion.

To give an example, let us take a look at his interpretation of the Sura *Lâ ikrâha fi' dîn* (There is to be no compulsion in religion). The passage may be understood in two different ways: for one, it may be taken to mean: 'Do not force humans towards religion', or, secondly, as meaning: 'Even when you have forced humans, and they outwardly profess to believe or behave in an Islamic way, it is not by any means real faith.' Both interpretations of the passage lead Soroush to deduce that the religious government should create an atmosphere in which each individual member of society can adopt belief without being forced to do so. He or she should be allowed to live their own religion and belief without having to live in fear of sanctions.⁴⁰ Clearly, his interpretation of Quran is politically motivated. Soroush has more than once expressed his opinion that he deems the aim of the Iranian ruling elite to make people believe by using force makes no sense. His interpretation of the Sura *Lâ ikrâha fi' dîn* challenges the Iranian state's legitimation. His major point of attack is the state's claim, supposedly based on the Quranic obligation of *al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa an-nahy an il-munkar*, to lead people on the straight path and, if necessary, to make them believers by force. Just as all other human beings, government cannot know what God really expects it to do, and thus should not meddle with people's religious affairs.

Government cannot force one to believe so that one will be happy in the life to come. Belief that's been forced is not belief; that's what I mean by saying that government is the guardian of people's faith. Government has nothing to do with the life to come, or, in other words, the role which it plays in connection with people's faith is as limited as possible. [...] So, a religious government's business, by being religious, does not have anything to do with the life to come. If it wishes to do something positive for people, it should do it in this world.⁴¹

The approach to the text has obviously undergone a substantial change over the years. The question *why* remains. One could go on using Bazargan's and Taleqani's approaches if one wishes to find argumentative proof for the introduction of democracy. Several facts seem to have contributed to why it was someone like Soroush who developed this particular approach to the text. For one, there must have been the experience that during recent years, under Islamic rule, the text has been severely abused. It became the explanation for everything and was used as either a stick or a carrot, as the Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd once put it, thereby losing, in the eyes of many believers, much of its inherent beauty and power. Maybe that is the reason why Soroush says – figuratively speaking – that the book should be given a rest, that its sacredness should be returned to it, that it should not be soiled any further. This, to me at least, seems to be the *credo* the new approach follows: do not read as much to find answers to all questions, read for other reasons, for yourself and your personal relationship to God.

The cleric Hassan Jusefi Eskewari, author of several highly interesting discussions of Soroush's ideas, has once put into words – quite fittingly, I find – what has happened to the Quran and what Soroush's reaction to that has been. He said that when Ali Shariati called for ideologizing religion in the 1970s, he wanted to take the Quran down from the *tâkhçe*. In Persian, the *tâkhçe* is the highest place inside a household, the highest bookshelf, for example. In Iranian households, the Quran is stored at the *tâkhçe* because the household's highest place is where the Quran has to be. It is only taken down on certain occasions, such as the birth of a child, when the baby's name is written down in it, or at the Iranian New Year's when it is put on the table with the presents, or when the Quran is kissed and protection is asked for before a journey. Well, Shariati – and the other scholars quoted earlier – held all of this to be wrong; he wanted to take the Quran down from the *tâkhçe* in order to give it more importance in everyday life. But their project failed. The Quran was read once again, true, but mostly by clerics who wanted to use it to legitimize their grasp of power. And with time, the Quran was soiled because it became too worldly. This is why Eshkewari is of the opinion that Soroush wants to put the Quran back on the *tâkhçe*. In a way, he is right. While Soroush does not want either that the Quran to lose its relevance, that it is no longer read, he does wish the Quran to be a book that brings God closer to humans. It pains him to see that in Iran, religion loses more and more of its sacredness, its purity. This is why the Quran has to be protected, since the book is the base of each individual's religious experience, and that is the core of the new understanding of religion which Soroush propagates. The Quran is a book from which a person takes his or her religiosity, but it is not the explanation and solution for everything and anything.

Quite apart from the above, contact with the west was another decisive impulse for the new approach to the text that Soroush developed. Through his studies of hermeneutics and epistemology, new questions put themselves to the thinker which he probably would not have hit upon otherwise. And it was through them that he came to develop a new approach to the text.

It may sound surprising that concepts such as those which have been discussed here can be expressed in the fundamentalist Iranian republic. In Egypt, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd has been declared a heretic for voicing comparable views. It is true that Soroush has time and time again received death threats from groups of thugs, but this happens only when he mounts an open attack on the clergy's sinecure. What he has not been attacked for so far are his ideas in cognitive theory. It seems that, when people are attacked for expressing modernist ideas, this is due more to the political climate of the moment and to the circumstances in which the criticism was raised. Eskewari, for example, was in June 2000 accused of apostasy and 'warring against God' because he had publicly announced that he was in favour of a division of state and religion, which means in essence the abolition of the Iranian Republic's *velâyat-e faqih* doctrine of government. Soroush's ideas, followed to their logical end, would mean nothing else. But Soroush did not, of course, publicly announce such ideas at a conference in Berlin in April 2000, nor did he happen to be among those who have been chosen to be made a public example of.

The following conclusions may be drawn. It is not necessarily easier to talk and write about new methods of Quran exegesis in Iran than elsewhere in the Islamic world. Maybe it is only chance at which particular point one gets caught. But in an Islamic republic, the need to think about the Quranic text and how to approach it may well be more pressing. This may be the explanation for Soroush's great success. In Iran, he said the right things at the right time. He noticed very early on that people turn away from religion because the predominating interpretation does not please them. In order to save religion, Soroush has searched for another. The magazine *Kiyân*, his mouthpiece, served to give his ideas a relatively wide circulation – until it was banned in 2001. It was even read – and widely so – in the theologians' city of Qom. The numerous publications of theological academies which, directly or indirectly, deal with Soroush's ideas bear witness to the debates he initiates, and the intensity with which he is read there. Quite naturally much of what he says is refuted in these circles. But at least his ideas must be reckoned with, and it does not seem to be an exaggerated hope to say that he will be, and already has been, influential. The fact that young mullahs today discuss themes such as human rights, democracy, and hermeneutic principles can be said to be due to Soroush's influence. What is more, Soroush has influenced a number of people who today form the spearhead of Iran's reform movement. They are his students who themselves say that, through him, they have undergone a decisive intellectual change. Akbar Ganji, once a member of the Revolutionary Guards, turned into Iran's leading expository journalist; Mashallah Shamsolwa'ezin is the Islamic republic's best known newspaper editor. After Mohammad Khatami's election, he founded the first independent and critical newspaper. In a country like Iran, Quran interpretation acquires meanings extending well beyond those present in other countries; it influences such practical areas as the making of newspapers. As for the movement which favours an interpretation different from the dominant, restrictive one, and for an approach towards the text

which differs substantially from the one having been followed before, Soroush can be called one of its leading protagonists.

Notes

1. For information regarding Taleqani, see the following: Shahrough Akhavi, 'Islam, Politics and Society in the Thought of Ayatullah Khomeini, Ayatullah Taleqani and Ali Shariati', *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.24 (1988), pp.4, 404–31; Mangol Bayat, 'Mahmud Taleqani and the Iranian Revolution', in Martin Kramer (ed.), *Shi'ism, Resistance, and Revolution* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987), pp.67–94; Nikki Keddie, *Roots of Revolution, An Interpretative History of Modern Iran*, (Yale: University Press, 1981), pp.210 ff.; Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent, The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, (New York: University Press, 1993), pp.216–72.
2. For information on the liberation movement, see: Houchang Esfandiari Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism, The Liberation Movement of Iran under the Shah and Khomeini* (London: Tauris, 1990).
3. Information on *tafsir ilmi*, i.e. 'scientific interpretation of the Quran', in the Arabian context, is offered by: Johannes M.S. Baljon, *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation (1880–1960)*, (Leiden: Brill, 1961); and J.J.G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt*, (Leiden: Brill, 1974), pp.35ff.
4. See Shaoul Bakhsh, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs, Iran and the Islamic Revolution*, (London: Tauris, 1984), p.168.
5. See Dabashi, (note 1) *Theology*, p.237.
6. *Ibid.*, p.243.
7. Ali Shariati, *Ma va Eqbal (We and Iqbal)*, (Tehran: Elhâm, 1979), 73f. Quoted from Bahauddin Khorramshahi, *Tafsir va Tafâsir-e jadid (Exegesis and Modern Commentaries)*, (Tehran: Keyhân, 1986), p.44.
8. Mortaza Motahhari, *Dah goftâr (Ten lectures)*, (Tehran: Sadr, 1981), p.190ff. Quoted from Khorramshahi, *Tafsir*, p.47.
9. For information on Bazargan, see: Chehabi (note 2), *Iranian Politics*; also Dabashi (note 1), *Theology*, pp.324–66.
10. For further information on this book see: Ann Lambton, 'A Reconsideration of the Position of the *Marga al-taqlid* and the Religious Institution', *Studia Iranica*, Vol.20 (1964), pp.115–34.
11. Saeed Barzin, 'Constitutionalism and Democracy in the Religious Thought of Mehdi Bazargan', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 21 (1994) pp.1,85–101.
12. Chehabi (note 2), *Iranian Politics*, pp.50–100.
13. For information on Tabataba'i, see Dabashi's detailed presentation in: Dabashi, (note 1) *Theology*, pp. 273–323.
14. See also Muhammad Hossein Tabataba'i, *Der Koran im Islam (The Quran in Islam)*, (Bonn/Köln: Botschaft der Islamischen Republik Iran, 1986), p.50.
15. See Dabashi, *Theology*, pp. 308.
16. Several studies have been published in recent years on Soroush: Afshin Matin-Asghari, 'Abdolkarim Soroush and the Secularization of Islamic Thought in Iran', *Iranian Studies*, Vol. 30 (1997), pp.1–2, 95–115. Valla Vakili, 'Debating Religion and Politics in Iran: The Political Thought of Abdolkarim Soroush', (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 1996); John Cooper, 'The Limits of the Sacred: The Epistemology of Abd al-Karim Soroush', in Cooper et al. (eds.), *Islam and Modernity. Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, (London: Tauris, 1998); Forough Jahanbaksh, *Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran (1953–2000): from Bazargan to Soroush*, (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Ashk Dahlen, *Deciphering the Meaning of Revealed Law. The Soroushian Paradigm Shiite Epistemology*, (Uppsala: University Press, 2001). The present author has published the following on Soroush: Katajun Amirpur, 'Ein islamischer Luther? Abdolkarim Soroushs Kritik an der schiitischen Geistlichkeit' (An Islamic Luther? Abdolkarim Soroush's Critique of the Shiite Clergy), *Orient*, Vol.37 (1996), pp. 465–81; 'Reformen an theologischen Hochschulen in Iran: Revolutionäres Establishment contra religiöse Aufklärer' (Reforms in Iran's Theological Academies: Revolutionary Establishment vs. Religious Advocates of Enlightenment), *Orient*, Vol.38 (1997), pp.535–57; 'The Representation of the West in Iranian Alternative Culture', in Kai Hafez (ed.), *Mass Media in the Middle East*, (New Jersey: Hampton Press, 2000); *Die Entpolitisierung der Religion. Abdolkarim Soroushs Werk und Wirkung in der*

- Islamischen Republik Iran* (The Depoliticizing of Religion: Abdolkarim Soroush's Work and Impact in the Islamic Republic of Iran), (Würzburg: Ergon, 2003).
- Some of Soroush's writings have been translated into English by Ahmad and Mahmud Sadri: Abd-al-Karim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*, (Oxford: University Press, 2000).
17. Most of my information for this biographical sketch is drawn from an interview conducted by me in November 1996 in London with Soroush himself, and on a biography on the internet (Seraj homepage). Differences between the two sources are indicated where necessary.
 18. Seraj homepage, updated version July 1996; my visit to the homepage dates from 2 May 1997.
 19. For information on the political role of Iranian students abroad, see: Keddie, *Roots*, pp. 236ff.. She concentrates on Abdolhasan Bani-Sadr, Ebrahim Yazdi, and Sadeq Qotbzadeh, all of whom held important posts in Iran after the revolution, but fell into disgrace after a short period.
 20. The following works concentrate on a refutation of Marxism: Abdolkarim Soroush, *Naqdi bar tazâd-e diâlektiki* (Critique of Dialectical Antagonism), (Tehran: Sarât, 1995); *Idiuluzi-ye seytâni*. (Satanic Ideology), (Tehran: Sarât, 1995).
 21. In *Nahâd-e nâ-arâm-e jahân*, Soroush analyses the foundations of Islamic philosophy, specifically *tauhid* (monotheism) and *ma'âd* (resurrection [after Judgment Day]). The book also offers a detailed description of Molla Sadra's (d. 1660) philosophical concept.
 22. For information on the aims of the Iranian cultural revolution, see: Mohsen Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988), pp.294-304.
 23. Interview with Abdolkarim Soroush.
 24. My figurative translation of the title is 'The Changeability of Religious Knowledge'.
 25. Abdolkarim Soroush, *Qabz o bast-e teutik-e shariat – nazariye-ye takamol-e marefat-e dini*. (Theory of Extension and Concentration/Evolution and Devolution of Religion – the Theory of Religious Knowledge's Development), (Tehran: Sarât, 1994), p.347.
 26. Soroush, *Qabz*, p.244.
 27. Karl Raimund Popper, *Objektive Erkenntnis, Ein evolutionärer Entwurf* (Objective Cognition, An Evolutionary Sketch), (Hamburg: Hoffmann & Campe, 1984), pp.85ff.
 28. Soroush, *Qabz*, pp.289,425. For further information on this issue, see: Toshihiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran. Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung*, (New York (reprint): Books for Libraries, 1998).
 29. Soroush, *Qabz*, pp.220,231.
 30. Soroush, *Qabz*, p.359.
 31. Karl Raimund Popper, 'Normal Science and its Dangers', in Imre Lakatos & Alan Musgrave (eds.), *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1995, pp.51-8,55). – Newton's quote runs as follows: *Hypotheses non fingo*.
 32. Soroush, *Qabz*, pp.215,236.
 33. Soroush, *Qabz*, p.252.
 34. Compare Rashid El-Solh, 'Islamist Attitudes towards Democracy: A Review of the Ideas of Al-Ghazali, al-Turabi and Amara', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 20 (1993) pp.1,57-63. Gudrun Krämer mentions Amara and several others as prominent figures of this school of thought. Gudrun Krämer, 'Cross-Links and Double Talk? Islamist Movements in the Political Process', in Laura Guazzone (ed.), *The Islamist Dilemma. The Political Role of Islamist Movements in the Contemporary Arab World*, (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1995), pp.39-68,51.
 35. The following writings may be consulted as exemplary of the extensive literature on this issue: Martin Forstner, 'Das Menschenrecht der Religionsfreiheit und des Religionswechsels als Problem der islamischen Staaten' (The Human Right of Freedom of Religion and of Changing One's Religion: A Problem of Islamic States), *Kanon* (Vienna), Vol.10 (1991), pp.105-86; Rudolph Peters & Gert J.J. De Vries, 'Apostasy in Islam', *Welt des Islams*, Vol.17 (1976/77), pp.1-25.
 36. See, among others: Abdoljavad Falaturi, *Westliche Menschenrechtsvorstellungen und Koran* (Western Perceptions of Human Rights and the Koran), (Köln: Islamische Wissenschaftliche Akademie, 1992); *Der Islam im Dialog* (Islam in Dialogue), (Köln: Islamische Wissenschaftliche Akademie, 1979); Adel Theodor Khoury, *Christen unterm Halbmond. Religiöse Minderheiten unter der Herrschaft des Islams* (Christians under the Crescent. Religious Minorities under the Reign of Islam), (Freiburg: Herder, 1994).

37. In a lecture Soroush gave at Tehran university on 21 August 1997. It was published under the title *Zâti va arazi dar dîn, Kiyân*, Vol. 8 (1998) pp.4–19,42.
38. Al-Ghazali, however, did not deny the necessity of applying the shari'ah. His aim was rather to show that, contrary to common opinion, the sufis did not at all deny the necessity of the duties of religious practices like the five mandatory prayers. In *Ihya ulum ad-din*, al-Ghazali describes how nothing but the fulfilment of the rules of shari'ah can be the base of a genuinely sufite life-style. But the meaning of the religious duties is only understood by humans when they have attained the highest rank in the soul's way towards God. See: W. Montgomery Watt, *Islamic Philosophy and Theology* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1985), p.92.
39. Abdolkarim Soroush, 'Tahlil-e mafhum-e hokumat-e dini' (Analysis of the Term 'Religious Government'), *Kiyân*, Vol.6 (1996), pp.2–13,7,32.
40. *Ibid.*, p.3.
41. *Ibid.*, p.9.