The Methodology of Abdolkarim Soroush: A Preliminary Study

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Introduction
Islam in the last two centuries has faced a variety of issues such as nationalism, modernity and the West, science and religion, and applications of the Islamic sciences to a changing world. All these challenges can be summarised under the rubric of the efforts to revitalise, reconstruct, and reform Islam. Both Sunnis and Shi’is have participated in the attempts to find Islam’s place in a world dominated by Western political, military and technological power. Intellectual thinkers from Jamal al-Din al-Afghâni (d. 1315/1897) to ‘Alî Shari’âti (d. 1397/1977) have struggled to re-think Islam in a modern age. During the 1990s, the Iranian lay thinker Abdolkarim Soroush [‘Abd al-Kar im Surûsh] distinguished himself as one of the most prominent intellectuals to emerge within the Islamic methodological and political discourse. Unlike most of his immediate predecessors, Soroush has developed his ideas and applications within an Islamic Republic complete with a political and legal system that is Islamic. In other words, he writes from within and about an Islamic State. This context is reminiscent of the intellectual efforts of medieval writers such as ‘Ali b. Muḥammad al-Māwardî (d. 450/1058), Abû Ḥâmid Muḥammad b. Muhammad al-Ghazâlî (d. 505/1111) and others who also wrote under Islamic regimes. For his part, Soroush has found wide appeal among the educated youth and the technocratic elite of Iran who are seeking to understand Islam’s response to modern social and political issues.¹

While the effort to study the thought of Soroush and his impact upon Iranian politics is important, the intention here will be limited to an introduction to the methodology of the interpretation of religion as developed by Soroush. This will be accomplished by examining his theories of epistemology and methodology. Much remains to be said concerning his views

on political Islam including the role of the clerics in Iran and in government and in his approach to relations with the West, but these will be left for future explorations. Once the epistemology and methodology of Soroush is understood, one will find it much easier to grasp the other issues that concern him but which are not directly examined in this paper.

After providing some introductory comments on the relevant works on Soroush and post-revolutionary Iran, a brief attempt will be made to position Soroush within the broader context of the development of Iranian thought. This will be followed by a short biography of Soroush and an examination of his methodology. The paper will end with a critical assessment of his ideas followed by a conclusion.

Relevant Works

For the study of Abdolkarim Soroush there are many primary sources available in Persian. Soroush writes, publishes and offers many public lectures, which are recorded and distributed. The main vehicle for the majority of his publications is the magazine Kiyān. His most important book, which was drawn from a number of articles published in Kiyān, is his Qabī wa Basṭ-i Tīūrik-i Shariʿat (The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of the Shariʿah) published in 1990. This seminal work outlines his main theories and will, in some measure, be employed in this paper. English primary sources are limited to a collection of key articles translated under the approval of Soroush by Mahmoud and Ahmad Sadri. The work is entitled Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush. The book includes the most extensive biographical interview of Soroush to date published in 2000 and includes topics ranging from Islamic revival and reform to ethics and secularism.

In addition, one of the only English works available detailing his theory of religious knowledge is a translated article published in 1998, entitled “The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge.”

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Secondary sources must include the short work by Valla Vakili *Debating Religion and Politics in Iran: The Political Thought of Abdolkarim Soroush* and his summary article in *Makers of Contemporary Islam*. These two works offer a concise outline of the thought of Soroush. Others have published articles such as John Cooper’s “The Limits of the Sacred: the Epistemology of ‘Abd al-Karim Soroush,” Afzil Matin-asgari’s “Abdolkarim Soroush and the Secularization of Islamic Thought in Iran,” Mehrzad Boroujerdi’s “The Encounter of Post-Revolutionary Thought in Iran with Hegel, Heidegger, and Popper,” and recently Hamid Vahid’s “Islamic Humanism: From Silence to Extinction.” Other useful information is available on various websites devoted to Soroush.

Before commencing with the main body of this study, something needs to be said regarding the place of Soroush within the flow of Iranian thought in order to provide some wider perspective.

**Soroush in the Context of Iranian Thought**

Soroush is both an inheritor and a participant in the long Islamic intellectual traditions within Iran. Indeed inheritance is not limited to Iranian thinkers, but would also include other seminal thinkers of Islamic tradition such as al-Ghazālī and his Iranian interpreter Fay'ī Kashānī as Soroush has mentioned in various articles. The concern here is to place Soroush within the...
contemporary stream of Shi‘i thought to better determine his role and impact as a thinker and to trace the broader intellectual developments within Iran and contrast this with the contributions Soroush continues to make.

The progress of religious thought in Iran is complicated and rich. For our purposes this development will be divided into pre and post-revolution periods. This is not the only means to outline Iranian religious thought, but it does highlight the various streams of ideas and struggles that have produced thinkers like Soroush.  

Over the past century, Iran has experienced reform movements centred on Western ideas and models, Marxist ideology, and calls for Islamic revival and reconstruction. Each in turn shaped the intellectual climate of contemporary Iran. The attraction to Western ideas came to the fore early in the history of modern Iran. During the early twentieth century through to the 1930s, political and administrative reforms were modelled on the West and tacitly approved by the religious establishment an example of which was Ayatollah Mirza Hossein Na‘ini’s (d. 1355/1936) defence of the idea of constitutionalism.

The 1930s and 1940s witnessed a widening of opinion over the questions of political reform. Reza Shah (d. 1363/1944) employed Western political models in the 1930s, but by the 1940s Marxist ideology began to become popular amongst Iranian youth. During this period, attempts were made to

Ghazali’s work.


11 Reza Shah and the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979) created a strong central government defined along a nationalistic ideology and sought an aggressive programme of economic modernisation and cultural Westernisation including the formation of a modern army with French advisers. See Abrahamian, Iran between Two Revolutions, 50–101.

12 This is seen particularly during the Qajar period (1779–1925) where European economic and cultural influence stimulated the Qajars to modernise and strengthen the state creating increased tension between the state and the ‘ulamā’. This led eventually to the constitutional crisis (1905–1911).


re-invigorate and reconcile Islam with the Western ideas of science and progress. Muslim reformist thinkers like Shari‘at Sangilajī (1307–1362/1890–1943), ‘Ali Akbar Ḥakamīzādah and Ahmad Kāsrāvī (1307–1359/1890–1940) sought to rationally purify religion from superstitions and thereby elevate the social status of Iranian Muslims.\textsuperscript{15} They criticised the ‘ulamā‘s version of Islam as a hindrance to progress and science, but their efforts were in turn criticised. Jahanbakhsh commented on the importance of the reformist thinkers that:

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Although these men were defamed, the role that they played, willingly or unwillingly, in developing the religious consciousness of modern Iranian intellectuals, both clergy and layman, is undeniable.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

These and others opened several themes which continued to be explored by later intellectuals. These issues included the rational aspect of Islam, the compatibility of Islam with science and progress, the challenge to purify Islam from outdated modes of thought and superstitions, the legitimacy and power of the ‘ulamā‘, and condemnation of taqlīd. For example, some of ‘Ali Shari‘atī’s work resembles that of Sangilajī’s.\textsuperscript{17}

From this period, many thinkers such as Muḥammad Iqbal (1293–1357/1876–1938), ‘Alī Shari‘atī (1352–1397/1933–1977) and Mehdi Bāzargān (1324–1415/1907–1995) influenced Soroush. As an example, Bāzargān believed that science and technology improved the material well being while religion provided the path for spiritual salvation.\textsuperscript{18} He attempted to show that one could be pious and still adhere to the principles of science and the demands of modernity. His views together with al-Afghānī’s influenced the development of a new generation of Muslim thinkers who became occupied with the question of how one could remain a Muslim in the face of modernity.\textsuperscript{19} Soroush inherited and employed such ideas in the development of his own theories of Islam, modernity, science, and politics.

By the 1950s and 1960s, Iran experienced an intellectual awakening. One indication of the intellectual ferment was the increase in the number of religious societies formed in the universities, among expatriates and by professionals such as teachers, engineers and physicians. Among the most significant developments were the Anjuman-i Māhānah-yi Dinī (Monthly Religious Society), the opening of the Ḥusayniyyeh-yi Irshād and the

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 52f.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 55.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 108.
introduction of the ‘Alavī high school system.\textsuperscript{20}

The Monthly Religious Society drew participants such as the Ṭāliqānī (1327/1910–1399/1979) and Murta ṣa Muṭahharī (d. 1401/1981), and the thinker Mehdi Bāzargān. The society was short lived with its closing in 1963 by the government. The Ḥūsayniyyeh-yi Irshād founded a year later in 1964 was intended to be a research and educational institute and served as the centre for religious modernism. The main figure associated with this centre and its principal speaker was ‘Alī Shari‘atī. The institute’s activities exposed the rifts between the religious intellectuals, the traditional orthodox ‘īlām and the Islam of the masses. By 1972, the government ordered the centre’s closure. The ‘Alavī high school system, which attempted to blend modern science with the traditional Islamic sciences, was to profoundly shape Soroush. This influence will be further discussed later.

By the late 1960s and 1970s, serious debates emerged in the form of books either calling on the religious establishment to respond to contemporary demands or condemning the West as a disease and not a cure for Iranian society.\textsuperscript{21} One such example of the latter was Jalāl Āl-i ‘Aḥmad’s \textit{Gharbzādegī} (Plagued by the West or Westoxification), which argued that the West had never really aided Iran, but had instead contaminated Iranian society.\textsuperscript{22} Shi‘ī thinkers such as Shari‘atī and the Ayatullāh Murta ṣa Muṭahharī became occupied with the reconstruction and reassertion of Islamic faith.

‘Alī Shari‘atī sought to re-familiarise Muslims to their heritage as a means to return to their true self.\textsuperscript{23} In doing so, he theorised that science and religion have different functions to perform and cannot be compared. He continued in part Muhammad Iqbal’s ideas that a reconstructed Islam is not threatened by technology, science or modern societies.\textsuperscript{24}

Ayatullāh Murta ṣa Muṭahharī in contrast to Shari‘atī saw science and religion as compatible and sought to bring all scientific investigation within the realm of Islam. In fact, Islam was seen to flourish within a scientific atmosphere.\textsuperscript{25} The idea that science and technology properly harnessed by

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Islam could provide material and spiritual ends was well received by influential traditional Iranian families. In particular two principles were drawn from Muḥtahhari’s teachings. One, a distinction was made between science, technology and their results without the West as a cultural value system. Two, the materialistic philosophy, which set the agenda and goals for Western science and technology, produced corrupted results due to evil intentions. Thus, correct intentions as proffered by Islam would permit the proper use of science and technology. Hence, it was obligatory for Muslims to study and use science. It was left to Soroush and others in the post-revolution era to further elaborate distinctions between the Western cultural value system and the products of science.

More could be said on the historic development of Iranian intellectualism, but by way of summation in the pre-revolution period Islam was either marginalized by Western and Marxist ideas or explained in the various shades of reconstruction, revival or reconciliation with Western concepts of progress and science. Western, Marxist and revivalist Islamic ideas each vied for dominance and within Islamic thought the general movement was to embrace modernism by extracting an ethics of science from the Qur’ān. In post-revolution Iran, Soroush began his thought by questioning the very approach to the issues of modernity as previously emphasised by earlier Iranian intellectuals and clergy. It is here that we turn to the post-revolution period with the attempt to situate Soroush in the context of his predecessors.

Post-revolution intellectualism evolved in a social and political context quite different than pre-revolutionary thought. The opposition was no longer directed against the regime of the Shah or Pahlavi nationalism, but increasingly focused on the failure of Islamic ideology to provide effective leadership for a religious society in a modern era. These new opponents emerged from within the revolution and fought against what has been perceived as religious despotism. As with the 1960s, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed fresh movements of intellectual activity. Soroush, unlike past

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28. Such activity was the establishment of the Hawzah-yi Andishah wa Hunar-i Islām (Centre of Islamic Thought and Art) in 1981, the monthly magazine *Kaybān-i Farhangi* in 1984 and the journal *Kiyān* in 1991. Both magazines featured articles by Soroush and while the *Kaybān-i*
thinkers such as Shari’āti and Mutahhari who expended their energy in the political sphere defending Islam in the face of antagonistic views and approaches, has little need to challenge a secular non-Islamic state; instead, he has devoted his career to developing an alternative Islamic view on the sciences and modernity. In an interview with Rajaee, Soroush summarised his position in relation to former thinkers by stating:

In one way or another, the revivalists before me wanted to reconcile tradition with change. [Muhammad] Iqbal wanted to establish a peaceful coexistence between them. Mutahari and [Allamah Muhammad Hossein] Tabatabi’-i said that we should identify the unchanging principles of religion with its changing ones and then allow for modification of the second based on time and place. Shari’āti considered the tenets of religion unchanging, but argued that it takes different forms in different places. The Sunni Muslims try to open the gate of ijtihad. I argue that, in order to solve the problem of the relation between tradition and change, we should separate religion from the understanding of religion. The first is unchanging, but the second changes. In fact, we should try to establish constant exchange and interaction between the second and other branches of human knowledge and understanding such as sociology, anthropology, philosophy, history and so on.

Clearly Soroush is the product of a different era and education than his predecessors and he has built upon their foundations. Before examining his methodology, mention needs to be made of his background, education and career.

**Biography of Soroush**

Abdolkarim Soroush, whose real name is Hossein Dabbagh [Huṣayn Dabbāgh] was born in Tehran in 1945. After a conventional primary education, he enrolled in the new ‘Alavī high school system. This education set the stage for his later thought and writings. The ‘Alavi school system was

*Farhangi* introduced a number of Iranian scholars to the wider public and entertained issues such as religion and science, freedom and social justice, and Islam and the West, the government in 1990 closed it over articles by Soroush. *Kiyān* was soon started by the old editorial board of *Kayhān-i Farhangi* in 1991 and has served as the primary vehicle for Soroush’s views.


Ibid., 114.


Soroush mentions that the school Principal, Mr Reza Rouzbah who held a master’s degree in Physics, was devoted to reconciling religion and science. For a short time Soroush attended the
a private institution dedicated to blending religious and scientific studies.

After high school, he read Pharmacology at Tehran University. During these years, Sorouh also studied Persian literature, poetry, philosophy and mysticism especially Jalāl al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Rūmī (672/1273). He approached the Islamic philosopher Muḥāṭḥārī about receiving private instruction on Islamic philosophy and was directed to one of Muṭāḥārī’s graduate students.33 Sorouh spent many years studying philosophy and became interested in the relationship between philosophy and religion. By 1964, the rise of political struggles made politics unavoidable for most university students. Here again Sorouh was introduced and attracted to the relationship between politics and religion. He went on to study Marxist and leftist thought, which he later strongly opposed. During this period Sorouh became acquainted with three thinkers who would greatly influence the development of this own thought.34

Muḥāṭḥārī’s annotated interpretation of Ṭābāṭābā’ī’s The Principles of Philosophy and the Method of Reason, which is yet to be translated into English, made a profound impact upon Sorouh. At the time Sorouh commented that the work had proven to him the “indisputable superiority of Islamic philosophy.”35 The remaining thinkers included Mehdi Bāzargān with his book The Infinity of the Infinitely Small and the lectures of ‘Alī Shari’ātī at the Ḥusayniyyeh-yi Irshād.36 Sorouh also managed in his words to “systematically and exhaustively study several interpretations of the Qur’ān from both Shi‘ite and Sunnī perspectives.”37 In relation to this study of the Qur’ān, Sorouh commented:

I am still grateful for this experience as most of my interpretive understanding of the Qur’ān belongs to this period. Although I had no interpretive theory of my own, I managed to gain a fair knowledge of the interpretive positions of the Islamic scholars. What fascinated me most were the details and intricacies of the differences in interpretation. This is the same point that later on made me reflect on the mystery of the differences of opinion in the exegesis of religious texts. I can assert this sensibility constituted one of the bases of my thesis of contraction principal’s extracurricular lessons on Qur’ānic exegesis in which he attempted to derive scientific principles from the text. Sorouh was unconvinced but his attention was drawn to the relationship between religion and science. Ibid.

33 Ibid., 5.
36 Ibid., 7.
37 Ibid., 6.
and expansion of religious knowledge in which I tried to answer the question why different interpreters disagree on the meaning of a given text.\footnote{Ibid., 6–7.}

Two years of national service in the field of pharmacology followed his time at Tehran University, but his formal education was not to end.

Soroush travelled to England where he received a master’s degree in Analytical Chemistry in 1973 at the University of London. Then he spent several years of doctoral research into the history and philosophy of science at Chelsea College in London. This research expanded his philosophical horizons to such an extent that it became a watershed in his intellectual career.\footnote{Ibid., 8.} The philosophy he studied in Iran seldom dealt with the problems of modern science. In England, he was introduced to the philosophy of science, which includes epistemology and classical and modern philosophy. His interests evolved from philosophy of science to the history and application of philosophy to the social sciences and religion. Soroush reflected that:

\begin{quote}
Philosophy of science was a true revelation for me. It opened up new horizons and marked a significant turning point in my intellectual development. It made me question, review, and revise my previous understanding of the Aristotelian philosophy and metaphysics.\footnote{Ibid., 18.}
\end{quote}

Shortly after the revolution in 1979, Soroush returned to Iran taking up the post at the Teachers’ Training College in Tehran. He was soon appointed as director of the college’s Islamic Cultural Group, which prepared the way for his inclusion in the Advisory Council of the Cultural Revolution. In April 1980, Khomeini announced the Cultural Revolution and in response to the occupation of Tehran University and the Teachers’ Training College by radical students established the Cultural Revolution Council which closed the universities. Khomeini appointed Soroush as one of the seven members of the Advisory Council of the Cultural Revolution.\footnote{There has been some criticism levelled against Soroush for his involvement in the Advisory Council and Soroush has responded: In the Advisory Council of the Cultural Revolution our main task was reopening the universities. This is a point that is unknown to many people. Universities had been closed for political reasons. It was after this event that the council was appointed by Mr. Khomeini, who was the political leader of the government of the time. This council was composed of seven people and its mandate was to revise the curriculum and to lay down the procedures for reopening universities with the help of professors who had been released from their routine duties. There were close to one thousand professors who were}
After resigning from the Advisory Council and then from the Teachers’ Training College, he took a position as Research Fellow at the Institute for Cultural Research and Studies at Tehran University, which he held until 1997. In addition in 1992, he established the department of History and Philosophy of Science at the Humanities Research Institute in Tehran. Since the early 1980s, he has published a number of articles and books including a series of essays defending social science education. He has lectured at universities and seminaries in Tehran and Qum and, from 1988 until stopped by officials, he lectured weekly at the Imām Șādiq mosque in Tehran.

Soroush’s publications and lecture interests are varied. In the 1980s and early 1990s, he began a serious investigation into religious texts and the process of change in interpretations. This led to a great deal of controversy and opposition. One result was the closure of the magazine Kayhāni Farhangi which had spread his ideas. After this closure, the monthly journal Kiyān became the primary outlet for his views and critiques. Other areas of interest have included lectures on mysticism and poetry, the philosophy of religion, and the relationship between science and religion. He is associated with the Kalām-i Jadīd, which is a modern theological trend arising out of the need for Muslim scholars to provide credible responses to modernity and secularism.

When asked in an interview about the rise in his interest in political applications and thought, Soroush enumerated four factors:

1. His self-taught knowledge of Qur’ān exegesis led him to question the cooperations with us in different committees of the council. Others joined the Center for Academic Publications. They composed articles, books, translations, and curricula for universities and colleges. The committee, then, was charged with reopening universities, not with closing them, as some have charged. I stayed in the council for four years. I resigned as soon as it turned into the headquarters of the cultural revolution. I no longer saw a role for myself there. The council eventually succeeded in reopening the universities after a year and a half. And I went back to teaching. Soroush, “Intellectual Autobiography: An Interview,” 12.

42 Jahanbakhsh, Islam, Democracy and Religious Modernism in Iran 1953–2000, 145. During the cultural revolution the social sciences were under attack by traditional minded clergy and some politically motivated academics who saw the social sciences as western and un-Islamic.


reasons for differences of interpretations of the sacred text from such sources as the Mu'tazilites and Ash'arite exegetes.

2. The blending of mysticism and politics. Mystics see the world as an obstacle and religion is seen as the methodology for the inner journey. Mehdi Bazargan and 'Ali Shari'ati sought to extract political doctrines from religion, thus showing that piety and mysticism were compatible with the outer journey of politics.

3. The theoretical positions of Bazargan and Shari'ati in particular highlighted why certain types of interpretations arise at certain times and not in others.

4. The application of the understanding of natural sciences as a competitive and collective process to religious knowledge and the philosophy of religion.47

The elite of the Islamic Republic have received him with a mixture of admiration and distress, but others such as the Ansar-i Hizbolah ("Supporters of God's Party") violently opposed his lectures forcing their suspension in 1996.48 At various times he has been banned from teaching, writing, lecturing, travelling, and public speaking. The main attacks against him revolve around his views regarding the impossibility of any final interpretation of Islam and his criticism of the clergy.49 Such opposition increased after the publication of a series of articles under the general title of Qabê wa Basê-i Ti'urik-i Shari'at (The Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of the Shari'ah) in 1988.

From this brief biography several items can be noted. First, Soroush received education in both science and religion including the contributions of former Islamic thinkers and this has shaped his subsequent thought. Second, he tends to focus on relationships such as between science and religion, politics and religion, and philosophy and religion. Third, he publishes and lectures extensively and often critiques the prevailing political structure of the clergy in relation to their interpretation of Islam. Fourth, given his controversial writings, he is opposed by various elements in Iranian society. What has yet to be discussed is the methodology he developed and employs in his critiques which have enraged his opponents. To this topic we now turn.

Methodology – The Interpretation of Religious Texts

In developing his methodology, Soroush has been rather harsh on previous attempts at reconciling religion with Western sciences and technologies. In fact, when speaking about Iran in the early part of the twentieth century and

49 Ibid., 44.
its encounter with Western ideas, Soroush commented that the superiority of the West simply overwhelmed a weak and anaemic people who welcomed the possibilities of progress and development. He writes, “In this encounter, we [Iran] had nothing left in the storehouse of our religion and native cultures save a few dried up formalities, habits and conventions.” 50 Attempts that were made to revive Islam in the face of such Western ideas were virtually pathetic and ill directed. Again to quote from Soroush:

Among Moslems, some superficial observers, incapable as they were of understanding the rhyme and reason of the new world, ignorant of the nature, the geography, and the geometry of religion, the history of religious culture, and the interchanges and struggles of religious thought with other ideas, assumed that religion could be rejuvenated through cosmetic changes. They disingenuously tried to extricate new scientific insights from the bowels of ancient texts, boasting of the prophecies of religion with respect to such phenomena as microbes, airplanes, electricity, vitamins, and so on. They actually hope to scour the crust and rust of ages from the face of religion through such a ruse. It was their intention to present religion as worthy of the modern age, as acceptable to the new sensibility. The pain, however, was too excruciating to be alleviated by such clumsy and irrational schemes. 51

Despite the good intentions of those who believed they could “rejuvenate” Islam, their ultimate failure was due not to a lack of effort and zeal, but to a lack of an adequate epistemological theory. Soroush continues:

Reconciling eternity and temporality, the sacred and the profane; separating constant and variant, form and substance; reviving innovative adjudication in religion; finding courageous jurisconsults; reinvigorating religious jurisprudence; changing the appearance while preserving the spirit of Islam; acquainting Islam with the contemporary age; establishing the new Islamic theology: these have been the goals of the religious revivalists, but they require an epistemological theory that is absent from revivalist literature. 52

After much reflection and thought, Soroush offered his own attempt to provide the theoretical foundation to re-interpret religion within a modern context. The clearest statements offered regarding the methodology of Soroush is contained in his book of articles entitled The Theoretical

52 Ibid., 30.
Contraction and Expansion of the Sharʿab. The majority of his later writings in the 1990s reflect in varying degrees the basic premises he developed in these articles. He employed two terms Qabāl and Baṣt, which are used in Islamic mystical tradition to refer to the contraction and expansion of the mystic’s heart and applied these to describe the alternation between epistemic openness and closure of Islamic societies. These ideas grew out of the need to find some solutions for dealing with the confrontation which began in the nineteenth century between traditional religious schools and the more recently established universities and technical colleges. The universities had become increasingly associated with political reforms within Iran. It is no accident that Soroush developed these ideas after his work on the Advisory Council where he wrestled with reconciling traditional religious desires and the demands of modern science and politics.

Soroush contends that his theory provides a solution to the previously unsolved puzzle of his predecessors who sought to reconcile change and immutability. For example, Afghānī saw the problem of the impotence of Islamic civilization lying with the Muslims and not Islam. ʿAlī Shariʿatī and Ayatullāh Murta Ᾱ Muṭahhari attempted to bring together tradition and progress recognising the immutability of religion and the need to make religion compatible with the modern world. Some have sought to cleanse Islam from irrelevant and/or foreign elements in order to reconstruct or revive Islam to fit into a modern world. Still others tried to add elements such as science to enhance and empower Islam. Soroush argues against these ideas as unacceptable due to the nature of Islam. The crux of his argument is that the religion of Islam is unchanging and any attempt to alter, revise, update or reconstruct Islam is ultimately futile. Thus, Islam must not be changed to reconcile it with the modern world, rather human understanding of religion must change. In fact, human understanding of Islam must change to meet the new challenges of a continually changing world. Soroush accomplishes this by providing a solution to the balance between immutability and change on an epistemological level, which in essence draws a distinction between religion and religious knowledge. Cooper’s article on the epistemology of Soroush

53 Abdol Karim Soroush, Qabāl wa Baṣt-i Tiʿrīk-i Shariʿat.
54 Cooper, “The Limits of the Sacred: The Epistemology of ʿAbd al-Karim Soroush,” 43.
55 Ibid.
57 Boroujerdi, Iranian Intellectuals and The West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism, 173.
58 Vakili, Debating Religion and Politics in Iran, 9–10.
59 Ibid, 11. Soroush stated: “Any attempt to reconstruct Islam is both futile and illusory, for [it] is not Islam that must be changed, but the human understanding of Islam.” Quoted by Vakili from Qabāl wa Baṣt-i Tiʿrīk-i Shariʿat, in ibid., 99.
offers this insightful summary:

The main thrust of Soroush’s argument in these articles is directed towards situating the religious sciences within the larger framework of human knowledge in general, and in particular within the context of philosophy and, more recently, the natural and social sciences in particular. The theoretical basis for this endeavour lies in what he sees as the crucial distinction which must be made between two layers of any religious discourse: at one level there is the religion itself, immutable, essential, and sacred; while at the second level there is the human understanding of religion, about which there is nothing sacred, and nothing which cannot be the object of questioning and criticism. At the second level are the texts of Islamic scholarship throughout the centuries. Moreover, the Islamic religious sciences, like any other product of human understanding, are in a constant process of evaluation and perfecting, an advance in one passing on in turn to affect the others.62

For Soroush there are many types of human knowledge and religious knowledge is but one branch. This knowledge is not divine and should not be confused with the religion itself. Thus, religious knowledge is not immutable nor stagnant locked in the past. It is the product of scholars who have studied the unchanging core of the Shi‘i Islamic texts, the Qur‘ān, Hadith and teachings of the Shi‘i imāms.61 Each scholar interprets texts differently based on the methodologies, worldview and culture of his time. So any study of the Qur‘ān is coloured by certain presuppositions from outside the Qur‘ān. Soroush writes that a scholar’s intellectual worldview, which is the understanding of the other human sciences, ensures that any understanding of religion is time bound.62 Thus, medieval scholars derived interpretations based upon the knowledge available to them, but in today’s world that knowledge has greatly expanded. To ignore modern tools is to the detriment of religious understanding. It is precisely these interpretive lenses that enable religion to be refocused and re-interpreted for a changing world. Relevancy and vibrancy is found in the fresh and innovative ideas that emerge from the unchanging religion. Thus, religious knowledge changes over time as former interpretations are replaced by later and more comprehensive understandings. However, religion is eternal and the relativity of religious knowledge in no way entails the relativity of religion.63 This is an a priori presupposition of the

60 Cooper, “The Limits of the Sacred: The Epistemology of ‘Abd al-Karim Soroush,” 43.
61 Vakili, Debating Religion and Politics in Iran, 11.
63 Ibid.
eternity of religion which is assumed by Sorouch and is shared by his Shīʿī contemporaries whereas his views on religious knowledge as changing has led to opposition over the obvious applications toward the official and authoritative interpretations rendered by the clergy. If interpretations are changing, then there can be no single fixed interpretation. With a plethora of available interpretations all relative and competing for authenticity, there is a danger of discernment between “correct” and “incorrect” interpretations. Who decides?

Soroush points to the scholarly community as those best equipped and responsible for distinguishing between interpretations. This community relies on and employs a religious methodology that is distinct to the field and publicly acceptable.

Soroush holds that knowledge is public — as the creation of new knowledge is always in reference to the overall body of public human knowledge — and so the criteria for judging correct and incorrect knowledge must be public as well.\(^\text{64}\)

However, Soroush offers no criteria for either the qualifications of these scholars or the process used to identify “correct” interpretations. His main concern is with uncovering the means by which religious knowledge is formed and developed rather than distinguishing between different interpretations.\(^\text{65}\) To this end, he sees no dichotomy between religious and scientific knowledge. Each informs the other and they are in constant dialogue. For this to occur there must be freedom of intellectual inquiry and the right to rationally criticise all academic theories, religious and non-religious. So, Sorouch welcomes a variety of interpretations and ideas and sees any obstacle to this development as a hindrance to Islam. In summary the major tenets of his theory are as follows:\(^\text{66}\)

1. Religion is different from the understanding of religion from an epistemological and historical point of view.
2. Religion is divine, eternal, immutable and sacred.
3. Religious knowledge is a human endeavour like any other branch of knowledge and therefore it is not sacred.
4. The understanding of religion and religious knowledge are affected by and in constant exchange with all other fields of human knowledge. It is subject

\(^{64}\) Ibid.

\(^{65}\) Vakili, Debating Religion and Politics in Iran, 11.

to expansion and contraction because it is in a give and take relationship with other disciplines of human knowledge.

5. Religious knowledge is therefore in a state of flux, relative and time bound.

This theory of Soroush offers several theoretical and practical conclusions, which directly affect the religious academic conception of Islam in Iran. First, the conception of Islam by the religious authorities is inconsistent with the requirements of modern science. Indeed, Soroush indicates that those who led the revolution had planned little for its aftermath. There was no appreciation for the global economy, modernity or the impact of technology and science upon society nor was there much theoretical basis for the achievement of their goals. Second, the religious authorities cannot meet these requirements because they have inadequate knowledge of modern science. Here Soroush severely critiques the identification of Islam with *fiqh* (Islamic law). He wrote:

The religious knowledge of our clergy is basically restricted to *fiqh* ... Their knowledge of other subjects is quantitatively and qualitatively small. Therefore, it is no wonder they equate Islam with *fiqh* or characterize *fiqh* as the most important of the Islamic sciences.

Based upon Soroush’s epistemology, the reduction of Islam to *fiqh* is reprehensible for it concentrates authority, power and interpretation into the hands of officially sanctioned people— the clergy. It demands adherence to one interpretation thereby confusing immutable religion with changing religious knowledge and understanding. Soroush is not alone in this critique and as he often does in his writings, he draws on the scholars of the past. In an article quoted by Shirazi, Soroush wrote:

Jurists who reduce research in religion to knowledge of *fiqh* ... especially that group of jurists who only concern themselves with the offences (*khela*fiyat) dealt with in *fiqh* and pay no attention to anything but disputes, suppressing their opponents and boasting of their victory over their enemies ... and take pleasure in exposing the misdeeds and the weaknesses of their fellow-men, were fiercely derided and scolded by Ghazali and Feiz Kashani and deemed to be afflicted with arrogance and intellectual opacity. Ghazali referred to the second group in

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particular as ‘beasts of prey amongst men’ because their effort was directed to strife and their nature tended towards tormenting people.\textsuperscript{71}

Obviously such a harsh criticism of the clergy drew strong opposition to Sorouh, but he goes even further by advocating a religious democratic state as a necessary conclusion from his epistemological approach.\textsuperscript{72} Here theory begins to give way to practice and practice, unlike theory, is beset by social and political obstacles, which are seen by Sorouh as impediments to the growth of religious knowledge.\textsuperscript{73} Thus, his political critiques are focussed on issues that present significant obstacles to the implementation of his ideas. However, this goes beyond the purpose of this paper.

**A Critical Assessment**

The ideas presented by Sorouh are quite attractive for they seem to provide a means to retain the immutability of religion while at the same time affording tools and permission to re-interpret that religion. One could compare religion to water, which by definition is H\textsubscript{2}O, but this water reshares itself to fit into any vessel while maintaining its essence as water.\textsuperscript{74} In a similar manner, religion remains true by virtue of revelation and it remains relevant by the applicability of its truth in all times, places and situations. My comparison is undoubtedly inadequate as water and religion occupy two different realms, but there is some overlap for descriptive purposes and it does open the potential of problems and critiques of Sorouh’s ideas as one moves from theory to practice.

In the assessment of the methodology of Sorouh there are a number of critiques of which only five will be discussed here. These are drawn mostly from the clergy, some religious philosophers such as Reza Davari and most recently a critique written by Hamid Vahid. First, let us examine some general critiques. The main conclusion of Sorouh’s methodology is the distinction between religion and religious knowledge. This is applied to the *Sharīʿah* which is determined to be divine while the comprehension of *Sharīʿah* is not. Concerning this division, in an interview with Mehrzad Boroujerdi in 1991, Sorouh commented, “I regard this epistemological distinction to be my most


\textsuperscript{74} Whether frozen, in the form of steam or even in the process of evaporation and condensing into clouds, H\textsubscript{2}O (water) under suitable conditions can return to the liquid state.
important achievement.”75 This has led to a very valid question. Where precisely does Soroush draw the boundary between religion and religious knowledge?76 Is this merely a subjective division or are there criteria to guide in this separation? As yet Soroush has not provided any further comment. However, Mohammed Shabestari, a cleric who shares many of Sorouh’s ideas, has articulated more clearly this boundary between what is purely religious and the human understanding of religion.77

A second and related criticism articulated by Boroujerdi revolves around Sorouh’s apparent oversight to the differences between religion as a worldview and science as an approach to understanding.78 Soroush’s methodology includes the use of various human sciences as a means to better understand religion. However, religion seeks to comprehend the world a priori while science comes to the world a posteriori. Religion arrives with a packaged set of answers to the questions of mankind’s relation to the world and to God. However, the interpretation and understanding of these answers does vary which is precisely the point Sorouh emphasizes. Science comes to nature with questions using deduction and observation to distil facts where-as religion interprets revealed texts to determine knowledge and belief. One tests various hypotheses while the other measures human life against a revealed, divine theory. The criticism follows that these two approaches come to questions from different directions and while religion and science are not mutually exclusive one cannot simply adopt the scientific approach to religion nor vice versa. However, in defence of Sorouh, he is merely saying that one’s understanding of religion cannot be separated and incompatible with one’s understanding of nature and the material sciences. The criticism Boroujerdi makes has some validity, but Sorouh’s methodology is not overly taxed. In fact, if anything, it potentially becomes stronger as the methodology is further elaborated to account for such criticism.

Two other critiques to be mentioned here come from the clerical establishment who have vigorously opposed Sorouh. Their main challenges deal primarily with the applications of his methodology, but they also do not ignore the methodology itself. These argue that Sorouh’s view that fiqh is epistemologically related to the other sciences confuses fiqh and philosophy,

75 Boroujerdi, Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism, 173.
77 Shabestari asserts that the primary function of revelation is to communicate divine values, not laws. His approach is not through natural sciences, but theology although he does utilize the social sciences. Cooper, “The Limits of the Sacred: The Epistemology of ‘Abd al-Karim Sorouh,” 49.
which occupy different domains. Simply stated, philosophy and fiqh employ different methodologies. By confusing the two, Soroush faces the real danger of raising human science above the word of God. Philosophical knowledge is reached through the application of human wisdom whereas religion and fiqh are realised through divine revelation and conviction. For the clerics the main fear, however, rests upon the implications of Soroush’s theory. The requirement of the use of all human sciences in the interpretation of fiqh would entail the loss of authority for the seminary educated clerical specialists as the “guardians of interpretation” and thus ultimately undermine their authority in governing society.

Critics such as Reza Davari, who is a professor of the history of Modern Philosophy at Tehran University, have echoed the critique of clerics by questioning Soroush’s and to a lesser extent Shabestari’s use of western ideas. They charge that the use of the falsification principle of Karl Raimund Popper, the research programmes’ concept by Imre Lakatos and Carl G. Hempel’s paradox confirmation undermine the canons of Islamic faith. The steady transformation and interconnectivity of all sciences as posited by Popper leads to a relativity of knowledge and ultimately to scepticism. The traditionalists argue that when these theories are applied, they subject the Shari‘ah to ever changing hermeneutical interpretations leading to uncertainty, even a state of “anarchy.” A detailed discussion of Popper, Lakatos and Hempel’s theories exceeds our purposes, but are mentioned to illustrate the complexity of the critiques of Soroush’s methodology. It is interesting to note that Soroush himself corrects the view that he even relied on Popper. He commented:

... contrary to popular belief, it was not Popper’s but Quine’s theories on the philosophy of science that guided my explorations of the philosophy of religion.

79 Ibid., 170.
80 Popper’s falsification principle proposes that the criterion of demarcation between science and pseudoscience is not empirical verifiability, but falsifiability by observation. In short, Popper considers only those theoretical assertions whose nature allows them to be falsified as convincing. Imre Lakatos, a Hungarian disciple of Popper, argued that science progresses more gradually than Popper’s theory. Lakatos maintains that in the scientific community one deals with a series (or succession) of theories rather than with one isolated theory. These theories are interconnected within a web of research programmes. Thus, science is compared to a battleground of competing research programmes where progress is achieved bit by bit as one advances from one research programme to another. See Karl Raimund Popper, The Open Society and Its Enemies (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Imre Lakatos, The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes, eds. John Warroll and Gregory Currie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Carl G. Hempel, Aspects of Scientific Explanation, and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science (New York: Free Press, 1965).
81 Boroujerdi, Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism, 169.
And I reveal here for the first time. Quine is a philosopher of logic who is still alive and is the focus of much critical attention. His theory is that all science is interconnected and, as such, judged as a whole, not as a collection of individual discrete theories, in the tribunal sense. This is the opposite of Popper’s thought. Popper, in essence, believes in individual theories appearing, one by one, in the court of experimentation to be assessed by the principle of falsifiability. It was Lakatos who, with the help of Quine’s ideas, developed the notion of “research programs” in science: a whole family of theories, organized in a research program, enter judgment’s court. In my book *Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge*, I have based one of my main arguments on this thesis. … This thesis poses the question whether there is such a thing as religious knowledge with a collective nature; my answer is affirmative.82

There remains much to discuss concerning Soroush’s epistemology and methodology and one final critique will be examined before offering a conclusion.

Resting his critique primarily if not exclusively upon Soroush’s English article written in 1998, Hamid Vahid challenges the very premises of Soroush’s ideas as invalid and proposes the theory of evolution and devolution of knowledge ultimately collapses into a form of religious nonrealism.83 Vahid summarizes Soroush’s theory calling it the Argument consisting of three assertions or premises namely observation is theory-laden, meaning (interpretation) is theory-laden and presuppositions are age-bound and are in flux.84 He goes on to argue that the first two premises are invalid and that meaning as theory-laden does not necessarily follow observation as theory-laden.85 Despite this, Vahid attempts to follow Soroush’s theory to its logical conclusions and finds that he must reject this theory for two reasons. First, Soroush postulates that religion is silent by which he means that the voice of revelation cannot be heard without the activity of religious knowledge. If there is no human engagement with revelation through presuppositions and theories of understanding, which are in constant flux, then essentially religion is voiceless.86 However, later in Soroush’s article Vahid points out that Soroush himself repudiates the idea that religion is silent by stating that religion is nothing but the history of the science of religion and that the

84 Ibid., 44; Soroush, “Evolution and Devolution,” 245f.
85 Vahid, “Islamic Humanism,” 44–47.
distinction between religion and religious knowledge is not really existent.\textsuperscript{87} The second reason for rejecting the theory was previously under critical assessment namely that Soroush holds that interpretation must be consistent with current knowledge. Thus, it appears that he is placing revelation under the authority of human understanding. In other words, as Vahid writes, if an interpretation is incompatible with theories of today, whether in science, philosophy or social sciences, then it must be rejected.\textsuperscript{88} This is not the place to address Vahid’s critiques beyond noting a few comments. Firstly, Soroush does not seem to derive meaning from observation as Vahid writes. The comparison Soroush makes is between observation and the text and not observation and meaning.\textsuperscript{89} Observation is influenced and coloured by theories and presuppositions while the text must be interpreted within a context and is also subject to theory. Secondly, Vahid claims that according to Soroush religion parallels nature,\textsuperscript{90} but Soroush does not appear to say this. The comparison made is that people are fallible and therefore our understanding of both nature and religion suffer imperfections requiring constant learning and application of new insights. To be clear, Soroush writes:

\begin{quote}
We are fallible human beings and that is our lot from Truth. The case of religion is no better than the case of nature. There also we are captives of our humanity. No human science is sacred, the science of religion being no exception. But of course, the revelation itself is different. Therefore the dichotomy of the revelation/interpretation should be kept intact.\textsuperscript{91}
\end{quote}

Finally, the argument that Soroush’s theory potentially leads to human wisdom being raised above revelation is valid if one takes this to mean that interpretation is subject to human understanding. However, one can anticipate Soroush’s rejoinder with the query how else can humanity understand revelation without using human reason, which is influenced and limited by humanness. Of course Sufi thought would offer a different solution where apprehension is a matter of the spirit, but this takes one too far a field from the current discussion.

\textsuperscript{87} Vahid, “Islamic Humanism,” 52f., also see Soroush, “Evolution and Devolution,” 248.
\textsuperscript{88} Vahid, “Islamic Humanism,” 53.
\textsuperscript{89} He writes: “In the same sense [as observation] and exactly for the same reasons, one can say that the text does not stand alone, it does not carry its own meaning on its shoulders, it needs to be situated in a context, it is theory-laden, its interpretation is in flux, and presuppositions are as actively at work here as elsewhere in the field of understanding.” Soroush, “Evolution and Devolution,” 245.
\textsuperscript{90} Vahid, “Islamic Humanism,” 49.
\textsuperscript{91} Soroush, “Evolution and Devolution,” 251.
Conclusion

Despite some critiques, Soroush’s theory appears well suited to bridge the gap between the divine nature of religion and its appropriation by humans. However, the ultimate value of his work may not rest within his theories, but in their practical applications. In other words, does the methodology that Soroush proposes actually work in our real pragmatic world whether under Shi'i or Sunni thought. Further, one can ask: does Soroush offer anything really new that is beyond the observations of other Muslim philosophers and jurists who have also noted the distinction between change and constancy in religion? It is to these matters that this article will conclude.

It is the intent of Soroush not merely to introduce and elaborate his theory of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge, but also to see his ideas applied in such diverse areas as political theory, including the twin issues of human rights and democracy, along with fiqh, clerical authority in contemporary Iran and Islamic reform and revival. How then does Soroush actually apply his theory? Specifically, what does he mean by religious knowledge as something that constantly changes? Soroush defines religious knowledge as simply a form of knowledge like any other form of knowledge, which, however, is concerned with religious truth. Of this knowledge he writes:

It is human, fallible, evolving, and most important of all, it is constantly changing in the process of exchange with other forms of knowledge. As such its inevitable transformations mirror transformations of science and other domains of human knowledge.

It is neither sacred nor divine and there is no final authoritative interpretation, but only the process of greater understanding within the contexts of today’s concerns and requirements. In practical terms, religious knowledge seeks to understand and apply religious truth and implies that the practitioner has faith in these truths as divinely and immutably given (Religion) and is willing to use whatever information is available to reach the goal of understanding (Theory of contraction and expansion of religious knowledge). Such information is constantly being advanced and expanded in the natural and social sciences. Soroush argues that religious knowledge, like scientific knowledge, is open to testing, validation, advancement and change. Truth does not change only the

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92 This is not an exhaustive list of applications. A sampling of his many articles includes topics such as morality, ethics, the philosophies of religion and science, secularism, modernism and the relationship between pietism and rationalism.

depth and quality of its apprehension. Therefore, under this definition and distinction between religious knowledge and religion, the theory Soroush advocates seems applicable to juridical knowledge as well as to other forms of knowledge such as are found in philosophy and mysticism. This can be clarified with some examples.

For the sake of brevity only two examples will be discussed. The first is in the field of political theory and the role of jurisprudence. Soroush has written a great deal on this topic and it would seem prudent to analyse the use of his methodology in an area which is of obvious concern to him.94 The one caveat for the moment is that Soroush is writing within Iran and applying his ideas to this religious and political environment. Essentially, Soroush dismisses Islam as a political ideology because such an ideology is based upon one interpretation of Islam and under his methodology there is no final authoritative interpretation. Therefore, no understanding of Islam is ever complete or final and no religious government can rule on the basis of an official Islamic political ideology because such an official ideology simply does not exist. One immediate application is that because jurisprudence (fiqh) is subject to the theory of the flux in religious knowledge, it cannot be the sole basis for a political government because fiqh is but one contributor to the understanding of religious truth. It is neither the final arbitrator nor is it the only source. This, of course, means for Soroush and his methodology that the clergy of jurisconsults are in no position to draft and dictate what is and is not the official Imāmī Shi‘ī government.95 However, since the concept of religious knowledge, as apparently presented by Soroush, is a part of the history of the human understanding of religion, one may wonder how his method would work in the presence of an Imāmī Shi‘ī Imām. The Imām by definition is infallible and renders the official interpretation that the community requires. In his presence would the theory of religious knowledge work or would one consider that for an Imām religious knowledge collapses into religion (or


95 It is recognised that this requires a great deal more elaboration. However, this is not the place to discuss in detail Soroush’s political theories in relation to his methodology of religious knowledge. For more detailed works one can see Vakili, Debating Religion and Politics in Iran; Soroush, “The Idea of Democratic Religious Government;” Idem, “Tolerance and Governance: A Discourse on Religion and Democracy.”
religious truth) such that they become synonymous. Since the twelfth Imām is in occultation, this line of discourse is of course theoretical and in his absence the application of the concept of religious knowledge remains. However, as mentioned earlier, one must ask who exactly is qualified to practice the theory of the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge in relation to political theory? The Shi‘ī clerics according to Soroush are generally not conversant with the contributions of sources of knowledge beyond fiqh and their traditions. Philosophers or university-trained technocrats are equally limited to expertise in their own respective fields. Thus, Soroush needs to provide more detailed and practical information as to how his theory works in the realm of politics such as who are qualified to participate in applying his theory to government and what criteria are to be employed in measuring the quality of competing interpretations. This is in addition to the many questions that arise regarding his desire to see religious government operate by preserving human rights along with free choice combined with the Shi‘ah faith. Unfortunately, as one seeks to flesh out the skeleton of his theory, one finds just how difficult it is to apply his ideas to politics.

The second example of an application of Soroush’s theory is mysticism. Soroush uses the writings of Rūmī, Mullā Šadrā (d. 1050/1640) and other mystical thinkers liberally in his writings. In fact he acknowledges:

My first and foremost attempt to understand the essence of religion originates in the works of Rumi. .... I ultimately realized that there is such a thing as an individual religion based on personal experiences, whose teacher is Rumi, just as there is such a thing as a collective religion which is what shari‘ah and fiqh teach and which is al-Ghazzali’s domain.96

The practice of religious knowledge would seem to work quite well with Rūmī, Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240), Mullā Šadrā and other mystics. Their interpretations are not presented as the only baqīqat (truth) nor even proscribed as necessarily the best way. Their ways are based upon mystical apprehension of spiritual truths using a form of religious knowledge based upon the inner experience with the divine. If anything, their writings become part of the collective inheritance of Muslim religious knowledge and form another component or access point into religious truth. It appears in part this is the way Sorouh has expropriated their contributions and there does not appear to be any contradiction with the theory of religious knowledge.

Beyond the world of Shi‘ism and mystics, one could argue that the ideas of Sorouh are already present within Sunnī Islam. For example, there are four

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recognised schools of law, not one official school, and the gate of *ijtihād* has
never really been closed implying the continuing need to interpret law for the
requirements of each generation. 97 The Islamic reform and revival movements
of the twentieth century clearly show a willingness to engage new ideas and
examine the old within the contexts of re-understanding and re-applying the
truths of Islam. Thus, one could argue that the application of religious
knowledge as Soroush has explained has been, in certain ways, underway for
quite some time. So, in this sense one may well ask if he offers anything really
new or is Soroush merely a later voice in this ongoing process. Certainly he
has sought to expand the sources of religious knowledge to include the
contributions of natural and human sciences. This, in itself, is not new.
However, the main distinctive quality Soroush brings to this discussion is his
adamant distinction between religious knowledge and religion particularly
within Shi‘ism. 98

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98 Soroush writes: “The missing link in the endeavors of the revivalists and reformers of the past
is the distinction between religion and religious knowledge. They failed to recognize religious
knowledge as a variety of human knowledge.” Soroush, “Islamic Revival and Reform,” 30.