

Chapter 4: The Issue of Religious Pluralism

The goal of this chapter is to unpack Soroush's soteriology. As a by-product of this theological study, it will also present Soroush's groundbreaking epistemological pluralism (his theory of religious epistemology)—the fact that he endorses a plurality of truths as opposed to a singular truth.¹ As we shall see, there are arguably two main examples of Soroush's dedication to the idea of pluralism: one, that he finds the bases for social / national / ethnic unities to be at best unstable, and two, that he supports a fragmented and decentered self and multiple and conflicting identities. Both are crucial in fact for understanding his theory of religion.

Although religious pluralism is the main issue at hand, the chapter will also pursue examples of Soroush's positions on social and cultural pluralism as they emerge along the way. Since pluralist tendencies have become a hallmark of the postmodern condition, such diversions away from the main thread of the chapter's argument on eschatological theology into Soroush's socio-cultural thought seem justified in the hope of further acknowledging him as a postmodern thinker. This chapter ends with a glimpse at a hermeneutic innovation about which Ricœur and de Certeau have theorized, and which help us understand how Soroush's writings on pluralism mimic his own theory. These writings are hybrid and pluralistic in nature, and this hybridity has a strangely transformative effect on his audience. The discourse of religious pluralism championed by Soroush and rejected by Kadivar thus emerges in this optic as yet another example of how Soroush speaks from a postmodern position, while Kadivar enters the conversation from the edges of orthodoxy.

Before I move to the core of my argument, let me begin this chapter by presenting short introductions to Western scholarship on the topics of 1) religious pluralism and the classical understandings of the finality of Islam and the Prophet, and 2) the place of the *'umma* in relation to "other" people of the Book. These beginnings will allow me to pursue the debate between

¹ Ghamari-Tabrizi states that, in the famous debate between Soroush and Kadivar, "Soroush stood for plurality of truths and Kadivar for the unity of truth" (*Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran* [London: I.B. Tauris, 2008], 225).

Kadivar and Soroush, as well as their other writings, in more nuanced ways. In similar ways, the allusions to Soroush's socio-cultural pluralistic tendencies throughout this chapter help to profile what is at stake in their respective views on religious pluralism and the future of Islam.

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

As calls for global human rights increase, the discussion about religious diversity and the responses to it have also turned global during the last fifty years. The observable realities of religious diversity throughout the world beckon religious scholars of all persuasions to ask questions of the following nature: Does the reality of the apparent religious diversity require a response to justify belief in any single creed? Can a person who acknowledges religious diversity remain justified in claiming just a single perspective as correct? Can it justifiably be claimed that only one religion offers a path into the eternal presence of God? Is it justifiable to claim that, although a few other religions offer a path to God, that one's own religion is still the best means of attaining salvation? Answers to these questions are relevant not just to the academic study of religions; the responses to these questions have come to increasingly impact how we treat others, both personally and on a global level. According to Ghamari-Tabrizi, it is exactly the emergence of such non-academic questions into the Islamic world that have driven Soroush to engage in the topic.²

Most authors in this field work with three models that show what is at stake when one religion contemplates its reaction to these questions: religious *exclusivism*, religious *inclusivism*, and religious *pluralism*.³ No matter the difference in scholarly approach, there seems to be some general agreement about the concepts of exclusivism and inclusivism. Exclusivism is the view that one religion has it mostly right, while all the other religions go seriously wrong. An exclusivist Jew or Christian would therefore consider Islam not as a continuation of the Abrahamic message but as a false religion. In clarifying their exclusivist Christian positions, for

² Ibid., 224.

³ For further information on these divisions, see Chad Meister and Paul Copan, eds., *Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (2010).

instance, Alston and Plantinga claim that epistemic obligation requires an awareness of the seeming religious diversity, and that this awareness does in fact have an impact on an exclusivist, which can range from causing minor uneasiness to significantly reducing the believer's level of confidence in the truth of certain beliefs to even causing belief abandonment.⁴ In contrast, inclusivists believe that religions or sects other than one's own carry some amount of the truth, of which the complete version is nonetheless found in one's own doctrine.

The third model, pluralism, however, has been subject to growing debate as a much more complex epistemological claim. To nuance such discussions of pluralism, a recent work by Paul Knitter is useful for summing up the various theological trends in addressing pluralism and classifying Christian approaches to it. Knitter posits four models to capture various dynamics in a pluralistic religious framework: *replacement*, *fulfillment*, *mutuality* and *acceptance*; he touches on a fifth category but does not actually categorize it, as he describes essentially what Anthony, Hermans and Sterkens refer to in a similar study as *relativistic pluralism*.⁵ Each of these models shows trade-offs of authority, belief, and credibility in cultural fields considered pluralist.

For the present study, it is critical to note that Soroush specifically denies agreeing with the elements of this fifth category, thus making it crucial to understanding the very specific thrust of his work. Therefore, I will also include Anthony, Herman and Sterkens' designation of relativistic pluralism as I now turn to discuss Knitter's categories. As I read them, Knitter's replacement and fulfillment models coincide with the respective, traditional definitions of exclusivism and inclusivism outlined above. The mutuality model (i.e., the first kind of pluralism Knitter addresses) presents a kind of pluralistic encounter among religions based on underlying, often amorphous, commonalities.

The person who best represents Knitter's model of plurality defined as mutuality is John Hick, who is incidentally the most influential proponent of religious pluralism. At the heart of

⁴ William P. Alston "Religious Diversity and the Perceptual Knowledge of God," *Faith and Philosophy* 5 (1988): 442–46; Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 189.

⁵ Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002).

Hick's pluralistic hypothesis is his assertion that an Ultimate Reality, which he calls "the Real," is the actual ground for all religious experience.⁶ Hick resolves the dilemma of the diversity and contradiction between the different conceptions of the Real in different religions by borrowing from Kant. According to Hick, Kant "distinguish[ed] explicitly between an entity as it is in itself and as it appears in perception."⁷ Hick applies Kant's distinction to religious phenomena and proposes a distinction between the Real (as it actually exists) and the Real as perceived and experienced by individuals within a particular tradition.⁸ Therefore, the reason that individual religious traditions have conflicting conceptions of the Real is that none of them has direct access to it. Rather, all perceptions of the Real are mediated through a unique religious tradition which acts as a conceptual lens.

Putting his hypothesis into the Abrahamic context, Hick proposes that each concrete "historical divine personality—Jahweh, the heavenly Father, the qur'anic Allah—is a joint product of the universal divine presence and a particular historically formed mode of constructive religious imagination."⁹ In other words, religious beliefs come partially from experience of the Real and partially from one's own imagination. Knitter's apt critique of Hick's model is that "this model tends to disregard the fact that common grounds are often identified from the perspective of one's own religious framework."¹⁰ Referring to Hick's body of work, Soroush rejects his disregard for difference in *The Expansion of the Prophetic Experience*, stating:

The historical existence of religions is indisputable, but the existence of a common essence or spirit among them is more open to dispute; in fact, it is virtually impossible to prove. Religions are not individual instances of a universal known as "religion" and, rather than having a common quidity, they simply bear a family resemblance, like the

⁶ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 2005).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 236.

⁹ John Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), 159.

¹⁰ Francis-Vincent Anthony, et al., "Interpreting Religious Pluralism: Comparative Research among Christian, Muslim and Hindu Students in Tamil Nadu, India," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 18 (2005): 157.

members of a family whose eyes, eyebrows, mouth, cheekbones and figures are more or less alike, but have no common core.¹¹

The second of Knitter's models for pluralism, the acceptance model, is, as Knitter says, "characteristic of the postmodern era and underscores that differences between religions are real and that their particularities are opportunities for reciprocal enrichment and growth . . . This model espouses the fact that 'the many' *cannot* be melted into one."¹² It insists that if we seek to remove diversity, as Hick's system suggests we should, we will end up destroying the vitality of religions altogether. Knitter identifies three different perspectives within the acceptance model:

1. *Post-liberal, cultural-linguistic perspective*

George Lindbeck, who launched this trend, claims that religious experience is shaped by religious language. Our experience, Knitter suggests, is determined by the common religious language. Religions cannot claim to give us a clue about ultimate reality according to this outlook; they only serve as a framework for understanding everything else by setting up a common language.¹³

2. *Plurality of ultimate perspective*

Represented by S. Mark Heim, this perspective holds that differences between religions are not just language-deep; rather, they reach into the very soul of religions. Difference in religions may also point to differences in the Divine Ultimate. Real differences between religions present the potentiality for us to learn something new.¹⁴

3. *Comparative theological perspective*

Represented by Francis X. Clooney and James L. Fredericks, this perspective claims that the foundations for a theology of religions are to be found in dialogue rather than in theology. One must be committed to one's own religion but at the same time open to the fact that there might be truths to be found in other religions also. Comparative theologians, Fredericks claims, "are open to the tensions arising from 'double claims' . . .

¹¹ Soroush, *EPE*, 67.

¹² Knitter, 45.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

between our commitment to the Christian tradition, on the one hand, and at the same time to the allure of other religious traditions.”¹⁵

These three complementary perspectives on the acceptance model underline the importance of religious diversity and tend to downplay any assertions of the importance of common underlying elements. Soroush’s position falls generally within this acceptance model and seems specifically closest to the *plurality of ultimate perspective* category. Soroush argues for a plurality of truths, but does he, like Heim, hold that differences between religions point to differences in the Divine Ultimate? This difference will require independent attention to Soroush’s position to demonstrate how, albeit postmodern in nature, his position is different from all of the ones delineated by Knitter. Soroush's pluralism is not of the kind represented in the work of these other theorists.

In Chapter 6 of Soroush’s *Expansion of the Prophetic Experience*, a chapter which earlier had comprised his introductory essay to *Serāṭhā-ye Mustaqīm [Straight Paths to God]*¹⁶ (1998), Soroush accepts Hick’s rendition of religious pluralism as an “authentic plurality”¹⁷ and one of the many ways Rumi had justified religious pluralism. Soroush surpasses Hick, however, to introduce other, more important “pillars underpinning plurality”¹⁸ via a systematic and repeated unveiling of sections of Rumi’s *Masnawi*.¹⁹ Why Rumi? Because, according to Soroush, “Rumi must be given the last word” on the topic of plurality:

I emphasize Rumi’s work on this subject, first because I consider him to be the Seal of the Mystics (*khātam al-`urafā*) and, secondly, because I find his manner of expression the sweetest and most telling.²⁰

¹⁵ Knitter, 169.

¹⁶ *Sirāṭ al-Mustaqīm* is a qur’ānic term that means “straight path.” In an Islamic context it has been interpreted as the “right path” or the “path of truth” (i.e., the way which pleases God). By pluralizing the word “path” Soroush in effect says that there is more than one path to God. According to Ghamari-Tabrizi, “by pluralizing the Qur’anic phrase ‘Straight Path,’ Soroush broke both modernist and orthodox traditions of Islamic theology” (*Islam and Dissent in Postrevolutionary Iran*, 224).

¹⁷ Soroush, *EPE*, 133.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁹ The *Masnawi* (also *Mathnawi*) is Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi’s (1207-1273 A.D.) magnum opus. It is one of the most widely known and influential works of both Sufi and Persian literatures and is sometimes referred to as the second Qur’ān. It is a series of six books of poetry totaling about 25,000 verses, or 50,000 lines. It is a spiritual writing that teaches Sufis how to reach their goal of achieving union with God. (Jalalu’ddin Rumi, *Masnawi*, ed. and trans. Reynold A. Nicholson, 8 vols. (London: Messrs Luzac & Co., 1925-1940).

²⁰ Soroush, *EPE*, 127.

Soroush begins by using Rumi's wisdom to defy orthodoxy, which is a commonplace in Islam. In this account, orthodoxy has only ever considered the religions of the Book (i.e., those which fall within the Abrahamic tradition) worthy of explication and to that end has maintained that the reason for successive versions of God's word has been due to evolutionary necessity and corruption. Humanity was not ready for Qur'ān until the seventh century A.D. Each period has seen a message, commensurate with the understanding of the people of its time. Another classical reason given for the existence of successive versions of Abraham's religion is corruption. Earlier versions underwent distortions and alterations and consequently a readjustment of the word was needed and granted by God.

Soroush says that religious diversity "is not just a matter of changing social conditions or of one religion being distorted and then being replaced by another."²¹ Utilizing Rumi's use of the term *manzar* (perspective, or point of view), Soroush introduces the first pillar on which Rumi's theory of religious pluralism stands. Soroush proposes an independent approach to pluralism when he cites *Masnavi* 3:1256: "From the place of view (*manzar*), O (thou who are the) kernel of Existence, there arises the difference between the true believer [Muslim] and the Zoroastrian and the Jew."²² Rumi says, according to Soroush, that "the difference between these three does not lie in any disagreement over the truth and falsehood, but precisely in the difference between their perspectives; and not in the perspectives of the believers at that, but in the perspectives of their *prophets* [emphasis added]," since it is the prophets that initially introduce the religion to the people and it is they who are the reference by which standards are set.²³

As I demonstrated in Chapter 3 of this dissertation, the importance placed on the prophets' role in defining their religions runs through Soroush's work: "There was only one multidimensional truth and the prophet's viewed it from three different angles . . . and these view points [sic] are all one and the same."²⁴ Soroush gives Rumi's perspectival theory further depth.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 127-28.

Rumi's allegory of how a group of people formed different impressions of an elephant in the dark shows that there are many versions of the same ultimate reality (to borrow a term from Hick) out there but none of those renditions are complete. What Rumi is trying to tell us, Soroush says, is that "we are all groping in the dark" but will "never grasp reality in its entirety . . . everyone sees that reality and understands it to some extent and from a particular angle, and they describe it to exactly that extent."²⁵ This same sentiment is also found in the first few lines of the *Masnavi*, thought to hold the main message of the work at large: "the breath which the flute-player puts into the flute—does it belong to the flute? No, it belongs to the man (the flute-player)."²⁶ Soroush adds, "We are all flutes held against the lips of truth, and truth breathes into us. And even if we were flutes with mouthpieces 'as wide as the universe,' we would still be too narrow for the truth to tell its full tale."²⁷

Soroush admits that Hick "makes this same point but using the Kantian noumena/phenomena²⁸ distinction."²⁹ Hick's use of Kant revolves around the concept of antinomies. Kant's antinomies of pure reason can be used to show why we are unable to effectively compare religions. To be able to prove that my religion has more truth content than yours, it is necessary to reach beyond the perspective of personal beliefs into a vantage point from which the totality of all religions can be surveyed. This is equivalent to stepping out of the *noumenal* and into the *phenomenal* realm in order to judge the noumenal as the realm of creation. Comparing religions, an activity belonging to the phenomenal world, creates a Kantian antinomy.

Starting from this epistemological assertion, Soroush begins his debate with Kadivar by highlighting this same antinomy, suggesting that the human mind is unable to determine the

²⁵ Ibid., 128.

²⁶ *Masnavi*, 2:1783.

²⁷ Soroush, *EPE*, 128. The parable of Moses and the Shepherd (*Masnavi* 1:1720-1815) is yet another example of the same outlook.

²⁸ The *noumenon* is an object or event that cannot be known with the use of the senses. The term is used in contrast to *phenomenon*, which refers to anything that appears to, or is an object of, the senses.

²⁹ Hick, 146-63.

superiority of any one religion. To have a scientific discussion about religion, it is necessary to carry on religious debates from a scientific and extra-religious standpoint.³⁰ This was a radical enough statement in itself in the Islamic Republic of Iran, but Soroush goes even further to suggest that even engaging in extra-religious debate soon uncovers the fact that it is patently impossible to make any definitive claims about religion, regardless of one's epistemological position. "Belief assessment in the face of religious diversity will never resolve debate over conflicting religious perspectives in an objective manner."³¹ In other words, if we assume that issues of self-consistency and comprehensiveness have been taken care of, there exists no set of criteria that will allow us to resolve most religious epistemic disputes (either between or within religious perspectives) in a way that is neutral and does not end up "begging the question."³²

But Soroush does not agree with Hick's position, calling it a kind of "negative pluralism," a kind of pluralism where "something is always lacking."³³ Soroush prefers "positive pluralism," a pluralism that is based on the belief that "existing alternatives and rival [religions] are unique in kind and irreducible."³⁴ It is for this purpose that he gives more value to Rumi's second pillar of understanding religious pluralism. Soroush calls this second pillar "the immersion of truth within truths," "the heart and kernel" of Rumi's stance on religious pluralism.³⁵ In *Masnavi* 6:1636 Rumi says, "Nay, the truth is absorbed in the truth; hence seventy, nay, hundred sects have arisen."³⁶ Soroush interprets this verse of the *Masnavi* to mean:

The subdivisions of religions into sects and the multiplicity and plurality of religions themselves [do] not lie in distortions, conspiracies, the ill doings of ill-wishers, the falsifications of falsifiers or the infidelity of the infidels (although no creed is free from

³⁰ Extra-religious knowledge is knowledge contained in the natural and social sciences and the humanities.

³¹ Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohsen Kadivar, *Pulūrālīsm-e dīnī: munāzīreh-e Duktur `Abdolkarīm Surūsh va Hujjat al-Islām Muḥsin Kadīvar [Religious Pluralism: A Debate between Abdolkarim Soroush and Hojjat al-Islam Mohsen Kadivar]* (Tehran: Rūznāmeḥ-i Salām, 1999), 12.

³² "Begging the question" is a logical fallacy in which the proposition to be proven is assumed implicitly or explicitly in the premise. Kadivar argues that Islam is the final and most complete religion and is the best way to salvation because the Qur'ān and the Prophet tell him so. For more on this position in the Christian context see: Michael Peterson, et al., *Reason and Religious Belief* (2002), especially pp. 40-53.

³³ Soroush, *EPE*, 137.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.

³⁶ *Masnavi* 6:1636

any of these things). The division and subdivision of religions is not a question of the accumulation of deviation upon deviation, Rumi maintains, but the product of the labyrinthine nature of the truth and the immersion of truths within truths. He teaches us that it is the accumulation of truths and their intricate interconnectedness and the difficulty of choosing between these truths that leads to authentic and unavoidable diversity. It is imperative to take this point to heart, to alter one's view and aspect, and, instead of seeing the world as consisting of one straight line plus hundreds of crooked and broken lines, to see it as consisting of an aggregate of straight lines which meet, run parallel and overlap: truths immersed in truths. And does the fact that the Qur'an describes the prophets as following a right path—in other words, moving along *one* of the straight paths and not *the* straight path—not substantiate this [emphasis in original]?³⁷

The Qur'ānic verses Soroush is referring to above are those addressing Abraham and Muhammad: "He rendered thanks for His favors, so that He chose him and guided him to a straight path [*ilā širāṭin mustaqīm*]" (Q 16:121); "by the Wise Qur'ān that you are sent upon a straight path [*alā širāṭin mustaqīm*]" (Q 36:3-4); "that He may guide you to a path that is straight [*yahdīka širāṭan mustaqīmā*]" (Q 48:20). Although there might be many more verses in the Qur'ān that speak to the existence of a straight path than there are ones that contain the term "the straight path," two of the most widely recited verses that form part of the daily prayer clearly point to what seems to be a unitary path (*al-širāṭ al-mustaqīm*):

Ihdinā al-širāṭ al-mustaqīm širāṭ al-ladhīna an'amta `alayhim ghayr al-maghḍūb `alayhim wa la dālīn [Lead us on the straight path, the path of those on whom Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace, those whose portion is not wrath, and who go not astray] (Q 1:6-7).

Soroush unfortunately does not explain how he dismisses what seems to be a designated singular path in the very first verses of the Qur'ān.

But what does the existence of many truths really mean? Soroush says that he "has consented to plurality and accepted it," and acquiesces that there is "no other alternative" because "religious texts and experiences naturally admit of a multitude of interpretations," that "reality is intricate and multifaceted" and that "divine providence and protectiveness dictate multiplicity and rivalry."³⁸ In other words, reality is made in such a way that every non-imitating believer who searches for an answer will have alternative readings of the divine and that these

³⁷ Ibid., 136.

³⁸ Ibid.

“existing alternatives and rivals” to our own religious views “are unique in kind and irreducible. None of them can be swallowed up or dissolved by any others, and each of them has incommensurable particularities; like multiple, correct, irreducible answers to a single question.”³⁹ Does this mean that there are an infinite many number of valid readings? Have we stepped into a Nietzschean world within which there exist an unlimited number of interpretations? Does Soroush’s postmodernism in some ways resemble deconstructivism in its conclusion that any text “may include infinite interpretations”? When Soroush says, “Every rational thinker has their own conception of religion, that is to say their own understanding of God, the Prophet, revelation, felicity, wretchedness, sin and obedience; an understanding that belongs to that believer alone, [resulting] from their reflections and [subject] to constant questioning and revision”⁴⁰ does he mean to say that *any* view of the core concepts of Islam are acceptable? If this were true he would not advise us, as Rumi does, to proceed on the path of this rational and discursive religiosity without a master. It is the master that determines what is permissible and what is not. Soroush states,

It is true that guidance is impossible without a guide; nevertheless, this guide may operate visibly or invisibly. He may be near or far. Be that as it may, his business is assistance. We must keep our eyes fixed on the ultimate destination (*viz.* salvation), for the starting point and the journey do not matter much here and do not have their own laws.⁴¹

That is, there is a correct path and an incorrect path. Although there are a multitude of paths, there is only one destination and not all paths lead us to the goal.

The nature of acceptable paths becomes even clearer as Soroush turns again to Rumi for help. A guide is needed but we are not always aware of the guide’s presence. Rumi advises a friend who had come to him for advice to “seek a master and warns him against embarking alone in the spiritual journey’s fearsome trail,” Soroush writes. He continues:

[Rumi] considers it impossible to travel this road without the assistance and effort of masters, and adds that, even people who seem to have had no master and have

³⁹ Soroush, *EPE*, 137.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 138.

nonetheless managed, in rare instances, to get somewhere, have secretly benefited from the solicitude of an unseen master and have supped at the table of an invisible but hospitable guide.⁴²

"The starting point and the journey do not matter," which is also clear from Rumi's allegory of the camel. The story can be summarized as follows: A man loses his camel and as a result spends his days searching for it. At times, he finds a sign from his lost camel, and that encourages and assures him that the camel can eventually be found. At other times, hearing news that is potentially negative makes him go weak in the knees. Another person, in imitation and without actually having lost a camel, walks in the first person's footsteps. Like him, the imitator tries to locate his camel by asking others. The true seeker and the false imitator continue for a while until finally the lost camel is reunited with its owner. But, lo and behold, the imitator finds that next to the true seeker's camel stands another camel, at which point he says, "My evil deeds have become pious acts entirely—thanks [to God]! Jest is vanished and earnest realized thanks [to God]! Since my evil deeds have become the means to [my] attaining unto God, do not then throw any blame on my evil deeds."⁴³

By "all roads" Soroush understands Rumi to mean that "the true and the false both lead to guidance (*hidāyat*) and deliverance (*nijāt*). God will take any honest student of the righteous path by the hand and deliver them to the destination. The honest for sure, but even the dishonest who is nonetheless looking, is not left without her or his share and portion of divine mercy and pardon. The insistence here is on the 'sincerity of the seeker' and the existence of the 'unseen guide' instead of the path and a visible, religious guide."⁴⁴

As for the last category, Knitter only points out that "relativists are people for whom the notion of truth is either so broad, or so diversified, or so distant, that they can't ever trust themselves to know whether they, or anyone, really have the truth."⁴⁵ This is what Anthony, Hermans and Sterkens call *relativistic pluralism*. In the relativistic pluralism model, all religions

⁴² Ibid., 138.

⁴³ Ibid., 1:3005-08.

⁴⁴ Soroush, *EPE*, 139.

⁴⁵ Knitter, 16.

are held to be of equal value and significance, irrespective of common or different elements among them.

Relativism is in fact what Kadivar accuses Soroush of during their debate:

What I wanted to show is that believing in antinomies in religious matters is incompatible with the core of our Shī'ī beliefs. Also, when we speak of the text it isn't true that all parts of the text have many interpretations. Some do but one cannot argue that all verses do. It is not possible to beat everything in the Book and *Sunna* with the same stick of inextricable ambiguity (*ibhām-e nāzudūdānī*). To be able to say that everything in Islam is a text and that, as a result, it can be read multiple ways just opens the door to absolute relativism.⁴⁶

When asked about the issue in an interview published in *Şerāṭha-ye Mustaqīm* (later published in *The Expansion of the Prophetic Experience*), Soroush defines relativism as the suggestion that "everything is relatively true,"⁴⁷ denies that he is a relativist by calling his method "critical rationalism" and claim that the misunderstanding between what he does and relativism is caused by conflating two distinct epistemologies.

In Soroush's reading, relativist epistemology contends that all knowledge is *caused* knowledge, while critical rationalist epistemology is more inclined to think that the attainment of knowledge is more a matter of *reasons*. What Soroush means by "causes" are the "non-rational factors" that make ideas and actions emerge.⁴⁸ If a person is a Muslim because s/he has converted into the faith after much thought and contemplation, their knowledge has come to them by way of reason, but if s/he born into a Muslim family and remain one by way of chance, their faith was caused and not reasoned. Soroush holds that when we look at great post-Enlightenment thinkers like Bacon, Marx, Freud, Foucault and Habermas we see "how they have all demonstrated in one way or another how non-rational factors (of the nature of causes) play

⁴⁶ Soroush and Kadivar, 67.

⁴⁷ Soroush, *EPE*, 158.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

games with rationality (and reasons), thereby distorting and tarnishing it.”⁴⁹ This does not mean that Soroush does not think that culture, geography, emotions, interest, internal and genetic factors, the subconscious, power and the like do not distort and influence perceptions and consciousness. When Soroush is pushed to form an opinion about an issue (e.g., what position to take in light of the reality of religious diversity), it is reason that plays the primary role in the attainment of knowledge for him. “However, when reasons have completed their work and arrived at parity,” as was the case with ranking religions according to truth value (it was not possible to rank religions because they belonged in the noumenal world), “causes come into play.”⁵⁰ In other words, Soroush admits that he could have just as easily been a Christian and been on a divine path, but he is on a Sufi path because he was born a Muslim.⁵¹ Soroush’s dedication to pluralism is not because “any religion will do.” It is because he has carefully reasoned his way through alternatives and come to the conclusion that there is no better choice. Pluralism is not a caused view for Soroush; it is a reasoned one. Thus, Soroush is a religious pluralist who can be classified under Knitter’s general “acceptance” model. His is a positive pluralism that denies relativism, celebrates difference, and argues for a restricted plurality of truths.

CLASSICAL POSITION

I turn now to a presentation on the classical Muslim scholarship that addresses religious pluralism in terms of the salvation of the “Other” in Islam. Most of the discussion about religious pluralism in classical Islamic theology has centered on salvific theory, which poses the question: Who shall be saved in light of divine mercy? If the answer to this question is only Muslims, then the position medieval scholars held would be considered exclusivist. The rest of this chapter will

⁴⁹ Ibid., 160.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

be dedicated to discussing the 1999 debate between Soroush and Kadivar, in light of Soroush's other writings in defense of pluralism both religious and cultural.

According to Muhammad Khalil, the standard view regarding prophethood and salvation in classical Islam was that "Muhammad's path is *the* ideal path [emphasis in original]."⁵² This could engender an inclusivist position regarding salvation, as the ideal path for one group does not necessarily mean doom for all else. As Khalil shows, however, this is in fact not the case; classical orthodoxy held an exclusivist position on religious diversity. Among the thinkers that Khalil uses as his case studies (al-Ghazālī, Ibn Arabī, Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, Muḥammad Rashīd Ridā, and Seyed Qutb), some maintained more than others that divine mercy would intervene at the last minute and save non-Muslims from everlasting hellfire.

Al-Ghazālī, Ibn `Arabī, and Rashīd Riḍā (particularly the first two, who held Sufi leanings) made efforts to create loopholes for the salvation of non-Muslim communities. But other scholars, such as Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, "do not seem to leave much room for Divine mercy on the Day of Judgment for any sane, adult non-Muslim who had received the Message."⁵³ An important note to make here is that those who have never come in contact with Islam (i.e., had not received the Message) were not considered subject to judgment. Although Khalil initially claims that "Divine mercy, always finds a way—*some way*—to make its presence felt in *all* the case studies [emphasis in original],"⁵⁴ he ends his dissertation with the conclusion that "despite the fact that the majority of case studies examined here argue otherwise, we can only conclude that the view of a never-ending punishment in hell and the prohibition of some from ever receiving pleasure in the Afterlife has tended to be the norm, rather than the exception" for the non-Muslim Other.⁵⁵

⁵² Muhammad Hassan Khalil, "Muslim Scholarly Discussions on Salvation and the Fate of 'Others'" (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2007), 221.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 229.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 230.

In consequence, the dominant classical Sunni position on the issue of the salvation of the Other seems to have been exclusivist according to Khalil's study.⁵⁶ As far as divine mercy goes, another interesting observation by Khalil is that although mercy is clearly emphasized and "arguably given priority in Islamic Scripture, it almost seems as if any discussion of the salvation of non-Muslims involves apologetic reinterpretations of specific qur'ānic verses and *hadīths*."⁵⁷

THE DEBATE

In 1999 a debate on the topic of religious diversity and the salvation of the non-Muslims took place between Soroush and Kadivar inside Iran. The debate revolved around the following question posed in *Serāthā-ye Mustaqīm* [Straight Paths to God] the year prior, about the topic: "As Muslims, what should our response be to the reality of religious diversity?"⁵⁸ The debate began with Soroush's introduction of the Kantian concept of antinomies. Belief assessment, according to Soroush, "can never resolve debate over conflicting religious perspectives in an objective manner;" a claim with which Kadivar repeatedly refused to engage.⁵⁹ One can argue that because no more than one among a set of incompatible truth claims can be true, Kadivar is only justified in continuing to maintain that his claim of justified inclusivism is true if he possesses non-question-begging justification for believing that Soroush's incompatible claim is false. But the point is exactly, as Soroush points out, that no disputant in religious conflicts possesses such justification—no disputant can be justified in holding his own claim to be true because it is essentially impossible to prove a religious claim once we step outside religious boundaries. And this is exactly what Kadivar refuses to recognize.

Soroush points out that we have no choice but to conclude that in the absence of objective, non-question-begging justification in religious disputes, disputants do not have

⁵⁶ An even more apt Shī'ī study on the topic will be included in the expanded book version of this dissertation. I have not been able to find a secondary source on this topic, so the study will have to be done using primary sources. It would also be important to establish what the contemporary dominant Shī'ī position is on the issue of salvation of the 'Other.'

⁵⁷ Khalil, 224.

⁵⁸ Soroush and Kadivar, 2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 12, 25 & 68.

justification for supposing the claims of others to be false, or their own to be true.⁶⁰ In an effort to bridge their epistemological gap and speaking intra-religiously, Soroush suggest that these antinomies can even be seen within Islam in the area of *fiqh* (jurisprudence).⁶¹

One *faqīh* (jurist) knows all the reasoning behind a certain edict. *Faqīh* number two uses [reasoning] but is not convinced and steadfastly defends his personal reading and judgment. The third *faqīh* does the same. This is how differences of opinions come about and continue to linger. The disagreement between the three is not from a lack of intelligence, virtue or piety. The same situation holds for different sects. Assuming that Shī'ī scholars hold the ultimate divine truth, why have Sunni scholars not accepted the Shī'ī reasoning and converted? If we were to assume that both sects have sought the truth, have been ordained on average with the same kind and amount of intelligence throughout the ages, then one reason why divisions hold between the sects could be that we are wrong as Shī'īs . . . or that every single Sunni has been under the influence of passions and desires.⁶²

A third choice is that the strength of our reasons for choosing our paths are of the same magnitude . . . In the end, we have to say that Sunni and Shī'īs are just two different interpretations of the same religion. This is the explanation I choose. Any other choice is problematic, and this is why I suggest that we have no choice but to be pluralists.⁶³

Kadivar responds that "plurality in *fiqh* is an extricable quality [of jurisprudence]. If we were all of sudden placed in the presence of one of the Fourteen Innocents (*chahārdah ma`sūm*),⁶⁴ the source of all these disagreements would vanish because they would respond to all our questions about truth and reveal the divine will."⁶⁵ This is in fact the same response he had given when speaking of extra-religious antinomies.

When speaking about Islam, it is the Qur'ān and the Fourteen Innocents that have the final word. The main question Kadivar poses to Soroush by way of a rejection of his extra-

⁶⁰ Ibid., 13. Regarding the Christian context, David Silver ("Religious Experience and the Facts of Pluralism" [2001]) and J. L. Schellenberg ("Religious Experience and Religious Diversity: A Reply to Alston" [2000]) come to similar conclusions and suggest that those partaking in religious debate should provide independent evidence (i.e., evidence that does not beg the question) for the claim that they have a special source of religious knowledge.

⁶¹ Soroush and Kadivar, 68.

⁶² Ibid., 69.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ The Fourteen Innocents are the Prophet, his daughter Fatima, and the twelve Imams. In Shī'ī thought they are sinless.

⁶⁵ Soroush and Kadivar, 69.

religious discursive methodology is "*cherā az hekmat-e khodā ghāfelīd?* [Why do you not take notice of God's wisdom?]"⁶⁶ Kadivar continues,

The criterion for distinguishing truth from falsity has been given to us; it is the word of the prophets and the words of the final Prophet containing the most truth. There is a reason why the Jews didn't accept Muhammad's words despite his miracle [the Qur'ān]: it's called rebellion and greed. Understanding this denial, this negation, this disavowal of God's truth as an antinomy is falling short of what is expected of you [*kam loṭfī*].⁶⁷

Soroush responds by saying that he also believes in the sinlessness (*'iṣmat*) of the Prophet and holds great value for his words. However, Soroush states,

Innocence is an extra-religious affair, meaning that in order to accept the sayings of a prophet, it is logically necessary to see him without sin. This is a prerequisite of being able to see him as a prophet. In other words, we are not convinced of the fact that the Prophet is sinless, we believe his words because we *believe* [emphasis added] that he is sinless and immaculate and chaste. If we take the sinlessness of the prophets as one of our foundational beliefs, then prophets fall outside the purview of those who can epistemologically commit error.⁶⁸

That is, it is just as epistemologically responsible for us not to accept the Prophet as sinless and as a result not accept his position. Both choices come from outside religion. Soroush thus accused Kadivar of engaging in extra-religious reasoning without being aware of doing so.

Kadivar asks if Soroush truly believes that it is not possible to assume that one side (Sunni, Christian, Jew, etc.) is more affected by their desires and greed than the other side (Shī'ī)?

Is it really not possible to think of one side as being in the wrong and the other as justified in their position? Is it not possible that the reasons presented by one side are preferable to the ones presented by the other?⁶⁹

No, Soroush responds; rather, we can only say that there is disagreement between these two groups:

Either *both* [emphasis added] groups are grappling with their desires and greed and are just as susceptible to human weakness, or they both have reasons for what they believe

⁶⁶ Ibid., 48.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 50.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 83.

⁶⁹ Soroush, *EPE*, 86.

in. In either case, we are in the same position; neither side has a stronger reason for winning the argument. Whatever epistemological rule we come up with is reflexive.⁷⁰

After repeated returns to this same argument throughout the debate, Soroush finally expresses his frustration by saying, "Don't say that God has messed up the brains of those who defy us. Give me a real reason. Remember, whatever theory you come up with is reflexive. Don't keep repeating that the reasons one group gives are weak, while those of the other group are strong. This is not an answer; this is exiting the topic."⁷¹

Kadivar asks Soroush point blank: "Is it true that in your opinion there isn't necessarily a single truth in this world?"⁷² Soroush responds by saying "yes, that is exactly the case"⁷³:

There is no singular discovery of meaning that can be called 'the truth.' There is a multiplicity of truths. In fact this multiplicity is the same as the discovery of these different meanings . . . The genus [of what we understood in orthodoxy to be truth] has changed, it is now the *tafsīr* of one's personal experiences.⁷⁴

Kadivar, revealing what has really been worrying him about the concept of religious pluralism, admits that "a person who arrives at antinomies in the extra-religious arena cannot believe in the truth of any one particular religion."⁷⁵ Since pluralism works with a plurality of truths, faith is made obsolete.⁷⁶ With the advent of the plurality of truths and religious pluralism there will no longer be any reason for believing in any one religion. Soroush allays Kadivar's fears by reassuring him that people do not become religious because they have rationally come to the conclusion that their religion has the most truth-value, but because it generates meaning in their lives. In fact, Soroush adds, it is epistemologically impossible for us to decide the comparative value of religious truth-content because we are not provided with the kind of information needed to make such a judgment.⁷⁷

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 92.

⁷² Ibid., 93.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 56.

⁷⁶ Soroush and Kadivar, 45.

⁷⁷ Soroush, *EPE*, 79.

The debate ends with participants thanking each other and neither Kadivar or Soroush having been convinced of the other's position.

THE RHETORIC OF PRE-REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLOGUES

Perhaps the most interesting effect of Soroush's discussion about religious pluralism is the transformative effect the physical reading of his material or listening to his debate with Kadivar had on his audience. Before delving into these transformative effects of Soroush's discourse, it would be instructive to look at the nature of his rhetoric and compare it to the rhetoric of pre-revolutionary ideologues. The 1970s introduced a new trend, the democratization of the interpretive process. Thinkers like `Alī Sharī`atī⁷⁸ and Mehdī Bāzargān⁷⁹ redefined who could and could not engage in speech about religion. They helped desacralize religious discourse, a mode of engagement that was until then reserved only for classically trained clerics. Today, it seems as if the Qur`ān and its supporting textual infrastructure are no longer a *special* language. Divine language has been subsumed under human language and, as a result, human / non-religious approaches / theories are being legitimately applied to it. Reading and interpreting divine intentions is now open not only to the traditional cadre of the classically learned but also to lay intellectuals and even the non-intellectual government officials. Soroush, although classically trained in the *`ulūm al-Qur`ān* (qur`ānic sciences), has not been anointed by the authority of the establishment, yet speaks authoritatively about Islam and is considered one of the main theorists of the religion—so much so that symposia are held in Qom to debate his work.

Not only have religious intellectuals like Sharī`atī and Soroush widened the definition of Islam by infusing non-scriptural material (i.e., extra-religious material) into the process of "reading" the text of the Qur`ān, but they have also changed its manipulation—a change in form

⁷⁸ Dabashi calls Sharī`atī the "Islamic ideologue par excellence" (*Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* [New York: NYU Press, 1993], 102).

⁷⁹ Mehdī Bāzargān (1907-1995) was a prominent Iranian scholar, life-long pro-democracy activist, and Iran's first prime minister after the Islamic Revolution. He was a well-respected religious intellectual known for his honesty and expertise in the Islamic and secular sciences; he is credited with being one of the founders of the *rowshanfekrī-ye dīnī* (Islamic intellectual) movement in Iran.

and rhetorical mode of discourse. While the classical exegetic format is the argumentative, descriptive study of the text, from the first *āyah* all the way to the end, the predominant trend in symbolic creative hermeneutics since the 1960s is the monograph, a work of scholarly writing focused on a single subject.⁸⁰ Monographic *tafsīrs* are not new; they have a history in qur'ānic studies.⁸¹ But the likes of Sharī`atī and Soroush turned them into political tracts. Alongside this change in form is a change in rhetorical mode. A recurring characteristic of the pre-Revolutionary (1960s and 1970s) monographs was their heavy-handed use of narrative to manipulate the interpretation of historical events, core religio-cultural symbols and Islamic identity. In narratives, a story is created in a constructive format (as a work of writing, speech, poetry, prose, pictures, song, motion picture, etc.) that describes a sequence of fictional or non-fictional events. Consider, for example, the narrativization of the Hussein paradigm.⁸²

The martyrdom of Hussein, the grandson of the prophet, captured the imaginations of the Shī`ī community almost immediately after his death. The "Karbala narrative," as Aghaie calls it, is a "systematic reconstruction of the historic battle of Karbala."⁸³ The general consensus is that this narrative has served as one of the central sources for Shī`ī symbols and rituals.⁸⁴ The

⁸⁰ For examples of English translations of monographs published in the 1960s and 1970s, see: Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad, *Plagued by the West [Gharbzadegī]* (1982); `Alī Sharī`atī, *Fatima is Fatima*, trans. Laleh Bakhtiar (1981); Mehdī Bāzargān, *Work and Islam [Kār dar Islām]* (1979). A good review of these thinkers' works can be found in Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent* (1993).

⁸¹ For more on the different kinds of classical *tafsīr* see: Walid Saleh, "Preliminary Remarks on the Historiography of *tafsīr* in Arabic: A History of the Book Approach" (2010).

⁸² The Shī`ī interpretive process does not restrict its sources to the Qur`ān and the Sunnah but also includes the lives and sayings of the twelve Imams, who are believed to be the Prophet's legitimate heirs.

⁸³ Hussein, grandson of the Prophet and third Imam of the Shī`ī, was believed to have been martyred at Karbala (current day Iraq) during a battle of the same name that took place on Muharram 10, 61A.H. (October 10, 680 A.D.). This highly uneven battle pitted a small group of supporters and relatives of Hussein against a large military detachment from the forces of the Umayyad caliph Yazid I, whose caliphate Hussein had refused to recognize. Hussein and all his male supporters were killed in battle, including his infant son. The women and surviving children were taken as prisoners. The dead are regarded as martyrs by the Shī`ī, and the battle holds a central place in Shī`ī history and tradition. The battle is commemorated annually during a ten day period in the month of Muharram by the Shī`ī as well as many Sunnis. The event culminates with the death of Hussein on the tenth day ('Ashūrā).

⁸⁴ For further information on Shī`ī symbols and rituals, see: Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam* (1978); Kamran Aghaie, "The Karbala Narrative: Shi'i Political Discourse in Modern Iran in the 1960s and 1970s" (2001); Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving the Karbala Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (2006); David Pinault, *Horse of Karbala: Muslim Devotional Life in India* (2000); Frank J. Korom, *Hosay Trinidad* (2003); Vali Nasr, *The Shi'a Revival: How Conflicts within Islam will Shape the Future* (2006).

dominant Karbala narrative in Iran from the fifteenth century to the 1960s seems to have been the one devised by Vā'iz Kāshifī. According to Vā'iz Kāshifī's *Rawzat al-Shuhadā* (1502), Hussein had foreknowledge of his death at Karbala and invited martyrdom upon himself in order to set a virtuous example for future Shī'ī generations. The enemy in Kashifī's narrative is the unjust Other, or in this case, "the *munāfiqūn* (hypocrite Muslims), among whom the Sunnis were the most prominent."⁸⁵ The true believers are those who "remained loyal to Hussein, and they are the ones who will be rewarded through worldly and heavenly bounty as a result of their loyalty and of their steadfastness in tolerating the oppression and injustice they encounter in the world."⁸⁶

Kashifī's message is one of quietism, where he preaches silent resilience in the face of injustice and "does not use the events of Karbala as a political role model for literal emulation."⁸⁷ That is, he does not advise the masses to take up arms against the illegitimate government of Shah Isma'il Safavi as Hussein had done against Yazid.⁸⁸ Instead, the events at Karbala represent an ideal for commemoration through ritualistic weeping and mourning. Having had foreknowledge of Hussein's martyrdom several accounts, according to Aghaie, "record that the prophet and Hussein promised earthly rewards (*thawab*) to anyone who shed tears for what Hussein had suffered."⁸⁹ However, the climactic moment of the narrative, Hussein's martyrdom (itself a symbolic act) did not become a call to arms in the face of worldly injustice. "Narratives like Kashifī's are not explicit efforts to contest the legitimacy of the ruling elites."⁹⁰ In fact, as Aghaie points out, Kashifī's narrative "stresses the inappropriateness of active political

⁸⁵ Kamran Aghaie, "The Karbala Narrative (2001): 154.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Before the great occultation (*gheybat al-kubra*) of the Mahdi (the Twelfth Imam) the Shī'ī state was only considered legitimate if ruled by one of the Imams. After the occultation the only legitimate state is the one the Mahdi reinstates upon his return at the end of time.

⁸⁹ Aghaie, 154.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

mobilization in the face of political injustice."⁹¹ In line with classical Shī'ī political theology it was the role of the Mahdī (the twelfth Imam) to deliver the people from political oppression.

During the 1960s and 1970s, however, Vā'iz Kāshifī no longer "fit the political mood of the time."⁹² Ṣaliḥī Najafābādī, a religious scholar who had studied with Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1960s, took up the interpretive challenge and revolutionized Kāshifī's quietist narrative. Najafābādī encouraged Muslims to actively emulate Hussein, not simply to mourn for him. In 1968 he wrote *Shahīd-i Jāvīd (The Immortal Martyr)*, in which he reinterpreted the Karbala paradigm in a more "politically activist light."⁹³ He spoke primarily about the need to "defend Islam from corruption" and from *bid'a* (innovation), a common charge brought against the Shah as a result of his Westernizing policies.⁹⁴ What was unusual in what Najafābādī did was to insist that the only way Hussein could have "achieved [his] objective was by seizing power from the Umayyads and taking over the government."⁹⁵ He also denied the quietist argument that Hussein's actions enjoined people to become better Muslims through the endurance of hardship and sacrifice. Thus, by highlighting certain aspects of Hussein's character and mission, Najafābādī rewrites the events by recreating a new version of the Karbala narrative.⁹⁶

Although Najafābādī's narrative encountered much resistance among the 'ulamā', his unconventional interpretation of the event at Karbala served to inspire some clerics (Mutahhari, for instance)⁹⁷ and one particular ideologue of the revolution, 'Alī Sharī'atī. A Sorbonne-educated doctor of philology, Sharī'atī kept Kashifī's core narrative but introduced a radically new meta-narrative into the story material, one largely derived from Marxist concepts of universal class struggle and anti-imperialist rhetoric. Sharī'atī, like Kashifī, agreed that the Hussein movement was for the purposes of "promoting good and discouraging evil, and also for

⁹¹ Ibid., 155.

⁹² Ibid., 157.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 158.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ For more on Motahhari see Chapter 2, footnote 32.

the purposes of revitalizing the spirit of Islam that was in danger of extinction."⁹⁸ But unlike Kashifī and more in line with Najafābādī's sensibilities, Sharī'atī concentrated more on the method of achieving change.⁹⁹ His was a theology of action and liberation and not just an invitation to mourning, and the method proposed by the movement was martyrdom in the face of oppression.¹⁰⁰

In summary, Najafābādī's narrative of the tragedy of Hussein and his followers "created an oppositional discourse that made justice and injustice a central theme of Shī'ism."¹⁰¹ The manipulation of the narrative led to a reordering of socio-political priorities. The Pahlavi regime and its international allies (mainly the United States) were seen as the imperialist powers representing injustice on the one hand, and the suffering masses represented by the populace of the third world, Islamic world and Shī'īs in particular were seen as the just and righteous. Thus, "a set of symbols originally used as a vindication of the Shī'ī cause became a vindication of oppositional movements in Iran."¹⁰²

SOROUSH'S TRANSFORMATIVE RHETORIC

As we see, the political debates of the 1960s and 1970s were about a political theology that wove revolutionary rhetoric by manipulating the symbolic martyrdom of the greatest of Islamic warriors. The post-revolutionary era, in contrast, and in particular, the post-war (Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988) period, is characterized by a move away from symbolic rhetoric and into the realm of theory-building, reflected in a shifting perspective regarding the ontology of the text in the 1990s and beyond. In the new rhetorical mode, the symbolic is minimized, and while maintaining the monographic format, thinkers have begun highlighting exposition and argumentation instead of narrative. This does not mean that they do not use narrative, but it does

⁹⁸ Aghaie, 168.

⁹⁹ Sharī'atī argued that the political motivations attributed to Hussein by Najafābādī did the movement more justice than so-called traditional narratives because Najafābādī's was the only "false interpretation" that called for action and did not ignore the historical fiction of the moment (Ibid., 169).

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 170.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 174.

¹⁰² Ibid., 175.

not dominate their hermeneutics. Soroush's rhetoric style is a mixed prose and verse genre called *prosimetrum*. Prosimetrum is "a text composed in alternating segments of prose and verse . . . Typically the verse portions serve as lyric, emotive, or personal insets within a philosophical or narrative frame, often with connectives between prose and verse sections."¹⁰³ Scott-Meisami points out that this particular genre has a long history in Persian intellectual thought. In her account, up until the nineteenth century, poetry

remained the central genre, to which all others are in some sense poor relations . . . it is considered perfect speech, superior to prose because of its metricality and the coherence of its parts, its universal appeal, its ceremonial functions, its relationship to music, its eloquence, its importance as a source of knowledge, etc. . . . Prose is loosely organized and follows the thought; poetry is highly organized and works through heightened language to create a sense of wonder and produce an emotional effect.¹⁰⁴

Through studying the works of Ahmad al-Ghazālī, Rāvandī and Sa`dī's Gulistān, Meisami shows the effect of the prosimetric work as a whole on the audience. The "author's didactic purpose" is served by this genre because the poetry's "affective nature . . . engender[s] wonder and produce[s] an immediate response," while information is conveyed via prose.¹⁰⁵ "The authority of the poetry as poetry is based both in its affective quality and on its status as the highest form of eloquence."¹⁰⁶ In this instance the "artistic prose seeks to approach the poetic, from which it takes inspiration, to exploit to the fullest the resource of the language."¹⁰⁷ This didactic and highly poetic genre is the rhetoric milieu within which Soroush operates.

The prosimetrum genre in the hands of Soroush has had the potential to be didactic and affective enough to engender what de Certeau calls a "complex form of transformation" for his audience, a transformation that works through speech itself. When speaking of revolution, revision and challenge at the end of his essay, *The Capture of Speech and Other Political*

¹⁰³ Alex Preminger, et al., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993), 981.

¹⁰⁴ Julie Scott-Meisami, "Mixed Prose and Verse in Medieval Persian Literature," in *Prosimetrum: Crosscultural Perspectives on Narrative in Prose and Verse*, ed. Joseph Harris and Karl Reichl (Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 296.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 316.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

Writings, de Certeau addresses the manner in which speech itself can be a transformative event, replacing the political revolution with a symbolic one.¹⁰⁸ De Certeau speaks of how what in the past would be called "real transformation" has now become virtual change. Soroush's use of hybridity, not just in the intermingling of prose and poetry but also in his mixing of Sufi and Western epistemologies, creates a hybrid rhetoric that has achieved just this kind of transformation experience for a whole generation of Iranians.

De Certeau, however, does not allow the uncertainties of a virtual victory to go unregistered: "Speech is neither effective occupation nor the seizure of power."¹⁰⁹ He recognizes that rhetorical gestures only turn political and ethical values into aesthetic ones; nevertheless, this is the only way forward that he can see. He states, "Out of failure and a lack of resources a virtual triumph is fashioned which, for the moment, curtains the void, the hole. It is fashioned out of words."¹¹⁰ Having been caught in a similar situation where the only tool at hand for which one might not have to pay as high a price as free speech, Soroush uses aesthetics to bolster, or as some have argued, to instigate a reformist movement.¹¹¹

Investigating Soroush's rhetoric in his 1998 book *Serāthā-ye Mustaqīm*, and in the Kadivar debate of 1999, a hybrid rhetoric can be detected, composed as it is of both Western and Sufi statements.¹¹² This new presentation of Islam, this new hybrid way of being a Muslim, is at once devout, rational and mystical, containing belief structures that have (even to this day in the West) been traditionally construed as incongruent. The statements in Soroush's works, cited in this chapter, should seem inappropriate and incompatible when used to support each other but they are not.¹¹³ What Soroush has done by way of intermingling these seemingly jarring statements and making the exercise seem natural and unproblematic, is to lend interchangeable

¹⁰⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 10.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ For more on Soroush, see Chapter 1, footnote 3.

¹¹² "[Soroush] skillfully wedded his Sufi language of skepticism with the Kantian neo-positivism of Karl Popper, to whose liberal political philosophy he subscribed" (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 201).

¹¹³ In fact, this is the nature of Soroush's post 1989 writings.

credibility to different ideological positions (Sufi, Western and Islamist), and in doing so codify a hybrid identity.

Soroush has actually spoken about hybrid identities before in his essay *The Three Cultures*.¹¹⁴ In that essay, he speaks about how Iranian culture is actually an "overlapping cultural web" of Pre-Islamic, Islamic, Persian and Western ways of being, and that "whatever solutions we divine for our problems must come from this mixed heritage to which our contemporary social thinkers, reformers, and modernizers have been heirs, often seeking the salvation of our people in the hegemony of one of these cultures over the other two."¹¹⁵ It is in this essay that Soroush denies the stable bases of social / national / ethnic unities and supports a fragmented and decentered self and multiple and conflicting identities. Soroush, while acknowledging the indivisible nature of Ancient Persian culture form the Iranian psyche, warns against the hazards of Nationalist extremism. He recognizes that Islam is the dominant culture among the three competing customs but invites his audience to "come to terms with Western culture" (the supposed enemy of Islam according the revolutionary rhetoric) and "move beyond" the discourse of *Gharbzadegi* (West-toxification).¹¹⁶

In a fascinating discussion about identity, Soroush then asks the following question: "Where among these three cultures does our identity lie?"¹¹⁷ Soroush answers that it lies in all three. The source of our problems, Soroush contends, "is the baneful equation of identity with rigidity."¹¹⁸ "One must seek purification in exchange with others" instead of "using the pretext of

¹¹⁴ Abdolkarim Soroush, "The Three Cultures," in *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, trans. and ed. Mahoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 156-70.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 158-62. "West-toxification" was a term used by Jalāl Āl-e Ahmad (variously translated in English as *westernstruck*, *weststruckness*, *westoxification* and *occidentosis*) in a book by the same name, *Plagued by the West* (1982), clandestinely published in Iran in 1962. In the book Āl-e Ahmad developed a stinging critique of Western technology and, by implication, of Western civilization itself. He argued that the decline of traditional Iranian industries and culture is the result of Western hegemonic practices. The notion became part of the 1979 Revolution's ideology, an ideology which emphasized nationalization of industry, independence in all areas of life from both the Soviet and the Western world, and self-sufficiency (*khodkafāi*) in culture and economics. Āl-e Ahmad and later Ali Shari'atī proposed a "return to the self" (*bāzgasht-e be khāshān*) as a remedy to westoxification.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

persisting in one's identity to continue a slovenly and secluded life."¹¹⁹ What causes fear of other cultures, Soroush maintains is the "lack of a strong cultural digestive system and also the misconception that each culture is an indivisible monolith"—that accepting one part "equals accepting the whole."¹²⁰ There is no "eternal cultural identity," Soroush argues; cultures must be given room to grow to "achieve self-awareness," to be allowed to "peek out of the cozy blanket of" their boundaries and strive for the ability to look at oneself with a self-reflective eye (*chashm-e `ibrat*).¹²¹ Once a person starts looking at their culture in this way, it becomes impossible to embrace age-old ways without having to "examine, revise and adjust" them.¹²²

In his debate with Kadivar and writings on religious pluralism, Soroush clarifies further his theory of religion and his position on the salvation of non-Muslims in Islam, which is an old theological question and falls under the purview of *kalām*. Also, he again embarks on a cultural discussion; this time, however, his position comes to this discussion not as theses to be defended (as was the case in *The Three Cultures*) but by way of methodology—his rhetoric. If in *The Three Cultures* Soroush talks of the overlapping presence of pre-Islamic, Western and Muslim cultures in Iran, when speaking about religious pluralism he methodologically uses the two languages of Continental and Analytic Philosophy and Sufism to make his point. Reading the pages where these (as we have been led to believe) epistemologically incompatible epistemologies are used alongside each other, one realizes how well they work together. Perhaps as Soroush states in *The Three Cultures*, "Rebellion against oneself is also part of one's 'self.' Rectifying one's identity is part of one's identity. Becoming, is also a part of Being. And this implies causing oneself and one's culture to move If movement means anything, it means avoiding imitation."¹²³ Soroush refuses to imitate even in speech and breaks epistemological boundaries. He believes that we are at once simultaneously indebted to Western ways of

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 164.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid., 165.

¹²³ Ibid., 166.

knowing and Being and Islamic ways of knowing and Being, where Islamic language manifests in its Sufi incarnations.

To suggest that reading Soroush's works somehow magically changes the reader is a farfetched idea for some. In "From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II" Ricœur explains that the world of the text is the means by which the reader attains self-understanding. This self-understanding is achieved by appropriating the work through the "distancing" effect of writing, which divorces the work from the author's intentions.¹²⁴ Ricœur suggests that the text creates its own world, and it is then up to the reader to inhabit that world, finding within it realities that explains her/his own particular situation.

By peppering his work with Western thought and Sufi poetry, Soroush creates a space where the reader has the opportunity to reconcile seemingly disparate ways of being -- to perform his own kind of philosophical pluralism as well as asserting it. As in real life, these seemingly incongruent ways of being are in tension with each other, but Soroush's methodology points to a solution in grappling with this tension. The effect Soroush has on those with hybrid identities, for example, "thinking" Muslims in Iran who seek to be intentional about their choices as Muslims, and who are more than likely familiar with Western thought, is to create a world in which these disparate ways of understanding (the ineffable) can coexist (e.g., Sufism and Kantian liberalism). A reader can witness these less than complementary ways of being intertwined, mirroring everyday life in the safe environment of a page, and at least momentarily, apprehensions about being pluralistic in the makeup of the self gradually dissolve. In fact, apart from the arguments he gives in the debate and interview and writings on the topic, this is another way Soroush invites the thinking Muslim to religious pluralism.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary Western theories of religious pluralism hold, at a minimum, that we are not able to speak definitively about the salvation of non-coreligionists. In its most permissive

¹²⁴ For further information see Paul Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

version (Hickian), religious pluralism allows for equal chance of salvation regardless of religion as long as one stays true to internal precepts. The dominant classical position on the issue has been that those who have been exposed to Islam and have rejected it are met with never-ending punishment in hell and are prohibited from ever receiving pleasure in the Afterlife. Kadivar, as a representative of the reformist orthodox Shī'ī camp holds a similar view. People of the Book can be saved, but he says nothing about what happens to those who refuse the message of Islam.

Soroush openly defies this orthodoxy and contends that to assume that there is one truth presented by the Prophet of Islam is naïve. There is a plurality of truths, and by that he means that every non-imitative, thinking Muslim practicing discursive / reflective religiosity has the capacity of coming up with their own understanding of what the Islamic sources say about God, the Prophet, revelation, felicity, wretchedness, sin and obedience. This is an understanding that belongs to that believer alone and is a consequence of their reflections—an understanding that is constantly being revisited and updated in light of new questions and information. This pluralist, discursive and individualistic way of looking at religiosity is inspired by Rumi, but when put forth by one of today's leading Muslim thinkers it becomes revolutionary, especially in an environment like Iran, where the state-sanctioned form of Islam is the only legal option.

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