

Dr. Abdolkarim Soroush

Einführung Jakob J. Köllhofer:

So, let me start with the introduction of Prof. Soroush by congratulations for his prize. Erasmus in our ears of course stands for the humanism and after all, I guess it's a prize for a program of his life. I guess, many of you have read articles and books or scene-books with his name as the author. If there is a house-intellectual of Iran's democratic reform movement, I think it is Abdolkarim Soroush. And in a way his educational background is ideal for our debate. Let me just list a few fields of expertise. He's an expert on mysticism, on poetry, Islamic theology, chemistry, pharmacology, just to name a few, and on the philosophy of science. All this in one mind, I think, is ideal for the attempt to reconcile revelation and reason, religious duties and human rights and in a way that's the topic of this conference. Welcome to Heidelberg.

Prof. Soroush:

Thank you very much, dear Jakob, and thank you all, ladies and gentlemen. Actually, yes, Heidelberg reminds me not only of chemistry laboratories, which, when I was doing history of science, I came across the name a number of times, but also of Hegel and many other philosophers, who were teaching for some time here in this city. This is my first coming to Heidelberg in this excellent atmosphere and the excellent morning we had and I hope that the afternoon will be even better than the morning.

Well, the issue of Islam and democracy and modernity is a very familiar one, and, as Prof. Arkoun made a remark this morning, we have actually gathered a number of times and we have seen similar faces in the same meetings discussing the same issue but of course not in a monolithic way and I'm sure that there has been some progress. I quite remember that for the first time that I proposed the idea of a religious democratic government was by the invitation of Mr. Steinbach, who is here and he invited me to gather with some other Iranian friends to Hamburg, if I'm not mistaken, it was about 12 years ago. And actually it was a terrible meeting, I would say and some of the oppositional groups physically attacked the meeting and so it had sweet and bitter sides, positive and negative. But I try to remember only the positive ones and there we discussed the same issue, Islam and modernity. It is a living issue and it is still with us and I think it is no repetition, if we take the issue continuously and discuss it, because there are still some unresolved points and parts in the issue, which have to be tackled by different speakers and different thinkers. It is a very living issue, of course, in my country, in Iran. We are living under a state which is very openly an Islamic state and which is ruled by the concept of authority, which, seemingly, is very anti-democratic. Therefore it is a very lively and vibrant discussion and debate in our country, the reconciliation of Islam and modernity, of Islam and democracy, Islam and science and so on and so forth. There are many writers, journalists, university professors, students and so on who are working in the field, who are active in the field and who are paying the price for their activities. Some of them are in jail now that I'm talking to you. There are also many newspapers, which are banned because they were explicit and open on the issue and they wrote things about religion and some extra religious issues. Me, myself involved.

I think it is not for nothing that there is such a hot debate about this. On the one hand Muslims, I'm speaking now from Iran and about Iran, who are the majority of the population, like their religion, it is like their homeland, they would like to live in it and to be happy with it and to have a prosperous life in their intellectual or spiritual homeland, i.e. Islam. On the other hand, of course, they understand the necessities and the requirements of the modern age, the modernity, the post-enlightenment world system as we know it today. But on the other hand they realize that this modernity comes from the West and the West has got a negative connotation in their mind, you know, the imperialist West. We have not been under colonial rule directly, but anyway, there have been always the impacts from the imperialist rule, especially during the last century. This is paradox. On the one hand you like modernity but on the other you do not like its source, i.e. the West, the post-enlightenment. And on the other hand since you like your religion, i.e. Islam, and the modernity is a dubious one, whether it is compatible with Islam or not compatible. So, there is huge theoretical thing to be worked out here, let alone the political, the social things, which have to be done side by side with the theoretical endeavor, that thinkers and intellectuals must take the burden.

Now, that's why, especially after the Islamic revolution in Iran, this debate of democracy and Islam has become even hotter than before and it has engaged many thinkers and writers, so many books have appeared in the past 25 years and we are still working on that. Arab-Muslim war was much better than our connection now. This is a pity, actually, this is a disease which is to be remedied, to be cured. I may remind you, that for example the present leader of the country, Ayatollah Khameni, he was one of the translators of the books of Sayyed Qotb, you know, and he did this – *Maalem Fi Tarigh*, and so on that was translated by him and another book by his brother. And so they read all this literature, especially the ideological literature coming from the Arab world. Translating it in order to fair the course of revolution in Iran. But after the revolution, actually, they think that they are rich enough and that they do not need anybody to teach them anything. So they know everything about revolution, about religion, about interpretation, about revelation and so they are not actually looking into any other place. Let alone the non-Arab, because the non-Arab countries, we do not have any clues of what they are doing in Indonesia, in Turkey the barrier of language and the imagination and the illusion of richness on the part of us that made us so isolated from the rest of the Muslim world. This is really a pity and if you ask other intellectuals, they will drop the names of western intellectuals one after the other - French, German, English. But if you ask them about the Arab intellectuals - not a word. You will not hear from anybody. They do not know they read their books, they do not know they mentioned their names. And this is really a pity. And I am sure that this is exactly, I mean perhaps the case with vis-a-vis Iran, with the Arab world. I mean I don't think that many of the books from Iran have been translated into Arabic. Therefore such a disconnection, such a cutoff between these different worlds of Islam is now reality in the world of Islam. And the fragmentation is current, is there, is present among us. We are talking about fragmentation and the fragmentation is already there, because of the barrier of language, and because of many other reasons and illusions and so on and so forth.

So much for the introduction. Now I am going to give you some points, maybe some theoretical points about this business of modernity, of democracy and Islam. And I am not going to give any solutions to the problem, I am not going to issue any Fatwa or whatever - actually nobody has encouraged me to do that. Just in order to show what the problems are, which we have to take into account, when we think about the relationship between democracy and modernity and Islam maybe for the future generations to decide what they want to do. I mentioned this in Amsterdam in the conference that Sadik and my friend Abu Zayd also got present that at least I can again say it about Iran, the era of derivation is over. I mean nobody is now thinking of derivation, democracy or modern ideas from the Qur'an or the tradition. I call it the era of derivation. I know that, for example, not only in the past in Iran but also in other parts of the Muslim world - such as Abul Aalah Ma'dudi - whose name was mentioned here. They were trying perhaps to say that o.k. this Ba'a or Shura is the same as election and things like that. So that was a period of time that most of the efforts of the so called Muslim intellectuals were directed towards this business of derivation.

I think now that everybody realizes that this was an unfulfilled dream. And the era or the time of this derivation is virtually over, all these efforts were in vain. And this is a very important, very precious realization on the part of the Muslim intellectuals. Because now they have come to realize that we are living in a new world with new conceptualizations of the whole thing, of human beings, of history, of everything, of society. And the modern society is not a simple and enlargement of the Arab or the Mecca society in the time of the prophet. So you are not only there for a quantitatively larger society, just qualitatively different. And since it is qualitatively different you cannot transfer mechanically the old ideas into the new modern society. So this is a precious very valuable realization which saves us from many actually futile efforts in order to make mechanical transformation or translation of the old ideals into the new ones. And for that matter I would add that the idea of Shura or Ba'a is not essentially Islamic. I mean they were there in the Arab society even before the Islam. Therefore those people who think that in order to Islamize democracy they have to invoke the idea of Shura or Ba'a, they are wrong headed actually, because they are now bringing the Jaheliya idea into the modern world and they want to make the reconciliation realized. So the derivation era I would say is over.

The following era, if I may say so, is the era of compatibility. This compatibility means that Muslims would like to live in a democratic milieu. They are not going to say that this democracy or modernity is Islamic. That is not the case and they would like to live in a democratic milieu, and at the same time they would like to keep their faith as well. They do not want to live in a democratic atmosphere at the expense of their beliefs and convictions. They would like to be faithful, they would like to have their spiritual interpretations of the universe and as their spirituality is very precious to them, but nevertheless they would like to come to terms with the requirements of the modern way of living as far as it is possible. So this is now the issue, and this issue and this new era, we call it, if you like, the compatibility era just to show that there is a way to reconcile or the way to make it compatible to be Muslim, and at the same time to live in a democratic milieu somehow or other. I am not saying that the totality of modernity is compatible with the totality of Islam and I am not saying that Islam has got only one single interpretation, so all these are matters of dispute. But some interpretations can accommodate some sorts of modernity, so this is a very minimalist idea.

I mentioned this word minimalism, so let me elaborate on it a little bit more. This is actually the gist of one of my lengthiest papers in Persian, not yet in English. And the title of the paper is "maximalist religion versus minimalist religion". Now, the maximalist religion or religiosity means a kind of religiosity, which would like to derive everything from the religion. You know, religious people are lovers and this is my dictum that religion is too important to be left to lovers only. Religion is too important to be left to lovers only because lovers usually do not see something, they do not see some faults and they cannot criticize their beloved, they're always forgiving, they're always submitting to their beloved. Therefore you need some critical eyes, some critical training in order to encounter, in order to meet your religion in a critical way of thinking. But religious people are like this and there is a saying by the first Imam of the Shiism: "the man cannot be blamed because he loves his mother, religion is the mother of the religious people". They are not to be blamed but nevertheless in a scholarly way and in a critical way of thinking we have to be aware of this. The maximalist religion is a product of love. Since you love your faith, you love your religion, you would like to see all beauties in your religion. You cannot understand and admit that perhaps there are shortcomings in your religion, perhaps you have to look to other sources in order to get other things. So this maximalist religion actually is the religion, which is now ruling in our country. Most of the authorities are maximalists in a sense that they encourage people, they persuade people to think that whatever they need, it can be derived from Islam. And so they are not going to look into any other sources, be it in the West or in the East or the Islamic Iran or whatever, so you have got everything and you have got the rich source and you can live a very happy life without borrowing anything from anybody else, this is maximalist religion.

But now, I would say, fortunately the realization of the minimalist religion is on the way. It is minimal in the sense that it gives you only a way in order to live a spiritual life, but there are many other things and needs that you have to fulfill, that you have to satisfy and you have to borrow them and bring them from other sources. From a theoretical point of view, the first point which I would like to mention and to emphasize is this: that in order to at least conceive the compatibility between religion and democracy is to have a minimalist conception of religion rather than a maximalist conception of religion. A maximalist conception of religion is an enemy to democracy, is an enemy to modernity, is an enemy to anything extra-religious. From a theoretical point of view I'm talking about a minimalist interpretation of religion, that is the first point.

The second point I would like to make is the idea of extra-religion, or extra-religious ideas and concepts versus intra-religious ones. This is something I realized very early in my career. When I started thinking and writing about religion in our society - and by the way I tell you, in a religious society the most difficult thing to do is to talk about religion. You have to be very careful and very cautious, very wise, very clever in order to push forward your ideas without encountering much resistance, perhaps I have not been too clever, because I have met some resistance. But nevertheless, that's the price that has to be paid, as I said. Now, I realized from the outset that, since religious people are lovers, they do not look beyond their religion, outside of their religion. They only confine their looks and their watches inside

the religion. A balance always should be done between the outside and the inside of the religion. It is very important – and this is actually the gist of my thesis in my book “Expansion and Contraction of religious knowledge”. There I try to keep the balance between the inside, the outside, the extra-religious ideas and intra-religious ideas. This has always been the case and I have tried to show in my book that this is not a new idea, but that it has actually been the whole history of religion. Always religious people, especially the scholars, theologians and philosophers, have been mindful of the extra-religious ideas. Look at the 2nd century after the demands of the prophet, look at the Motazelite, even look at Asharite, they despise philosophy, but nevertheless, they had their own philosophy and they borrowed parts of their philosophy from outside of Islam, from Christians, from Greek and so on and so forth. And they tried to make a balance between the two, they introduced willy-nilly, knowingly, unknowingly part of these ideas into their interpretation of Qur’an and so on and so forth. And you remember that the Hadith, which became dominant - Mr. Abu Zayd perhaps must tell us of the authenticity of the Hadith: “he who interprets the Qur’an according to his own will and his own ideas, definitely will go to hell”. Perhaps the Hadith was the product of the 2nd or the 3rd century because this interpretation of the Qur’an according to the personal ideas became dominant, became prevalent. Some people took ideas from the Greek, some people took ideas from the Indians and so on and so forth. So, the interpretation became dependent on these extra-religious ideas but I argued in my book that this is quite natural. You cannot blame anybody. Those people who think that they can empty their mind and they can have no presupposition whatsoever and with absolutely evacuated mind they can encounter their revelation in a pure form in order to grasp the deep meaning of the revelation, I think, they are under an illusion. The modern historiography tells us that this is unfortunately impossible and whether you like it or not, as the history says, you are always under the dominance of some ideas, some ideas which you are not aware of. But they are there and they influence your way of thinking and your interpretation of the text that you have got in hand. The text needs not to be a sacred text, not to be a scripture, it could be the poetry of Rilke, it might be the poetry of Hafiz or whoever. That’s always the case, and history is a witness to that. All those who have said, that “Man Fasaca Quram Be Rabehi”, they have been in the same trap, they have been trapped by the same pitfall and when you deconstruct their interpretation, their Tafsir, you will see that the ideas from different corners are coming and flowing into their books and their works and products. This is the influence of the extra-religious ideas and the intra-religious ideas. Not only in the business of Tafsir and interpretation of the text but also in knowing God and in interpreting history and everything.

Let me tell you, for example, most of the Muslim philosophers became realists, realists in the medieval sense of the word, i.e. conceptualist, i.e. believing in universals. This is not an Islamic teaching at all, you wouldn’t find anything about realism or nominalism, in none of the Islamic texts, neither in Shiism, nor in Sunnism, definitely not in the Qur’an because the idea was far from the mind of Muslims, absolutely. Realism versus nominalism. Nominalism became the order of the day in Europe and realism was, of course, there in the old Greek and then the Muslims borrowed from it. But most of the philosophical, rational interpretations of the Qur’an are under the dominance of the school of realism, philosophical realism. So that came from elsewhere, absolutely. They didn’t discuss it, they didn’t do it openly, they didn’t even show that they were aware of using the products of the school of realism, Greek realism. But nevertheless they always thought of the essences of things. When they looked at water they thought, ok. water has got some essence, so God is talking about the essence of water. When they looked at trees they said: every tree has got its own essence. There is God then, he talks about trees, Ashjar, in Qur’an, so he is talking about the essence of trees. When it came to the Ashara, of course, they were nominalists and so they took a different approach altogether. This I mention, as a lively example, in order to tell you that the ideas come to our minds from corners unknown to us and it is always for the later generations to come and to construct the ideas to see the influence of the foreign idea. Therefore, for a religious person, for a believer, for a scholar especially, it is incumbent to know. As much as he knows his religion he must know the extra-religious factors and ideas. And this is something we do not find. And that was especially my recommendation to the seminaries in Iran that, ok, you are religious scholars, you are “alem” and you know the Qur’an, you know the Hadith, everything, but you know only the Qur’an and Hadith. You have to expand your knowledge and you have to go beyond this text in order to know things outside your religious scriptures. This at the same time gives you the clue, that why religious understanding is so historical. It is historical because the human knowledge outside religion is historical as well, so that influences and makes religious understanding contingent upon the extra-religious idea.

I would like to add another point. The third point is that especially another philosophical issue, which we have to have in mind before perhaps coming to more down-to-earth ideas, is the idea of rights. Religious language, especially in Islam and Judaism - I’m not talking about Christianity, it’s a little bit different, nor about Buddhism – is a language of duties, a language of obligations. I personally have searched the Qur’an for this. In the whole Qur’an, more than 6.000 verses, only once or twice you would find the idea of rights. I tell you the one which I remember now, maybe Prof. Abu Zayd reminds us of some other places. (Qur’an Verse) It is about the person who is murdered, so the authority or the guardian of the murder has got the right to revenge. So the idea of the right is that. (Qur’an Verse) This is very exceptional. I remember Levi-Strauss who is, of course, the guru of the neocons. Forgive me for sighting him, but he has got a very nice book on history and there he mentions that you wouldn’t find any mention of rights in the whole old testament, that is what he said and I wrote on the margin: nor would you find it in the Qur’an. He, of course, did not know nothing about the Qur’an, I supposed, but he was a Jew and he knew well about the old testament. He says that the rights in the modern concept, modern sense of the rights, you wouldn’t find it in the old testament. I tell you that you wouldn’t find in the Qur’an as well, maybe in one or two places.

The language of these two religions is the language of duties, of obligations, let us say of responsibilities. The God of these two religions is the God of duties and responsibilities. He’s there and he’s watching you carefully in order for you to fulfill your responsibilities, to perform your duties and obligations and so on. The language of rights is virtually absent from these two and therefore their economics are duty-economics, their politics are duty-politics, their ethics are duty-ethics and so on and so forth. On the other hand the liberal West, the dominant language of liberalism, is the language of rights. And I think democracy is part of this liberalism in the modern West, of course, which is based on the rights. Of course one can criticize and I have criticized that too much emphasis on rights to the neglect of duties is shortcoming and on the other hand too much emphasis on duties with the neglect of rights also is another fault. We have to avoid both.

But let us be clear about the situation now. This is the situation and democracy, I would like to say, is an offspring of the language or

of the culture of rights. The compatibility of the culture of rights and the culture of obligations is a difficult thing. I'm not saying it is impossible but the challenge is a very serious one, a severe one and it is to be welcomed, because after all we have to challenge real problems. I personally have got the experience and the idea and I just put it here as a suggestion. It doesn't have a simple solution. And maybe we have to transcend both paradigms. Paradigms of right and paradigms of duties, and maybe we have to create a third paradigm in which we can reconcile the two, we can combine the two. I have got some clues, but I am not going to suggest it to you here and leave the problem open to you, but I tell you that it is an important one.

The liberal West, as I said, has got too much emphasis on the issues of rights. And democracy is an offspring of the culture of rights. And that's why neither in Judaism nor in Islam, I mean both in Judaism and Islam there has been some sort of resistance towards democracy, because this duty-oriented mentality rejects too much emphasis on rights. Because rights means a form of independence for the human beings from God. "I have got the right" - and this is something which is not so sweet to religiously minded people. Duty means obedience, means submission, means surrender, you surrender to your God, to your Lord, who wants you to perform your duties. But having rights means that you are independent - even vis-a-vis of God. You have got these rights and you claim it. And this is some time associated with some sort of arrogance, which is not always praised in fields of religiosity. So how can we reconcile duties and rights avoiding arrogance and at the same time accepting the submission and surrender to God? So this is the real challenge to all religions, including Christianity, because the submission to God is the essence to all religiosity - no doubt about it. And if you think that you are an independent person, you are a God for yourself, which means polytheism rather than monotheism rather than worshipping the real God.

So this is another challenge and I am happy to have drawn attention to this in our country, in my country. For the people who are working in the field, that the field of reconciling the Islam and democracy is not only politics. It is not only politics, it is not only to have elections, to have separation of power and so on. There are much deeper issues involved here, that if the mentality is not prepared for that, I mean, all these things may be superficial, you know artificial things - you may have a parliament, you may have seemingly a judiciary, but none would function in a right way. Because you need some philosophical underpinnings, even theological underpinnings in order to have a real democratic system. Your God cannot be a despotic God anymore. A despotic God would not be compatible with a democratic rule, with the idea of rights. So you even have to change your idea of God, of divine and then it goes deep into your theology, that's why I have always suggested in our country, that we have to reshuffle, we reshuffle, or what I am restating, revise and deconstellative lack over theology even. It is not only the interpretation of the text, it is not only going through the Hadith of the prophet and so on. It is not only political activism, there are much deeper issues involved and that's why we have been in the process of democratization for a whole century. You remember the first democratic or constitutional revolution in our country took place in 1906. We are now in 2004 - this is roughly a century that this democratization has been on the way. And you won't find a single person who tells you that the culture of democracy or liberty is well settled there. No, there is still a long way to go, and that's because the conceptual side of it is still to be realized and materialized. And I think in the field of theology, in the field of scriptural interpretation and so on, we have got a long way to go, but I don't think that I have got a long way to go here in my speech.

Well, actually what I wanted to say virtually in the field of the philosophical underpinnings is already said, but let me mention an anecdote: two months ago I was in Iran and I went to visit Ayatollah Montazeri. Ayatollah Montazeri, of course, is a well known figure in Iran and he was of course due to be the supreme leader of the Rohollah but that was not his lot and so he was deposed before the Rohollah. And then, of course, his political fortune was reversed and he came under house arrest for a few years, for five years actually. Now he's semi-released from his house arrest. Visiting him is a very risky business anyway and is not welcomed by the government. But since there was an old friendship between me and him, I decided to go on and visit him, that was outside Ghom. A good discussion actually arose between us, me and him. One of those discussions was about the Islamic state. You know Ayatollah Montazeri was one of the first jurists, first grand jurists, who wrote an extensive book - four volumes - about the Velayate Faghih and authority of the jurist and supported the idea actually. And that's still the best and the most detailed source of the idea of the Velayate Faghih. But recently of course he has changed part of his ideas. Now I asked him, Ayatollah, let aside all this business of the Velayate Faghih and whether it is God who decides for us, as to the way of ruling the country and so on and so forth. What if there is a contract between people and the government. On the basis of the contract we hire some people, even if they are not our representatives, we hire some people to serve us as governors, as rulers. And we pay them as long as they serve us and they keep the contract we go along with them. And if they don't, we depose them, and break the contract and finish it. He said from an Islamic point of view it is absolutely and perfectly o.k.. And then he said this has got an Islamic basis, Oufehel Oqud. "You have to keep your promises, keep your contracts". So forget about this Velayate Faghih, forget about the divine way, just make a contract. I told him, dear Ayatollah, this is exactly the contract principle, the contract argument in the western political philosophy. This is the basis of all democracy, the basis of the new way of politics. And he said perfect, even on an Islamic basis it is at least compatible. You cannot derive it from the idea of Oufehel Oqud, but you can base it on the idea of Oufehel Oqud. So then I mentioned this to the university, to the students of the University of Tehran, that look, for those of you who would like to think in a religious framework. For those of you who still think that it is your religious duty perhaps to support or to oppose a political system. For those of you who still depend on a religious authority. Now listen to Ayatollah Montazeri. He has actually admitted and accepted the contract theory of government and so this is a way forward actually.

I would like to say, not only on the basis of those philosophical underpinnings which I didn't have time to talk with him, though I think he was not very well aware of again the philosophical presuppositions of the contract theory, because there are a lot. But, nevertheless, I would like to say that, o.k. look, when a religious authority actually thinks like that we should not oppose him, we should not tell him that you do not know Islam, we should not tell him that o.k., you have to come to religious intellectuals, non-clerical laymen in order to teach you what is the contract theory. At least he has got so many followers and this is how democracy could find its way and break its way into Muslim societies. You propose the way in a simple language and you try to attract these authorities.

But nevertheless, my main message is this, that along side the political activism and even this kind of religious issuing Fatwa, you have to have those philosophical operations to establish the culture of democracy and to show and to demonstrate to the Muslim people that

they can live in a democratic system while they are able to keep their faith intact. I think, it was not only my right but my duty to finish at this time.

Thank you very much.