

Hermeneutics
Херменевтика

MODERN QURANIC HERMENEUTICS: ABDULKARIM SOROUSH ON THE EXPANSION OF PROPHETIC EXPERIENCE

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Abstract. Since early times, Muslims have speculated on the nature of Revelation and the Divine Speech. This has resulted in Muslim scholars developing divergent approaches to this problem. With the constitution of the orthodoxy, the former school became dominant and it postulated that the Quran is the Word of God dictated to Prophet Muhammad through the angel Jabrail. However, during the last decades in Iran emerged scholars, such as Abdulkarim Soroush, who proposed new approaches to understanding and interpreting Revelation. This paper discusses the hermeneutical project put forward by Soroush by discussing his article on the “Expansion of Prophetic Experience”. In this article, the author argues that his modern hermeneutics is radically different from orthodox theology and problematizes that the idea that the Quran as a human creation brings about other implications outside theology, such as for instance opening the Muslim thought and liberating it from scriptural readings.

Keywords: modern Quranic hermeneutics; Abdulkarim Soroush; Revelation; expanding prophetic experience; Islamic orthodoxy

1. Introduction

Notions such as “Revelation” and “Prophethood” denoting revelation of an information from communication with God, are key concepts that build the meta-narratives of the semite-abrahamic cultural tradition. Thus, every idea about the concept of Revelation and every question related to the fundamental experience of the Prophet, not only relates directly to the essence of this historical tradition, but it also impacts the fundamentals of every other cultural tradition that is related to the history of semite-abrahamic tradition. This is why the nature of Revelation and the contact of an individual (Prophet) with the supernatural power (God) has always been a subject of speculation and often times of polemics among scholars of these cultures, including the Islamic world. According to the monotheistic teaching of this tradition, the Prophet who was inspired by God teaches men about the matters of this world and the hereafter. Thus, by implementing his teaching, men find salvation in both worlds. The representatives of these religions consider Revelation, experience and spiritual or imaginative intuition

as the sole authority of knowledge and cognitive certainty, neglecting reason and philosophical knowledge or respecting them as long as they did not challenge their beliefs. However, there were others – especially after the proliferation of post-Socratic philosophy – that leaned towards reason and philosophy acknowledging to them the absolute authority of knowledge and judgement, disregarding any knowledge originating from revelation, intuition, spiritual or imaginative experience. Thus, since earlier times a conflict is present between reason and revelation, or philosophy and religion, in general. Among these dichotomies, there are serious intellectual discussions related to the very nature of Revelation, modes of contact between man and God, and the type and the essence of the Divine Speech.

Depending on the approach and belief related to the “Sacred Text” we can determine ontological, epistemological, and cosmological conditions of the individual in this world. This is precisely the reason why in the history of Muslim thought, the issue of the Quran was the first to divide the theologians. Muslim scholars who sought to understand and interpret the Sacred Texts, faced an essential question: is the Quran a word of God or of a Prophet? This question in the past as well as in the present is one of the key challenges in Quranic studies.

Abdulkarim Soroush is one among the Iranian thinkers to argue that the Quran is not a word of God, but of the Prophet. This has sparked a lot of debates and criticism. In general, Soroush’s ideas about the Quran and Revelation are radically different from the orthodox approach and discourse in Islam. Thus, it could be considered as a methodology that rivals and challenges the orthodox and classical approaches to the meaning and interpretation of the Quran, and consequently of the Religion of Islam itself. Thus, having in mind the modernization of Muslim societies in various social dimensions, on the other hand, and the reluctance to rethink the theological discourse—including the methodology of interpretation of the Sacred Texts—on the other hand, the Islamic thought continues to be closed, poor, and unproductive.

This paper discusses some of the key thoughts of Soroush on Revelation, the Quran and Prophethood in his theory of “expansion of Prophetic experience”. It will also analyze the implication of his thought in the Muslim intellectual and societal life. The paper argues that Soroush’s thought on the Quran enables the continuous expansion of meanings that leave the Text open to new interpretations.

2. Modern Quranic hermeneutics in Iran

With the spreading of modernization and modern sciences in Muslim societies, the political elites and intellectuals with modern education therein, built academic and educational institutions modeling them on modern Western system. Consequently, a modern reason begun to be installed, rivaling and seriously challenging the traditional religious reason. However, the traditional reason continued to dominate in religious schools that had huge impact on Muslim societies.¹ As a result, two conflicting systems of knowledge were created in Iran, aiming at excluding one-another and building

hegemony in their societies. But, where does the traditional reason differ from the modern one, and what are the reasons for the intolerance between the two?

Scholars that studied this issue found substantial differences between the traditional and modern reasons. The fundamental difference between the two consists in the traditional reason being “dogmatic”, whereas the modern reason “critical”. Thus, a deep divergence exists between tradition, whose system is based on the epistemological religious and mythological systems, on the one hand, and the modern system which is based on enlightenment and human values, on the other. But the fundamental difference lies in the field of thought, in particular pertaining to the thought about the “truth”, from where the gap between these two systems originates. As noted by Abulqāsim Fanāyī, the modern man understood that what he knows is not the truth itself, but a form or a theory of truth which itself is created by him. In other word, the forms and theories of “truth” than men have on their mind are the constructs of their understanding. Apart from this, the modern man understood that a truth might have various forms and from a single truth there could be diverse interpretations, understandings, and theories. Thus, the world of existence is like a text that could be viewed from different perspectives and read in numerous ways. (Fanāyī, 1389: 144)

This means that the knowledge of modern man is a manifestation of his dimensions of being, or in the best case, a product of his imperfect and erroneous reason. In this way, he understood that instead of the truth, what we always get are descriptions or theories of it, which in turn is not the truth itself. According to the modern man, the human reason is formed and acts in accordance with the specific subjective circumstances and is constructed in the specific historical circumstances and limited by his intellectual abilities.

Therefore, if one is to claim that he or she knows the truth, it must be kept in mind that such knowledge pertains to a reflection, a layer or a theory of truth. (Fanāyī, 1389: 145)

Such an approach to the truth resulted in advent of thought and modern hermeneutics that had an impact on every dimension of life including theology. “Modern epoch that opened a new dimension in Western history meant that for the people of the epoch, the philosophical, religious and artistic texts of the Middle Ages and earlier times presented themselves in their full vagueness and senselessness. It is precisely in this respect that the historical dimension of modern era differed from that of the past. This condition resulted in thorough studies and deep reflections that lead to mind being focused in the matters of interpretations and understanding of texts as a variation of knowledge.” (Shabestari, 2006: 40) Thus, in contrast to the classical hermeneutics, the modern hermeneutics, apart from texts and their authors focuses on phenomena that enable continuous expansion of understanding that leave open the possibilities for various meanings. The modern condition that influenced Muslim societies as well, including the Iran,²⁾ challenged the traditional and religious thought and the interpretation of Sacred Texts.

Modern reason has challenged with robust arguments any possibility of human contact with supernatural divine power; hence the reason is not in a position to legitimize any Sacred texts. As noted by Bijan Abdulkarimi, “in present time, in the time of metaphysical subjectivism and the spread of scientific reason and modern technology, the question about the possibility of Revelation, or the human conversation with Logos, using the terms of pre-Socratic wise men, or the fundamental truth of this world, is the key question that intellectuals of the East face, and in particular scholars of the Muslim World.” (Abdulkarimi, 1396: 34) Muslim theologians and intellectuals begun to think seriously about the nature of Revelation and the Quran and the mode of creation of contact between man, i.e. the natural being (the Prophet) and a supernatural power (God).

Apart from Soroush, it was Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari who dealt with this problem in Iran. The latter has produced numerous important works³ addressing the need to rethink and advance interpretations of the Islamic Text. The recent positions on the Quran and Prophetood elaborated in an article titled “A Prophetic reading of the world” sparked reactions for and against it. In this article, Shabestari states that the Quran is a “prophetic word”, a product of Revelation and not the Revelation itself. Shabestari puts forward two main arguments: First, according to insights of the philosophy of language during the last two hundred years, the Quran (*Mushaf*) should be considered as an Arabic text understood by all (believers and non-believers, alike) which could be attributed to a man (namely to the Prophet of Islam), and as such we could consider it a word of a man. If we consider it a direct book of God with all its specificities of Arabic language, not only do we deny its quality of being understandable by all, but we also eliminate its quality of being “intelligible”. Therefore, to attribute the origin of a text to God, we have to choose another approach and method. The second arguments states that the literary genre of almost all the Quranic verses is narration. The Quran is a monotheist reading of the world deriving from the “hermeneutic experience of the Prophet”. There are however other genres of Prophetic experiences that are expressed in non-narrative and non-literary forms. Such experiences enrich and expand the hermeneutic experience. The Quran is a basis for a monotheist reading of the world and not a treasure of cognitive truths and truth claims about the Being.” (Shabestari, 2010)

It should be noted that both Shabestari and Soroush do not address the epistemological dimension of Revelation, since, as theologians, they accept the epistemological justification of divine information, overlooking the argument of their truthfulness.

3. The Quranic hermeneutics of Abdulkarim Soroush

Abdulkarim Soroush (1945 –) is educated on the traditional disciplines of Islam and obtained a doctoral degree on History and Philosophy of Science from the University of London. He is among the first academics to lecture on the analytical and philosophy of science in Iran, and the first to introduce the philosophical ideas of Karl Popper (1902 – 1994) in Iran initiating the well-known ongoing debate among the so-called

Iranian Popperians and Heideggerians. In Iran he is considered the “father of religious intellectualism” (*roushanfekri dini*). During the nineties of the last century, he became critical of the political role of powerful clergymen in Iran. Soon after he was censured by the state and expelled from academic institutions. His thoughts on Revelation, Prophethood, religious pluralism, democracy, theocracy, and other topics sparked wide debates in Iran, and, as a result, he was condemned and accused of blasphemy and treason against Islam and Islamic Revolution in Iran. Despite of this, his works and lectures are the most read and listened to, and thus he could be considered as the most engaged and influential thinker in present day Iran. He is also one of the most criticized scholars in Iran and throughout the Muslim world, resulting in numerous books and articles produced about his thought and ideas.

After the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the new political system and its Islamic ideologues faced different problems that called for new ideas and novel interpretations. Ironically, they looked for answers in the ancient Islamic texts written centuries ago. Thus, the new ideologues and leaders faced serious challenges for which they sought theoretical solutions. One of the Iranian thinkers to find the solution in the rethinking and resignification of the interpretation of Islam, was Abdulkarim Soroush. He has written several books of great importance on the topic of Muslim Iranian intellectuals in the post-Revolution period. However, it was the ideas elaborated in the series of articles titled “The theory of expansion and contraction of Shariah” (Soroush, 2006: 32 – 156) – appearing in 'Keyhan-i Ferhengi' magazine, and later published in a book with the same title – that sparked harsh reactions and polemics. In these writings, Soroush proposed a synthesis of tradition and modernism in matters of religious knowledge. Among arguments developed by Soroush is the distinction between religion in itself and religious knowledge, implying that religion is static and unchangeable, but religious knowledge is changeable, erroneous, temporary and restricted to a particular time and space. Soroush sought to interpret religion in its historical contexts that are varied and diverse. He stressed the fact that Revelation in itself is silent, doesn't speak, but it is our understandings and interpretations that give voice to it. And, since our understandings and interpretations are plural and diverse, the meanings of Revelation become diverse and plural manifesting themselves in numerous schools and sects of Islam. (Soroush, 2006: 132 – 156)

Another groundbreaking approach to Islam by Soroush is found in his “The essentials and accidentals in Religion” (Soroush, 2009). In this article, the author discusses the definition of religion through an ontological analysis differentiating between the “essential” character of Islam, that is a fundamental necessary substance, on the other hand, and its “accidentals” as contingent layers of its crust. However, Soroush insists that it is necessary to distinguish between the two. According to the author, the essentials of religion could not be defined, and even if defined, they could not be static. They are, rather abstractions that are “embodied” in accidentals, which, in turn, are historical and as such variable in time and space. In this article, the author

lists, among other, the following accidentals of Islam: historical contingencies, such as the Arabic language and culture, terms, concepts, and propositions which are used by the Prophet of Islam in the ancient Arabia, as well as historical narratives of the Islamic fundamental texts. (Soroush, 2009: 29)

In addition to new ideas proposed as part of conceptualization of religion, Soroush proposed new ideas and methods in the field of the conceptualization and interpretation of the Divine Word, particularly concerning the nature of Revelation and prophethood that shocked religious circles in Iran, thus causing severe criticism and reactions.

3.1. Soroush's ideas on Revelation and Prophetic experience

Conceptualizations and interpretations of Revelations posed, from the beginning, a serious challenge for the Islamic reason. In the early centuries of Islamic history, lively debates on the issues of Revelation and "Divine Speech" took place among Muslim scholars. *M'utazila* defended the position that the "Divine Speech" was a creation. This theory is based on the ideas that the truth of the "Word" is composed of coordinated letters and utterances to signify a certain meaning (Al Mugnī, 2006: 136). According to this perspective, *M'utezilas* position was that every word of God is mediated through prophets, and as such represents a new creation and a new event. Thus, every prophet chosen by God created new word, thus Hebraism, Christianity and Islam are new religions. For *M'utezila*, the nature of the "Word of God" is that is directly created by God, and as such an "extraordinary phenomenon" and *sui generis* in the system of the laws of nature. (Shabestari, 2006: 137). *Ash'ari*, on the other hand, held that the "Word of God" is an essential attribute (*sifati dhāt*) that was from the beginning an indispensable part of God, whereas sacred books revealed to the prophets are verbal expressions of that essential attribute. According to this position, the "Word of God" does not consist of letters and utterance, but it is the meaning and the truth that are always part of God and, as such, it is referred to as the "word of spirit" (*kalām nafsī*) (Shabestari, 2006: 137).

Another interesting theory about the "Word of God" is developed by Ibn Kul'lāb (3rd Hijri or 9th century AD). The theory states that the "word of spirit" (*kalāmi nafsāni*) and the eternal "Word of God" were never delivered in the shape of a Codified Book (*Mushāf*). Ibn Kul'lāb held that the interpretation and the Arabic or Hebraic expression of the "Word of God" is not itself the word of God, and that the Quran is an Arabic interpretation and expression of the "Word of God" and not identical to the word of God. According to him, during revelation of the "Word of God" and its reception by the Prophet of Islam, the phenomenon of "interpretation" that contains linguistic features and elements of the Arabic, occurred. (Shabestari, 2006: 142)

It was the great mystic, Muhyiddīn Ibn 'Arabī (1165 – 1240), who was the first to provide a distinctive theory on the meaning of the "Word of God". According to this theory, Revelation does not end, but continues even after the Prophet of Islam. Ibn 'Arabī has divided Prophethood into two forms: law enacting and no-law enacting,

arguing that the Prophethood in the former sense is discontinued with the Prophet of Islam. He did not speak of “inspiration in itself” for everyone and for every time in the sense of a collection of knowledge and theoretical truths. The theory of Ibn ‘Arabī stresses that the inspired word (*wahy*) is identified by the way it affects man. It is conceivable that a “certain word” is revelation to a person, but not to another. Hence, to establish whether a particular word is revelation or not, we should not ask whether it breaches the laws of nature or not. Rather, we should ask what that particular word does to the person that other words are incapable of doing, and in what way it is a “completely distinct word.” According to this view, the Quran was a revealed word for the Prophet Muhammad, whereas for the others it could be so only if they would experience it as a “completely distinct word.” The inspiration in itself has no meaning for all the times and for all persons. (Shabestari, 2006: 143). Nevertheless, despite all diverse views that Muslim thought developed about the “divine word”, it was the *Ash‘ari* theory that dominated the Islamic theology for many centuries.

This has continued until Muslims got acquainted with modern thought when new thinkers and theologians involved into serious endeavors to bring new understandings and concepts related to Revelation and the Quran. Thus “contemporary intellectuals and scholars concluded that if Muslims wish to develop a religious discourse, they should initially rethink their approach to Revelation and the meanings of religious texts, since anything other than this would be just a matter of cosmetic change without any deep emancipatory and progressive effect.” (Melekian, 2009: 45) According to the critical Muslim scholars, the meanings and interpretations of Islamic Sacred Texts are contaminated by radical political and sectarian ideologies that are hindering the development of a human and peaceful discourse among the Muslims. This is precisely why Mohammed Arkoun (1928 – 2010) calls for new approach to the study of the Quran, “As far as what is commonly called the Qur’an is considered, it must be said that this term has become so heavily loaded by theological inquiry, legalistic instrumentalization and the ideological manipulations of contemporary political movements that it must be subjected to a preliminary deconstruction in order to make manifest levels of function and significance that have been side-stepped, suppressed or forgotten by pious tradition as well as by text-oriented philology, to say nothing of the savage exegesis of the so-called fundamentalist Muslims”. (Arkoun, 2006: 64) Soroush’s ideas and speculations on Revelation and the Quran should be seen as part of these intellectual endeavors to extract meanings and interpretations dissimilar from literal and anachronism interpretations.

In his writing, interviews and polemics on Revelation, Prophethood and the Quran, Soroush proposed numerous novel ideas and approaches. Of course, his theories about these fundamental categories of Religion of Islam could be legitimately criticized. However, this paper analyses only key thoughts and discusses some of their implications.

Thought in his first work Soroush presents the theory on the advancement and rethinking of religious knowledge, he writes about the need to re-conceptualize Revelation and Prophethood. In his work "*Bast-e Tajrobeh-yi Nabavi*" [Expanding prophetic experience] (Soroush, 1378), the author elaborated his thoughts on the nature of Revelation and Prophethood. Among others, the main propositions of this theory are as follows:

- Prophethood is an experience. According to Soroush, what a human being makes a prophet is Revelation, which is nothing but a religious experience. Thus, in contrast to the experiences of others, prophets are obliged by their experience to communicate their experience to others. He states that having religious experience does not make people prophets, as they are not obliged to communicate this experience to their respective societies;

- The prophetic experience could be perfected. That is, "Revelation or Prophetic experience could be further expanded if the Prophet" (Soroush, 1378) lived longer, thus we could have a larger Quran if the Prophet of Islam lived longer than he did, or likewise it could be more reduced if the Prophet lived shorter than he actually did. Therefore, the volume of the "Word of God" was determined by the Prophet's lifespan;

- Revelation or the Prophetic experience followed the Prophet's personality, and not vice-versa. Soroush states that the more the personality of the Prophet was developed, the more the Revelation or the Prophetic experience was improved and became more sophisticated. The gradual revelation of the Quran is a proof to this claim;

- The experience of the Prophet of Islam expanded within the "historical" and "spatial" circumstances and was affected by "interacting with the environment" and "dialogue with the people of the time". (The nature of Revelation is a dialogue, and not a monologue.) "The experience of the Prophet of Islam underwent a "historical" and "contingent" expansion." In other words, Soroush states that the Quran is revealed during a course of interaction with the realities facing Prophet Muhammad, whereas, unlike other prophets, his prophetic experience was a synthesis of "inside" and "outside" experiences. He lived among his people and was part of the socio-political developments of his time, which became part of the Muslim Holy Book as it is today. He writes that during Prophet Muhammad's life, there were questions raised and challenges that had impact on the spirit of Muhammad and made him take his stances on them. (Soroush, 2000: 19)

- Prophetic experience does not belong exclusively to prophets, since other people could become part of it. In this work, Soroush also states that "the historical expansion of prophetic experience" does not end with the death of the Prophet, but it could continue by other people that follow the same path. In this sense, some of the people who were part of this prophetic expansion were Mavlane Rumi, Ibn Arabi, and others. Thus, according to Soroush, Revelation had no specific form or utterance, and this helped people to understand it, since the Prophet spoke using the restricted language and knowledge of his society with which he was naturally familiarized. (Soroush, 1378: 38)

– The historical expansion of the Prophetic experience did not and should not end with the death of the Prophet, since “the end of Prophethood” does not imply the end of Prophet’s presence in the life of believers. “Prophethood was an experience. As long as the light of this experience shines, Prophethood will remain live and active. In this sense, following the Prophet means following his experiences, and, rather than passive imitation, it means active participation in his experiences.” (Soroush, 1378: 171) Soroush writes that the Quran is a human creation, as it is a perception and understanding of Revelation as a spiritual and religious experience of the Prophet. (Soroush, 1378: 39).

– To follow the Prophet means to be a part of his experience. According to Soroush, the people around the Prophet were not only the addressees of Revelation, but with their actions they became part of Prophet’s experience, and through their active questions, positive or negative reactions, they imposed themselves in the process of Revelation.

“The expansion of prophetic experience is a theory that speaks about the human and wordy part of the Prophet and the wordy and historical dimension of Revelation and Religion.” (Soroush, 1378: 40)

In one of his interviews, Soroush proposed new ideas regarding Revelation and the Quran, which were soon after followed by polemics and numerous substantial writings in which, among other, Soroush defended the position that accounts about natural phenomena in the Quran, such as universe, mental illness and the like, could not be correct, as they are limited to what it was known about such phenomena at the time of the Prophet, and as evidenced by modern science, many of such information is erroneous. (Soroush, 2007) However, Soroush maintains that this does not damage the sacredness of the Quran at the slightest, since the latter has to do with the spiritual and metaphysical teachings in the hereafter. By way of illustration, he brings into discussion Prophet’s medicine and referring to Ibn Khaldun’s *Al-Muqaddima*, asserts that the in fact Prophet’s medicine consists of modest knowledge that Arabs of that time, and the Prophet himself sought the help of specialist physicians. Another example of discrepancy between the formal meaning of the Quran and science mentioned by Soroush has to do with the claim of the “seven heavens” that was interpreted by all classical commentators of the Quran based on the Ptolemy astronomical theory. (Soroush, 2007)

3.2. An analysis of Soroush ideas and theories

Soroush’s idea about continuation of Revelation after the decease of Prophet Muhammad is rooted in the mystical tradition of Islam. It was Ibn Arabi who held that Prophet Muhammad received merely the normative Revelation, whose aim was to enact laws for society, whereas Revelation in general continues after him as was present before him. (Ibn ‘Arabi, 1391: 134). It seems that neither Soroush, nor Ibn Arabi before him succeeded in establishing an ontological and epistemological difference between Revelation to the prophets and Revelation to the mystics. Both stress that the difference between the two types of Revelation lies in terms of applicability of their norms in society. To both authors, whereas the prophets are obliged to communicate to the

people, this is not the case with the mystics. But, since we do not have a knowledge on the nature of their Revelation, we can legitimately ask: How are they obliged with such a task; or why some individuals (that is, prophets) are obliged to enact norms, and others (mystics) not; and how come that given that they are both objects of the same Revelation, they differ in their obligations to it; or what is the reason for discontinuation of the normative type of Revelation in the face of human need for new norms and laws? Muhammad Iqbal's account on the discontinuation of prophethood claims that with the Prophet Muhammad comes the era of critical reason, and after him, the reason can be critical to Revelation itself. (Iqbal, 2009: 141). However, perhaps this account could be limited only to the Arab societies of that time, and could not be valid in the context of Hellenistic societies in which a rich philosophical tradition flourished.

Soroush's view about the "expansion of prophetic experience" could also be understood as referring to the expansion and development of emancipatory and civilizing ideas of Prophet Muhammad who contributed towards the emancipation of Arab societies of his time and the foundation of the great historical Islamic civilization. Soroush maintains that adherence to the prophetic tradition could be interpreted in two ways. First, as accentuating the historical personality of the Prophet, which considers the Prophet as a missionary whose mission has ended at a particular point in history, and now that he is not among us anymore, we only follow his teachings. This is about following and practicing his formal commands. According to Soroush, this is typical of Wahhabi theology which separates between spiritual personality of the Prophet, on the one and his historical personality, on the other hand, without any consideration for the former. The second meaning of adherence to Prophetic tradition and teachings is based on the distinction between Muhammad as a Prophet and Muhammad as a founder of a profane school of thought. The founders of profane schools of thought are historical personalities and it is their schools that endure after their death. (Fanāyī, 2010: 449 – 451) The historical personality of the Prophet consists of his esoteric personality. "Prophethood was an experience. As long as this experience remains alight, Prophethood will be alive and active". Therefore, "following the Prophet implies following his experience, actively participating in his experiences, rather imitating and passively repeating them." (Fanāyī, 1378: 171) Thus, for Soroush, following the historical personality of the Prophet is akin to confining oneself to limited historical realities of the people of Arab Peninsula of the seventh century, who are in many key respects unrelated to latter times. In this sense, the movements that seek to solve contemporary problems and dilemmas by referring to the historical realities of the time in which Prophet lived, could only lead in decadent and radical actions. Therefore, if Muslims today understand the idea of "expansion" and apply it as proposed by Soroush, they could eliminate obstacles in their way towards intellectual emancipation and cultural growth.

According to Soroush, the expansion of Prophetic experience could be considered as an endeavor to bring and revive religious and spiritual life in modern world. Discussing

the implication and potential results of this idea in contemporary realities, Abulqāsim Fanāyī wrote:

“With the re-opening of heaven’s gate, the dialogue between the profane and the sacred will be re-established, and God will be present in the lives of humankind and He will again speak to them. Human need for religion will be realized only through the Prophetic experience, and the latter could fulfill this need only if it is conceptualized as “expandable” and enriched even after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The further “expansion” if this experience is a responsibility of the “society” of believers, and not of any single individual. It should also be noted that the prophetic experience is “expanded” under the influence of historical circumstances characterizing the epoch in which the Prophet lived. Thus, the expansion of this experience in our epoch would be impossible without acquainting ourselves with the historical circumstances of the Prophet’s epoch and without distinguishing between the sacred and historical dimensions of the prophetic experience, that is to say its essence and accidentals. The “prophetic experience” should be expanded and accompanied with the expansion of traditional and spiritual experience that is trans-religious. Following exogenous prophets would be useful only when it is accompanied with reason and spiritual component. Thus, in order to be part of the expansion of Prophetic experience, we should be acquainted with the accidentals and essentials of this experience, and thus we could today revive the essential teaching of the Prophet through the accidentals of our time.” (Fanāyī, 1389: 449 – 451)

Therefore, according to Fanāyī, the prophetic experience today could and should be expanded according to the trans-religious paradigms and contingencies, keeping in mind the rational and spiritual human dimensions. Thus, the essential prophetic teachings could be revived only through contemporary contingencies, such as democracy, human rights, freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, etc.

Apart from stressing the need to expand and revive the Prophetic experience in our time, Soroush also aims to find a place for a new and contemporary interpretation of the Muslim Holy Book. The modern reason has challenged all the ancient claims related to the Holy Book, including those of Muslims with the fundamental question: How is it possible that the Holy Book is heavenly inspired and to manifest absolute sacred truths, given that at the same time it reflects cultural, linguistic, ethnic and historical realities and influences in which the Prophet lived? Muslims and western scholars were constantly faced the question whether words of the Quran are from God, that is, whether God uttered them in the Arabic language, or whether its meanings are from God and the actual words from the Prophet. There are two answers to this question. The dominant answer does not find any relation of interaction between Revelation and the surrounding culture, thus denying any possibility that historical circumstances influenced the process of Revelation and the nature of Prophetood. According to this approach, the Prophet is only a messenger who communicated the message from God to the people in its exact content and form, and without any influence. From this aspect,

Revelation is of no historical character, but a holy and sacred imperative, transcending time and space. The orthodox Islamic theology holds this position relating to Revelation and Prophethood, which stresses that the Islamic Revelation was revealed in a human language and it necessarily had to be in the language of the people to whom the Prophet was sent. However, this does not imply any human role in the process of Revelation. The second answer⁴ is marginal and holds that Revelation and Prophethood is a profane and historical phenomenon coordinated with the historical questions and needs of the Arabs of the 7th century. This approach argues that the accurate meaning of the Quran derives from the analysis of the “interaction of Revelation to the event”, or in other word, to understand the Quran, we should look at and analyze the event and culture of the time in which it was Revealed, as well as the process of its collection. Similarly, Soroush stresses that the Quran is a product of historical subject. Immanuel Kant held that the human reason does not create the object – which is defined through the human experience and perception—but in fact, it imposes to the matter the categories of perception. When Soroush writes that “Revelation follows the Prophet”, he in fact says that the Prophet does not create Revelation, but during revelation, it is the Prophet’s reason that imposes to Revelation its categories and its imaginary forms. (Masudi, & Tolou Berekati, 2015: 78)

Categories such as religion and Revelation are human, and it is the human subject that ascribes meaning to them and applies their norms and laws in a society. Thus, perception of Revelation and religion as human categories, which are important dimensions of the human being, are important considerations when attempting to understand and reinterpret the fundamental components of Islamic tradition aiming at revival of its spirit in accordance with the contemporary intellectual settings.

Thus, if the human quality of the Prophet is to be taken seriously and the if the human is taken as a historical being – historicity being one of the fundamental attributes of the nature of human existence – there can be no denial of the fact that the Prophet was a historical human and an effect of it. The same holds true for the Quran and Religion of Islam as historical categories. Thus, it is crucial to acknowledge that the category of Revelation—which interacts with specific condition of an individual as a historical being—could not be conceived as independent of the tradition or historical and cultural dimensions of the Prophet. If the Divine Speech was considered in its historical dimension, conceptualized as a historical word which is given and structured within specific cultural and historical settings, Muslims would accept only its essentials, such as the ideas of the good, the beauty, the mercy, and the like, and the same could be expanded and developed according to the accidentals and contingencies of time and space. This approach would enable them to liberate themselves from the narrow and dogmatic conceptualizations of the sacred texts. In this way, Soroush’s position on the Quran as a prophetic experience constructed within certain historical and spatial limits helps toward expanding and enriching of the Quranic hermeneutics and new readings and novel interpretations. The current dogmatic theology with its anachronism and out-

of-context interpretations, has reduced the imagination and speculative creativity, and thus continues to create a culture deprived of any philosophical and aesthetic form.

Though exegesis (*tafsīr*) was considered to be a basic understanding, whereas interpretation (*ta'wīl*) as the highest level of understanding of the Quranic text, unfortunately Muslims today are in the first level of considering the Quran to be a book of anachronistic laws and norms. However, even the classical interpretations of the Quran were logocentric, meaning that their focus was on the text, and according to this approach, any written text has a meaning reflecting the aim of the author, which is difficult to find, but not impossible. (Ahmadi, 1993: 154) Unlike the classical hermeneutics, the modern hermeneutics, apart from the text and the author, focuses on realities and phenomena that enable continuous expansion of meanings leaving the text open to alternative interpretations. (Palmer, 1969: 18) Modern hermeneutics postulates that one's character, intellectual background, family and settings in which one lives, desires, goals, morality and many other factors, inevitably influence the form and the way in which a religious or other text is produced. (Grondin, 2002: 37) Thus, if the modern hermeneutics that enables continuous expansion of the corpus of meanings and leaves the text open to new meanings, is applied in the Quranic and religious studies, and in general it is the philosophical thought among Muslims, it would enable the advancement of meaning and ideas. Based on this hermeneutical approach, Soroush maintains that the society has obliged the Prophet to speak in its language, i.e. to express his experience and ideas in semantic forms that were comprehensible for the Arabs of that time. According to Toshiko Izutsu (1914 – 1993), in order to understand the concepts of a language, and in specific its moral-religious concepts, it is not enough that we refer to dictionaries, but we should have an understanding of the historical and cultural circumstances in which those concepts were used. In other words, we should establish the meanings of such concepts according to the understanding of the context and backdrop in which they were used. (Izutsu, 1966: 518) It is impossible to think about the world free from any system of concepts established at a given time and space. In this regard, the Quranic concepts were created from collective experience of Arabs of that time. Such concepts have Arab identities as any thought or experience constructed within the semantics of those concepts inevitably carry the social contingencies of that time. Accordingly, the ways Muslims think today is based on language and identity constructions of at least ten centuries ago. Thus, if we confirm that the “Arab-Islamic Reason is that mental structure which was shaped in the arab-islamic culture of the past, that is during the period of codification (9th to 10th century)”, (Al-Jabri, 2011: 81) we could conclude that the Islamic orthodox theology and thought represents a way of thinking within the paradigms of the past and of the codified tradition in a system of concepts and images of the codification era. Therefore, there is a need today for a paradigmatic shift in order to understand and reinterpret fundamental categories of Muslim historical tradition, including the categories of Revelation, Prophethood and sacred texts, in order that they become a part of the horizon for a new theoretical and cultural world.

It is in this way that the thought of Abdulkarim Soroush on Revelation and the Quran contributes to the creation of a new hermeneutics that is free from historical paradigm of both the Islamic orthodox theology and the modern secular thought, providing an opportunity to rethink and expand the spiritual life of humankind.

4. Conclusions

In his article “Expansion of Prophetic experience”, Abdulkarim Soroush brings new and unconventional ideas for Islamic theological circles, and specifically for traditional madrasas of Iran. In the article, Soroush maintains that “Revelation is a religious experience,” “Revelation follows Prophet’s personality, and not vice versa,” “Revelation or Prophetic experience could be expanded more if the Prophet lived longer,” and “religion is a spiritual and social experience of the Prophet.” The key Soroush’s thoughts presented in the abovementioned article could be summarized as follows: during Prophet Muhammad’s era there were questions and challenges that have influenced Prophet’s psyche and put him in a position to take certain stances on them. Revelation was amorphous, silent, and in order for the people to understand it, the Prophet spoke in the language and restricted knowledge of the society of that time. Soroush thinks that the Quran is a human work and merely a particular perception and understanding of Revelation as a religious-spiritual experience of the Prophet. The ideas of “Expansion of Prophetic experience”, though not unknown to the Muslim mystical philosophical tradition, could be considered a valuable contribution towards rethinking and redefining Revelation and the nature of the Holy Book in the modern world. Clearly, such ideas pose serious threat to the orthodox theological system and have to a great extent challenged the theological fundamentals and hypothesis of many believers. But, it should be bore in mind that the theological and metaphysical systems codified more than ten centuries, could not defend and justify the religious spiritual reason in modern societies. Thinkers such as Mohammed Arkoun, Nasr Abu Zayd, Mojtehed Shabestari, Soroush, and others, apprehended that concepts such as Revelation could not be defended with metaphysical and theological systems and with the language of ancient believers. Therefore, projects of contemporary thinkers, such as Soroush and others – who by rethinking and reinterpreting the actual categories of Islamic tradition and religion according to contemporary frameworks of knowledge, including Revelation and the Holy Book – are seeking to expand and enrich the spiritual dimension of Muslims and to build a more emancipatory and intelligent cultural spirit in Islamic societies.

NOTES

1. On the dominance of orthodox reason, see: Al-Azm, Sadiq (2014) “Scientific Culture and the Poverty of Religious Thought”. In: Critique of Religious Thought. Berlin: Gerlach.

2. Since this paper discusses the ideas and theories of Abdulkarim Soroush, it focuses on the Iranian society.
3. M. Shabestari works on the the Quran includes: *Hermenütik, Ketāb wa Sunnat* [Hermeneutics, the Book, and the Tradition], Teheran: Tarh-e Nou, 1996. *Naqd-e bar Qerā'at-e Rasmī Dīn* [A Critiques of the Official Reading of Religion], Teheran: Tarh-e Nou, 2000. *T'amullāti dar Qerā'at-e Ensan-ī az Dīn* [Thoughts on Humanistic Reading of Religion], Teheran: Tarh-e Nou, 2004. *Qerā'at-e Nabavī az Jehān* [Prophetic Reading of the Universe], Teheran: Tarh-e Nou, 2010.
4. Represented by modern thinkers such as Mohammed Arkoun, Nasr Abu Zayd, Mojtabeh Shabestari, Abdulkarim Soroush.

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