



THE CREATIVE OMNIPOTENCE ABDOLKARIM SOROUSH

Abdolkarim Soroush (born in 1945) – In 1963, I entered the University of Tehran’s College of Pharmacology, obtaining my doctorate in 1969. During these same years, I was also studying Islamic philosophy. In 1972, I went to London and obtained an M.Sc. in analytical chemistry and then studied the history and philosophy of science at Chelsea College for five years. I returned to Iran in 1980 and I immediately established a course on “Islamic culture” at the Teacher Training University and began my lecturing career. In 1981, Iran witnessed a “Cultural Revolution” and Imam Khomeini, the leader of the revolution, appointed me a member of the “Cultural Revolution Headquarters”. Our brief was to rewrite universities’ curriculum. I worked in the HQ for four years and then resigned from all government posts and devoted myself to academic life. The main courses that I taught during this time were on the philosophy of science and the philosophy of religion and Islamic mysticism. During these years, I managed to write 23 books on these two subjects. I also corrected and edited the *Masnawi*, the seminal work of Rumi, the mystic, and gave talks on various public issues. I also spent some time as a visiting professor and researcher at the universities of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. – Address: Academy for Philosophy, 6 Nezami Alley, France St., Tehran, Iran.

My time at the Wissenschaftskolleg provided me with a good opportunity to study and explore a series of related subjects in the history of Islamic culture and civilization. Of

At the Wissenschaftskolleg, Abdolkarim Soroush was a Fellow of the Ebelin and Gerd Bucerus ZEIT Foundation.

course, my main research project was on the Mu'tazilite school of theology (8th century A. D. on), which can be used to construct a secular foundation for ethics and politics. Of course, I had been mulling over these issues for years. But my time at the Wissenschaftskolleg, my discussions with the other researchers, and my visits to other institutions and universities in Germany gave me the opportunity to refine my ideas further and to prepare them for publication. During this same period, I prepared an article entitled "The Challenge of Ethics and Rights in Modern Times", which is to be published in Iran as a part of a collection of essays.

The concept of "right" in modern times has a non-religious foundation and, of course, stands in stark contrast to "duty", which was a key concept in pre-modern times and had its roots in religious ideas. The clash between these two concepts – in a different form and garment, of course – surfaced in the early days of the genesis of Islamic theology. The Mu'tazilites were the vanguards of this debate. The Mu'tazilites were rationalists in two senses. On the one hand, they were *a priorists*, that is to say, they were not pure empiricists, and, like the Aristotelians, they also used pre-experiential views in their philosophical judgements. On the other hand, they also looked beyond revelation and religion and did not obtain their theories about human beings and God from religion alone. This was in contrast to the Ash'arites, who opted for a different course on both these counts and, as we would put it today, were maximalists. This contrast was particularly striking regarding ethical values. For the Ash'arites, good and bad were not intrinsic to acts, but flowed instead from God's injunctions and proscriptions. Anything that displeased God was bad and anything that pleased God and that He commanded was good. But the Mu'tazilites entrusted this judgement to human reason, believed that good and bad were inherent in autonomous human acts, and considered the precepts of religion to be subject to the precepts of reason. "Reason" in this context was precisely non-religious and non-revelational reason. This was the point at which the confrontation between reason and revelation became serious and significant in Islamic culture.

This confrontation had many subdivisions and offshoots, but it was at its most serious in the realm of ethics and rights. If a secular provenance can be found for ethics, then it becomes possible to do the same for "rights" and "politics". In this way, it will become possible to construct a legal and political system that is not incompatible with religion but that is based on reason.

Of course, the roots of this issue lie in God's omnipotence, which was the begetter of all these debates: Does God's omnipotence place Him above ethics and justice too? Does it also

rob human beings of free will? The Mu'tazilites' answer to both these questions was, of course, negative. They believed that we have to worship a God who does not trample justice underfoot and who is not so overpowering as to nullify/negate human beings' free will or the essential qualities of objects or the system of causality; a God whose power does not harm human autonomy.

It was not without reason that the Ash'arites were also nominalists and did not believe in essence and essential qualities. This gave God a free hand in the world and allowed him to impinge freely on everything without encountering any obstacles.

This was how it came to be that, in my project, I sought to espouse a revival of the vanquished Mu'tazilite school of thought and a renewal of their experience in the hope of political reform in the world of Islam. And I look forward to releasing the results of my project for publication soon.

In addition to my research work, my stay in Berlin provided me with a good opportunity to take part in seminars and to present papers on the subject of my project, some of which are listed below:

In Heidelberg: Islam and Democracy (December 2004)

At UNESCO in Paris: System of Rights in Islam (November 2004)

In Göttingen: Religious Reform in Iran Today (April 2005)

At the Catholic Academy, Berlin: Islamic Revolution Revisited (May 2005)

In Sarajevo, Islamic University: The Changeable and Unchangeable in Islamic Thought (May 2005)

At the Freie Universität, Berlin: Revisiting Mu'tazilite Thought in Contemporary Iran (June 2005)