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'Abdolkarim Soroush

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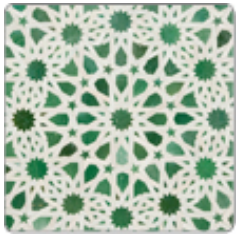


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ʻAbdolkarim Soroush

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Introduction

ʻAbdolkarim Soroush is the penname for Hossein Haj Faraj Dabbāgh (1945–). He is one of the most controversial figures in the religious and political polemics of postrevolutionary Iran. This is owing to his early adherence to the Islamic revolutionary values, his polemics against Marxism, later departure from the conservative Islam toward a reformist stand based on the philosophy of science and modern hermeneutics, and his current role as an uncompromising and outspoken opposition voice, as well as a fervent supporter of the Green Movement. Soroush’s ideas should be categorized under religious reformism in general, which goes beyond Iranian politics. Due the political nature of Islam today, particularly its governmental institutionalization in the postrevolutionary Iran, his views on religion have found direct political relevance to the relationship between religion and politics in the Shiʻite world. The modern category of “religious intellectualism,” in which Soroush is a major exponent has been connected to religious and political reformism, hence his journalistic title of “the Luther of Islam,” which he does not approve of because of fundamental differences between his agenda and that of Luther’s. As a prolific writer, and an eloquent lecturer and public speaker, Soroush has addressed a variety of issues for a large audience in Iran and beyond. In Iran, he was particularly associated with the Kiyān Circle, a circle of thinkers and writers who published their critical and reformist views in a journal named “Kiyān.” With his background in both Western and Islamic philosophy, he has managed to maneuver on ideas concerning the evolvement of religious sciences in keeping with the demands of modernity. Soroush is especially known for his critique of clerical Islam and his treatment of Islamic theology and law in relation with contemporary issues such as religious pluralism, democracy, and human rights by employing a literary style of writing that draws on his background in Persian mystical poetry. Soroush has been criticized from two opposite quarters. While the Iranian conservative clergy and politicians have repeatedly accused him of undermining Islam, secular intellectuals criticize the religious content of his ideas and the “paradoxicality” of his project: namely, religious intellectualism. Over the past decade, Soroush has attracted a lot of attention in Western academia. He left Iran after the conservatives’ pressure on him grew more intense following the turmoil during and after Khatami’s presidency. Since 2000 Soroush has been living in the West giving lectures at several universities including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and University of Chicago.

General Overviews and Biographies

Although ʻAbdolkarim Soroush has been quite well known in Iran since the beginning of the Islamic revolution, he was introduced to the West only in the wake of the reformist movement preceding and following Mohammad Khatami’s presidency, and particularly after Soroush’s emigration to the West. Cooper 1998 is one of the earliest and best overviews of Soroush’s life and work in English highlighting his religious revivalism while Jahanbakhsh 2001 is more useful with respect to introducing Soroush in his contemporary intellectual context. Vakili 2001 has the advantage of presenting a systematic overview of almost all of Soroush’s teachings. Jackson 2006 is a quick but worthwhile glance at Soroush’s intellectual and political contributions. Fletcher 2005 captures the overall methodology of Soroush in his treatment of religion. Kamrava 2008 locates Soroush in the contemporary context of religious intellectualism. The most detailed and lively overview of Soroush is to be found in his only autobiography in Sadri and Sadri 2000.

Cooper, John. “The Limits of the Sacred: the Epistemology of ʻAbdolkarim Soroush.” In *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond*. Edited by John Cooper, Ronald L. Nettler, and Mohamed Mahmoud, 38–56. London: I. B. Tauris, 1998.

A lucid introduction to Soroush's life as well as his intellectual and stylistic development. The author highlights the significance of Soroush's revivalist approach and its influence on postrevolutionary discourses.

Fletcher, Charles. "The Methodology of 'Abdolkarim Soroush.'" *Islamic Studies* 44.4 (Winter 2005): 527–552.

A useful overview of Soroush's thought in the context of Iranian intellectual awakening and reformist politics with a positive appraisal of the practical outcomes of Soroush's project. The author explains Soroush's methodology in interpreting religious texts, his major thesis of contraction and expansion of religious knowledge, and some major criticisms aimed at his premises.

Jackson, Roy. *Fifty Key Figures in Islam*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Offers a concise introduction to Islamic figures from the Prophet Muhammad to Soroush in the last chapter. The chapter on Soroush is a glance at his political and intellectual life as well as his major premises.

Jahanbakhsh, Forough. *Islam, Democracy, and Religious Modernism in Iran (1953–2000): From Bāzargān to Soroush*. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2001.

A thorough examination of the contribution of seven prominent thinkers to the religio-political thought in Iran and their understanding of democracy between the years 1953 to 2000. The section on Soroush includes his biography, a systematic overview of his major premises, and useful citations.

Kamrava, Mehran. *Iran's Intellectual Revolution*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

A survey of different intellectual movements in Iran that compares and contrasts conservative, reformist and secularist discourses. Soroush's ideas on jurisprudence, hermeneutics, and religious government are explained in the context of religious reformism and in comparison to several other contemporary religious reformists in Iran.

Soroush, 'Abdolkarim. "Intellectual Autobiography: An Interview." In *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of 'Abdolkarim Soroush*. Edited and translated by Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri, ix–xix. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

This is a seminal book and the earliest translation of Soroush's writings into English. It includes the longest and most detailed intellectual biography of Soroush presented as a lively interview with him by Mahmoud Sadri. Soroush explains both the sociopolitical background of his work and the past intellectual influences on him.

Vakili, Valla. "'Abdolkarim Soroush and Critical Discourse in Iran.'" In *Makers of Contemporary Islam*. Edited by John L. Esposito and John Obert Voll, 150–176. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

This article on Soroush, included in a collection of works on Muslim intellectuals, is a good introduction consisting of a brief biographical survey of his views on religion and politics, and a brief sketch of the criticisms aimed at him. This article is referred to by almost all that has been written on 'Abdolkarim Soroush in the West since 2001.