
THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE MUSLIM INTELLECTUAL IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Abdolkarim Soroush

An interview by Farish A. Noor

Professor Abdolkarim Soroush is an Iranian philosopher and social scientist who is currently based at the Institute for Epistemological Research in Tebran, Iran. A well-known scholar and Islamist intellectual in Iran and abroad, his writings have been widely disseminated both in print and via the Internet. In Iran, he is seen as an advocate of institutional reform and a radical rethinking of the Islamist political project itself, while abroad he remains a source of inspiration to many Muslim intellectuals, students and activists who have been grappling with the question of Islam's relationship with modernity. Here he talks about the complex relationship between Islam and modernity and the role of Muslim intellectuals in contemporary Muslim societies.



Farish: Today we often hear about the challenges faced by Muslim intellectuals and the societies they live in. How does this theme fit into your own work? For years you have been seen as one of the most important thinkers in the Muslim world who is trying to encourage Muslims to engage with the Other and the challenges of modernity. Are we still facing the problem of recognizing modernity itself?

Abdolkarim: Well, first of all let us begin by establishing two important points. You speak of Islam and you speak of modernity as two separate themes or ideas, but we need to remind ourselves from the outset that the two of them are abstract concepts that are not and cannot be reduced to simple categories. First of all we have the phenomenon of Islam. Muslim intellectuals still talk about Islam as if it were a simple, unified entity; a singular object. But in reality the history of Islam, like the history of other religions such as Christianity, is fundamentally a history of different interpretations. Throughout the development of Islam there have been different schools of thought and ideas, different approaches and interpretations of what Islam is and what it means. There is no such thing as an a-historical Islam that is outside the process of historical development. The actual lived experience of Islam has always been culturally and historically specific, and bound by the immediate circumstances of its location in time and space. If we were to take a snapshot of Islam as it is lived today, it would reveal a diversity of lived experiences which are all different, yet existing simultaneously. Religion, like all human phenomena, needs to

be understood in this context. There is always a plurality of 'Islams' as there is a plurality of other human phenomena—this also happens to include modernity. Modernity is not a unified phenomenon or idea either.

Throughout history there have been many different schools of thought that envisaged different views and understandings of modernization and what the modern epoch meant. There is therefore a plurality of modernities as well. Like Islam, modernity has moved in many directions and has evolved with manifold consequences. Modern science has furnished us with new ways of looking at the world but it can be, and has been, used to entrench biases and prejudices that are also anti-modern and irrational. The holocaust and the wars of the 20th century are examples of the modernist project gone wrong, but we cannot deny their fundamentally modern character. Modernity is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon with both good and bad characteristics and potentialities. It is therefore not a coherent unity. It is fundamentally contaminated by crisis and contingency as well as many paradoxes and contradictions. But all of this is quite natural in modern life.

Farish: But we in the Muslim world are not immune to these paradoxes and contradictions either, I suppose.

Abdolkarim: No, we are not. We Muslims need to recognize that we live in the modern world whether we like it or not. But the modern age in which we find ourselves is not a homogeneous one. The four pillars of modernity are modern concepts, conceptions, means and ends. These in turn shape the pluralistic and heterodox worldview of modern life. The plurality of modernities means that there exist many different ways through which people understand themselves in the world today. The modern age has given us modern conceptions, such as the conception of God, of Prophethood, etc. The modern age also furnishes us with modern ends, such as modern notions of happiness, meaning of life and so on. Today, Muslims must accept that many of our beliefs and assumptions are also shaped and drawn by modern concepts and ideas related to history, geography, time and space. Political Islam, which we see on the rise in so many parts of the contemporary Muslim world, is itself a symptom of the modern age in which we live. Even the idea of an Islamic state that has become the goal of so many Islamist movements is itself a modern concept that could not have come into being during the pre-modern era.

Farish: Talking about the contradictions and paradoxes of modernity and living in the modern age, how would you characterize the manifold attempts by various Islamist movements and governments in the present day that are trying to avoid the pitfalls of modernity by establishing some form of Islamic social or political order?

Abdolkarim: What you are talking about is the phenomenon of political Islam as seen in various parts of the world. As I said earlier, this itself is a modern phenomenon and is, in a sense, a product of the encounter between Islam and modernity. The fact that such Islamist movements and governments have come to power and are trying to reconstitute Islam in the world today is no surprise. This is partly because Muslims still have great difficulties in dealing with the legacy of modernity, which many of us feel is alien to our culture and values. For at the heart of the project of modernity lies a healthy epistemological skepticism that leads us to the demystification of the

human being. Modernity is characterized by the questioning of everything, of all that we once held dear and inviolable. It opens the way to plurality and diversity, but it can also be seen as a challenge to the worldview of the past.

Farish: How is this modern understanding of the world different from that of the old? And why is it seen as a threat by some?

Abdolkarim: We can understand this better when we look at specifics. Modernity in itself is not really a problem for the conservative Muslims among us. What becomes a problem is the effect that some modern ideas have on us. This becomes clear when we look at the discussion of modern concepts such as 'secularism' and 'human rights'. Now secularism is actually based on an understanding of rights. The whole secular culture of the modern age is predicated on the basis of individual rights—our right to speak, to think, to learn, to work, to act. This in turn leads to a new understanding of human subjectivity which is grounded on notions of free rational agency on the part of free individuals. This may seem normal to you and me, but we must remember that the language of rights is completely different from the language of traditional religion which is based on the notion of duties instead. The language of fiqh, for instance, is a science of obligations; it is not a discourse of rights. Here then lies the crucial difference between the traditional way of life in the past and life in the present modern age. In the past, it was thought that one had a duty to be religious or ethical. The traditional notion of God in the past was almost a tyrannical one: God for us was a supreme being who demanded our devotion and love at all costs. The traditional notion of God was a God of obligations and duties who was intolerant and demanding. But now in the modern age we think it is our right to be religious and ethical; in fact, we demand the right to be religious and to express our religious beliefs. Our view of God has also changed for we now feel that it is our right to worship him and show our love to him freely. God, in the modern age, is understood as the God of rights who is closer to the individual believer. We see this approach being brought to the fore by Muslim groups living in the West who demand their right to express their religiosity which they conflate with their identity as minorities. Religion here has become part of the process of identity politics, which is a form of politics at home in the modern age. While we may be doing the same things and be engaged in similar activities, our way of looking at them has changed radically.

Farish: What does this difference of outlook entail? Why does it become a problem for so many Muslims in the contemporary world?

Abdolkarim: Well, ideas between the modern and traditional worlds sometimes experience a rupture. There are many cases where we simply cannot reconcile the ideas and values of the past with those of the present. The facts of modernity may not be explicable in terms of traditional values and worldviews. Some of them may even appear unpalatable and obnoxious to traditionalist thinkers and more traditionalist societies. When this happens, we experience a crisis. But we all live in the modern world now, and we cannot change that. Crisis is part and parcel of the times we live in, and the crisis of uncertainty is itself part of the modern experience. This merely confirms the fact that we have arrived at the modern age and that we have become part of it. There is no turning back for us.

Farish: When you say that some of us Muslims have a problem in dealing and living with modernity, you obviously have specific actors in mind. I presume you are speaking of the more conservative sections of the traditional intelligentsia and other such religious functionaries in the Muslim world. Why is it that the ulama, who were once the great defenders of the integrity of Islam, have now become the biggest obstacle to dealing with modernity?

Abdolkarim: Well first of all we need to remember as you said the role played by the ulama in the past. It is true that they were the ones who rescued Islam when it was in a state of crisis. The efforts of the ulama to safeguard the discursive structure of Islam from both external attacks and internal disruption were the main factor that helped Islam retain its cohesiveness and coherence over the centuries. But because of this we must understand that the religious mode of thinking in the past was necessarily a reactive and conservative one. The ulama may have preserved the discursive coherence and unity of Islamic teachings, but they were also the ones who shut the doors of *ijtihad* and thus brought to an untimely end the tradition of critical thinking in Islam. Furthermore, the ulama, who were responsible for conserving much of Islamic thought, philosophy, law and history, have themselves grown increasingly conservative over the years. Unfortunately this trend of thinking has not changed very much. The traditional ulama have not adapted their line of thinking even after all the major social, political and economic upheavals in the modern Muslim world. That is why in Iran, for instance, we still live under the dominance of the mullahs and ulama. Even a century after the Constitutional Revolution [of 1905] the mullahs and ulama of Iran are still speaking the same language of obligations and duties, and not the language of rights. When they speak of religion and religious matters it is clear that their worldview is rooted in the past and their conceptions of God, of religious devotion and faith, are all based on traditional notions of moral obligations to God. Sadly for us, most ulama remain conservative in their outlook and they are engaged in conservative hermeneutics. They spend their time in endless doctrinal disputes over matters of law and legal theory, but their response to the challenge of modernity remains a reactive one; one that is political rather than philosophical or rational. As such, the mullahs cannot address critically and intelligently the challenges of modernity.

Farish: What about the numerous attempts by conservative ulama and political leaders to reintroduce some form of neo-traditional Islamic polity in the modern age? We have witnessed, for instance, the revival of Sufism in political circles in many parts of the contemporary Muslim world where Muslim leaders and ulama have tried to construct political systems based on traditional notions of law, order and civil obedience and duties. Even the leader of the Taliban in Afghanistan claims that he receives visions in his dreams which are dutifully interpreted by his loyal followers.

Abdolkarim: Now we need to be very careful about these contemporary social experiments. We need to remember that Sufism also has in it a strong authoritarian strain which was manifested on many occasions in the past. Due to the lopsided development that we see in the Muslim world today, where states are given so much power at the expense of the people, any attempt to translate Sufism into politics will most likely lead to an authoritarian form of rule. The case of the *vilayet-i faqih* [rule of jurists] in Iran is a good example—it was a concept that originated from Sufi discourse. In the past we have seen many attempts to do this as well, when Muslim rulers chose the discourse of Sufism as a discourse of legitimization for their regimes. It led to the emergence of authoritarian rulers who were regarded as *walis* [spiritual leaders] instead.

We will have to be very cautious about any attempt to translate traditional concepts of power, law, order or obligations in the context of present-day political realities.

Farish: If that is the case, then who are the ones who have to take up the challenge of modernity? Who should lead the process of engagement with the facts of modern life?

Abdolkarim: Here is where the modern Muslim intellectual comes to play his or her role. By the term 'modern Muslim intellectual' I am not referring to those whose attachment to Islam or modernity is merely nominal. These intellectuals are not the ones whose understanding of Islam is reduced to a few quotes or phrases. Nor are they the ones who think of modernity in terms of its axiological phenomena like consumerism or material development only. They are the ones who are well versed in both Islamic studies and in the understanding of modernity and its internal workings. The modern Muslim intellectual has to be one who understands the fundamental differences between Islam and modernity, and would therefore be able to bridge the gap between the two. But in order to do this he or she has to know how and why Islam and modernity are different, and where the differences actually lie. They cannot simply talk about differences in terms of dress, culture or behavior—these are merely the symptoms of difference, but they do not constitute the actual epistemological difference itself. Modern Muslim intellectuals are, in a sense, a hybrid species. They emerged in the liminal space between modern ideas and traditionalist thought. We have seen the emergence of such figures in many Muslim countries that have experienced the effects of colonization and the introduction of a plural economic and educational system. They have their feet planted in their local traditions as well as the broader world of the modern age. As such, they are comfortable in both, handicapped by neither. The modern Muslim intellectual is one who is not daunted by the task of delving into his or her religious knowledge for critical answers and solutions to the present. Such intellectuals are better able to do so because they are not the product of a traditional educational system which is narrow and rigid. They are not bound by traditional norms and rules of religious discursive activity, because they are not really part of that particular narrow tradition. Unlike the traditional ulama, who never go beyond the texts that they read, the modern intellectual will be able to read deeper into the text in a critical, imaginative manner.

Farish: But here it seems as if you are calling for a reading of both Islam and modernity which can be threatening to the representatives of both traditions. To talk about a critical and imaginative reading of Islam in the light of modern-day realities sounds like challenging the dominance of the ulama and an invitation to *ijtihad*. You are not advocating a 'free reading' of religious and legal texts, or course.

Abdolkarim: Of course not. But what I am calling for is a critical reading of the corpus of Islamic texts and doctrine so that we can begin to break free from the dogmas of the past which may have been relevant at a certain stage in Islamic history, but no longer. This is not to say that the readings and interpretations of the past were not important or relevant. They were—but that is precisely the point. Their relevance lies in the past, in the pre-modern age, but not now.

Farish: What role does the Muslim intellectual play in the process of interrogating modernity in turn?

Abdolkarim: Here is where the modern Muslim intellectual has a role to play for the world community as a whole. As I said earlier, neither Islam nor modernity is monolithic, and both are open to question. The process of questioning has already begun in the case of the latter. As we have seen in recent decades, a critical questioning and reassessment of the claims of modernity has been done in the West. Thanks to the lessons of post-modern critical theory we all know that modernity is not innocent, nor is it culture-blind and as objective as it claims to be. But at least in the West modern Western intellectuals have begun to question this and they have developed a more critical attitude towards modernity as a phenomenon. The modern Muslim intellectual stands to serve the needs of other communities as well when he or she begins to question and rethink the premises of both Islamic discourse and modern discourse simultaneously. He or she can also show to the non-Muslim world how complex Islam truly is, once he or she brings to the surface the internal dynamics of Islamic discourse that have been silenced or suppressed for so long. As a result our collective understanding of Islam will be broadened and enriched.

Farish: The way you pose the challenge gives one the impression that we in Muslim world have little choice at the present. It seems that if we are to break free from the stranglehold of both conservative and modern dogmas then there is a great need for some imaginative and critical thinking among Muslims today.

Abdolkarim: We do not have much choice at the moment. The Muslim world is caught between states and governments that are secular in orientation and ulama who are conservative in theirs. The duty and task of reform falls on the shoulders of the modern Muslim intellectual, who needs to retain a critical distance in between.

Dr. Farish A. Noor is a Malaysian political scientist and human rights activist. This interview was conducted at a workshop on Muslim intellectual trends in 2000. It is part of a series of interviews published under the title "New Voices of Islam" (Farish A. Noor, (ed.) ISIM institute, Leiden, Netherlands, 2002.)

Reproduced by Hoggar Institute 2008

Source : Muslim WakeUp! Inc.