Reforming Religious Knowledge

Asma Barlas

In “Religious authorities in Islam” (Daily Times, 31 December 2002), I commented on how Muslims produce religious knowledge because I believe this explains both why the knowledge is anti-women (inasmuch as it misrepresents the Qur’an’s position on sexual equality and women’s rights), and why most Muslims nonetheless are opposed to the idea of rethinking it. In this context, I quoted the Iranian intellectual, Abdolkarim Soroush, who believes that Muslim opposition to reform results from confusing religion with their own knowledge of it; this leads them to regard calls for change as an indictment of the religion itself rather than of their own limited and imperfect understanding of it.

In this essay, I will explore some of the arguments Soroush makes in his book, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2000) since I believe he deals compellingly with interpretive problems confronting Muslims today. (The book is a collection of essays on different themes which means that in order to get a composite understanding of his position on an issue, it is necessary to connect the arguments he makes in different contexts and essays in a way that he does not always do himself.)

One of the issues that Soroush analyzes is the relationship between theory and practice and, more specifically, between Islam and history. He begins by asking if there is “a connection between a theory and its historical and practical unfolding” (76). Should we ascribe faulty practices to a doctrine or to how its adherents interpret it? “If,” he argues, “we are going to maintain that an actual system springing from an idea has no relationship to the idea whatsoever, why then identify that system with that idea at all?”

To Soroush, it seems obvious that one cannot absolve a doctrine “from the responsibility of allowing … abuses” (78). As he says, “False interpretations and improper conclusions, however sincerely drawn, are still, indubitably, fruits of the doctrine” (84). This line of reasoning leads him to conclude that Islam itself “allowed both false righteousness and true virtue.” As he puts it, even though the “seed of religion resists contamination …the plant that grows out of that seed opens a canopy for the virtuous and villainous alike” (86). If this view raises some troubling questions for Muslims, so does his assertion that if Muslims could interpret Islam all over again, its interpretive history would “not assume different forms or contents nor [would it] inaugurate a radically new history” (86).

To me, this is the most questionable of Soroush’s arguments since such historical determinacy undercuts “our view of humans as moral agents by suggesting that we are caught merely in the ‘hinges of history’ . . . unable to do much about it,” as I argue in my book (*Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an*, University of Texas Press, 2002: 208). In the end, I am not sure that Soroush can bring himself to embrace “a view that undermines the idea of human agency and, with it, the idea of morality (since, in the absence of agency, one cannot be moral)” (Barlas, 208). Thus, he expresses reservations about holding “ideologies responsible for everything done in their name” and questions whether “the history of a doctrine [is] identical with the doctrine” (81).

Perhaps most importantly, he rescues Islam from Muslim interpretations and practice of it by arguing that the “last religion is already here but the last understanding of religion has not yet arrived.” Indeed, he distinguishes not only “between religion and our knowledge of religion,” but also “between personal knowledge of religion and religious knowledge” (37; 34). On the basis of these distinctions, he argues that while religion may be perfect and complete, our knowledge of it is not. Moreover, since knowledge is shaped by both time and culture, there is a continual need to reform it. In fact, at the core of Soroush’s interpretive philosophy “is the claim that religious knowledge is subject to ‘contraction and expansion’ and that this flux is a natural part of the history of religion” (Barlas, 2002: 208). It is the failure to recognize this fact, he contends, that is the greatest impediment to Muslim “revivalists” today. As he puts it, “Everywhere they turned they were haunted by agonizing questions: What is your claim and goal anyway? What is the ‘defect’ in religion that you propose to repair? What error or ailment has befallen it that it has provoked this empathy and reformist zeal? What essential subject has escaped the Prophet’s mind, what good or evil has religion left out that now demands your help in explicating or teasing out? And, anyway, if religion really does harbor such flaws and faults, why are you still committed to it?” (31).

As Soroush makes clear, however, such questions arise from the failure to realize that, “as a branch of human knowledge,” religious knowledge also is “incomplete, impure, insufficient, and culture-bound” (32). And to the extent that this is so, “rehabilitating religious thought; correcting misreadings; … redirecting religion towards it essence; rectifying misunderstandings; and tearing asunder the veils of ignorance and ill will are among the duties of the faithful and, as such, they are part of the history of religion” (86).

To Soroush, reforming religious knowledge means replacing “one understanding of religion with another” (33). Such a shift in understanding, however, presupposes a shift in how we live in the world. For instance, accepting the Qur’anic principle of the ontic equality of men and women means giving up systems of male privilege and how many Muslim men would be open to that? Hence the antipathy to reform. In Soroush’s words, the “stunning beauty of the truth . . . lies beyond the veil of habits” and, sadly, too many Muslims today are enmeshed in this veil to see the truth of the Qur’an’s teachings.