

# The Inequalities of the Public Sphere in a Democratic Religious Iran: A Critical Examination of the Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush

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IN A WORLD THAT IS INCREASINGLY DRAWN to fundamentalist ideologies—be they Muslim, Hindu, Christian or secular—voices calling for reform and debate within the religious sphere deserve considerable attention and praise. One such voice in the Islamic world is that of Abdolkarim Soroush, an Iranian intellectual, well known for his opposition to the theocratic state in Iran. Born Hossein Dabbagh, Soroush was once an active and important supporter of Ayatollah Khomeini and the revolution that established the Islamic Republic in 1979.<sup>1</sup> He served as a member of the Council for the Cultural Revolution, created by Khomeini after the revolution to monitor the re-opening of the country's universities and to redesign the curriculum. Over time, however, his views towards the government changed. As he watched religious leaders abandon the values and ideals that he had once supported, Soroush became increasingly disillusioned with the revolution. The Islamic government committed countless abuses and became progressively more corrupt. Joined by several of his colleagues from Tehran University and the government, Soroush began to criticize the very government that he had once helped install. These new thinkers collectively became known as *roshannekran-e dini*, or religious intellectuals. They attempted to reconcile their Muslim faith with ideas of modernism and liberalism in an Iranian context. As their criticisms came into greater conflict with the government's ideology, Soroush and many of the other *roshannekran* were eventually forced to leave Iran.

Although Soroush has written about and developed a diverse array of topics, his idea of establishing a “democratic religious government” in Iran is his most controversial.<sup>2</sup> According to Soroush, a “democratic religious

government” is a system ruled by popular vote, in which all issues, including those of religion, can be debated and voted on openly within the public sphere. The public sphere is defined as the arena in society where private individuals come together to openly discuss, debate, and negotiate the laws, principles, and values of a democratic government.<sup>3</sup> A democratic religious government greatly differs from a theocracy, where religious leaders create a “religious ideology” for the state and govern as “guardians” of the faith. Within Soroush’s system, the government only becomes religious in nature if the people are granted the freedom to understand and negotiate their own religion and subsequently choose for their government to be religious.

Soroush’s ideas and philosophy regarding the compatibility of democracy and Islam are truly progressive; however, he fails to address the inherent gender and religious inequalities that exist within the Iranian public sphere. The type of government that he proposes functions on the assumption that all citizens in a democratic religious government are granted equal access to the public sphere. However, women and religious minorities in Iran have suffered a long history of discrimination, subjugation, and struggle, putting them at a great disadvantage in the public arena. By avoiding the concerns of the marginalized populations in Iran, Soroush promotes a form of government, which like the current regime in Iran, could potentially be corrupted by a few prominent individuals in positions of power.

## SORUSH AND RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE

At its core, Soroush’s vision for a democratic religious government in Iran is based on “religious knowledge” as opposed to religion. In his “Theory of Expansion and Contraction of Religion,” Soroush argues that religion is unchanging, divine, and unquestionable. He claims that the word of God cannot be subject to human criticisms since God transcends us all.<sup>4</sup> However, religion should not be mistaken for religious knowledge, which he defines as the human understanding of religion “While accepting the eternal nature of the *Qur’an* and the Tradition, the revivalists refresh and complement our knowledge of them. That which remains constant is the religion; that which changes is religious understanding.”<sup>5</sup> By accepting religious knowledge as a temporal entity, people can therefore use reason freely in order to interpret the divine and transcendental. “[We must] treat religious knowledge [as] a branch of human knowledge, as incomplete, impure, insufficient, and culture bound.”<sup>6</sup> Based on his arguments, for example, interpretations of the *Qur’an* made under Caliph Mu’awiya in the seventh century would most likely not hold true today, as our knowledge and understanding have developed

significantly since then. Furthermore, he argues that no individual maintains complete authority on religious knowledge.<sup>7</sup> This claim directly challenges the concept of *vilayat-i faqih*, or “rule of the jurists,” as articulated by Ayatollah Khomeini, which claims that there are specific individuals, namely members of the *ulama*, who have unique capabilities to lead the Shi’as in the absence of the Hidden or Twelfth Imam. Instead, Soroush argues that all of us are able to interpret and evaluate the religious knowledge for ourselves.

## A DEMOCRATIC RELIGIOUS GOVERNMENT

The idea of a democratic religious government is not only an alternative to a theocratic state such as Iran, but also represents an alternative to liberal, secular democracies such as the United States. According to Soroush, a democratic religious government is one that grants every citizen in the country the right to interpret religious knowledge for him or herself and to codify these interpretations in the electoral process. Valla Vakilli, of the Council on Foreign Relations, describes the underlying principle behind this form of government in his essay titled, “Abdolkarim Soroush and Critical Discourse in Iran”:

Individuals in a religious society naturally manifest their commonly held religious sentiments in their politics. If a political system in such a society rests upon public opinion and participation, then this system will embody, in one form or another, these religious sentiments.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, if the people of a society are allowed the complete freedom to debate and express their religious beliefs in the public sphere, then the government will, by definition, become a religious government. In Soroush’s vision, there is no single ruling ideology and the government remains fluid and changing. Based on this definition, the United States cannot be considered a democratic religious government even though it has a majority of Christian voters. Americans can push for specific legislation based on their religious faith, such as anti-abortion laws, but cannot use the Bible as a source of law since the American government explicitly separates Church and State.

According to Soroush’s essay “Tolerance and Governance,” religion and government go hand in hand because they share a commitment to bringing justice to society. A government, according to Soroush, seeks to establish justice, while religion is based on justice. Soroush writes that, “in the opinion of believers, justice is at once a prerequisite for and a requirement

of religious rules. A rule that is not just is not religious.”<sup>9</sup> Soroush argues that even internationally-recognized notions of human rights, which may remain outside the realm of religion, must be protected in a democratic religious government. For example, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) grants children the right to special protection during times of war. This issue, however, is not discussed in any of the Islamic religious texts. Nevertheless, Soroush argues that rights such as these should be guaranteed as extra-religious laws in the democratic religious government he envisions “For a government to be both religious and democratic, according to Soroush, it must protect the sanctity of religion and the rights of man.”<sup>10</sup> Soroush does not see these two as being mutually exclusive or even in opposition to each other. Human rights as a “liberal” idea can be incorporated into an Islamic context, “since many religious values such as truth, justice, humanity and public interest... are integral to nonreligious value systems as well.”<sup>11</sup> Soroush thus challenges both religious and “secularist” skeptics by showing how religion, human rights, and democracy can go hand in hand.

Soroush’s arguments concerning morality, however, do not appear to be consistent with those concerning human rights. While his writings never explicitly define “morality,” it can be gathered that he is referring to the morals set out in religion. In an interview with the *Boston Globe*, Soroush was asked about his views on secularism, religion, and human rights. In the article, the interviewer concludes that:

[Soroush] certainly doesn’t wish to see Iranian society become as permissive as American society, where he believes that human rights claims have unduly silenced religious believers. He says, ‘... the concept of justice, human rights, though they are universal, must be conditioned by the idea of morality. I think human rights nowadays have been carried away.’ While those who advocate human rights may favor gay rights, for instance, Soroush believes homosexuality is simply immoral.<sup>12</sup>

In other words, the morality of religion supercedes human rights. Soroush claims that “morality” must condition human rights. However, he does not clarify when morality takes precedence. It is clear, for example, that Soroush maintains a hostile view of homosexuality based on his understanding of religious moral values. However, these values are increasingly being challenged today by a growing number of individuals and jurists throughout the world. They argue that the right to express one’s sexual preference is a universal human right. In this case, Soroush’s notion of morality, based on religious values directly contradicts “universal rights,” despite the fact that

he claims that both can fit within the model of a religious democracy.

## THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN A DEMOCRATIC RELIGIOUS GOVERNMENT

In various interviews, Soroush has acknowledged that there may be some inconsistencies in his arguments; however, he claims that ultimately these issues will be debated and worked out in the public sphere by Iranian civil society.<sup>13</sup> The public sphere, as defined earlier, is the area in society where discourse and exchange of ideas, values, and policies can occur openly. Dr. Nancy Fraser, a political scientist, further defines the public sphere within a democratic system as “a space for the communicative generation of public opinion, in ways that are supposed to assure (at least some degree of) moral-political validity.”<sup>14</sup> It is in this realm that Iranian civil society can interpret and debate their understanding of religious knowledge. According to Vakilli, “A religious democratic government loses legitimacy when its actions...violate the public’s sense of religion.”<sup>15</sup>

This public sense of religion is constantly being modified through public debates and deliberations. As Michael MJ Fischer shows in *Iran: From Religious Discourse to Revolution*, the Shi’a community in Iran has historically valued the tradition of debate or *bahs* on most political, religious and social issues.<sup>16</sup> In the Shi’a *madrassas* and religious universities, questioning and open dialogue are a fundamental aspect of one’s development as an *alim* (a religious scholar). This opposes the commonly held view that Shi’as are the greatest opponents

of democracy. In addition, outside of Shi’ism, Islam has had a long history of consultation. The *shura*, loosely interpreted as a consultative assembly, has been used since the time of the Prophet Muhammad to gather representatives of the *ummah* or religious community to negotiate and gain a better understanding of Islamic law. Although, as Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim points out in *Toward an Islamic Reformation*, “The

problem with *shura* as a constitutional principle...is that...it has neither been comprehensive in scope nor binding in effect.”<sup>17</sup> He believes, however, that this does not mean that the *shura* cannot be used for the purposes of promoting democracy in Islam. The *shura* and other traditional Islamic mechanisms of discourse support Soroush’s arguments in favor of an Islamic democracy.

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## MARGINALIZED POPULATIONS IN SOROUSH'S DEMOCRATIC RELIGIOUS GOVERNMENT

Soroush does not go into considerable detail about the concerns of women or religious minorities in his conception of a democratic religious government. However, it is clear that based on his personal values, he believes they must enjoy equal protection under the law. His vision theoretically allows for women and religious minorities to have the right to vote, freedom of religion, and the right to enter into the public debate.

Today, nearly 98 percent of Iranians are Shi'a Muslims of the Twelve Imam Jafari School.<sup>18</sup> Religious minorities make up an extremely small percentage of the population. These include the Baha'is, Armenian Christians, Assyro-Chaldeans, Protestants, Jews, Zoroastrians, and Sunni Muslims.<sup>19</sup> One of the few reasons religious minorities continue to live in Iran, despite the Islamic character of the state, is national pride. In an interview with several Iranian Jews at Yousefabad Synagogue in Tehran, one man passionately declared, "I am first Iranian and then Jewish. I cannot be expected to pack up and go from a land where my family has lived for the past two thousand years."<sup>20</sup>

Soroush argues that under a democratic religious government, the rights of religious minorities would be completely protected. He contends, "The heart of a religious society is freely chosen faith not coercion and conformity."<sup>21</sup> His views on the rights of minorities show his distinction between religion and religious knowledge. For example, Islam calls for Muslims to kill apostates and idolaters. In a religious democracy, however, this Islamic idea could be debated and changed by the people. Soroush talks about a "faithful-spiritual community... started from faiths and hearts," that connects all people of different faiths together.<sup>22</sup> He discredits many of his critics, who argue that an Islamic state will undoubtedly impose its faith on non-Muslims, arguing that even among Muslims there is no single understanding of Islam that is universally followed. However, Soroush fails to discuss any specific protections that will be implemented to defend the rights of the religious minorities of the country. In other words, if a majority of the public were to agree to outlaw the Baha'i faith, these individuals could do little to nothing to stop it. He responds to such criticism by referring once again to Iranian civil society and the public sphere, maintaining complete faith that the public discourse will lead to a just outcome.

Regarding the issue of women's participation in a democratic religious government, Soroush is even less clear on what women's rights should specifically be. In Iran, the *masalayeh-zan*, or woman's question, is one that has gained increased attention in recent years among intellectuals inside and

outside of the country. Feminists such as Ziba Mir-Hosseini, a prominent anthropologist, and the editors and writers of *Zanan*, a feminist journal in Iran, have struggled to bring the *masalayeh-zan* to the forefront of Iranian discourse. This issue is extremely important in any discussion about reform because Iranian women have shown some of the fiercest and most organized opposition to the current regime. Sadly, Soroush and other religious intellectuals have generally been ambiguous on the question of women. This was an issue that Ziba Mir Hosseini took to heart in her interview with Soroush in 1992. When pushed in the interview, Soroush finally responded:

To enter a debate on the women's question via the path of women's rights is incorrect and I consciously don't pursue it. Not because I don't believe in them... but because I believe this isn't a starting point...we'll get nowhere by haggling about women's legal rights.<sup>23</sup>

Here, Soroush is hesitant to address the question of women's rights as an issue that cannot be separated from larger issues of human rights. This hesitance poses a serious risk to women who may find themselves at the mercy of dominant leaders in the future who are not restrained by safeguards.

Furthermore, while Soroush claims to support gender equality, he fails to acknowledge the history of women's subjugation in Iran and the impact this has had on women's inferior position in modern Iranian society. According to Farideh Farhi, a professor of political science at the University of Hawaii, "Many religious intellectuals are uncomfortable with adopting the view that women have been oppressed throughout history."<sup>24</sup> She specifically points out that in his essay entitled "*Qabz va Bast-e Hoquq-e Zanan*" (Contraction and Expansion of Women's Rights) in the feminist journal, *Zanan*, Soroush claims that "women have generally been prone to tolerating cruelty and, if they have done so in the past, they can continue to do so in the future."<sup>25</sup> Although his statements should be read in the context of his precarious position as an Iranian dissident, his conservative views concerning women undermine his progressive views concerning Islam and human rights. While Soroush's approval of women's participation in the public debate is an improvement on what women have available to them today in the Islamic Republic, it is far from solving the *masalayeh-zan*.

One of the main problems in his discussions concerning religious minorities and women is that Soroush does not adequately address the history of subjugation and discrimination felt by both groups. When he does examine their history, he does so generally only within a broader Islamic context.



## A HISTORY OF SUBJUGATION: RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN IRAN

In her article, “Ethnic and Religious Groups in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Policy Suggestions for the Integration of Minorities,” Dr. Nazila Ghanea-Hercock, an expert on international human rights law, gives a brief history of the treatment of religious minorities before the revolution. Her research shows that life for religious minorities in Iran had been difficult long before the creation of the Islamic Republic:

This chequered history witnessed, for example, the 1839 murder of 36 Jews in Mashhad and the forced conversion of the rest of them. The late 1800s saw vicious attacks on the Bábís, and later Bahá'ís... Under Reza Shah's rule (1925-1941) the Armenians were suspected of Soviet leanings and their Archbishop was exiled. Jewish, Bahá'í and Armenian schools were closed down... in the mid-1950s the Shah allowed attacks on the Bahá'í community since he needed to attract the support of the clergy in his anti-Communist campaign.<sup>26</sup>

Religious minorities have long been mistrusted, hated, and discriminated against by the majority Shi'a population. Baha'is, who are believed to be apostates of Islam, have been the most brutally persecuted population in Iran. Since the founding of the religion in Iran in the mid-1800s, Baha'is have suffered tremendously for their faith. Their situation has only become worse after the revolution. According to Dr. Ghanea-Hercock, Baha'is today cannot organize to pray, attend any institution of higher learning, or serve in the government.<sup>29</sup> Many education campaigns were launched under Khomeini to teach Iranians about the dangers of “Baha'ism.” Evangelical Protestants have also been targeted severely under the current regime because of the ban on proselytizing. They are not allowed to speak in Persian at their services, and the printing of Bibles has been restricted.

The other religious minorities have fared marginally better. Armenian and Assyrian Christians have been tolerated under the current regime. Their long history in Iranian society and their specialized trades grant them a degree of acceptance among the majority Shi'a population. Nevertheless, as a result of Armenian and Assyrian languages being banned in schools, young members of these communities are losing their connection to their ethnic counterparts outside Iran. They also face discrimination in jobs, universities, the *Majles* (parliament), and housing. Iranian Jews, who predated Muslims as residents of the region, have suffered at different times from differing degrees of violence and discrimination. Since the creation of the State of



Israel, animosity and mistrust of Jewish Iranians grew again within the Muslim population.<sup>28</sup>

## WOMEN IN IRAN

In Iran, women have been marginalized, attacked, and subjugated for centuries. Iranian society is extremely patriarchal and cultural attitudes towards women have historically been conservative. Reza Shah attempted to “modernize” the country and liberate Iranian women by banning the veil from being worn in public. However, this legislation had the reverse effect. It prevented many women from entering the work force and going to school and even stores out of fear of the eternal implications of unveiling. Similarly, although Muhammad Reza Shah is often seen as a champion for women’s rights, his views on women did not always translate into greater emancipation for the majority of women who were not from the upper class or not well educated. According to Guity Nashat in the introduction to *Women in Iran*, “Most Iranian women followed religious precepts and customs and were not affected by these laws, and only a small percentage participated in Pahlavi-era elections.”<sup>29</sup>

For the past hundred years, women in Iran have challenged antiquated family laws and sexual discrimination in universities and the workplace. They endured enforced unveiling and later enforced veiling. For years, Iranian women have struggled with general societal views that condone domestic violence, pardon rape, attack women’s sexuality, and humiliate women in the public sphere. Under the current regime, polygamy and *sigheh*, or temporary marriage, have been made legal, further complicating women’s position in society. Although women have made considerable advancements in the legal, economic, and political arenas, cultural attitudes and values towards women have not significantly changed. It should be noted, however, that Iranian women actively participated in the 1979 revolution and continue to struggle inside and outside Iran to advance the position of their gender despite the many obstacles still in their path. As Bill Beeman of Brown University suggests, “There are more women in the current Parliament than ever served under the Pahlavi regime...University enrollment is nearly equal for men and women.” Women can be *Mujtaheds*, or religious scholars, and as anyone who has been to Iran knows, they can also be taxi drivers.<sup>30</sup>

## THE INEQUALITIES OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

A democratic public sphere is not immune to the marginalization of women

and religious minorities. Not all individuals are granted equal voices in the public debate when they are challenging and questioning popular values and attitudes. In “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” Nancy Fraser offers a powerful criticism of the public sphere in a liberal democracy.<sup>31</sup> Although her criticisms are made within the context of a “bourgeois liberal” society such as France, many of her arguments hold true within the Iranian context. She argues:

The official public sphere rested on, indeed was importantly constituted by, a number of significant exclusions (namely race, gender, property ownership). The public sphere was really a way for bourgeois men to see themselves as a ‘universal class’... preparing to assert their fitness to govern.<sup>32</sup>

If the phrase “Muslim men” replaces “bourgeois men,” Fraser’s arguments become relevant to Iran. Anthropologist Talal Asad reiterates the point, while also offering a non-Western criticism of the public debate. Asad argues, “The public sphere is a space necessarily (and not just contingently) articulated by power...The enjoyment of free speech presupposes not merely the physical ability to speak but to be heard.”<sup>33</sup> Inequalities of power, in other words, are reflected in the public sphere through the media and various other instruments that dominate the public discourse. Although, according to Soroush, there are to be no formal restrictions on the public sphere, this does not guarantee that all individuals can equally access this sphere, especially if they lack resources, education, and the ability to debate. Exclusion from the public sphere can be found in other democratic societies as well. In a democratic religious government, however, the religious nature of the government further exacerbates social, economic, and political inequalities.

### THE INEQUALITIES OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN A DEMOCRATIC MUSLIM IRAN

In the context of a democratic Muslim Iran, many of the inequalities inherent in the society and government today would simply be reflected in the unrestricted realm of the public sphere. Since Iran is overwhelmingly Shi’a, the government would reflect the religious faith of the majority regardless of the influence of secular individuals or political and religious divisions among the Shi’a themselves. Therefore, the obvious problem for religious minorities (including atheists) would be that in a democratic religious government, they

would be marginalized by the majority's religion. Put differently, they would be told that as non-Muslims, "their state chooses to ally itself with beliefs they do not share."<sup>34</sup> More significantly, because those in the majority would dominate the discussion within the public sphere, religious minorities would find it difficult to convince Muslims of an opinion if they based their arguments on their own religious texts. In other words, religious minorities in a "religious society" would be forced to debate issues within the religious discourse of the dominant religion, thus putting them at a greater disadvantage. If in free Iranian elections, the people decided to have Shi'a Islam remain as the official religion of the government (even if they maintain a considerably open and liberal interpretation), religious minorities would have to debate their status in the government and society in Islamic terms. For example, a Jewish man would not be able to marry a Muslim woman based on strict interpretations of Islamic law since Muslim women are prohibited from marrying anyone outside the faith. As a result, the Jewish man and his potential wife would have to debate with Muslims, including clerics and jurists who have devoted their entire lives to the study of Islamic law and the "art" of religious debate, on the issue of inter-religious marriage. Clearly, the *ulama* would have a significant advantage over the Muslim woman, as well as the Jewish man, since women also suffer from the unequal nature of public discourse.

Throughout Iranian history, women were excluded from the religious circles and institutions in Iran and were therefore not trained in the traditions of debate and *bahs*. Only under the current regime have women been able to enter the *Houzeh* or institutions of higher Islamic learning. Ziba Mir-Hosseini sees this as a major problem:

There aren't many women competent to deal with theoretical debates on Islamic grounds. Women in the Houzeh seem to have no qualms about its views on women; some are even worse than men. To some degree this is to be expected: women who enter a patriarchal institution must accept its values in the first place, otherwise there's no place for them. Perhaps this is a stage; women in the Houzeh can't enter such debates at present. Some [religious] women, such as those in Zanjan, haven't the expertise and others [non-religious] refuse to frame their discussions in Islamic terms. Male religious intellectuals, such as yourself, won't enter gender debates at all.<sup>35</sup>

Soroush responds to this statement in his interview with Mir-Hosseini by saying that education for women will help alleviate these problems. However, education policy is an issue that must be decided upon within the public sphere, which is not readily accessible to women in the first

place. Therefore, if those who dominate the public debate do not want to reform religious institutions, then education will remain out of the reach of many women. Farideh Farhi contends that “inequality exists because discussion and debate are controlled through an extensively Islamic juridical bias...[and] being well versed in Islamic law is the primary criterion upon which admission to that public debate is based. Anyone who lacks ‘proper credentials’ [including women and religious minorities] is automatically excluded from participation because they are defined as being ‘linguistically incompetent.’”<sup>36</sup> Women, who have been historically excluded from religious debate and positions of power, are at an extreme disadvantage, even in a religious democracy. Most have never studied Islamic discourse and probably would not be able to make a case for their rights within this framework. For example, there have been countless cases of women on death row in Iran, who have been forced into *sigheh* or temporary marriages with the jailers, whereby they are raped, devirginized and promptly executed. This horrifying practice developed in response to the Shi’a law that prohibits a Muslim from killing a virgin. Women would find it extremely difficult to win such a debate with the public, however, because they would still have to combat the religious arguments, which justify the use of *sigheh* and which continue to hold considerable strength in Iranian society.

Similarly, religious minorities are marginalized in a predominately Muslim society and cannot use their own religion as a basis from which to argue. Through the years, religious minorities have been losing their positions in the government and public offices as well as their religious identity within their own communities. Iranian Muslim leaders and thinkers, on the other hand, have been developing their sophisticated ideologies and systems of debate

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and discourse for decades, if not centuries. For the past twenty-five years, Iran has been ruled by religious clerics, who have learned how to rule, disseminate information, consolidate power, and discuss religious issues in a way that can effectively persuade the public. Such marginalization of minorities occurs in liberal

democracies such as the United States, but to a much lesser extent. A religious democracy, however, provides the additional burden of having a single religion dominate the discourse of the public sphere, thus exacerbating the already existing inequalities in society. In a religious democracy, the *Qur’an*

could very well be cited as a source of law. This becomes a problem when non-Muslims want to make an argument based on their religious or secular ideas, which the dominant religion does not accept as valid.

## RESTRICTIONS ON THE PUBLIC SPHERE

A solution to the problem of inequality within the public sphere is the institution of legal restrictions or guidelines that will protect the rights of subjugated populations. For example, in a newly formed democratic Muslim Iran, feminists would begin a public campaign against divorce laws that deny women their children upon divorce. They would demonstrate, lobby, petition, and engage the public. These women would immediately face the opposition of many Shi'a religious leaders as well as many Iranian men who would have the *Qur'an*, *hadiths*, sayings of the Imams, and several centuries of history supporting their side of the argument. There would be two choices for the women. On the one hand, they could attempt to debate within the realm of Islamic law but would have to, in many ways, reject the validity of Islamic texts. On the other hand, the women could debate the issue in terms of human rights. If they choose to debate within this realm, however, they would still have to combat the religious arguments, which hold considerable strength in Iranian society. To turn the public sphere into a more level playing field, the government could give human rights or civil liberties precedence over religious arguments. However, this would contradict Soroush's arguments concerning the central role of morality in a democratic religious government, which he believes takes precedence over human rights. Ultimately, there are many contradictions and unanswered questions with restricting the public sphere in a religious system, none of which have been adequately addressed by Soroush in his writings.

## CONCLUSION

Soroush's call for a reconciliation of Islam and democracy as well as the separation of religion from religious knowledge is sophisticated, significant, and courageous in the face of modern Islamic fundamentalism. However, one cannot ignore his inability to answer both the women's question and the question of religious minorities. Soroush argues that all of these issues will work themselves out in the public sphere, through public debate, media coverage, public demonstrations, awareness campaigns, and other public forums. However, he does not acknowledge the inequalities that are inherent in the public sphere. In his speeches, writings, and interviews, Soroush either

avoids addressing the problems facing women and religious minorities or contradicts himself by arguing that morality, human rights, and religion can coexist without an institutional structure to address their contradictions.

Despite these criticisms, however, the reality cannot be ignored that Soroush's greatest supporters have been women and members of religious minorities. His attempt to democratize Islam has gained a tremendous following in Iran because it stands as a powerful alternative to the current theocracy. Now that many of the opposition groups to the regime are increasingly coming from the religious community itself, ideas such as Soroush's will hold considerable weight in a future Iran. Before we can accept Soroush's arguments as a possible model, however, it is essential to address their shortcomings and dangers.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Soroush Biography as presented in Erasmus Prize. 1996. <http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Biography/E-BIO-20041100-ErasmusPrize.html>

<sup>2</sup> Soroush, Abdolkarim. 2000. "The Idea of a Democratic Religious Government." Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush. Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pg122.

<sup>3</sup> Soroush, Abdolkarim. "Tolerance and Governance." Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam. p 131.

<sup>4</sup> Soroush, Abdolkarim. "Islamic Revival and Reform." p33.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid 33

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 31

<sup>7</sup> Ibid 37

<sup>8</sup> Vakilli, Valla. 2001. "Abdolkarim Soroush and Critical Discourse in Iran." Makers of Contemporary Islam. John L. Esposito and John Voll ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p158.

<sup>9</sup> Soroush. "Tolerance and Government." p132.

<sup>10</sup> Vakilli, p160.

<sup>11</sup> Soroush. "The Idea of Democratic Religious Government." p127.

<sup>12</sup> Secor, Laura. 2004. The democrat: Iran's leading reformist intellectual tries to reconcile religious duties and human rights. *The Boston Globe*. March 14. [http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/On\\_DrSoroush/E-CMO-20040314-1.html](http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/On_DrSoroush/E-CMO-20040314-1.html)

<sup>13</sup> "Civil Society" as it is used in this paper, refers to the organizations, institutions, and individuals who carry out collective action in society outside of the structure of the government.

<sup>14</sup> Fraser, Nancy. 2000. "Transnationalizing the Public Sphere." [www.yale.edu/polisci/info/conferences/fraser1.doc](http://www.yale.edu/polisci/info/conferences/fraser1.doc)

<sup>15</sup> Vakilli, 160.

<sup>16</sup> Fischer, Michael MJ. 1980. Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. p 63.

<sup>17</sup> Ahmed An-Naim, Abdullahi. 1996. Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights and International Law. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. p 79.

<sup>18</sup> There are many sub-sects within the Shi'a branch of Islam. Iranians are primarily of the Twelve Imam sect, believing that there were twelve Imams, descending from the Prophet directly, and who are the highest authorities on Islamic law after the Qur'an and the Hadiths.

<sup>19</sup> Ghanea-Hercock, Nazila. 2004. Ethnic and Religious Groups in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Policy Suggestions for the Integration of Minorities. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Subregional Seminar Minority Rights: Cultural Diversity and Development in Central Asia. October. p9.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Jewish Community at Yusefabad Synagogue in Tehran. June 1, 2004.

<sup>22</sup> Soroush. "Tolerance and Government." p141.

<sup>23</sup> Hosseini, Ziba Mir. 1999. Challenges and Complicities: Abdolkarim Soroush and Gender. From Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/On\\_DrSoroush/E-CMO-19990000-1.html](http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/On_DrSoroush/E-CMO-19990000-1.html)

<sup>24</sup> Farhi, 325.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Ghanea-Hercock, 9.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Iranian Jewish Community at Yusefabad Synagogue.

- <sup>29</sup> Nashat, Guity. 2004. "Introduction." *Women in Iran: From 1800 to the Islamic Republic*. Lois Beck and Guity Nashat ed. Chicago: University of Illinois Press. p 25
- <sup>30</sup> Beeman, William. 2001. Iranian Women's Situation has improved under the Islamic Republic. <http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Anthropology/publications/Iranwomen.htm>
- <sup>31</sup> Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." Habermas and the Public Sphere. Craig Calhoun ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- <sup>32</sup> Fraser, 113-114.
- <sup>33</sup> Asad, Talal. 2003. "Secularism, Nation-State, Religion." *Formations of the Secular*. Stanford University Press. p184.
- <sup>34</sup> Feldman, Noah. 2003. "Gods Rule and People's Rule." *After Jihad: America and the Struggle for Islamic Democracy* (Draft). drsoroush.org. [http://www.drsoroush.com/English/On\\_DrSoroush/E-CMO-20020930-1.html](http://www.drsoroush.com/English/On_DrSoroush/E-CMO-20020930-1.html)
- <sup>35</sup> Hosseini
- <sup>36</sup> Farhi, 332.