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IDEA LAB

Who Wrote the Koran?

By MOHAMMAD AYATOLLAHI TABAAR

For more than two decades, Abdulkarim Soroush has been [Iran](#)'s leading public intellectual. Deeply versed in Islamic theology and mysticism, he was chosen by Ayatollah Khomeini to "Islamicize" Iran's universities, only to eventually turn against the theocratic state. He paid a price for his dissidence. Vigilantes and other government-supported elements disrupted his widely attended lectures in Iran, beat him and reportedly nearly assassinated him. In a country where intellectuals are often treated like rock stars, Soroush has been venerated and reviled for his outspoken support of religious pluralism and democracy. Now he has taken one crucial step further. Shutting from university to university in Europe and the U.S., Soroush is sending shock waves through Iran's clerical establishment.

The recent controversy began about eight months ago, after Soroush spoke with a Dutch reporter about one of Islam's most sensitive issues: the divine origin of the Koran. Muslims have long believed that their holy book was transmitted word for word by God through the Prophet Muhammad. In the interview, however, Soroush made explicit his alternative belief that the Koran was a "prophetic experience." He told me that the prophet "was at the same time the receiver and the producer of the Koran or, if you will, the subject and the object of the revelation." Soroush said that "when you read the Koran, you have to feel that a human being is speaking to you, i.e. the words, images, rules and regulations and the like all are coming from a human mind." He added, "This mind, of course, is special in the sense that it is imbued with divinity and inspired by God."

As Soroush's words spread thanks to the Internet, Iran's grand ayatollahs entered the battlefield. In their rebuttal, the clerics pointed to the Koranic verses that state "this is a book we have sent down to you (O Muhammad)." They ask, Don't these verses imply that God is the revealer and Muhammad the receiver? They also point out that there were times when Muhammad waited impatiently for the revelation to come to him and that in more than 300 cases the prophet is commanded to tell his people to do one thing or another. This demonstrates, the argument goes, that the commands are coming from elsewhere rather than from the heart or the mind of the prophet himself.

Soroush, in turn, responds by saying that the prophet was no parrot. Rather, Soroush told me, he was like a bee who produces honey itself, even though the mechanism for making the honey is placed in him by God. This is "the example the Koran itself sets," says Soroush, citing the Koran: "And your Lord inspired to the bee: take for yourself among the mountains, houses . . . then eat from all the fruits . . . there emerges from their bellies a drink . . . in which there is healing for

people.”

Soroush has been described as a Muslim Luther, but unlike the Protestant reformer, he is no literalist about holy books. His work more closely resembles that of the 19th-century German scholars who tried to understand the Bible in its original context. Case in point: when a verse in the Koran or a saying attributed to Muhammad refers to cutting off a thief's hand or stoning to death for adultery, it only tells us the working rules and regulations of the prophet's era. Today's Muslims are not obliged to follow in these footsteps if they have more humane means at their disposal.

Soroush's latest views have not endeared him to the powerful conservative wing of Iran's establishment. Some have accused him of heresy, which is punishable by death. There have been demonstrations by clerics in Qom, the religious capital of Iran, against his recent work. But Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah [Ali Khamenei](#), unexpectedly warned against feeding the controversy. He said those who are employing “philosophy or pseudo-philosophy” to “pervert the nation's mind” should not be dealt with “by declaring apostasy and anger” but rather countered with the “religious truths” that will falsify their arguments.

In Iran today, many opponents of the government advocate the creation of a secular state. Soroush himself supports the separation of mosque and state, but for the sake of religion. He seeks freedom of religion, not freedom from religion. Thus he speaks for a different — and potentially more effective — agenda. The medieval Islamic mystic Rumi once wrote that “an old love may only be dissolved by a new one.” In a deeply religious society, whose leaders have justified their hold on power as a divine duty, it may take a religious counterargument to push the society toward pluralism and democracy. Soroush challenges those who claim to speak for Islam, and does so on their own terms.

Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar is an adjunct lecturer at the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University.

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