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Rationality in Religious Epistemology: An Analysis of Abdul-Karim Soroush's View on the Transformation of Contemporary Religious Thought

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Abstract

The rapid development of science and social changes in the contemporary era has created a tension between traditional religious thought and the modern world. Religion is often viewed as a static system, while science and technology continue to evolve. The aim of this research is to explore how Soroush distinguishes between religion as eternal revelation and religious knowledge as a product of human effort that can evolve in response to changes over time. The methodology used in this research is qualitative analysis with a descriptive-analytical approach. The findings indicate that Soroush emphasizes the importance of intellectual humility in facing the plurality of religious interpretations, viewing religious knowledge as an ongoing process that evolves according to social and scientific changes without compromising the essence of revelation. Academically, this research contributes to the study of religious epistemology by providing insights into how Soroush's thought can help redefine the relationship between religion and science in the context of the contemporary world, as well as renewing religious understanding in a more flexible and dynamic way.

Keywords: Abdul-Karim Soroush, Religion, Epistemology, Critical, Rationality.

Introduction

Religious thought in the contemporary world, particularly in the context of Islam, faces a significant challenge in adapting to the rapid development of science and technology. On one hand, religion is often seen as a static system, with doctrines that cannot be altered or questioned. On the other hand, science continues to evolve, providing new insights that often conflict with the traditional views held by many religious followers.¹ In facing these challenges, the thought of Abdul-Karim Soroush plays an important role in contemporary Islamic intellectual discourse, particularly in the context of religious thought reform. As a philosopher, theologian, and public intellectual from Iran, Soroush is known for his critical ideas regarding religious authoritarianism and his efforts to align Islamic principles with the values of modernity. Soroush's thought is often positioned within the framework of Islamic reformism, which seeks to reconstruct religious interpretations through a dynamic and contextual approach. He argues that religious understanding should be pluralistic and dynamic, open to criticism and the advancement of scientific knowledge.

His concept of the "theory of contraction and expansion of religious knowledge" is one of his most significant contributions, demonstrating that religious understanding can and must continuously evolve in line with scientific progress and social change. From an academic perspective, Abdul-Karim Soroush's thought reflects a flexible, dynamic, and innovative approach to religion, more as an enlightened religious intellectual (*raushanfikir al-din*) than as a traditional scholar. Soroush is an active advocate for religious revivalism (*ihya' al-din*) and introduces the epistemological theory of "*al-qabd wa al-bast*" (contraction and expansion) to distinguish between religion and religious knowledge. In this analysis, Soroush's thought is placed within a methodological framework utilizing al-Jabiri's classification of reasoning, particularly the reasoning of formation (*al-'aql al-mukawwan*), where Soroush is positioned as a method within the context of cultural reasoning. This approach is important because Soroush is analyzed as an insider in the Islamic tradition, studying his own religion, and therefore, his understanding is treated as an integral epistemological framework.²

One of the interesting views expressed by Edward Said in his book *Beginnings, Intention, and Method* is about the importance of a beginning. Said states, "A beginning is not only an act; it is also a framework of thought, a kind of work, attitude, and awareness. A beginning is pragmatic, like when we read a difficult text and ask where to start to understand it, or where the author began their work and why. And it is also theoretical, like when we ask whether there are epistemological or unique performance characteristics inherent in beginnings in general [...] However, a complex form has its own logic. Is the beginning like that as well?" A beginning is always the starting point for someone to understand and give meaning to the emergence of a phenomenon, including the various doctrinal and moral-cultural variables that underlie it.

A beginning is not only an actual act but also a framework of thought, attitude, and awareness. If a complex phenomenon has its own logic, then is the beginning also like that? Or, is the beginning better understood as a pre-reflective condition, where the phenomenon is allowed to emerge without any intention? For Edward Said, a beginning can be seen as an initial moment that appears simple, yet actually involves various elements often overlooked in interpretation, both in practice and theory. The beginning also contains the potential for diverse and complex interpretations, influenced by different socio-cultural backgrounds. Considering the importance of a beginning, understanding Abdul-Karim Soroush's thought must start from the cultural context that shaped his view of social reality. Soroush explains that as a Muslim Iranian, he and other Iranians inherit three cultures simultaneously: Persian national culture, Islam, and the West. Iran is not only a geographical location but also a situation and identity shaped by collective memories, constructions of consciousness, and distinct social institutions.

These collective memories are reflected in Iranian culture and civilization, which represent the fusion of these three identities.³

Research on Abdul-Karim Soroush's thought has been extensively conducted by various scholars, focusing on his contributions to the reform of religious thought in Islam. A study by Akbar shows that Soroush played a significant role in bridging religion and rationality by challenging the static view of revelation and religion.⁴ Bagir further elaborates on Soroush's idea of the "contraction and expansion of religious knowledge," which demonstrates how religious understanding can evolve without losing its spiritual essence.⁵

Furthermore, Purnama, in his research on al-Jabiri's reasoning, also argues that Soroush's thought is within an epistemological framework that is more open to scientific and social discourse. This study highlights how Soroush uses formed reasoning (*al-'aql al-mukawwan*) to describe religious knowledge that evolves with time, as well as how his ideas can help bridge the gap between religion and science in the contemporary context.⁶ This research offers a new contribution by delving deeper into the rationality in religious epistemology through Abdul-Karim Soroush's perspective, focusing on the transformation of religious thought in the contemporary era. Although many previous studies have discussed the fundamental aspects of Soroush's thought, this article provides a more comprehensive analysis of how the theory of *al-qabd wa al-bast* can be applied to address the challenges faced by religion in the contemporary scientific world.

The purpose of writing this article is to analyze Abdul-Karim Soroush's thoughts on rationality in religious epistemology and how his views offer solutions to the transformation of religious thought in the contemporary era. Soroush's concept of rationality is distinctive in that it separates divine religion from human understanding of religion, allowing for epistemological flexibility and adaptation. His rationality promotes the idea that religious knowledge is not sacred or final, but rather subject to expansion and contraction as human reasoning, scientific discovery, and social contexts evolve. Through this, Soroush offers a solution by proposing a dynamic model of religious knowledge that bridges the gap between immutable spiritual truths and the changing landscape of modern intellectual inquiry. The significance of this research provides a relevant perspective for resolving the tension between religion and science that often occurs in Muslim societies. In the context of the contemporary world, where science and technology continue to evolve, it is important to consider how religion can remain relevant without conflicting with scientific progress. Soroush's thought opens opportunities for a more rational, dynamic, and open interpretation of religion in response to the development of scientific knowledge.

Method

This research uses a qualitative research design with a descriptive-analytical approach. This approach is chosen because it aims to deeply explore Abdul-Karim Soroush's thoughts on rationality in religious epistemology and his contributions to the transformation of religious thought in the contemporary era. According to Creswell, the descriptive-analytical approach in qualitative research is used to explore the meaning and in depth understanding of phenomena that occur within specific social and cultural contexts.⁷

Specifically, this research employs a library research method, which involves the systematic collection, review, and interpretation of written materials related to the topic. In terms of data collection, this research uses the technique of literature review. The necessary data is collected from various primary and secondary sources, including the major works of Abdul-Karim Soroush. Additionally, the research also gathers data from secondary literature, such as journal articles and books that are

relevant to the discussion. To analyze the data, this research applies content analysis techniques. During the analysis process, the researcher identifies, categorizes, and interprets the main ideas within Soroush's thought. This technique helps the researcher to systematically explore the core of Soroush's ideas, relate them to the development of religious thought, and identify the relevance of his ideas in addressing the challenges faced by religion in the contemporary era.

Intellectual Biography of Abdul-Karim Soroush

Abdul-Karim Soroush, born Hossein Haj Faraj Dabbagh on December 16, 1945, in Tehran, Iran, is a prominent intellectual in contemporary Islam, known for his contributions to philosophy, theology, and the reform of Islamic thought. His religious and educated family background had a significant influence on his views, combining religious zeal with a love for science and philosophy. Soroush studied pharmacy at the University of Tehran before continuing his studies in analytical chemistry at Chelsea College in London and the history and philosophy of science at the University of London, which greatly impacted his thinking.⁸

Upon returning to Iran in 1979, during the Iranian Islamic Revolution, he became active in the Cultural Revolution Council and taught at the University of Tehran. However, his disagreement with the post-revolutionary theocracy, particularly the dominance of the clergy, led him to become a critic of the more authoritarian government. Soroush developed the theory of "contraction and expansion of religious knowledge" to demonstrate that religious knowledge can evolve alongside scientific progress, even though the essence of the teachings remains unchanged.⁹ He emphasized that religious knowledge must be dynamic and contextual, avoiding a static view that considers it beyond debate.¹⁰

Soroush also criticized the use of religion for political purposes, emphasizing that the clergy should not hold absolute political power, as this could suppress freedom of thought. Although controversial in Iran, Soroush's thought gained international attention, with calls for building a dialogue between Islam and the West. His works have been translated into many languages, and he was invited to lecture at leading universities in Europe and the United States, including Harvard and Princeton. His ideas encourage Muslims to integrate Western scientific advancements without losing their religious identity.¹¹ Despite his criticism of theocracy being seen as controversial, Soroush became an inspiration for many intellectuals and young people who view him as a visionary advocating for Islamic reform without compromising the essence of faith.¹²

Wijaya explains that Abdul-Karim Soroush's thought focuses on the need to renew religious discourse in order to remain relevant to the times. He argues that although the Qur'an remains the source of religious teachings, its interpretation must continue to evolve in line with changing social and cultural contexts.¹³ According to Soroush, religious knowledge is not something static, but something that can develop, especially with the advancement of science and social conditions. He also criticizes the view that religious knowledge is absolute and cannot be debated. Soroush introduced the theory of contraction and expansion of religious knowledge, which distinguishes between religion as a system of belief and religious knowledge as a product of human interpretation.¹⁴ With this theory, Soroush seeks to create a more rational Islamic discourse that is relevant to the social reality of contemporary Muslim society, so that Islam can continue to provide meaning in the context of a constantly changing world.

The Historicity of Religion and the Humanitarian Dimension in Soroush's Thought

Abdul-Karim Soroush began his reform of religious thought with a historical-anthropological approach to gain a deeper and more rational understanding of religion. Adopting Bakker's theory, Soroush rejects the view that sees religion as an autonomous phenomenon separate from the social

practices that shape its understanding. Therefore, religion and social practices must be analyzed in an integrated manner, as religion is part of human culture that continuously evolves over time.¹⁵ Soroush's anthropological approach to religion positions it as a cultural component that must be understood through its evolution, functions, symbolism, and role in society, as well as its relationship with other institutions. Soroush seeks to understand religion within the context of human culture and examines the actualization of religion in specific social, historical, and cultural settings.

Before delving further into Soroush's thought, the relevance of Karl Jaspers' existential thought can enrich our understanding of historicity in the epistemology of religion. Jaspers states that "there is no reality more essential to human beings than the history of themselves," which indicates that humans are always bound by time and history. This reflection on time also mirrors the understanding of human existence, which is bound within the framework of temporality. In this regard, Heidegger's thought on "Dasein" (Being-there) as an existence inseparable from history and time is highly relevant, as time becomes an essential condition in shaping historicity and human understanding of the world.¹⁶

Soroush also adheres to this concept of temporality in his discussion of religion. He believes that religious interpretation cannot be detached from the ever-evolving nature of time. By using analytical methods such as Karl Popper's falsification, Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shift, and religious anthropology, Soroush emphasizes the importance of temporality in religious understanding. All these methods are based on the understanding that religion evolves alongside changes in time and social context, which provides space for rational thought in the epistemology of religion.¹⁷

Soroush's thought on the historicity of religion leads to the application of a hermeneutic interpretation of religious texts, such as the Qur'an and Hadith. In his two main works, *The Contraction and Expansion of Legal Theory* and *Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, Soroush develops an interpretive model that combines modern epistemological theory with traditional Islamic knowledge, such as *kalam* (Islamic theology), *ushul* (Islamic legal theory), and *irfan* (Islamic esotericism). He argues that religious understanding must continuously evolve, allowing religion to remain relevant in the face of changing social and cultural contexts.¹⁸

Soroush is also influenced by Muhammad Iqbal's thought on the prophetic nature of the Prophet Muhammad, as illustrated in the statement of Abdul Quddus, a Sufi from Ganggah, who views the Prophet's return from his ascension (*mi'raj*) as having significant meaning for the social and cultural order of humanity. This provides an important perspective in understanding religion, not only as a revealed doctrine but as a living phenomenon that remains relevant to society.¹⁹ According to Soroush, the human aspect of religion is often overlooked in Islamic discourse. Religion cannot be understood merely as a collection of revealed texts, but must be seen in its engagement with human history and its manifestation in social reality. In this regard, Soroush's way of thinking introduces an anthropocentric dimension to the understanding of religion, where the Arabic language and culture are considered elements that enrich the anthropological character of Islam. However, this does not mean that religion is merely a cultural construct; rather, religion must be seen within the framework of human limitations in understanding it, both in terms of time and culture.²⁰

Through this anthropological perspective, Soroush seeks to revive the creative and dynamic dimension of Islam, which has stagnated in the contemporary period. The historicization and humanization of religion open the path for the reform of Islamic discourse. With a historical-anthropological reading, Soroush restores Islam as a living event within the context of interaction and the learning process in culture, emphasizing that religion cannot be separated from its time and culture.²¹

The Theory of Contraction and Expansion of Religious Knowledge

Abdul-Karim Soroush describes two interconnected phases in the development of religious understanding, namely the contraction (*al-qabd*) and expansion (*al-bast*) phases, each reflecting two different conditions of thought regarding religious teachings.²² In the contraction phase, religious understanding tends to be rigid and limited, where interpretations of religious teachings are more focused on texts considered absolute and non-debatable. This phase often occurs during periods of social uncertainty or crises, where society feels the need to maintain stability through unquestionable religious teachings. In this phase, religious understanding is tied to established doctrines and tends to leave little room for reinterpretation or debate.

On the other hand, in the expansion phase, understanding of religious teachings becomes more open and flexible. In this phase, religion is seen as a belief system that can evolve and adapt alongside social, cultural, and especially scientific advancements. The expansion phase creates space for reinterpretation of religious texts, opens opportunities for dialogue between religion and science, and allows religious teachings to remain relevant in the face of changing times.²³ Soroush explains that although the core of religious teachings remains unchanged, the way humans understand and interpret them must be able to keep pace with social dynamics and new scientific discoveries, so that religion continues to be a relevant force in contemporary society.

The theory of "*al-qabd wa al-bast*" also links religion with science, which, in Soroush's view, should not be understood as two opposing entities. On the contrary, science, which continues to evolve, should be one of the factors that drive the expansion and development of religious understanding. Soroush believes that the advancement of science, whether in the fields of science, philosophy, or the humanities, is an important factor influencing how religious teachings are interpreted in a broader and more contemporary context.²⁴

In this context, Soroush's theory of "*al-qabd wa al-bast*" urges Muslims not to view religion as something static, but as a dynamic system that can evolve and enrich itself in line with changes in society and knowledge. This is highly relevant to the advancement of modern science, which often presents new findings that can challenge old understandings of religion and life. Soroush emphasizes that although religion is transcendental, human knowledge and understanding of religion must adapt to the ever-evolving scientific and social realities. In this regard, Soroush's thought offers a middle path that allows religion and science to complement each other, rather than contradict.²⁵

This theory not only serves as a tool for understanding the dynamics of religious thought, but also as a guideline for the reform of religious thinking that is open to renewal and change. Fauzi argues that Soroush's neo-rationalist thought, based on the theory of contraction and expansion, opens the possibility for developing a more rational, critical, and responsive Islamic thought in relation to the changing times. Thus, this theory makes an important contribution in moderating the relationship between religion and science, as well as helping facilitate the process of adapting religion in an increasingly modern world.²⁶

Various studies conducted previously also show that Soroush's thought has had a significant influence on contemporary Islamic intellectual discourse. Khudari Lantong's research indicates that Soroush's thought on the flexibility of religious interpretation is crucial in addressing the challenges of secularism and modernity.²⁷ Meanwhile, the study by Sufratman and Karomi emphasizes that the theory of "*al-qabd wa al-bast*" provides a more inclusive model for religion to interact with the scientific world, without losing its essence as a spiritual system.²⁸

Transformation of Religious Thought in the Contemporary Era

Abdul-Karim Soroush, as one of the leading thinkers in contemporary Islam, plays a central role in the reformation of religious thought, particularly in responding to the challenges faced by traditional religious thinking. Soroush begins his reform of thought by challenging the traditional view that considers religion as something static and unquestionable. As an intellectual who sees science and religion as two dimensions that are not in conflict, he seeks to demonstrate that religious understanding must evolve alongside scientific progress and social changes. Soroush proposes a more flexible understanding of religion, with an emphasis on rationality and contextuality, which allows religion to maintain its relevance and become a powerful tool for understanding life in modern society.²⁹

One of Soroush's most significant contributions is his idea of religious epistemology. In Soroush's view, religious knowledge cannot be seen as something fixed and final. Instead, religious knowledge must be understood in its historical and social context, which is constantly changing. This relates to the theory of contraction and expansion, as previously explained, which teaches that religious understanding can change according to the context of the times, without compromising the essence of religious teachings. In this regard, Soroush suggests that Muslims should not only accept the revealed texts literally, but also open space for criticism and reinterpretation that is more in line with the challenges of the era.

One of the biggest challenges faced by traditional religious thought is how to reconcile religious teachings with scientific progress, particularly in the field of science. In traditional societies, religion is often seen as the sole source of truth, which cannot be contested or questioned. However, with the rapid development of science offering knowledge based on empirical evidence, many people have begun to question the relationship between religious teachings and new scientific discoveries. This is where Soroush makes his important contribution.

Soroush emphasizes that religion and science should not be understood as two opposing entities. He believes that science and religion, although different in methods and approaches, both have the same goal: to seek the truth. In his book *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience*, Soroush demonstrates that religion must be developed within a framework that allows for scientific discussion and debate.³⁰ Soroush, religion is not merely a doctrine to be passively accepted, but a dynamic system of thought that must always interact with social and scientific developments.

Religious epistemology, as proposed by Soroush, opens space for the development of religious knowledge that is not limited to traditional interpretations but also introduces a more rational and contextual understanding. This aligns with the hermeneutic view that emphasizes the importance of interpretation in understanding religious texts.³¹ Soroush adopts a hermeneutic method that allows religious texts to be interpreted by considering their social and historical context, making them relevant to the advancements in scientific knowledge.

Mulyadi assesses that Soroush's thought paves the way for the development of a more rational Islamic thought that is open to modernity. This thinking focuses on how religion can evolve alongside the advancement of science and address the tension between the two.³² Additionally, M. Amien's research on Islamic epistemology theory also emphasizes the importance of Soroush's thought in modernizing the understanding of Islam, ensuring its relevance in an increasingly complex and diverse world.³³

Modern Epistemology in Soroush's Thought

Abdul-Karim Soroush, an intellectual educated in the classical Islamic tradition, Western philosophy, and modern thought, developed an intellectual framework that is a synthesis of these various traditions.

His religious discourse is influenced by a range of schools of thought, such as the rationalism of the Mu'tazilah, Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, Karl Popper's falsification method, Thomas Kuhn's paradigm shift, and Jalaluddin Rumi's mysticism. This synthesis of thought resulted in an approach he calls rational-critical or realist-critical.³⁴ In the context of religious epistemology, this approach positions Soroush's thought between classical religious metaphysics and postmodern relativism.

Soroush emphasizes the importance of avoiding two extreme views: naïve realism, which tends to see the world in totality or a single grand narrative, and relativism, which disregards the values of universal truth. In Soroush's view, the world is a complex entity, made up of various smaller narratives that interact with each other. He responds to the challenges faced by traditional religion by proposing contemporary rationality that acknowledges the limitations of human understanding. This contemporary rationality no longer seeks to achieve a total worldview, as the *ego cogito* in Cartesian philosophy did, which aimed for absolute and unquestionable knowledge.³⁵

Soroush's thought encourages the faithful to think critically and be open to understanding religion. Soroush views religion as a system that cannot be understood statically or absolutely, but must be seen within a framework that allows for critical thinking and evolving interpretations. He proposes that religion should not only be understood through a single, dogmatic narrative, but must be confronted with pluralism and the social dynamics that evolve over time. In this regard, he adopts the principle of rational modesty, which emphasizes awareness of the limitations of human understanding in interpreting the reality of religion.

The concept of rational modesty encourages the faithful to realize that the truth in religion is not absolute and can continuously evolve. Soroush explains that critical rationalism requires individuals to acknowledge that most of the beliefs held by humans are merely hypotheses, always open to critique and correction. The stage of human reason that reaches the condition of rational modesty also influences a person's understanding of religion. Soroush positions his thought as an example of critical rationalism, explaining:

Hence, my position, in fact, is the sophisticated rationalism or critical rationalism. That is to say, the actually existing world, be it religion, philosophy or nature, is much too complicated to be dealt with by judgements based on naïve rationalism or to sanction dogmatic commitment to one single option [...] One of the clear consequences of critical rationalism is to show that most of people's certainties are little more than conjectures. This is not to say that people can never arrive at truth but that arriving at truth has no specific signpost. The signposts mentioned in traditional philosophy, such as observation, certitude, etc., are all fallible. Hence, one cannot easily say, this is true and that is not true. [...] Critical rationalism is, therefore, much more modest in its claims and it takes human fallibility very seriously.³⁶

The actual contemporary reality, whether in the context of religious discourse, philosophy, or ecology, cannot be understood with naïve rationalism claims or dogmatic justifications that assume a single truth or grand narrative as the most perfect. Critical rationalism asserts that all certainties constructed by humans are hypotheses, always open to critique and correction. In other words, the search for a singular certainty is never sufficient. Soroush's view of contemporary reality reflects the strong influence of various Western philosophical discourses and mirrors an understanding of the postmodern condition.

In the postmodern context, various narratives, whether in philosophy, religion, or culture, can no longer claim to be a singular narrative representing absolute truth. Postmodernism emphasizes the

emergence of various smaller narratives that represent diverse human understandings and require recognition in the global cultural arena. Understanding that humans (ego cogito/the I) are engaged in a monologue, even within religious narratives, is a naive and overly ambitious view. While this perspective may be believed or supported by philosophical and theological arguments, it is essentially an illusory projection of the human ego trying to transcend the boundaries of time and situation. In this postmodern reality, Soroush proposes the importance of humble reason (rational modesty), which is an awareness of the limitations of human understanding.³⁷

One of the major influences on Soroush's epistemological thought is Karl Popper's theory of falsification, which states that certainty in religion is never absolute and that all religious understandings are hypotheses open to testing and correction. In Soroush's view, falsifiability does not mean a rejection of religious belief, but rather a process that allows religious understanding to remain open to change and improvement.³⁸ This concept of falsification creates space for religion to adapt to changes in time and scientific knowledge without losing its essence as a spiritual system.

According to Soroush, falsifiability does not mean that all religious claims can be immediately proven or disproven, but rather it is a dynamic process in which these claims remain open to revision based on the continuously evolving empirical experience.³⁹ Soroush emphasizes that all certainties constructed by humans, whether in religion, philosophy, or science, are merely hypotheses that can always be tested, and nothing can be regarded as final or absolute truth. Soroush's thought on the paradigm shift in religion adopts Thomas Kuhn's theory regarding major changes in world understanding, where an old paradigm is replaced by a new one. In the context of religion, Soroush believes that the understanding of religion is also undergoing an inevitable paradigm shift. He exemplifies the Copernican revolution, which replaced the geocentric view with the heliocentric view in astronomy, and argues that a similar shift should occur in religious understanding. This paradigm shift leads to the idea that religious knowledge can no longer be seen as a single narrative claiming absolute truth, but must be viewed as an evolving system of understanding that remains open to critique.⁴⁰

Soroush views the postmodern condition as allowing the emergence of smaller narratives that represent a more diverse human understanding, including in the realm of religion. In his view, postmodern religion can no longer claim a single truth but must accept the existence of a plurality of understandings that must be recognized and respected within the global cultural context. This thought is highly relevant to the current global condition, where religion is no longer understood within the confines of one culture but must be able to interact with various cultural traditions and global ideas.⁴¹

Distinguishing Religion and Religious Knowledge

Soroush's epistemological theory seeks to elevate the issue of religious knowledge to a deeper level by emphasizing that religious revivalists often fail to distinguish between religion (*al-din*) and religious knowledge (*ma'rifat al-din*).⁴² According to Soroush, this failure leads to a contradiction between the unchanging religious teachings and the ever-changing world. He argues that it is not religion that needs to be changed, but rather humanity's understanding of religion that must be adjusted to bridge the gap between the stability of religion and the dynamism of the world.⁴³

Soroush explains that religion itself is the essence of revelation, which remains unchanged, while religious knowledge is knowledge that evolves alongside human efforts to understand and interpret religion. According to Soroush, religious understanding is not sacred because it is a product of human intellectual capacity, which is limited.⁴⁴ In other words, as Jafari and Süerdem explain, religious

knowledge cannot be equated with religion itself, because it is always bound to specific social, cultural, and temporal contexts. Human understanding of religion can vary between individuals, and it can evolve alongside intellectual advancements and the social changes that occur.⁴⁵

Soroush criticizes the revivalist approach that seeks to separate the essence of religion from its social practices and interpretations. Revivalists, such as al-Ghazali and Dihlawi, focus on the sacralization of the essence of religion by removing elements considered to contaminate or be irrelevant to the core teachings of religion. However, according to Soroush, they fail to distinguish between religion itself and religious knowledge, which results in inconsistencies in the interpretation and practice of religion. In Soroush's view, religious knowledge must evolve dynamically, adjusting to the context of the times without altering the essence of revelation itself.⁴⁶

Soroush uses the theory of contraction and expansion (*al-qabd wa al-bast*) to explain how religious knowledge develops. According to him, religion as revelation remains unchanged, but human knowledge of religion continually evolves in accordance with changes in social and intellectual contexts. In this regard, Soroush's distinction between religion and religious knowledge bears a conceptual similarity to M. Amin Abdullah's interpretation of "hard core" and "protecting belt," inspired by the scientific epistemologies of Imre Lakatos and Thomas Kuhn. In Abdullah's framework, the "hard core" refers to the fundamental, immutable core of religion (akin to revelation), while the "protecting belt" refers to the interpretations, reasoning, and contextual understandings that surround and safeguard the core, which are subject to change and revision.

However, Soroush's contribution is distinctive in that he does not merely adapt a scientific metaphor to Islamic thought, but builds an independent epistemological framework rooted in Islamic tradition while embracing modern rationality. His theory of *al-qabd wa al-bast* is not only descriptive but also normative and reformative, urging scholars and believers to consciously update religious interpretations in line with human progress. Unlike Abdullah, who emphasizes the methodological pluralism of Islamic studies in higher education, Soroush focuses more on the dynamics of interpretive authority, the non-infallibility of religious understanding, and the individual's role in constructing religious meaning.

Soroush emphasizes that revivalists should not replace religion with their own understanding, but rather replace the old understanding with a new one that is more relevant to the modern world. In this regard, religious knowledge should be seen as an ongoing process that complements the believers' understanding of revelation, and not something stagnant or final.⁴⁷

Some Islamic reformist-modernist figures, such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Murtadha Mutahhari, have attempted to make religion relevant to the modern world while maintaining the fundamental principles of Islam. They incorporated scientific and rational elements into the interpretation of religion to ensure that it remains effective and functional in the contemporary context.⁴⁸ While these figures are sometimes loosely associated with revivalist movements due to their efforts to renew Islamic thought, it is more accurate based on scholarly categorizations such as those by Albert Hourani and Fazlur Rahman to describe them as reformist or modernist. Al-Afghani, for instance, is widely regarded as a key figure in Islamic modernism, advocating for the integration of Western scientific knowledge with Islamic values. Likewise, Mutahhari, influenced by both Islamic tradition and Western philosophy, emphasized rational engagement and reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) in making religion socially responsive. Unlike classical revivalists who focus on returning to foundational texts with minimal reinterpretation, these thinkers advocated for a reconstruction of religious thought in light of modern challenges.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The findings of this study show that Abdul-Karim Soroush's thoughts on rationality in religious epistemology provide a significant new insight into understanding the relationship between religion and science in the contemporary era. Soroush successfully distinguishes between religion as eternal divine revelation and religious knowledge, which is dynamic and evolving. In his epistemological framework, he proposes that human understanding of religion, while based on revelation, should remain flexible and open to the advancement of science and social change. The critical rationalism approach advocated by Soroush, based on rational modesty, encourages the faithful to recognize the limitations of their understanding, avoid claims of singular truth, and embrace the plurality of interpretations. By distinguishing between religion as an unchanging divine system and religious knowledge as a human endeavour that is constantly evolving, Soroush addresses the tension between the stability of religious teachings and the dynamic world that continues to evolve.

The novelty of this study lies in its systematic analysis of Soroush's epistemology by situating it within the discourse of Islamic rationality, particularly using the reasoning framework of *al-'aql al-mukawwan* as developed by al-Jabiri. Unlike previous studies such as those of M. Amin Abdullah that emphasize epistemological integration through interdisciplinary approaches in Islamic higher education this research highlights Soroush's internal critique of Islamic thought as a believer-scholar within the tradition itself. The study also identifies how Soroush's theory of contraction and expansion offers not only a theoretical epistemology, but also a practical framework for religious interpretation in an age of rapid scientific and cultural transformation.

Endnotes

- ¹ Bisri et al., "Navigating Modern Challenges: The Practical Role of Triple-Relationship of Religious Moderation through an Islamic Perspective," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 14, no. 2 (2024): 286–302.
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