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Leezenberg, M.

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# Interview Soroush: Enlightenment & Philosophy in Islam

MICHIEL LEEZENBERG

Just prior to Soroush's departure from the Netherlands, Michiel Leezenberg talked with him about the philosophical origins and dimensions of modernity in the Islamic world. Soroush opened with some of his impressions of the Dutch public debate on Islam, democracy, and secularism.

**AS:** Maybe due to recent events, and maybe due to the media, Islamic identity has become very central to Muslims here; nevertheless, they consider themselves Dutch citizens. What worried them was that newspapers and television are very expressly inimical to Islam and give a distorted picture. Even Dutch academics, I found, are not very knowledgeable about both Islamic culture and lands. Local Muslims want to abide by the law, and want the authorities to respect Islam just as much as any other religion, and to do full justice to secularism, i.e. impartiality towards all religions. In the United States, where I lived for five years, the whole atmosphere is more religious. In the Netherlands and France, it is not a very welcome thing to be a religious person.

**ML:** The Dutch press is not only dominated by a secular outlook, but also by the slogan that Islam has not yet had an Enlightenment. This has—in part inadvertently—been fed by studies like Jonathan Israel's *Radical Enlightenment* (2000), which argue that the Enlightenment actually started in Holland, and more specifically in the circle around the Dutch philosopher Spinoza. According to this view, the truly radical Enlightenment of the Spinoza circle was expressly anti-clerical, atheist, materialist, and even feminist, and anti-colonialist. What do you think of the idea that the Muslim world at large, or Islam as a religion, has not had this process of Enlightenment yet?

**AS:** There has not been anything corresponding to the Enlightenment in the European sense in the Islamic world: neither modern philosophy, nor modern empirical science, nor the modern notion of freedom. These only gained currency in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. I believe, however, that in the early twenty-first century, to blindly follow the eighteenth-century Enlightenment may not be defensible anymore. Enlightenment in the European sense has its historic specificity that cannot be recreated; a reform in Islamic lands would be by definition different from the European Enlightenment.

According to some historians, the Islamic Enlightenment occurred much earlier, but due to historical reasons, it could not continue. We cannot say that rationalism or secularism was absent from the scene. In theology or *kalam*, you have the rationalist and quasi-secular Mu'tazilites, who relied on reason in coming to know God and in moral thinking. Unfortunately the rationalism of the Mu'tazilites was Aristotelian. This was very inauspicious: the European Enlightenment is based on a nominalist rationalism, whereas Islamic rationalism was Aristotelian and non-nominalist. Mulla Sadra's philosophy, despite its appearance, is totally nominalistic; it might bring a kind of modern Enlightenment.

Part of the Enlightenment, of course, is the advancement of modern empirical science, and therefore I have looked at the Enlightenment through the spectacles of philosophy and science. There are

**Abdolkarim Soroush is one of the most influential religious thinkers to emerge from post-revolutionary Iran. He is an influential proponent of *kalam-e no* or "new theology," which explores new ways of secularism beyond the politicized and revolutionary forms of religion that marked the Islamic Revolution. From November 2006 through September 2007, Soroush stayed in the Netherlands as ISIM Visiting Professor at Free University Amsterdam.**

shortcomings in explanations of the Enlightenment that do not pay sufficient attention to modern science; and from the scientific point of view, the Dutch contribution has been minor. On the other hand, Spinoza, Erasmus, and other Dutchmen have made important contributions to the Enlightenment.

I have a personal relationship with Spinoza; I feel a certain similarity in my fate with that of Spinoza: because of some of his unorthodox views, he

was excommunicated, and had to leave his place of birth in Amsterdam. Of course, Spinoza's was not a biblical God; I think it is very unfair, however, to call Spinoza an atheist. Some of his ideas are very relevant to the modern Muslim world: reconciling the religious law with democracy and providing a modern understanding of the state is much like what Spinoza has been doing. What makes Spinoza modern is that he historicizes all prophethood; but his ideas of prophethood are inspired in part by al-Farabi and Moses Maimonides.<sup>1</sup> Like al-Farabi, Spinoza thinks that philosophy is prior and superior to prophethood: philosophers usually work with their speculative or intellectual faculty (*'aql*), whereas prophets mainly work through the imagination; they cast the universal in particulars and symbols and thus make it accessible to the layman. All of this you can find in Spinoza, but the roots are in al-Farabi; Maimonides thinks that prophet Moses is above imagination, but for Spinoza, all prophets are on the same footing.

More relevantly, Spinoza thinks that religion is not incompatible with democracy. He thinks about religious democracy. He shows that secularism is neither necessary nor sufficient for a democratic state. For example, in present-day Turkey, many people think that secularism is necessary for a democratic state; elsewhere, people seem to think that secularism is sufficient. According to Spinoza, however, you can be a democrat out of a religious motivation and out of religious obligations to spread democracy, to separate powers, and so on.

**ML:** Perhaps the distinction you make sheds a light on the differences between al-Farabi and Spinoza: you suggest that the Enlightenment is not just a matter of political philosophy, but also involves a specific sense of rationality, and experimental natural science. Al-Farabi sees rationality as superior to revelation, but he does not propagate democracy, and he does not talk about experimental science. Your suggestion that it was his Aristotelianism that blocked the development of experimental science based on nominalism might be worth pursuing.

**AS:** I have done some work on the question of why empirical science in the modern sense did not develop in the Islamic world. The predominance of Aristotelianism does not explain it, because it dominated European scholasticism as well. Some historians of the Enlightenment argue that most of what we call Enlightenment and modernity was reaction against the idea of an omnipotent God; in Islam, Sufism rather than science was the reaction: it tried to make God a lovable rather than an omnipotent God.

**ML:** Your critique reminds me of the way in which in the Indian subcontinent, Muhammad Iqbal argued that it was Sufism, which he sees as a specifically Persian element in Islam that undermined every-

thing that was activist and intellectual and modernist in Islam. For him, Sufism was egocentric, politically quietist, and otherworldly. Intriguingly, he pits Nietzschean views of the ego and the will against traditional mystical notions of self-annihilation (*fana*).

**AS:** One of the things I like in Iqbal is his emphasis on free will. I would like to suggest that free will has been a suppressed entity in both Islamic philosophy and Islamic mysticism. The Sufis are determinists, even fatalists: they see human beings as toys in the hands of God, who cannot control themselves. In Islamic philosophy, the law of causality is so powerful that it, too, corners free will. Free will is part and parcel of the Enlightenment and of modernity. In Iqbal you see it maybe for the first time in Islam. In his magnum opus, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, he proposes to reintroduce the idea of free will and an open future; and through this, he comes to a new conception of God and of religious interpretation.



PHOTO BY DENNIS JANSSEN, 2007

This is why Iqbal is so relevant for today's questions; and mind you, it is also one of the Mu'tazila's ideas. They, too, emphasize free will (*ikhtiyar*).<sup>2</sup>

**ML:** You yourself very often refer to Iqbal and Ali Shariati, who in turn gets many of his ideas from Iqbal. Has your reading of classical authors like Rumi, Saadi, and Mulla Sadra been shaped by the ideas and concerns of these modernists, or did reading the classics conversely shape the way you understand modernists like Iqbal and Shariati, or even Anglo-Saxon philosophers like Quine, Popper, and Kuhn? And do you think that classical authors like Spinoza and al-Farabi can play a more than symbolic role in contemporary debates?

**AS:** I think our whole life is filled with infatuations: you come across somebody by chance, and then you become interested. I liked the argumentative character of Islamic philosophy. I also liked Anglo-Saxon philosophy of science because of its analytical approach to problems; I am still using these analytical tools. Of course, neither Iqbal nor Shariati proceeded analytically. Iqbal was infatuated with Nietzsche and Bergson; Shariati had read Sartre and Fanon. I prefer Iqbal as a philosopher: he sometimes has very deep insights, and he is a poet of the first rank. Shariati was really a prophet in Spinoza's sense: a man of rhetoric and the imaginative faculty. He also turned Islam into an ideology, something that Iqbal never dreamt of doing. He had a very great influence in bringing about the Islamic revolution; but nowadays, we have to be very critical about what he says, and not take him as a guru or a leader.

I discovered Rumi quite early in my life. Rumi has a lot to say, not only to me, but to modern man, about the liberation of reason. Of course, he teaches about love; but for him, love has different func-

tions. One of the main functions is to liberate reason from greed, selfishness, and many other diseases; and through liberating reason to create a liberated man, which is the main objective of all religion and all mysticism. I think everyone, everywhere at any time needs such kinds of teaching.

**ML:** Does that fit in with your main criticism of Shariati? If I recall correctly, you reproach him for politicizing religion, whereas you think the core, not only of Islam but of all religions, is private faith (*iman*). Did you get that view from Rumi? It need not be a politically quietist faith, because it doesn't exclude public or political action.

**AS:** I am not a person who lives in isolation, nor do I invite anyone to live an isolated life; and Rumi was not like that either. Even as a Sufi, you still have obligations, e.g. vis-a-vis justice. Shariati's activism was very one-sided, as it was tilted towards politicized Islam and revolution. Islam also has a spiritual side. I think it is so powerful and so important that it has to be reintroduced in modern times.

**ML:** You argue that the classical Islamic notion of justice (*adala*) as a hierarchical order imposed by a ruler in order to avoid social chaos overlaps with modern liberal rights-based conceptions of justice. Does that imply that modern Islamists and liberals are divided by a common language of rights? Would you suggest that you can speak of a common modernity shared between Islamists and secular liberals, or are there bigger differences between them?

**AS:** There are big differences, no doubt about it. In my own characterization, modern culture is a rights-based culture, whereas pre-modern or religious culture was duty- or obligation-based. It does not mean that these two are totally at loggerheads, but the emphasis is different. Modern man is seen as freed from the bondage of religion, and as having exiled God to the remote heavens; but he is very close to a morally deterring kind of egoism. In the religious atmosphere, you are supposed to be more humble and conscious of your obligations. Now can duty- and rights-based views be reconciled? Both have their shortcomings. What we need is neither to combine nor to eliminate the two, but perhaps a third paradigm. Perhaps we should revalue the concept of virtue, which may do justice to both obligations and rights.

During the ugly episode of the publication of cartoons of the prophet Muhammad, the people in favour of publication emphasized the publisher's right to free speech. Although this argument is based on the language of rights, I find it very weak. Rights always give you a number of choices. You will not be prosecuted because you have published it, fine; but you had the right to publish or not to publish. The language of rights is not satisfactory in explaining what one has to do. The language of obligations has no such shortcoming: its explanatory power is much bigger than that of the language of rights. In order to have both rights, which is a beautiful thing, and the more powerful explanation of obligations, we need a third paradigm; perhaps one of love, perhaps one of virtue.

**ML:** You sound a bit like communitarians like Alisdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, who also argue that liberal individualism runs into contradictions. Would you say that today's worldwide newly visible public religiosity has always been around but has found a new way of legitimately expressing itself in public (as has been said about the recent electoral victory of the Islamist AKP in Turkey), or would you take it as a sign that some of the classical ideals of liberal secularism are untenable, or more dramatically, that liberalism has failed in some respects?

**AS:** Well, liberalism—as the culture of rights—has definitely failed in some respects, and I think the secularization thesis has proved wrong. People expected a continuous decline of religion in society, but now we see the reverse. We live in a postmodern era, one of the main blessings of which is that the sharp dichotomies of the past, e.g. between secularism and religion, and even science and religion, are getting blurred. These are relics of the positivist era, and no longer tenable.

**Abdolkarim  
Soroush**

## Notes

1. The connections between Maimonides' and Spinoza's views on prophecy have been explored in detail by, among others, Heidi Rawen, "Some Thoughts on What Spinoza Learned from Maimonides about the Prophetic Imagination," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 39, nos. 2 and 3 (2001).
2. The Mu'tazila were an important rationalist school in early Islamic speculative theology (*kalam*); in Sunni Islam, they were eclipsed by the rise of Ash'ari theology, but among Shiites, their doctrines remained influential.

Michiel Leezenberg is Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy, University of Amsterdam, and Sabbatical Fellow at ISIM.

Email: M.M.Leezenberg@uva.nl