



On Understanding Religion: A Study of Abdul Karim Soroush's Thoughts

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Abstract : *This paper discussed the method of understanding religion according to the views of Abdul Karim Soroush. The main question of this paper is "What is the adequate method to understand religion according to Abdul Karim Soroush?", and "How to do that?" It found out that Soroush has differentiated religion from human's understanding of religion. In the context of the study of religious knowledge, the Qur'an must be distinguished from its exegesis, and the Hadith from its syarah (explanation). If they are not distinguished, said Soroush, we risk to put human's understanding of religion at the same level of that of the Qur'an and the Hadith. They are obviously not the same. While the Qur'an is based on revelation, human's interpretation of the Qur'an is a result of rational thinking. This means, religion is absolute and human's understanding of the religion is relative. In understanding religious texts (the Qur'an and Hadith), Soroush also maintained the conceptual theory of contraction and expansion. This theory is regarded as one of Soroush's original thoughts with regard to an endeavor of understanding religion: it is for this reason that his thoughts are significant to the contexts in which we are now living Islam.*

Keywords : *Religion, Religious Understanding, Contraction, Expansion, Abdul Karim Soroush*

Abstrak : *Tulisan ini mengkaji tentang metode pemahaman agama menurut perspektif Abdul Karim Soroush. Pertanyaan utama yang akan dijawab dalam tulisan ini adalah bagaimana dan apa saja metode Abdul Karim Soroush dalam memahami agama. Setelah menganalisis pemikiran Soroush, ternyata ia membedakan antara agama dengan pemahaman*

agama. Dalam konteks kajian ilmu agama, Al-Qur'an harus dibedakan dari Tafsir, sebagaimana Hadis dari Syarah. Jika kedua hal tersebut tidak dibedakan, maka pemahaman manusia akan setara dengan Al-Qur'an dan Hadis itu sendiri. Padahal jika dicermati, perbedaan antara keduanya sangat jauh. (Kebenaran) Al-Qur'an bersifat absolut, sedangkan (kebenaran) Tafsir bersifat relatif. Demikian juga dengan agama yang bersifat absolut, sementara pemahaman terhadap agama bersifat relatif. Dalam memahami teks-teks keagamaan (Al-Qur'an dan Hadis), Soroush juga menggunakan teori penyusutan dan penyempitan atau penyempitan dan pengembangan agama (*Theory of the Contraction and Expansion*). Teori ini merupakan salah satu pemikiran Soroush yang dianggap orisinal sekaligus berhubungan dengan agama dan pemahaman terhadap agama. Karena itu, pemikiran Soroush sangat penting dan relevan dengan konteks kita sekarang.

Kata Kunci : Agama, Pemahaman Agama, Kontraksi, Ekspansi, Abdul Karim Soroush

A. Introduction

At the time 'Umar bin Khaṭṭāb (d. 23 H / 644 AD) was the caliph, Persia, which is now called the Iranian state, was one of the important areas ruled by Islam. Apart from Iraq and Baghdad, Persia (Iran, Syairāz) was one of the central cities in terms of knowledge development. Example of this knowledge includes philosophical thought which was later developed into *Islamic philosophy* (*Islamic philosophy*). Iran is one of the countries that gave birth to many thinkers in science, religious studies and Islamic philosophy. Iranian thinkers have been widely known in the West and East, such as Muḥammad Ḥusain al-Ṭabāṭaba'ī (1904-1981),¹ Ayatullah Khomeini (1902-1989),² Shariati (1933-1977),³ Murtadha Motahhari

¹ For further information on Ṭabāṭaba'ī's biography and thoughts, see Achmad Muchaddam Fahham, *Tuhan Dalam Filsafat 'Allamah Ṭabāṭaba'ī* (Jakarta: Teraju, 2014), p. 204.

² For further information on Khomeini, see Baqer Moin, "Ayatullah Khomeini Mencari Kesempurnaan", in Ali Rahmena, *Para Perintis Zaman Baru Islam*, trans. Ilyas Hasan (Bandung: Mizan, 1996), p. 69–100.

³ For a glimpse of Shari'ati's biography and thoughts, see Azyumardi Azra, *Pergolakan Politik Islam: Dari Fundamentaslisme, Modernisme Hingga Post-Modernisme*, (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1996), p. 69–90; Wardani, *Filsafat Islam Sebagai Filsafat Humanis-Profetik* (Yogyakarta: Aswaja Pressindo, 2014), p. 149–174; Marhaeni Saleh M, "Ali Syari'ati: Pemikiran dan Gagasannya", in *Jurnal Aqidah*, Vol. 4, No.2 (2018): 182-196; Sabara, "Pemikiran Teologi Pembebasan Ali Syari'ati", in *Al-Fikr*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2016):

(1919-1979),⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1933-present),⁵ Abdul Karim Soroush (1945-present), and others. Iran was one of the centers of Islamic science. However, Iran's history and modern times are completely different, especially after several political conflicts. Modern Iran is considered advanced after Khomeini launched a revolution in 1979 by overthrowing Reza Vahlevi, which was considered to be conspiring with the West. Iran's contribution to Islamic civilization is beyond doubt, as seen in the book *Islam, Iran & Peradaban: Peran dan Kontribusi Iran dalam Peradaban Islam*.⁶

Muslim scholars paid little attention to the history of the construction of Islamic sciences, making them losing their sense of scientific revolution. To borrow Karl R. Popper's words (1902-1994), "Islamic sciences are considered immune, cannot be retested, tested, questioned and canceled their validity. As such is due to the fact that historical-empirical aspects of Islamic sciences are obscured, even confused with normative aspects of piety. Even rumors have it that Islamic sciences are belonged to the realm of revelation".⁷ This has caused many Muslims fail to distinguish between the Qur'an and its exegesis or between the Hadith and

212-230; See Eko Supriyadi, *Sosialisme Islam: Pemikiran Ali Syari'ati* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2003); see Zulfan Taufik, *Dialektika Islam & Humanisme: Pembacaan Ali Syari'ati* (Ciputat: Onglam Books, 2015).

⁴ For further information on *Muthahhari's* biography and thoughts, see Haidar Baqir, *Murtadha Muthahhari sang Mujahid, Sang Mujtahid*, (Bandung: Yayasan Muthahhari, 1998); Hamid Algar, *Hidup dan karya Murtadha Muthahhari*, (Bandung: Mizan, 2002); Murtadha Muthahhari, *Kritik Islam terhadap Materialisme*, terj. Ahmad Kamil (Jakarta: AlHuda, 2001); Murtadha Muthahhari, *Filsafat Hikmah Pengantar Pemikiran Shadra*, terj. Hamid Algar (Bandung: Mizan, 2002).

⁵ For further information on Nasr's biography and thought, see Ach. Maiumun, *Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Pergulatan Sains dan Spiritualitas Menuju Paradigma Kosmologi Alternatif*, (Yogyakarta: Ircisod, 2015); Willam C. Chittic, "Pree Pace" in, *The Complete Bibliografhy of the works of Seyyed Hossein Nasr from 1958 Throgh April 1993*, Mehdi Aminrasavi dan Zainal Moris. ed, (Kuala Lumpur, Islamic Academy of Science of Malaysia, 1994); John L. Esposito, *Ensiklopedi Oxford Dunia Islam Modern*, Terj. Eva, Femmy S., Jarot W., Poerwanto, Ropiks, (Bandung: Mizan, 2002); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islam Antara Cita dan Fakta*, trans. Abdurrahman Wahud dan Hasyim Wahid, (Yogyakarta: Pustaka, 2001).

⁶ Ghulam Reza Awani, dkk., *Islam, Iran, dan Peradaban: Peran dan Kontribusi Intelektual Iran dalam Peradaban Islam* (Yogyakarta: RausyanFikr Institute, 2012).

⁷ M. Amin Abdullah, *Islamic Studies Di Perguruan Tinggi: Pendekatan Integratif Interkoneksi* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2012), p. 50.

its *sharah*. The Qur'an has absolute truth, while the exegesis is a result of human's thoughts. Many of them are unable to distinguish between religion and religious thoughts, which in turn has rendered the Islamic thoughts rigid and monotonous.

The rigid forms of Islamic thoughts need to be reinterpreted and recontextualized in order to make them suitable with the current situations, without leaving behind the fundamental teachings of Islam. In other words, Islam must have a sense of inclusiveness of thoughts, ones that develop from time to time. This has in turn reminded us of a great Shi'i thinker named Abdul Karim Soroush. This paper will focus his thoughts on the method of understanding Islam.

B. Short Biography of Abdul Karim Soroush

Within the study of history of ideas, it is crucial for us to explore the biography of the person under study, in which information about the person's backgrounds of family, education, intellectual careers and other factors that influence their thoughts is provided. Abdul Karim Soroush is not an exception. There must be many historical factors around him that have been influential to his thoughts. Here, in order to explore his biographical accounts, the author have mainly referred to his work, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). This book is a collection of Soroush's articles, later translated and re-edited by Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri. In this book, Sadri also interviewed Soroush.

Soroush was born in South Iran on December 16, 1945, coinciding with Muḥarram 10, 1324 H, or popularly known as the 'Āsyūrā' day. In the Shi'a tradition, the 'Āsyūrā' day is considered as the most historic moment, because it was commemorated as the day when Ḥusein bin 'Alī bin Abū Ṭālib was killed during the reign of Yazīd bin Mu'āwiyah. In fact, the killing of Ḥusein, taking place in Karbalā', Iraq in 61 H / 680 AD, was sorrowful not only for the Shi'a group, but also for the Sunni followers.⁸ This incident has "tarnished" the name of Yazīd and his family who controlled the reign of the Umayyad dynasty. It should be noted that although Soroush was born on the 'Āsyūrā' day, he was not a fanatic about such event. He came out of

⁸ see Abū al-Qāsim 'Alī bin Mūsā bin Ja'far bin Muḥammad bin Aḥmad bin Muḥammad bin Ṭāwus, *Tragedi Pembantaian Keluarga Suci Nabi Saw: Karbala Iraq*, trans. Sayyid Ahmad Husaini (Jakarta: El Faraj Publishing, 2007).

the mainstream thinking of Shi'a scholars who were considered orthodox or conservative.

Since childhood, he has received religious trainings, aside from the general education. As a child, he was very fond of poetry. The first poet he knew was Sa'di. Soroush's father was an admirer of Sa'di's poetries compiled in *Bustān* (Garden), which he read every after the Subuh prayer so loudly that Soroush could hear the poetries and still remembered by heart some of them. Soroush realized that his writing style was influenced by Sa'di.⁹

American journalist, Robin Wright, and several other figures, have dubbed Soroush as "the Muslim Martin Luther". Luther (1483-1546) was a German theologian who had a great influence on Christianity. He strongly opposed the Roman Catholic Church. In my opinion, this is an excessive assessment because many other Muslim thinkers have the same thoughts as Soroush, even they are more influential than him. Politically, Soroush is different from the European reformists of the 16th century. Soroush was a brave man because he was one of those who had criticized the post-revolutionary Iranian social system. Yet, he does not openly speak about the position of ulama (scholar) in the Islamic tradition which does not recognize the existence of an intermediary between humans and God.

Soroush was not quite satisfied with the educational system in his hometown schools. Thus, after finished his schools there, he wanted to travel to Europe for furthering his education. One of the European countries he aimed to go is England. Soroush is a scholar of chemistry, therefore he is also interested in natural and exact sciences, such as physics, mathematics, and biology. Many of his friends were experts in these fields. While studying at the University of London, he decided to study sciences of philosophy. One of the requirements to take this program is a bachelor degree in one of the natural sciences. The first philosopher of science that he met while studying the philosophy of science in London was Karl R. Popper (1902-1994).¹⁰ 1974 saw the start of Soroush's studies in London, and it also

⁹ See N. Hanif, *Biographical Encyclopaedia of Sufis: Central Asia and the Middle East* (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2002).

¹⁰ See Kees Bertens, *Filsafat Barat Kontemporer Inggris-Jerman* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2002); Mohammad Muslih, *Filsafat Ilmu: Kajian atas Asumsi Dasar, Paradigma, dan Kerangka Teori Ilmu Pengetahuan* (Yogyakarta: Belukar, 2005).

coincided with the widespread acceptance of Thomas Kuhn's (1922-1996) ideas.¹¹

Having studied in the Western academic milieu and as a scholar of world-wide reputation, Soroush has extensive teaching experience in European and American universities. In 2000, he became a visiting lecturer at Harvard University, teaching Rumi Philosophy, Islam and Democracy, Qur'an Studies, and Philosophy of Islamic Law. He was also once a lecturer at Yale University, and had taught Philosophy of Islamic Politics at Princeton University in 2002-2003. He was also invited to give lecture at Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, and at Columbia University in 2007, at Georgetown University in 2008, and at the University of Chicago in 2012. The experiences of teaching Islamic studies in the Western world have shaped and influenced the ways in which Soroush have viewed to understand religious texts.

Soroush's most monumental work is *The Hermeneutical Expansion and Contraction of the Theory of Sharia*. This book reevaluates Islamic law from the perspective of jurisprudence, the history of ideas, exegesis, epistemology, philosophy of science, and sociology. In this book, as in his many other books, Soroush posted a number of critical questions, such as "What do we know about God?" and "To what extent do we accept the fatwas issued by the *fuqaha* 'as orders from God? ". These questions are reasonable because Muslim communities tend to uncritically accept the (religious) understanding of the *fuqaha*. Soroush's thinking has been largely influenced by Muhammad Iqbal (1293-1357 H / 1877-1938), Ali Shariati (1352-1397 H / 1933-1977 AD), Mehdi Bazargan (1324-1415 H / 1907-1995 AD), and Muslim and Western philosophers. Many of his thoughts is also influenced by al-Ghazālī (1058-1111 AD / 450-505 H) in Islamic legal theory. This last name is widely known in the East and West as an opponent of some philosophical thoughts later denied by Ibn Rushd (1126-1198 AD / 520- 595 H).

In Western literature, al-Ghazālī is equated with St. Augustine (354-430), a Christian philosopher who wrote the book *The City of God*. The difference is that Augustine remained attached to philosophy until the end

¹¹ Thomas Kuhn's thought can be read in Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970); Muhyar Fanani, *Pudarnya Pesona Ilmu Agama* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2007); Muhyar Fanani, *Metode Studi Islam: Aplikasi Sosiologi Pengetahuan Sebagai Cara Pandang* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2008).

of his life, while al-Ghazālī took the Sufi path as a way of seeking the truth.¹² Orientalist HAR Gibb (1895-1971), besides juxtaposing al-Ghazālī with St. Augustine (354-430), also paralleled him with Martin Luther (1483-1546), the reformer of Christianity in Europe at the beginning of the 16th century. Gibb was impressed with al-Ghazālī's intellectual career.¹³ Shafi'i Ma'arif (1935-?), in his article, "Al-Ghazali: Figure of Anti-Intellectualism?" has rejected the argument that al-Ghazālī was one of the causes for the decline of Islamic civilization, due to his sever al-Ghazālī attack to the philosophers.¹⁴ According to William Montgomery Watt (1909-2006), in terms of the fame of figures in Islamic history, al-Ghazālī was as famous as the Prophet Muhammad,¹⁵ even "almost a Prophet" if there is a Prophet after Prophet Muhammad.

However, al-Ghazali did not attacked philosophical thoughts but the following three propositions. The *first* is the philosophers' denial of the bodily resurrection on the Day of Judgment. The *second* is the notion that God's knowledge is limited about universal things, while specific or particular things are outside God's knowledge (Ibn Sīnā's thesis). The *third* is the philosophers' stance on the immortality of nature (Aristotle's typical thesis). According to al-Ghazālī, no Muslim believes these three propositions. Al-Ghazālī's intellectual wanderings were written in his book *Al-Munqiz min al-Dalāl* (Savior/Liberator from heresy).¹⁶ The point is that al-Ghazālī has been a great influence on the history of Islamic thoughts, including on Soroush.

Almost all great thinkers have some works that can be studied by later generations. If a thinker does not have written thoughts, his thoughts in oral forms could be written by someone who have documented

¹² Athur Hyman, *Philosophy in the Middle Age*, ed. Jame J. Wals (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1978), p. 263; then see Syafi'i Ma'arif, *Peta Bumi Intelektualisme Islam di Indonesia* (Bandung: Pustaka Mizan, 1993), p. 56.

¹³ Muhammad Husein, *Mengaji Pluralisme Kepada Mahaguru Pencerahan* (Bandung: Mizan, 2012), p. 139.

¹⁴ Syafi'i Ma'arif, *Peta Bumi Intelektualisme Islam di Indonesia*, p. 54–60.

¹⁵ Nurman Said, "The Significance of Al-Ghazālī and His Works for Indonesian Muslims; A Preliminary Study," In *Studia Islamika: Indonesian Journal for Islamic Studies* 3, no. 3 (n.d.): 26.

¹⁶ Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Freedom and Fulfilment: An Annotated Translation of Al-Ghazālī's al-Munqidh Min al-Dalāl and Other Relevant Works of Al-Ghazālī*, trans. Richard Joseph McCarthy, Boston: Twayne Publisher, Cet-I, 1980.

them. This is what was done by Muḥammad Rasyīd Riḍā (1865-1935) to the thoughts of his teacher, Muḥammad 'Abduh (1849-1905). It seems that the case is different from Soroush. Besides being busy in teaching, he is also productive in putting his ideas into books or scientific journals. It is not surprising that Soroush is well known among those of whatever biographical backgrounds who are interested in the study of Islamic thoughts, especially the modern ones.

In this paper, two of Soroush's works are used the main sources. They are *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam Essential writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*,¹⁷ and "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge".¹⁸ In the field of Islamic Studies, the study of Soroush's works is imperative because their historical nuances are more dominant than normativity. Some thinkers say that Soroush was the Iranian thinker who has revived Mu'tazilah's "liberal" thoughts. Therefore, it is not surprising that Mohammed Hashas categorizes Soroush as "neo-Mu'tazilah".¹⁹

C. Analysis of Abdul Karim Soroush's Thought

As an Iranian who is an expert in the fields of scientific philosophy, Western philosophy, Islamic philosophy, theology, and Persian literature, Soroush's thoughts have been studied by thinkers of the East and the West. Apart from that, Soroush was also interested in studying religious philosophy, social philosophy, and political philosophy. Some of Soroush's thoughts that need to be examined are the following:

1. Religion and Religious Understanding

There is no doubt that the terms religion and religious understanding are two different things. The two terms are like two sides of a coin inseparable but indistinguishable. Religion (Islam) does come from God, but understanding religion is not God's business, but human

¹⁷ Abdul Karim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, Trans and Ed, Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Abdul Karim Soroush, "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge", in Charles Kurzman (ed), *Liberal Islam: A Source Book*, New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

¹⁹ Mohammad Hassas, "Abdolkarim Soroush: The Neo-Mu'tazilite that Buries Classical Islamic Political Theology in Defense of Religious Democracy and Pluralism", *Studia Islamica*, Vol. 109, No. 1 (2014): 147-173.

affairs. Because those who understand and who are influenced by social, cultural, economic, and intellectual factors are human. Therefore, the understanding of religion (religious texts) can differ from one scholar to another. This is the sunnah that has transpired, is, and will happen until the Day of Resurrection.

By understanding religion, the plurality of religious thoughts is born. Therefore, understanding religion is not sufficient normatively only, but also seeing the side of historicity.²⁰ Historically, religion is now practiced more as an understanding that has been contaminated by certain situations and conditions. We have to distinguish between religion and religious thought, the Koran with exegesis, Hadith from *sharah*. This is one of Abdul Karim Soroush's concerns.

He highlighted the mindset of some Muslims whom incompetent to distinguish religion from religious thought. Religion does not need improvement and perfection, unbound from any culture but religious understanding is imperfect, must continually be improved. The religious teachings contained in holy texts (Al-Qur'an or hadith) must be distinguished from exegesis and *syarah* which are the products of the thought of the ulama. The Koran does have absolute truth, but understanding about it is not necessarily absolute due to the limitation of human understanding. Soroush explained:

“The truth is that as long as one has not distinguished between religion and people's understanding of it, one will be incapable of finding an answer to these intriguing questions. Yes, sacred scriptures are indeed (in the judgment of followers) flawless; however, it is just as true that human being's understanding of religion is flawed. Religion is sacred and heavenly, but the understanding of religion is human and earthly. That which remain constant is religion (*din*), that which changes is religious knowledge and insight (*ma' refat-e dini*)”.²¹

Soroush's ideas are also similar to the thoughts of classical scholars, especially in understanding religious texts, for instance, the plurality of exegesis is an inevitable reality. The Koran comes from Allah the Absolute and infinite, while humans (*mufassir*) are limited beings and are limited by

²⁰ M. Amin Abdullah, *Studi Agama: Normativitas Atau Historisitas?* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2011).

²¹ Abdul Karim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam...*, p. 31.

a certain scope. In this case, Sahal bin 'Abdullāh al-Tustarī (200-283 AH) elucidated:

لو أعطي العبد بكل حرف من القرآن ألف فهم لم يبلغ نهاية ما أودعه الله في آية من كتابه لأنه كلام الله وكلامه صفته وكما أنه ليس لله نهاية فكذلك لا نهاية لفهم كلامه وإنما يفهم كل بمقدار ما يفتح الله عليه وكلام الله غير مخلوق ولا تبلغ إلى نهاية فهمه فهموم محدثة مخلوقة.²²

If a servant is given a thousand understandings of one letter from the Qur'an, surely, he will not be able to achieve the purpose of Allah in His holy book. Because he is kalamullah (word of god), God's words are His attributes, God is infinite, so are His words. It's just that a person can understand what Allah opens or gives meaning to him. Kalam Allah is not a creature, so it cannot be reached by a limited understanding of beings”.

Soroush's thought tries to arouse the spirit of Islamic *ijtihad*, not to be shackled by the authority of orthodox clerics blindly (*taqlid*). Islamic thought must continue to be developed, it must not stop at certain times and generations. Seeing this phenomenon, Soroush gave birth to an idea called *Theory of the Contraction and Expansion of Religious Exegesis*.

2. Theory of the Contraction and Expansion

In his book, *Reason, Freedom, & Democracy in Islam*, Soroush makes a particular topic entitled *The Contribution of the Theory of the Contraction and Expansion of Religious Exegesis to the Islamic Reform and Revival*.²³ In Arabic, *Theory of the Contraction and Expansion of Religious Exegesis* is usually called *al-qabḍ wa al-baṣṭ fi al-syarī'ah*. Etymologically, *al-qabḍ* is a form of *masdar* (third verb) from *qabaḍa – yaqbiḍu – qabḍan*, which has many meanings when associated with the word or *Damir* before and after it.²⁴ Ibn Fāris (d. 395 H) said that every word consisting of the

²² Abū 'Abdullāh Badruddīn Muḥammad bin Bahādir bin' Abdullāh al-Zarkasyī, *Al-Burhān fi Ulūm al-Qur'ān*, in taḥqīq by Muṣṭafā 'Abdul Qādir' Aṭ ā, J-I (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1428 H / 2007 AD), p. 29. This is also quoted by Husein Muhammad, *Studying Pluralism to the GM of Enlightenment* (Bandung: Mizan, 2012), p. 29. Husein Muhammad, *Islam Tradisional yang Terus Bergerak: Dinamika NU, Pesantren, Tradisi, dan Realitas zamannya* (Yogyakarta: IRCiSoD, 2019), p. 249.

²³ Abdul Karim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam...*, p. 30.

²⁴ See the sentence or *damir* that accompanies the word before and after the word in Ahmad Warson Munawwir, *Kamus Al-Munawwir: Arabic-Indonesian* (Surabaya:

letters *qāf*, *bā* ', and *ḍād* , then the meaning revolves around something that is taken and then put together (*yadullu' alā syai 'ma'khūz wa sharpmu' fī syai'*).²⁵ While the word *al-bastu* is a *masdar* form of the word *basata – yabsutu – bastā*, which also has many meanings according to the *damir* that accompanies it. Every word consisting of *bā* ', *sin*, and *ṭā'*, then means to unfold something (*imtidād al-syai'*),²⁶ deployment, expansion.²⁷

The aim of the Theory of the Contraction and Expansion of Religious Exegesis is neither to reconcile disputes between traditional and dynamic jurisprudence, nor to modernize religion, reinterpret sharia, or deny the truth. However, this theory intends to assert in detail the alteration process of religious understanding. For Soroush, this theory is an *exegesis-epistemological*. This theory is also part of three fields of science, namely *kalam* (Islamic theology), *ushul fikih* (applied logic in Islamic jurisprudence), and *irfān* (the esoteric dimension of Islam).²⁸

Concerning *kalam*, the theory of contraction and expansion describes the things that affect our understanding of the Qur'an and the sunnah. This has led to the birth of various methods and styles of exegesis. This theory is also associated with *ushul fiqh* because it explains the sciences needed in formulating laws. Concerning *irfān*, this theory explains three aspects of religion, namely *syariah*, *tarekah*, and *essence*.²⁹ The last three terms are synonymous with Sufism (mysticism).

This theory not only harmonizes the categories *al-šawābit* (fixed things) and *al-mutaḥawwil* or *al-mutaḡayyirāt* (things that can change), tradition and modernity (*al-turās wa la-ḡadāsah*), sacre and mundane,

Progressive Pustaka), p. 1086; Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic: Arabic English*, ed. J. Milton Cowan (Beirut: Librairie Du Liban-London: Macdonald & Evans Ltd, 1974), p. 738-734; It can also mean touching, preventing, and holding back, see Majduddin Muḡammad bin Ya'qūb al-Fairūzā bādī, *al-Qāmūs al-Muḡīṭ* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, cet-II, 1430 H / 2009 AD), p. 672.

²⁵ Abū al-Ḥusain Aḡmad bin Fāris bin Zakariyā, *Maqāyīs al-Luḡah*, edited by Anas Muḡammad al-Syāmī (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīṡ, 1429 H / 2008 AD), p. 759. See also Aḡmad bin Muḡammad al-Fayyūmī, *Al-Miṡbāḡ al-Munīr*, edited by Aḡmad Jār (Cairo: Dār al-Gadd al-Jadīd, 1428 H/2007 AD), p. 282.

²⁶ Ibn Fāris, *Maqāyīs al-Luḡah...*, p. 92.

²⁷ Aḡmad al-Fayyūmī, *al-Miṡbāḡ al-Munīr...*, p. 34. Fairūz Ābādī, *al-Qāmūs al-Muḡīṭ...*, p. 681.

²⁸ Abdul Karim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam...*, p. 34.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34-35.

reason and revelation, but it also unites the elements of purity and potency in religious knowledge and presents a plausible exegesis of both³⁰ The understanding of scholars towards the Koran and hadith is not a holy understanding. Prophet Muhammad is the first interpreter (*al-mufasssir al-awwal*) and Islam is the last religion, but there are no final jurists or commentators. The last religion (Islam) has come, but the understanding of it has not yet reached perfection. Soroush emphasized that:

"The theory of the contraction and expansion of religious exegesis not only reconciles the categories of eternity and temporal change, tradition and modernity, heavenly and earthly, reason and revelation, but it also unites the elements of purity and potency in religious knowledge (which is the goal of revivalists and reformers) and presents a plausible exegesis of both".³¹

This theory is highly suitable for those who are stirred by a calling for revival and who are blessed with a fervor for understanding religion.³² In the context of Islamic Studies or Islamic philosophy, Soroush's theory needs to be developed therefore, our religious understanding becomes inclusive. Soroush's thinking has relevance to the study of Islamic law/jurisprudence which is generally relative, local and temporal in nature. It seems that what was initiated by Soroush is similar to the theory of openness of fiqh reason (*infitāḥ al-'aql al-fiqhī al-islāmī*) which was initiated by Idrīs Nagasy al-Jābirī. The reasoning in fiqh cannot be said to be shariah reasoning if it is not open to other sciences. Fiqh rationalism is exempt to various scientific developments based on ethical values.³³ Thus, a fiqh scholar must understand and master several branches of knowledge in order to develop the theory of *Contraction and Expansion*.

3. *The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge*

Apart from the *theory of the contraction and expansion of religious exegesis*, Soroush also employs the term *The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge*. The two theories are related to one another. In his article entitled "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge",

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³³ See Idrīs Nagasy al-Jābirī, "Al-'Ulūm al-Islāmīyah wa Madkhal al-Ibistemūlūjīyah wa Tāriḫ al-'Ulūm", in *Al-Dā'il*, Vol. 1. No. 1, (Rajab 1434 H / June 2013), p. 33-54.

Soroush discusses the differences between religion and religious understanding which are the effort of human understanding of religious texts. Religion is sacred and must be true, while religious understanding is a human exegesis that can be wrong and shift. Soroush declares:

“The exegesis no doubt may be conjectural, fallible, changeable, partial, fallacious, one-sided, misguided, prejudiced, culture-bound, and incomplete, but this is what the Source of Revelation has ordained it to be. We are fallible human beings and that is our lot from Truth. The case of religion is no better than the case of nature. There also we are captives of our humanity. No human science is sacred, the science of religion is no exception. But of course, the revelation itself is different. Therefore, the dichotomy of the revelation/exegesis should be kept intact. We are all immersed in an ocean of exegesis, and whenever one tries to offer the "true" exegesis of the text, he makes himself even more engaged”.³⁴

From the above quotation, it can be seen that revelation that comes from God must be true (absolute), but an understanding of revelation can be wrong and shift according to situations and conditions (relative). Humans are finite creatures it is impossible to comprehend the intention of God's infinite will. The existing exegesis is one of the forms of understanding chosen by certain interpreters. Excessive truth claims on religious understanding are inappropriate because they can lead to an exclusive attitude that generates intolerant behavior. Even so, a person is indeed required to hold fast to the understanding of religious teachings which he believes to be true, without having to denounce the opinions of others. In a pluralistic society, tolerance, dialogue and openness are necessary to manifest a safe, peaceful, and serene life.

D. Reflections on Abdul Karim Soroush's Thought

From the above explanation, it can be seen that Soroush is one of the "Liberal Muslim" thinkers who advocate freedom of thought and oppose *taklid* against religious authority. As someone who has insight into studies in the East and West, Soroush can be compared with other Muslim thinkers who try to convert the way someone thinks. Several lessons can be

³⁴ Abdul Karim Soroush, "The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge", in Charles Kurzman (ed), *Liberal Islam: A Source Book* (New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 251.

learned from his thoughts in relation to Islamic philosophy in general, and religious studies in particular.

1. Passion to Conduct Ijtihad

In order for us to have a creative, innovative, progressive, free and responsible way of thinking, we must have the courage to engage ijtihad in facing modern-contemporary issues. Soroush desire that Islam is ahead by leaving the *taqlid* and certain religious authority. The slogan "the door to ijtihad has closed" with the death of the Imam of the School cannot be justified. The problems of life continue to develop, while religious texts are limited (*al-nuṣūṣ al-mutanāhiyah wa al-waqā'i gairu mutanāhiyah*). That is why the door to ijtihad has never been closed as the assumptions of classical and middle-aged scholars, even most of today's scholars. To borrow Amin Abdullah's term (1953-present), what is needed now is Fresh Ijtihad,³⁵ who are able to counter the challenges of modern times. The Prophet Muhammad himself emphasized that:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَبْعَثُ لِهَيْدِهِ الْأُمَّةَ عَلَى رَأْسِ كُلِّ مِائَةِ سَنَةٍ مَنْ يُجَدِّدُ لَهَا دِينَهَا.³⁶

"At beginning of every century Allah will send to this ummah someone who will renew its religious understanding".

Sahih hadith which was narrated by Abū Dāwūd (d. 275 H / 889 AD) above indicates that the gate of ijtihad is never closed until the Day of Resurrection. The stagnant of thinking has been going on for a long time since the death of the Imam of the Fourth School, even though their thoughts are not always correct and cannot necessarily be applied to certain areas. In their time, the social sciences and humanities had not yet developed as they are now, let alone science-technology. In the present context, a mujtahid must conceive well in sociology, anthropology, economics, chemistry, physics, biology, and modern science. Ijtihad is inadequate simply by repeat past observations. Understanding the Koran and hadith must be accompanied by developing social-humanities sciences hence, the outcomes of intellectual ijtihad are aligned with the current situation.

³⁵The term *fresh ijtihad* is Abdullah Saeed's term, later popularized by Prof. Dr. H. M. Amin Abdullah in his books. See M. Amin Abdullah, "Fiqh dan Kalam Sosial di Era Kontemporer: Perjumpaan *Ulūm al-Dīn* and Modern Science Towards *Fresh Ijtihad*", in Akhmad Sahal and Munawir Aziz, *Islam Nusantara: Dari Ushūl Fiqh Hingga Konsep Historis* (Bandung: Mizan, cet-I, 2015), p. 69-97.

³⁶ Sulaimān bin al-Asy'aṣ al-Sijistānī, *Sunan Abū Dāwūd, Kitāb al-Malāḥim, Bāb mā Yuẓkaru fī Qarn al-Mī'ah*, no. 3740.

According to Soroush, non-religious sciences (general science, secular science) cannot be completely ignored because they provide the foundational values of religion, such as justice, humanity, public interest and related matters also exist in the non-religious value system. Soroush says:

“Religious scholars cannot afford to be oblivious to extra-religious knowledge. Nor can they shirk the responsibility of balancing the knowledge inside and outside religion, since many basic religious values such as truth, justice, humanity, public interest, and so on are integral to the nonreligious value system as well. If religious justifications are invoked in this context, then a circularity or a tautology will result. On the other hand, arguments that are adduced for the truth and justice of religion are generally rational, human, and non-religious in nature, yet they are influential in understanding religion. Therefore, disregard of rational criteria and of the necessity for the harmony of religious understanding and rational findings is a breach of religious responsibility. It is a reason that defines truth, justice, public interest, and humanity, that attributes these properties to a particular religion (or else it would not become a rationally acceptable religion), and that undertakes the task of understanding the teachings of religion”.³⁷

From the quotation above, it can be concluded that all knowledge must be studied because each has its proportion. Because a person cannot master various fields of science, the "academic community" needs to have a dialogue between each other in answering the problems of life. Amin Abdullah mapped that there are three forms of knowledge interrelation; *single entity* (each field of knowledge does not want to know and dialogue with each other, let alone cooperate), *isolated entity* (each field of knowledge knows each other but does not want to cooperate or have a dialogue), and *integrated entities* (each field of knowledge greet each other and want to dialogue and work together).³⁸ In the present context, it is the final model that helps acknowledge the problems of human life.

2. Progressive and Inclusive Thinking

The intolerant behavior that often occurs in society is the aftermath of a rigid and textual understanding of religion. Diversity of thought has existed since the time of classical and medieval scholars. Unfortunately, this

³⁷Abdul Karim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam...*, p. 127.

³⁸ Amin Abdullah, *Islamic Studies di Perguruan Tinggi...*, p. 404-405.

has never been seriously studied by modern Muslim thinkers. The thought products of classical and middle-century scholars, which amounted to hundreds of thousands of volumes (maybe even millions) were only understood by some people rigidly. In the end, those classical books become sacred. That is why Soroush revived and developed the term *religion and understanding of religious knowledge*.

Many Muslims are incapable to distinguish the Qur'an and tafsir, hadith and *sharah*. They equate this so that the opinions of the ulama are considered teachings that cannot be challenged again. Historically, Soroush placed religious teachings under their scope. The truth of religion is already final, but religious teachings continued to modify throughout the ages. This is what needs to be reconstructed, especially the science of kalam, tafsir, hadith, jurisprudence, philosophy, Sufism, and morals.³⁹ Textual religious understanding regardless of the context will often cause an uproar in the midst of society. Some parts of the verses of the Qur'an and hadith, must be understood contextually and then contextualized with the current situation.

Following a certain understanding in religion is indeed necessary, but it must take into account the situations and conditions that surround it. The authority of a religious institution (NU, Muhammadiyah, Persis, NW, and others) does not always have to be followed, due to cultural, social, political, and environmental differences in the local community. What we have to improve is cultural literacy of reading foreign languages, especially Arabic and English. Science is increasing along with the birth of some serious thinkers in studying their scientific fields. Soroush's academic enthusiasm must be a model in the development of humanist and progressive Islamic studies (fresh *ijtihad*).

3. Studying Philosophy

Philosophy (Islamic Science) in terms of logical and correct thinking methods is highly recommended to be studied (anthology, epistemology, axiology). One of the Western philosophers admired by Soroush was Karl R. Popper (1902-1994), who introduced the term theory of falsification of science by using context of justification and context of discovery. Studying philosophy is important in an academic context in higher education because with the philosophy we can think critically and rationally. Although it must be realized that certain scholars forbid the study of philosophy, some even say that Islamic philosophy does not exist because

³⁹ *Ibid*, p. 53.

it is all part of the ancient Greek heritage. That is why al-Ghazālī (d. 505 H / 1111 AD) criticized some of the earlier philosophers' thoughts.

Controversy about Islamic philosophy has occurred since the time of al-Ghazālī (d. 505 H/1111 AD) in his book *Tahāfut al-Falāsifah* (confusion of philosophers), which was later refuted by Ibn Rushd (d. 595 H / 1198 AD) in his book *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*⁴⁰ (Confusion over Confusion). During this time, Ibn Rushd (520-595 H / 1126-1298 AD) is known as Aristotle's commentator as well as a critic of al-Ghazālī. As a commentator, Ibn Rushd commented on Aristotle's work on the mistakes made by al-Farābī (872-950) and Ibn Sīnā (980-1037). While in his position as a critic of al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd wrote and refuted his criticisms of philosopher and philosophy. In addition, Ibn Rushd also criticized the understanding of various Islamic schools of the Koran, such as Ḥasywiyah, kalam, and peripatetic philosophers.⁴¹

By studying philosophy, one can criticize existing theories and make new theories to develop Islamic sciences. In the academic context in Higher Education, there is no sacred and unquestionable theory, no thinker is immune to criticism. It could be that one day along with the development of science, the standard theory will be modified with another theory. If a person meets the requirements for doing *ijtihad*, he can make new ideas or theories to alter existing theories.

In this regard, it is interesting to note Soroush's expression: "*... no theory is considered sacred or above questioning; no authors are immune to criticism. The atmosphere of the university intimates to the student and the professor: "If you are qualified, your mind can wander freely; you have the right to take an ax to any belief or conclusion in order to build newer, better ones; there is no authority in science blocking the free, chosen paths of thought"*.⁴² As the world of education increases, the production of knowledge will continue to transform and continue. A paradigm shift and the emergence of new theories in Islamic Studies, Islamic Philosophy, and other Islamic sciences which certainly inevitable.

⁴⁰ In Indonesian translation read Abu al-Walid Muhammad ibn Ahmad Ibn Rusyd, *Tahafut At-Tahafut: Sanggahan Terhadap Tahafut al-Falāsifah*, Trans. Khalifurahman Fath, (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2004).

⁴¹ Aksin Wijaya, *Nalar Kritis Epistemologi Islam: Membincang Dialog Kritis Para Kritikus Muslim: Al-Ghazali, Ibnu Rusyd, Thah Husein, Muhammad Abid Al-Jabiri* (Yogyakarta: Teras, 2014), p. 131.

⁴² Abdul Karim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam...*, p. 173.

E. Conclusion

Abdul Karim Soroush has played significant contribution to the field of Islamic Studies, particularly in relation to his ideas of differentiating between what is called “religion” and “the understanding of religion”. His thoughts have strong relevance with the contexts of Muslim diversity, both today and in the future, so that they have been studied by many Indonesian Muslim scholars, who want to put Islam and its teachings remaining dynamic and contextual. His theoretical approaches of *the contraction and expansion of religious exegesis* and *the Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge* have greatly influenced the ways in which ones should understand religious texts. The use of such approach will help us remove an attitude that sacralize religious understandings (*taqdis al-afkar al-diniyah*). This way, religion is seen as an absolute truth, but an understanding of religion is a relative truth.

Many Muslims follow certain religious authorities for their understanding of the Qur’an and the Hadith as the sources of Islamic teachings and laws. Occasionally, however, they confuse between the Qur’an and its exegesis, and the Hadith and its commentaries. Whereas both the exegesis and the commentaries are results of *ijtihad* conducted in a certain place and time in the past, which may not necessarily correspond with the contexts of other places and other times. Therefore, the terms “religion” and “the understanding of religion” offered by Soroush need to be developed further. To establish the thoughts initiated by Soroush, an *ijtihad* is needed to encourage creativity, innovation, progress and inclusion. This is where the urgency of Soroush's thoughts, especially in the Indonesian context. []

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