

CHAPTER 13

Challenges and Complicities: Abdolkarim Soroush and Gender

Ziba Mir-Hosseini

The text in this chapter is taken from a book entitled Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran, written by Ziba Mir-Hosseini, and first published in 1999. The reason for including this chapter in this reader is because it highlights two major issues in Iran post-Khomeini, namely, the issue of gender and the methodology that some intellectuals are employing in the reinterpretation of Islam. This chapter differs from preceding chapters because it consists of an introduction in which the life of one of Iran's leading intellectuals and 'dissidents' is presented, and this is then followed by conversations between the two.

*Ziba Mir-Hosseini is a social anthropologist whose primary academic interest lies in the field of gender, which is reflected in her publication about family law in Islam¹ and more recently in her collaboration with Kim Longinotto in the making of two award-winning documentary films, *Divorce Iranian Style* and *Runaway*. Her 1999 publication, *Islam and Gender*, continues and expands on the themes addressed in her previous works. Interestingly, in the introduction to the book Mir-Hosseini describes herself as an Iranian and Muslim who understands and relates to issues as an Iranian Muslim woman, and who values and respects her religious and cultural heritage.² The self-reflexive section in the introduction is frustratingly brief; however, Mir-Hosseini's 'Islamicity' becomes clearer as the book traces her threefold classification of contemporary perspectives of gender in modern Iran (1995–98). Her sympathies lie with the group described in the final chapters of the book, which she calls 'modernists', and representatives of this group are Abdolkarim Soroush and Hojjat al-Islam Sa'idzadeh. They offer a vision of Islam which is based upon a radical reinterpretation of Islam which holds that its ethical teachings are neutral in terms of gender, and the discrimination and lack of equality between the sexes exists because of wrong interpretations that reflect the successful attempts by some males to gain powerful positions in society. The difference that Mir-Hosseini sees in the views of Soroush and Sa'idzadeh, however, lies in their position towards *feqh*. The*

*latter believes that *feqh* cannot be discarded, indeed, his reinterpretation of Islam and specific gender issues is rooted in the particular methodology of *feqh*. First he introduces the issue – for instance, women's right to serve as judges, both Shi'i and Sunni, he then scrutinises these opinions in the light of the Koran, Hadith, Consensus, Reason, and the practice and custom of the time, finally he refutes those that are contrary to the principle of equality and elaborates on those that accord with it.³ On the other hand, Soroush is much more critical of the *feqh* tradition, and sees the legal debates as secondary, preferring to use theoretical and philosophical debates (including the perspectives of mystics such as Rumi and Ebn 'Arabi)⁴ as his point of departure. Soroush admits that we are all trapped in the hermeneutic circle and therefore the old *feqh* rulings cannot guarantee adequate guidance for the contemporary age. It is for this reason that he claims it is necessary to rely on divine revelation,⁵ and this point seems somewhat at variance with his statement that the starting point for a reformulation of gender issues should be the guidance offered by the mystics. Soroush is criticised by Mir-Hosseini for being too abstract, whereas Sa'idzadeh receives approval because his grounding, which is in *feqh*, results in more specific treatment of contemporary issues in Iran.*

*Yet it must be said that ultimately the views of both Soroush and Sa'idzadeh concerning the ethical imperative are not startlingly new, as similar ideas have been expressed by scholars such as Fazlur Rahman (which Soroush himself points to).⁶ Moreover, if the views of these two scholars are taken to their logical conclusion, one has to question what would be left of traditional Shi'ite Islam, and this perhaps is exactly why Soroush's thought has become so problematic for many conservative religious groups in Iran (which Mir-Hosseini mentions in the introduction to the chapter in this text). If much of the Shi'ite tradition (the *hadith*, histories and other sacred texts such as the *Nahj al-Balaghch* (a book composed of the sayings of Imam 'Ali) – in the words of Sa'idzadeh 'The 'Ali of Nahj al-Balaghch is a brutal man'⁷ – are unreliable then the basis for understanding the Qur'an itself is severely shaken and makes reinterpretation extremely difficult (a point acknowledged by both men).*

Another point of interest is the context in which these ideas concerning gender are discussed. The difficulty and fear experienced by Soroush as an academic and by Sa'idzadeh as a cleric in Qom in expounding their views reflects the power of both 'traditionalist' clerics and of the patriarchal world view of Iranian society. Yet, the apparent growing number of clerics in Qom who are receptive to these ideas, or at least, those of the 'neo-traditionalists' (Mir-Hosseini's second group) suggests that reformist ideas within the seminaries in Qom mirror the 'realities' of family life (in which both partners work outside the home) which question the tradition of the male duty to support his wife. One wonders about the validity of the claim made by the 'neo-traditionalists' that the promotion of women's equality was advanced by Khomeini, who they claim endorsed the right of women (via judges) to divorce their husbands. Khomeini declared, 'Caution demands that first, the husband be persuaded, or even compelled, to divorce, if he does not (then) with the permission of the judge, divorce is effected, but there is a simpler way, (and) if I had the courage (I would have said it).'⁸

The second group Mir-Hosseini discusses is the 'neo-traditionalists', the views of whom are represented in discussions with Seyyed Zia Mortazavi (the editor of *Payam-e Zan* [Woman's Message] which is a monthly journal that focuses on gender issues) and Mohammad Hasan Sa'idi of the propagation office of the journal. The views on gender of these neo-traditionalists as represented by Mir-Hosseini are a mix of the 'traditional' world view that Islamic regulations respond to the differences in nature between the sexes,⁹ and the more progressive opinions that women should have an active role in society. This is exemplified by the view that wearing the hejab has permitted women to participate in society rather than remaining unseen in the home. Yet the journalists of *Payam-e Zan* guard a rather conservative view of Islam that endorses the male right of polygamy, the 'unequal' worth between the sexes in payment of blood money and the duty of maintaining his wife (even if she works and earns more than her husband). This is justified by adhering to the principle of balance (rather than equality), for Islamic laws are based on justice, and so the individual who has the most onerous burdens or duties should also receive greater rights and privileges. Mir-Hosseini criticises this perspective because of its failure to respond to modern circumstances in Iran where in practice the burdens are more equally shared between the sexes than the presumptions upon which the *feqh* rulings are based. However, the neo-traditionalists appeal to the *feqh* principle of 'denial of harm' by which a woman is sometimes able to attain a greater degree of freedom (divorce from her husband) and achieve a better level of parity of rights with her husband.

The 'Traditionalists' represent a group that believes that differences between the sexes are based on nature but they differ from the neo-traditionalists in that the former seek a far greater restriction on women's participation in society, despite the permission granted to women by the Islamic Republic of Iran to engage in the political process and in society. A typical traditionalist argument is that there are 'two defects in women, one of which is their love of luxury and display, and the other is lack of knowledge and strong reasoning'.¹⁰

This introduction has not provided any detailed background to Abdolkarim Soroush because this is given in Mir-Hosseini's text. The significance of this text is not just related to Soroush's opinions on gender, but rather the broader issue of Islamic hermeneutics. His call for a more democratic and open discussion about religion is refreshing, but it is easy to understand why his critics dislike his world view, which could be construed as relativist. The following quote in which he discusses the ambiguous (*mutashabihat*) and clear verses (*muhkamat*) of the *Qur'an* demonstrates the radical threat he has presented to entrenched and conservative Islamic thinking:

Interestingly enough, the *Qur'an* itself does not give any clue as to how the *mutashabihat* can be determined and distinguished from other verses, and the whole history of Islam clearly shows that virtually every verse of the *Qur'an* has been suspected at one time or another of being *mutashabih*, which is clear evidence in favour of the suggestion that all this stems from the nature of interpretation and interpreters' presuppositions.¹¹

Notes

- ¹ *Marriage on Trial: A Study of Islamic Family Law: Iran and Morocco Compared* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1983).
- ² *Islam and Gender* (London: I.B. Tauris), p. 19.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 245.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 231.
- ⁶ Soroush, 'Contraction and Expansion of Women's Rights' found on www.seraj.org/zanan.htm.
- ⁷ *Islam and Gender*, p. 264.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 165.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- ¹¹ Abdul-Karim Soroush, 'The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge', in C. Kurzman (ed.), *Liberal Islam* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

Further Reading

- J. Cooper, 'The Limits of the Sacred: The Epistemology of 'Abd al-Karim Soroush', in J. Cooper, R. Nettler and M. Mahmoud (eds), *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), pp. 38–56.
- Z. Mir-Hosseini, 'Women's Rights and Clerical Discourses: The Legacy of 'Allameh Tabataba'i' in N. Nabavi (ed.), *Intellectual Trends in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press: 2003), pp. 193–217.
- A. Soroush, 'The Evolution and Devolution of Religious Knowledge', in C. Kurzman (ed.), *Liberal Islam* (Oxford University Press, 1998).
- *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, trans. and ed. M. Sadri and A. Sadri (Oxford University Press, 2000).

[I began studying the works of Abdolkarim Soroush in autumn 1995, after the second of my debates with *Payam-e Zan*, and following the disruption of his lectures by the Ansar-e Hezbollah, 'helpers of Hezbollah'.¹ On 11 October, Soroush was invited by the Islamic Students Society to address a meeting in Tehran University; as he began his lecture, he was attacked and injured by about a hundred youths from off campus, members of Ansar. Their leader, in a debut public speech, claimed that Soroush's ideas were subversive to Islam and undermined the *velayat-e faqih*, vowed that he would no longer be allowed to disseminate them, and demanded a public debate with him. Another meeting at which Soroush was to speak had been disrupted in a similar manner in Isfahan University in June. On both occasions, the authorities had ignored student

warnings. Press coverage was polarised: some papers condemned the attacks as blatant violations of constitutional rights to freedom of thought and speech; others applauded the legitimate right of Hezbollah to intervene if necessary.

Abdolkarim Soroush is perhaps the most influential and controversial thinker the Islamic Republic has so far produced. In the early years, his lectures were broadcast regularly on national radio and television; I remember watching him in television debates with secular and leftist intellectuals, using Islamic mystical and philosophical arguments to demolish Marxist dogmas. I was curious to find out for myself what it was in Soroush's ideas that now, sixteen years into the Islamic Republic, put him on the other side of the fence and enabled women like those in *Zanan* to reconcile their faith with their feminism.

As I made my way through Soroush's vast corpus of publications – over twenty books – I could see why and how his ideas created such varied passions and reactions. He is a subtle and original thinker, who has found a new language and frame of analysis to re-examine hallowed concepts. He approaches sacred texts by reintroducing the element of rationality that has been part of Shi'i thought, and enabling his audience to be critical without compromising their faith. He is making it legitimate to pose questions that previously only the ulema could ask.

I could see some interesting parallels and differences between Soroush and Shari'ati. Both have been immensely popular with the youth, distrusted and opposed by the clerical establishment, and dismissed by secular intellectuals as lightweights. But their visions and conceptions of Islam are fundamentally different. For Shari'ati, the most important dimension in Islam was political; he sought to turn Islam into an ideology, to galvanise revolutionaries, and to change society. For Soroush, on the other hand, Islam is, as he puts it, 'sturdier than ideology'; all his thinking and writing are aimed at separating the two.

Abdolkarim Soroush is the pen name of Hosein Dabbagh, born in 1945 in a pious but non-clerical family in southern Tehran.² Soroush was among the first graduates of Alavi High School, established by a group of pious bazaaris in the late 1950s with a curriculum integrating modern sciences with traditional religious studies. He then studied pharmacology at Tehran University and, after completing his military service in 1972, he went to England to continue his studies. Obtaining a Master's degree in analytical chemistry from London University, he went on to study history and philosophy of science at Chelsea College. While in London, he joined a group of Iranian Muslim students who held meetings in a building in west London,³ where Shari'ati's funeral service was held and where Ayatollah Motahhari spoke when he came to London. Soroush was close to both men, and was a regular speaker there. He returned to Iran just as the Pahlavi regime was about to collapse.

In 1981 Soroush became one of seven members of the Council for Cultural Revolution, appointed by Ayatollah Khomeini when the universities were closed in order to contain the students and to eliminate leftist groups from the

campuses. The council's task was to oversee the Islamisation of higher education and to prepare the ground for the reopening of the universities. This occurred in 1983, after a massive ideological purge of students and teachers; and Soroush started teaching philosophy of science in Tehran University. Not long after, he resigned from the council, disagreeing with the direction it was going.⁴ Since then he has held no official position within the ruling system of the Islamic Republic, although his lectures continued to be broadcast until the late 1980s and he remained close to centres of power, acting as adviser to several government bodies until the early 1990s.

In 1984 Soroush began teaching courses in philosophy of religion (known as modern theology), comparative philosophy, and mysticism to both university students in Tehran and Houzeh students in Qom. In 1988, he started a series of weekly lectures in Imam Sadeq Mosque in north Tehran, on *Nahj ol-Balagh*, the collection of Imam Ali's sermons and hadith. In the early audiences were members of the political and religious elite, including some government ministers. By autumn 1994, when the lectures were suspended, the audience was different: younger, and largely students. Not only had Soroush acquired a following among students who found his ideas and approach intrinsically appealing but he was beginning to set the tone for more public debates.

Disruption of his lectures began in April 1995, after the publication in *Kiyan* of his lecture 'Liberty and the Clergy'. He argues there that the clergy as a group functions as a guild, with religion as their source of livelihood, which limits both their own freedom in interpretation and that of others.⁵ This article was denounced as 'subversive to Islam', and brought the Hezbollah back to campus.⁶ After the attack in Isfahan in June, a letter of protest signed by 104 writers and university teachers was sent to the president of the Islamic Republic.⁷ With the emergence of the Ansar following the October incident in Tehran University, Soroush was no longer able even to give his regular university lectures. The showdown came in the spring of 1996. He wrote an open letter to the president, calling on him to 'remove this rot' and to ensure freedom of speech and thought.⁸ But to no avail. In mid-May, Ansar members surrounded Amir Kabir University in Tehran, where Soroush was due to talk in a meeting to mark the anniversary of Ayatollah Motahhari's death. Clashes ensued between the students and Ansar, arrests were made on both sides, and Soroush sent a message announcing his withdrawal. Soon after, unable to teach and fearing for his life, he went abroad on a lecture tour, not returning until April 1997.

As with Shari'ati, most of Soroush's writings are edited texts of public lectures, delivered in a variety of forums. If read chronologically, these volumes reveal the development of not only his ideas but his relationship with the Islamic Republic. Up to 1983 they mostly constitute a critique of the leftist ideologies espoused by Iranian intellectuals and groups then politically active.⁹ After 1983, Soroush's writings show his concern with themes in philosophy and epistemology. They

include translations of English books on philosophy,¹⁰ a volume of collected essays and lectures on ethics and human sciences,¹¹ as well as several articles in cultural periodicals.

The breakthrough in his work came with his seminal articles on the historicity and relativity of religious knowledge: 'The Theoretical Expansion and Contraction of the Shari'a'.¹² These articles – in which Soroush distinguished religion from religious knowledge, arguing that whereas the first was sacred and immutable, the latter was human and evolved in time as a result of forces external to religion itself – appeared intermittently between 1988 and 1990 in the quarterly *Kayhan-e Farhangi*, published by the Kayhan Publishing Institute, which had come under the control of the Islamic faction shortly after the revolution. The heated debate that followed the publication of these articles led to a kind of intellectual coup and the birth of an independent journal, *Kiyan* (Foundation) in October 1991.¹³ Soroush's writings form the centrepiece in each issue of *Kiyan*; they reveal the concerns and thinking of a deeply religious man who is becoming increasingly disillusioned by the domination in the Islamic Republic of what he calls 'feqh-based Islam'.¹⁴

This began a new phase in Soroush's writings, comprising volumes of collected essays, largely published originally in *Kiyan*; most are edited texts of lectures and talks delivered in universities and mosques in which he expands his epistemological arguments to develop a critique of government ideology and policies of the Islamic Republic and to argue for democracy and pluralism on religious grounds. Each volume bears the title of one of the essays, and has gone through several editions and impressions.

In the vast amount of his published work I could find nothing on women, apart from two paragraphs, both merely asides commenting on the incongruity between texts taught in the seminaries and the current state of knowledge and world views.¹⁵ So I looked for his unpublished work, and acquired recordings of two lectures in which he had addressed the issue of women, both of them in the series on *Nahj ol-Balagheb*. The first was delivered in Imam Sadeq Mosque in January 1989; Soroush used the occasion of Women's Day to comment on Imam Ali's harsh views on women, contained in a sermon delivered after the Battle of the Camel, led by Ayesha, the Prophet's widow; it reads:

O people! Women are deficient in Faith, deficient in shares and deficient in intelligence. As regards the deficiency in their Faith, it is their abstention from prayers and fasting during their menstrual periods. As regards deficiency in their intelligence it is because the evidence of two women is equal to that of a man. As for the deficiency in their shares that is because of their share in inheritance being half of men. So beware of the evils of women. Be on your guard even from those of them who are (reportedly) good. Do not obey them even in good things so that they may not attract you to evils.¹⁶

As Soroush recited and translated the sermon, some women in the audience – as in all mosques, the women's section was curtained off from the men's, where Soroush was speaking – cried out in protest, to be promptly silenced by a man shouting: 'It's the Imam's words the Doctor is quoting: do you object even to them?'¹⁷ But the protests continued and stopped only when Soroush asked to be allowed to finish his commentary and explain. His commentary, however, betrayed his ambivalence on the issue of women in Islam, and also suggested that he was not prepared for such a reaction, nor for a man to shout the women down. He had intended to confine his discussion of women to one session, but the reaction persuaded him to continue the following week. He repeated and elaborated the content of the discussion in his second lecture, and I shall discuss his views in that context.

The second lecture was delivered in Isa Vazir Mosque in central Tehran in 1992, as part of an extended commentary on Imam Ali's letter to his son, known as the Will, the closing sentences of which contain the Imam's advice to his son about women. Again Soroush had intended to devote only one session to the theme of women and gender relations, but at his audience's request he continued for four more sessions. Although he was more explicit in his views, and expanded on what he had said in 1989, his position on gender, and the thrust of his arguments, remained the same. In 1995, Zanan gave me an abridged transcript of the 1992 sessions, prepared earlier for publication as 'The Perspective of the Past on Women'; but they never carried the article and, so far, neither lecture has appeared in print.¹⁸

The main part of this chapter consists of selected passages from the 1992 sessions, which touch directly on gender and reveal Soroush's perspective. I conclude with extracts from an interview with him in London in October 1996 when I was able to discuss the 1992 sessions with him, to ask about the audience, and raise my objections to his gender perspective.

The 1992 lecture was spread over five weekly sessions from 8 October to 5 November, each lasting nearly two hours. The audience of about one thousand, including many university students, was both more numerous and younger than that which attended his 1989 lecture. The sessions have an informal but uniform structure. On the tapes, as Soroush is speaking, one can hear children's voices, greetings by new arrivals, and so on. He begins each session with a short Arabic prayer, the same as in 1989 before his commentary on the *Nahj ol-Balagheb*, then summarises the main points covered in the previous session, before reviewing and developing them further. When he has finished, there is a break, during which those who have questions submit them anonymously and in writing; the session ends with Soroush reading out and answering a selection of these questions.

Soroush is a gifted orator; his voice is calm and mesmerising. He talks without a script, and often without notes. I present a summary of each session, retaining

the order in which he introduces his points and using his words as much as possible. There is a clear structure and purpose to each lecture, during which he takes his audience through layers of religious concepts and philosophical arguments, interjecting Qur'anic verses, hadith, and mystical poems. He does this knowledgeably, clearly, and honestly. His style and language are as important as what he has to say. His command of literature and his memory are formidable; he appears to know by heart the Qur'an, the *Nahj ol-Balaghah*, Rumi's *Mathnavi*, and Hafez's *Divan*.¹⁹

Sorush's Lectures on Women

From the opening summary, we gather that the previous session's theme was ethics and religion. Sorush repeats two points: that political ethics are separate from religious ethics, and that although religious ethics are primarily personal in nature, they can be a source for a sound political ethics. Imam Ali's letter to his son is one such source. Addressed to a future leader, it contains the Imam's advice on several political and social matters. Sorush recites and translates the closing sentences:

Do not consult women because their view is weak and their determination is unstable. Cover their eyes by keeping them under veil because strictness of veiling keeps them [good]. Their coming out is not worse than your allowing an unreliable man to visit them. If you can manage that they should not know anyone other than [you,] do so. Do not allow a woman matters other than those about herself because a woman is a flower, not an administrator. Do not pay her regard beyond herself. Do not encourage her to intercede for others. Do not show suspicion out of place because this leads a correct woman to evil and a chaste woman to deflection.²⁰

He continues:

In an earlier discussion on *Nahj ol-Balaghah*, we said it contains words that are uncongenial to women, and infringe cultural notions and democratic values that have come to fill human societies in the past two centuries. For this reason, words that were once acceptable – that no commentator found forbidding to interpret or to justify – are now problematic. They demand a new interpretation or a new defence. Our forebears had no qualms in either interpreting or defending such words . . . As such a position for women wasn't contested, no one doubted these words . . . But today women – even men – don't accept or believe in such a position.

Nahj ol-Balaghah contains two kinds of statements on women: those based on reasoning and those not. Taken at face value, both are offensive to women. Among the latter, for instance, is the Imam's address to the people of Basra after the Battle of the Camel. He says: 'You were the army of a woman and in the command of a quadruped. When it grumbled you responded and when it was wounded you fled away.'²¹ Or: 'As regards such and such woman, she is in the grip of womanly views while malice is boiling in her bosom like the furnace of the blacksmith.'²² Or: 'Woman is evil, all in all; and the worst of it is that one cannot do without her.'²³ These statements contain no reasoning. But in other statements the Imam has reasoned; they include those famous ones: that women are deficient in belief, in reason, and in worldly gain, because they do not pray or fast during menses; the testimony of two women equals that of one man; and their share of inheritance is half a man's. In this part of the letter that we have recited, the Imam also advises his son not to consult women because their views are weak.

Put together, these statements suggest that seeking women's advice and involving them in affairs of society should be avoided; that is, it's Muslim men's duty to keep their women secluded, to control them, and not to allow them a say. If we add *feqh* rulings, the picture that emerges is even more devastating for women. There's no denying that in an Islamic society women are granted fewer rights and fewer opportunities than men.

If one of the *ulema* of a century ago could be reborn and see the conditions of our society and the women, undoubtedly he'd have a fright. Such a level of women's [public] presence – which isn't by any means ideal – would be unthinkable for him. The very fact that it's now accepted that a woman's presence in society doesn't violate her womanhood and Muslimhood is due to the immense changes that have occurred in the realms of thought and practice; these have also found their way into our religious consciousness and our society. Women's presence in society is now as natural and logical as their absence once was. This tells us the extent to which, in our understanding and practice of religion, we act unconsciously and involuntarily; this isn't to be taken negatively but in the sense that we're guided by elements that aren't in our control. They do their work, shape our lives, our minds, our language . . .

You know, and I have already said, that there have been several reactions to these hadith of the Imam and similar ones. These reactions are instructive, too. Specific justifications have been made; for instance, some of our clerics say that the Imam's comment on women's

deficiencies was made after the Battle of the Camel, and was due to the insidious role that Ayesha played in it. Such hadith, they argue, refer only to Ayesha or women like her. Some say the Imam uttered such words about women because he was upset and angry. Neither argument works. We must remember that reason derives its validity and universality from its own logic, not from what its user wishes to impose on it. That is, once we contend that a certain hadith of the Imam was influenced by anger or an event, then we have to admit the probability that other emotions and events influenced other hadith. In that case, no hadith can ever again be used in the sense that they have been so far. Likewise, we can't say this hadith referred only to Ayesha. Its logic and content convey universality: it's not only Ayesha but all Muslim women who inherit half a man's share, and so on . . .

But the explanation we gave [in 1989] about those hadith of the Imam that are based on reasoning was that once a hadith is based on reasoning then it must be approached through its own reasoning. In fact, the credibility of such a hadith is contingent on the force and validity of its reasoning, not on the authority of its utterer. This has been our method in dealing with all sacred texts. For instance, we read in the Qur'an: 'If there had been in them any gods but Allah, they would both have certainly been in a state of disorder' [Sura Anbia, 22]. This is a reasoning whose acceptance doesn't rest on its being the word of God but on its force and soundness, so that it can become a backbone for our thinking . . .

One can take issue with the Imam's reasoning and say that if women don't pray or don't fast at certain times [during menses], this isn't a token of deficiency in their faith. It's in fact the very proof of their faith, as His prophet tells them not to pray at such times. Obeying His prohibitions is like obeying His commands. In God's eyes what matters is the spirit of an act, not its form . . . As to women's deficiency in material gain, it's true that their share in inheritance is less, but this isn't proof that they're less than men and we can't conclude from it that women shouldn't be consulted, or assigned certain social and political status. No logical connection can be made here. If they inherit less, it's because they are told so.

Such an approach might work, of course, with ahadith based on reasoning. But what about the others that aren't? Our solution here is to say that these hadith are 'pseudo-universal propositions' (as logicians have it); that is, they reveal the conditions of women of their time. In addition, since what an Imam or a sage says is in line with the society in which he lives, we need a reason to extend it to other epochs . . . Here we're faced with two jurisprudential principles and

positions: one holds that *shari'a* idioms – whether legal or ethical in nature – speak of societies of their time and thus we need a reason for extending them to other societies or times; and the other argues the opposite, that we need a reason *not* to apply such ahadith and Rulings to all other societies and times. These two positions can't be reached from the words [of sacred texts] but only when we examine them from outside and apply our own reasoning to them.

Contrary to the Imam's advice, today in the Islamic Republic women are consulted. As for women's entry into Parliament, the problem is theoretically resolved: women don't directly decide for Islamic society. Although it seems to me the *ulema's* thinking on the issue hasn't changed, since the argument put forward then against women's entry into Parliament was that the Prophet said that a society ruled by a woman is doomed.²⁴ Both Shi'i and Sunni *ulema* have argued that if women are in Parliament, their votes will be counted among the rest and thus they can influence the passing of a bill, which is a kind of *velayat* for women, although it isn't personal. At present, as you know, in our country the Majles is [only] the adviser of the *vali-ye faqih*. The notion of legislation as understood in other parts of the world doesn't exist in our country; that is, the Majles doesn't have an independent view, and the *vali-ye faqih* can alter its decisions or act counter to them. So you could argue that women's presence in Parliament doesn't contradict the Prophet's hadith. It bans women from *velayat*, which at present only the *vali-ye faqih* exercises. But what about the ban on consulting women? As far as I remember, before the revolution when the Houzeh opposed women's entry to the Parliament, they made no reference to such arguments or ahadith, either because they didn't find them acceptable or [they didn't think it] suitable to invoke them.

Anyway, these words exist in *Nahj ol-Balaghah*, and solutions must be sought for them, and the search for solutions, as I said already, is decisive and can't be confined to words. If we challenge their authenticity, then our entire [corpus of] sacred sources will come into question. If we say they're pseudo-universal propositions, then not only women but men and many other rulings based on them will be affected. If we accept them as they are, then we must resolve the consequences of their incongruity with our present society. What we can say is that there's a kind of absolute neglect regarding such ahadith. They aren't addressed seriously, so no serious solutions are found for them. This is because the hold of democratic values and notions of human rights is so strong that men and women don't allow themselves to think of contradicting them and prefer to keep silent in the face of

incongruities. This isn't limited to our time, nor to religious knowledge, but [it's true of] all times and all branches of knowledge. It's also the case in science. A cultural view, a theory, sometimes takes such hold and captures minds and imaginations to such an extent that no one dares think otherwise. So, in every era, part of religious thought, views, or ahadith is overshadowed and ignored, and another part is highlighted and welcomed.

All we can say is that such issues must be left for history to resolve, in time. When our minds tell us not to think about this issue [women in sacred texts], then we can't hope to find a suitable solution. In the past, this and many other issues were so much in line with popular culture that there was no need for thinking. In our time such ahadith have been dealt such devastating blows that no one finds it expedient to tackle them or to confront such a formidable torrent. The most we can do is to become familiar with the problem and its cause and leave the solution to time and later thinkers.

On this note, Soroush brings the session to an end. He has repeated essentially what he said in 1989 about the Imam's famous words on women's deficiencies, applying his theory of 'Expansion and Contraction of the Shari'a' descriptive, explanatory, and normative, all at once. He argues both that understanding of sacred texts is time-bound and that the *ulema's* opinions are influenced by what he calls 'extra-religious knowledge'. Changes in knowledge render natural and Islamic some matters that were once considered 'unthinkable' and 'non-Islamic'. He despairs at the *ulema's* unwillingness to admit this at a theoretical level and to take consciously planned steps to revise their understanding in the light of current realities. He also implicitly criticises the institution of *velayat-e faqih* by pointing to the contradiction in having a parliament yet subordinating it to the rule of *vali-ye faqih*.

Despite this heady stuff, and Soroush's fresh approach, listening to him I could not help thinking that he too, as a religious intellectual, was avoiding the issue by skirting around any discussion of women's legal rights in Islam – the domain of *faqh*. This may have been a concern voiced by his audience,²⁵ since, even though he had declared the theme of women closed, he returned to it at the next session, a week later (15 October), because 'some friends, especially sisters, asked for more'. But once again he skirted around *faqh* and moved instead into religious literature to shed light on the sources from which jurists derive their conceptions of women's rights. This time he framed his discussion in the context of changing conceptions of the human role and place in the universe, and asked why there is such a focus on women's rights in Muslim societies. He demonstrated that there is nothing sacred in our understanding of the *shari'a*, which is human and evolves in time and is filtered through our own cognitive universe.

The recording begins with the usual prayer and summary of key points from the previous discussion, before Soroush continues:

Friends know that in our time certain views have emerged about mankind, women included. In our society in recent decades these views have centred on women's legal rights. The problem facing our thinkers has been to explain to believing Muslim women why certain differences in rights between women and men exist in Islamic thought. Confronted with the notion of gender equality, they try either to explain these differences away or to argue that Islam upholds sexual equality but rejects similarity in rights. Some have argued for differences not in rights but in the duties of each sex, stemming from the differing abilities of each sex and the natural division of labour. Others have tried to explain by connecting differences in rights to physical, psychological, and spiritual differences between the sexes . . .

The nub of the matter is that it's assumed that equality between men and women – which women demand in our time in various parts of the world – means equality in legal rights. Here I want to explain the exact meaning of this [notion of] equality between men and women – in the sense that some are now seeking – and then see whether the common understanding of women's rights and duties in Islam admits such a notion of equality; and how most of our *ulema*, thinkers, and jurists have conceptualised women and their status and the basis for their views. I stress, it's not for me to judge but only to offer a historical report of understandings that have so far existed. Nor do I claim that the door of understanding is closed, that no other understanding will emerge on this issue. Nevertheless, what has existed so far must be recognised and known.

We can have two views, both of which are rooted in our conception of women's purpose in creation . . . In a nutshell, one holds that woman is created for man: her whole being, disposition, personality, and perfection depend on union with man. The other view denies such a relationship and holds that a woman has her own purpose in creation, her own route to perfection . . . The first view – that woman is created *of* and *for* – sums up past perspectives, including those of Muslims. Both qualifiers [of and for] are important.

In poetic and mystical language, Soroush discusses at some length what these qualifiers entail, how they create asymmetry in rights and shape relations between the sexes. A woman is created to mediate man's perfection, to prepare him to fulfil his duty, to enable him to manifest his manhood, to make him worthy of God's call. This is the essence of womanhood, and that is why she

attains perfection through union with a man. But for a man, union with a woman is not the end but only the beginning of his path to perfection. Soroush opens two caveats: to say that woman is created of and for man does not mean she is created for, or to be at the mercy of, man's whim; and to say that woman's perfection rests on union with man does not necessarily imply marriage, although formation of a family is one manifestation of such connection and an arena for complementarity and mutual perfection.

On the second view, which he says has captured the hearts and minds of Muslim women of our time, Soroush is less eloquent or forthcoming:

[The] second view, demanding equality between the sexes, says nothing more than that woman is not created *of* and *for* man. This philosophical and existentialist conception, of course, defines the scope of women's legal rights, shapes their status and relations between the sexes, and so on. Here I don't want to discuss the implications of such a conception for women in the sphere of gender relations, nor shall I enter philosophical and legal discussions. These are to be found in the works of the late Motahhari and other thinkers such as Allameh Tabataba'i. Perhaps what can be said in defence of difference and non-similarity [of gender rights] has been said in these works, and I don't intend to add anything here. Nevertheless, I will make one point. One of those who judiciously understood yet denied [the implications of the two views] was Ayatollah Motahhari: in his book *Women's Rights in Islam* he clearly states that in the Islamic view woman isn't created for man. But I should say that this is not the general presumption of our *ulema*. An understanding of equality between man and woman won't be possible unless we understand the basis correctly and know contemporary men's and women's understanding of it. This is the formulation of the problem, the two claims that confront each other . . .

Having identified the core contradiction in the gender discourses of contemporary Muslim thinkers, such as Motahhari, Soroush delves into religious literature to show the kinds of theories and master narratives on which they are based. He observes that although no Muslim thinker has said in so many words, 'woman is of and for man', they all subscribe to the thesis; he offers three kinds of evidence for this: first, that religious sources are male-oriented: whatever their genre, they solely or primarily address men, even when they deal with apparently genderless themes, such as rules for praying or ethical issues such as lying or cheating. In this, Soroush says, scholars have followed the example of the Qur'an, which most often addresses men. For instance, many of the blessings promised in paradise – such as black-eyed perpetual virgins – appeal only to men.

The second kind of evidence is the way religious literature describes marriage. Here again, men are treated as the main beneficiaries, even though marriage is by definition a joint affair. He examines legal and ethical sources to list the kinds of benefit Muslim scholars identify in marriage, ranging from immunity from Satan's temptations to achieving the peace of mind that enables men to prepare for greater duties in life, such as gaining knowledge and serving God. He also relates ahadith of the Prophet, that 'women are among Satan's army and one of its greatest aids'; and a story from Rumi's *Mathnawi* that when God created woman, Satan rejoiced, saying 'now I have the ultimate weapon for tempting mankind' – meaning, of course, men.

Similar is the sort of advice given to men on how to respect women's rights and pay them their dues. Soroush reads a passage from Feiz Kashani's *al-Mohajjat al-Beiza* (The Bright Way), a book on ethics and morals. Feiz, a sixteenth-century Shi'i scholar, defines marriage as a kind of enslavement, and a wife as a kind of slave, advising men: 'now you have captured this being, you must have mercy on her, cherish and respect her, etc.' Soroush points out that it was in the light of such a conception of marriage and women's status that scholars read and understood the hadith, and shows the internal flaw in such understandings. He recites ahadith attributed to Shi'i Imams, telling men not to teach women Sura Yusef from the Qur'an, but Sura Nur instead, and to forbid women to go to upper floors of the house in case they are tempted to look down at unrelated men passing in the street.

The point is not what the real meaning of these ahadith is, nor whether or not they are authentic. The point is, what meanings have been attributed to them [by] our religious scholars [who] have taken them seriously. My point is phenomenological, not theological. I don't judge, I simply say that in Islamic culture and history they've been taken seriously, and religious scholars have based their views on them.

Soroush's final argument to show the absolute hold of the 'woman is for man' thesis is from mystical and philosophical literature. He cites two contrasting passages, one from the celebrated Sufi Ibn Arabi (d. 1240), the other from the philosopher Molla Hadi 'Hakim' Sabzevari (d. 1878), and argues that they reveal the same conception of women, although expressed in two different idioms. Inspired by a hadith about the creation of Eve from Adam's rib, Ibn Arabi says that, like a rib, woman has the inborn ability to bend in her love without breaking: she is the symbol of divine love and mercy, created from 'affection', and love toward man is implanted in her essence. Thus woman's role and destiny is to bend in love; in so doing she joins man and makes him whole again. Man's love for woman, on the other hand, is like the love of the whole for a part; looked at this way, man's love for woman does not infringe his love for God. Compare

this, Soroush tells his audience, with Hakim Sabzevari's view that women are in essence animals; God gave them human faces so that men will be inclined to marry.

I apologise to the sisters present here for the insult implied in these words, but it's important to know them. Today in our society there's an unacceptable cover-up, even by our Muslim thinkers, who hide what's been said . . . There's no reason, no point in hiding it, it'll be clear to those who care to think and search. It's important to face it with an open mind, to know better the dark tunnel we've come through, and how to contemplate our future.

His excursion into religious literature ended, Soroush concludes his talk with three further points.

First, in the sphere of women's rights we cannot think and talk only in *feqh* categories, of forbidden and permitted acts; we must also think in terms of interpreting religious texts, of man's and woman's purposes in creation, of traditions and social customs. Second, if Muslim scholars defined women's status in a way we find unacceptable today, it is not because they wanted to humiliate women or undermine their status, but because that is how they understood and interpreted the religious texts. Women in the past accepted their status not because they were stupid or oppressed but because they had no problems with such understanding and interpretation. In the past two centuries, however, the myths and theories that made such understandings acceptable to men and women have been challenged by scientific theories, including evolution. Changes in our world view have also made women's legal rights an issue in Islam. Finally, the problem cannot be resolved by providing new justifications to defend an outmoded world view, hoping women will be lured back into accepting them; after all, acceptance is a matter of belief rather than reasoning. What we can do is try to understand the basis for, and implications of, old and new views on women. Only then can women clarify for themselves where they stand in relation to each view, and where they want to be.

Soroush invites his audience, in particular the women, to do this. The session continues with Soroush answering four questions. Two invoke a Qur'anic verse and a hadith to negate the 'woman is for man' thesis, to which Soroush replies: 'True, there are also many others, but so far the other side is stronger, in the sense that their reasonings and evidences dominate.' A third question asks for

comment on women's status in present society; he answers that this can best be dealt with by a sociologist. After a lengthy pause, Soroush reads out what must be part of the final question: 'In our history, women have said nothing about themselves.' He responds with a critique of feminism:

Yes, it has been the case, and even if [women] said [something] their voices haven't reached us. There are several theories here. The argument of feminist movements – that now exist in the world as so-called supporters of women, demanding equal rights between men and women on all fronts – is that differences between men and women, which their rights are based on, result from socialisation. That is, boys and girls are socialised differently: boys are taught they are superior to girls, sexes are assigned different roles, they are valued differently, this sets a pattern and men and women have come to accept their roles; this has been the case in most societies from the start, and so on. I once witnessed a debate abroad between one of these feminists and an opponent, who argued that you must explain why this pattern was set in the first place, why men and women accepted it, and why it continues today; perhaps there's a reason for it, perhaps there [really] is a difference between the sexes – not [necessarily] that one is better than the other – but why do you want to deny difference?

This leads into a digression on the philosophy of history; Soroush affirms his own view that 'the history of mankind has been natural', and asks whether the fact of women's oppression at certain periods can be taken as contrary evidence. Although he admits that his theory cannot be falsified, he seems to imply that history will show men's domination to be natural, too.

That last question seems to me to haunt the three sessions on gender relations that follow. They are more discursive in style and full of incomplete statements and arguments. Unlike in the first two sessions, Soroush pursues neither a central argument nor a sustained critique of old readings of the sacred texts, but tries instead to make sense of the Imam's words, to provide the basis for debate and a new positioning. This he makes clear at the outset. In his summary of the previous discussion, he repeats his criticism of current understandings of the sacred texts, voices his scepticism of the new view, which he sees as seeking to 'put women in men's place', then continues:

The old view has passed its test, and religious societies that lived by its rules have revealed what they entail for men, women, and the family. On the other hand, societies that have opted for the new view, putting women in men's place, have also shown their hand. In both camps, many now feel the need for revision. But since these views aren't

philosophically neutral, revision is always slow and painful. They're tied up with a mass of baggage, and it's impossible to remain impartial when dealing with them . . . Until very recently – in the West, too – men have been the main theorists on women's nature and role in creation and society. This must make us cautious. When women replace them, they too are tied to their own baggage, however different. This is one of those rare cases where the door of judgement is closed to us, as both science and reason can be influenced by our emotions. You can't apply cold reason to an issue in which your entire being is immersed. There can be no guarantee that mistakes made in previous centuries won't be repeated . . .

I say all this to affirm that we must rely here on Revelation and seek guidance in the words of religious leaders and those pious ones who are free of such baggage; the path of human reason here passes through the path of divine Revelation; if we explore and invest in this path, perhaps we'll obtain worthwhile results.

Having set the tone and the theme, Soroush returns to the closing sentences of Imam Ali's letter to his son, quoted earlier. He relates them to the concepts of *hejab*, sexual honour and jealousy (*gheirat*), and worth (*keramat*). On *hejab* he is brief, confining himself to two points: that its form and limits have always been bound up with culture and politics; and that what God permits, man should not forbid. To drive both home, he relates what Ayatollah Motahhari told him about how he began research for his book on *hejab*. Motahhari said he was afraid to enter a minefield of divergent opinions, but as his research progressed he found an astonishing degree of consensus among Shi'i and Sunni jurists: all – bar one Sunni – held that women's hands and faces need not be covered. He also found that all *fatwas* recommending stricter covering were issued after Reza Shah's unveiling campaign. Soroush leaves his audience to draw the moral from the anecdote: that advocating *chador* as the 'superior form of *hejab*' has more to do with culture and politics than sacred texts. 'We all know that *chador* is not "Islamic *hejab*", but it's rare to find a cleric who allows his womenfolk to venture out without wearing one. What Motahhari said on *hejab* – which was what he found in *feqh* texts – shocked the *ulema* of his time, who interpreted it as a licence for promiscuity.'

On the second concept, jealousy (*gheirat*), Soroush is more explicit. He first defines jealousy as 'preventing another sharing what one has', and distinguishes it from envy (*hesadat*), which he defines as 'wanting what belongs to another'. The first is a positive ethical value that is extra-religious and should be encouraged, he argues, but the second is negative and should be controlled. He refers to another hadith of Imam Ali: 'the jealousy of a woman is heresy (*kofr*), while the jealousy of a man is part of belief',²⁶ and tries to shed light on what

heresy can mean in this context. It has an ethical rather than a religious connotation, arising from the asymmetry inherent in the way the sexes relate to each other. Women are entrusted to men, they become not only part of men but part of their honour. Men can take more than one woman as spouse at the same time, while the opposite cannot happen. Without asking whether such asymmetry is defined by laws of nature or culture, Soroush ends the session by saying there is another jealousy, manifested in creation, but he will leave it for next week.

In the next session (28 October), Soroush continues with the theme of jealousy, but on a mystical level. He starts with Rumi's interpretation of a hadith about divine jealousy and relates it to love ('*eshq*'), devoting the entire session to this. Here he is in his element, weaving his own narrative into a rich body of mystical concepts and poems to make a case for love, which he argues must be treated with jealousy, that is, protected from those who do not have it.

I find this session the most engaging and important, and yet the most difficult to assess. I am taken by Soroush's eloquence, his perception, and his courage in tackling such a delicate issue in a mosque. He makes a strong case for love, keeping it out of the *feqh* domain – yet I am puzzled by the clear male bias in his narrative. I can't decide whether he is telling his audience the whole story or is talking in innuendo. He begins by pointing to a duality, a paradox, in Persian literature, which reflects a cultural ambivalence towards the subject of love and women. Love is the main theme in Persian literature, yet one is never sure whether the writer is talking about divine or earthly love.

Our poets have perfected the art of ambiguity. In our culture, the same ambivalence can be seen when women are concerned . . . It's enough to look at our own current society. I suppose there are few societies in the modern era for which sex and women are such a problem, yet we pretend the issue is resolved, that no problem exists. It's enough just to see the places that come under certain people's control; the kinds of separation and segregation [imposed] speak of the obsession, of the state of minds, and show the size of the problem and the distance that must be crossed for it to be resolved naturally.

He talks about the role of earthly love in the lives of those such as Ibn Arabi and Hafez, and recites poems in which they talk of their love. He relates the story of Ibn Arabi's falling in love with a learned and beautiful Isfahani woman in Mecca, and her influence on his mystical development.²⁷ He also tells two stories from the Qur'an that speak of women's love for men: those of Zoleikha for Yusef (Sura 12) and the daughter of Sho'eib for Musa (Sura 28). He relates both stories in detail, seeing their message as endorsing the naturalness of attraction and love between men and women.²⁸ Unlike others, he emphasises not Zoleikha's

cunning and her attempts to seduce Yusef but his beauty and ability to resist temptations. God put love for him in her heart; he is so beautiful and desirable that other women, having at first blamed Zoleikha, sympathise with her when they see him, and plead with him to respond to her love. The two stories, he says, must be taken in conjunction with Sura Nur; he recites verse 31, which deals with women's covering and chastity. He asks, can love between men and women be recommended on ethical and religious grounds, or must it be condemned? In either case, what are the consequences, and how should a religious society deal with it?

In the rest of the session, Soroush presents a broad review of love in the history of Islamic thought. On the one hand are the moralists, who denounce love and tolerate no mention of it; on the other are those who recognise its blessing and power and resist denouncing it in the name of religion. Mystics argue that earthly love is a passage to divine love, a metaphor leading us to the Truth; but this is also an attempt to theorise a successful experience. The force of their argument is such that even philosophers have to contemplate love, although some reduce it to sex drive.²⁹ Those who readily issue *fatwas* dividing love into *halal* and *haram*, not only mistake lust for love but also forget that love, as Sufis argue, is involuntary; it is in its nature to undermine the will, thus it is not a matter on which there can be a *feqh* ruling. Instead of condemning it, our thinkers should contemplate love – whether earthly or divine – and propagate it. We must not let love be treated as a disease, something that defiles. It is healing and purifying, and can cure both individuals and societies of many afflictions and excesses. *Feqh*, more oriented to piety than love, must approach mysticism, which is more inclined to love than piety. Then they can overcome the duality, the rupture, in our cultural history and moderate the excesses of both.

Concluding his review, Soroush returns to jealousy. What he says here, it seems to me, not only reveals his male bias but undermines the case he has made for love.

Thus man's jealousy towards women isn't only about honour but also about love. It's said that women are the repository for love and men the repository for wisdom; we can put this better, and say that women are objects of love, and men are not. If we accept that great loves have led to great acts in history, then we must admit that women have played a great role, and it's unwise for women to try to be men; they can't, they can only forfeit their womanhood. This is to negate one's blessing. It does [neither sex] any good, if someone, or a group, doesn't appreciate their worth and their place and also if others try to dislodge them from their place.

Soroush seems to have forgotten that only a moment earlier he told his audience two Qur'anic love stories in which, as he himself pointed out, men

(Joseph and Moses) not women were the objects of love. Or does the lapse betray his own ambivalence?

Also puzzling, I find, is Soroush's final observation on love in contemporary Iranian poetry. He says he will touch on it only briefly, inviting his audience to do their own research and draw their own conclusions. Love still dominates our poetry and occupies our poets' minds, he says, but its manifestations are no longer pure and spiritual. In the past the poet was part of a closed world defined by religious values: 'even if the poet chose to fix his gaze on the earth, the sky above him cast its shadow on his world.' This is no longer the case; he makes the point by reciting a poem by Forugh Farrokhzad, where she says she never wanted to be a star in the sky or to be the companion of angels, she never separated herself from the earth.³⁰ This identity – never wanting to be part of a celestial world – Soroush argues, is evident in her approach to love and some how degrades it. Adding 'some of her poems, if you don't know they're hers, you'd think they're by a mystic', he recites one of her love poems, but stops as he reaches lines in which she expresses yearning for her lover, saying that a mosque is not the place for it.³¹ He ends his defence of love by returning to the mystical realm, where earthly love is a metaphor for, and a means of experiencing, a greater truth.³²

In the final session, Soroush concludes his commentary on Imam Ali's words on women with a discussion of *keramat*, which he glosses as 'the limit, the purpose, the proper place of each being'. He approaches the concept from a philosophical angle, placing it in the context of the two competing world views discussed earlier. The first, to which the Imam's words belong, accepts the world and its order as designed by the Creator, and has no dispute with the place assigned to His creation. The second, which makes the Imam's words difficult to digest, sees the world and its order as accidental, and wants to define the role of creation. The first view (that of Islamic thinkers) sees women as created for men and the roles of the sexes as non-interchangeable. In the second (that of modern times) women aspire to men's place in the order of things. Soroush embarks on a long discussion, examining the pros and cons of each of these world views. Critical of both but not totally rejecting either, he resorts to the Qur'an to shed light on women's place in the divine order of life. As he continues, it becomes clear that his own understanding of the Qur'anic position is in line with that of Islamic thinkers whose texts he earlier analysed critically. He recites and elaborates on a Qur'anic verse: 'And one of His signs is that He created mates for you from yourselves that you may find rest in them, and He put between you love and compassion; most surely there are signs in this for a people who reflect' (al-Rum, 21). Earlier, when speaking of love, he found a kind of symmetry in the ways men and women relate to each other; now he finds asymmetry and complementarity:

The most important role for women, as understood from this verse, and as recognised by most of our *ulema*, is to restore to man the peace he has lost, to correct the imbalance that prevents him from fulfilling his role. This is the role assigned to woman; this is the status bestowed on her by creation. You can, of course, disagree and believe that woman is malleable and can assume whatever role she is given, and man likewise; who says woman should be confined to this role – she can have better roles in society . . . Fine, this is a theory that some maintain today. But as I said, what we find at the root of Islamic thought is that men's and women's roles are assigned, defined, and not interchangeable; in this view, woman fulfils her role in society through man, that is, she restores to men, the main actors in society, their lost balance and peace.

If we accept this as a proper understanding of religious texts, then, when the Imam says: 'don't allow a woman matters other than those about herself, because a woman is a flower, not an administrator', he means that [gender] roles in society are not changeable. Those who say otherwise are those who say we [are the ones who] define roles, that people can be prepared for roles through socialisation, education, etc.

Typical to his style, Soroush now poses a question and a counter-argument that subvert the claims of conventional understandings.

But if we accept the view that [gender] roles are defined and their limits set, we face the question: what are these limits? Who says these limits have been correctly defined? How do we know the roles men and women have played so far are the male and female roles they should have played? This is an important question. In theory, we might accept that man should remain man, and woman should remain woman, but who has defined what men should do, and what women should do? We have three sources to consult: religion, science, and history.

To find the answer, Soroush invites his audience to consult each of these sources, telling them to focus on history, which he sees as natural, as reflecting the human nature in which men and women have shown their characteristics. He expands his response to a question a few weeks earlier about the philosophy of history.

I know you'll object that women weren't allowed to find their own status. But this objection isn't valid, whether in this case or in others. We must ask why and how men succeeded . . . We can look at history

from an ethical angle and reach certain conclusions; but if we suspend ethical judgement and look at history in terms of possibilities, we'll reach different ones. I suggest that if women occupied a position we now see as oppressed, then they saw this as their proper place in life; they didn't see themselves as oppressed and didn't ask for more, as they saw their *keramat*, their worth, as being women, not as being like men. We can't impose our own values on the past, and assume that what we now consider to be injustice, or essential rights, were valid then – that's the worst kind of historiography. I suppose we're at the start of a new epoch; in fact it began almost two centuries ago, with the rise of protesters, who see themselves as making and designing their own world. It remains to be seen how.

Although science, the second source, Soroush argues, can tell us more about the characteristics of each sex, it cannot give us the final answer. Religion, whose answer he has been exploring in these lectures, is no longer consulted, since:

Men and women of this age – whether religious or not – now inhabit a world where they give an absolute value to expressing dissatisfaction and protesting at their lot. They're not prepared to hear the clear answer of religion, nor does anyone tell them. So we must only wait for the third source – history – to make our places clear to us. It's only then that humans can hear and understand the delight of surrender to God's will.

So Soroush concludes his discussion of women and gender roles. He talks for another half an hour, dealing with questions, but makes no further points.

Soroush in London

In October 1995, when I first listened to recordings of these lectures in Tehran, I did not know what to make of them. I was taken by Soroush's rational approach to sacred texts, by his eloquence, by his willingness to see different sides to an argument, by his courage in opening up and speaking of taboo subjects (such as Farrokhzad's love poetry) in a mosque, to an audience for whom women like her had been demonised in the past seventeen years. On the other hand, I found his own position on gender problematic, and was frustrated and annoyed by what I saw as skilled evasion of any kind of serious debate over women's legal rights. I could also see that his position, and to an extent his approach to women's issues, was very close to that of Shari'ati. They both criticise not just old understandings of women's status in Islam but also the advocates of equal rights; both refuse to enter the realm of *feqh*.

I decided there was no way I could include Soroush among the supporters of gender equality in Islam. Clearly he subscribed to the view that in the divine order of things women are for men, as they are men's 'calm', their anchor. I shared my misgivings about Soroush's gender position with Shahla Sherkat, editor of *Zanan*. She conceded that she had pressed him to let her publish a transcript of his lectures, but when the text was prepared Soroush delayed approving it for publication. Finally, she herself abandoned the project. She gave me a copy of the transcripts.

I could not understand how and why Soroush's ideas had inspired women in *Zanan*, who like me objected to his gender position.³³ Only later, when I was well into writing this book, did I understand that I must shift my focus. It was not his position on gender but his conception of Islam and his approach to sacred texts that empowered women in *Zanan* to argue for gender equality, just as they also, I realised, made possible my debate with the *Payam-e Zan* clerics, even though they did not agree with his approach to the texts any more than I agreed with his gender position. The tension in the last session of our debate – I now realised – had partly to do with my increasing self-confidence in locating my objections within an Islamic framework, which I had internalised by listening to Soroush's tapes and reading his work in the intervening months.

Between May and December 1996 Soroush gave a number of talks in London, mostly in Persian and to audiences largely of Iranian students, including a series of eleven lectures on Rumi and mysticism. I attended most of these talks, and whenever I had a chance I asked questions and tried to draw attention to gender issues. The opportunity to hear Soroush in person helped me place his 1992 talks on women in the context of his wider analytical method and his later thinking. By now I could see how his approach to Islam could open up space for a radical rethinking of gender relations, among other issues. Yet whenever I or other women in the audience asked him pertinent questions, he was evasive. For example, at a Middle East Forum meeting at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, in June, I asked him why he had not addressed women's questions in print. He replied that it was not easy, they cannot be addressed without discussing human rights, and anyway women do it themselves. In September, at a seminar in London, 'Obstacles to Development in Iran', organised by the Islamic Society of Iranian Students, where Soroush was one of four panellists – all male – I asked why none of the speakers had said a single word about women's rights or gender issues. Again Soroush's answer was vague, in line with his 1992 talks.

After listening to the 1992 tapes again, I still could not decide what he was actually saying. There were different layers. Although I agreed with some points, I could not accept others. Sometimes he seemed to be arguing in line with the traditionalists. I agreed with his identification of the main contradiction in the

Islamic Republic's discourse on women, but his own arguments seemed to me just as problematic. What Soroush was arguing, and urging on Muslim women, was to resolve the contradiction by accepting the role they were given in creation, their 'position'. He called this 'the step that must be taken'. To me, this was the voice of a conservative philosopher, not a reformer and thinker trying to reconcile democracy and Islam. Didn't he consider gender equality, too, to be part of democratic and human rights?

Then in October I had a private meeting with him, in which I raised my objections to the gender position he took on the tapes, and tried to draw him into a more specific discussion. I started by summarising his arguments and the issues he raised in the 1992 talks, interjecting comments of my own. Dealing with Imam Ali's views on women, he says we find them difficult to accept because they reflect an old world view. He criticises the two ways they are now dealt with (casting doubt on their authenticity; interpreting them as only concerning Ayesha), saying that neither will solve the problem. He suggests dealing with them by reasoning; but this, I said, is not enough.

AKS: Enough for what? That depends what conclusions you want to draw. In that talk I laid an important foundation whose implications for religious literature, in my view, can't be appreciated now. I said that unquestioning obedience to the words of a religious leader when he reasons isn't obligatory. In certain situations we follow and submit unconditionally: we're Muslims and pray as the Prophet says; here there's no room for questioning. But this isn't the case when there's reasoning in the words of a religious leader.

ZMH: That is, we can refute it?

AKS: Of course we can. If not, what is reasoning for in the first place? not just to persuade but also to evaluate. If Imam Ali reasons with us, he invites us to reason back, to use our critical faculties. There I tried to present a counter-argument, and pointed out that we can't deduce from the Imam's words that women are defective in faith [because they don't pray or fast at certain times]. If we say that, then we must also say that those who can't afford to go on Hajj pilgrimage are also defective in faith; but we say that it's not obligatory for them.

Such a foundation can be a torch for you when entering the religious literature, to put aside fear and clarify matters for yourself. You can say that such reasonings satisfied the logic of people of that age, or that since the reasoning is false it's impossible that the Imam would deduce such a Ruling from it. What conclusion you draw from these arguments depends on your own perspective and intentions. That's the essence of what I said there; it can have many applications if we use it consistently and methodically.

I continued with my summary, and pointed out that, despite the many insights he provides into the old view, there is a kind of fallacy in his arguments, particularly as regards what he calls 'the new view'.

ZMH: When it comes to discussing the new view that 'woman is not for man', you oversimplify a complex debate and reduce women's demands for equal rights to 'wanting to take man's place', which in your discourse becomes not valuing God's design for humanity. It's in this context that you introduce the concept of *keramat* to define the true place and boundaries of created beings, and you examine it in the context of two competing world views: the old and the new. You criticise the *ulema's* understanding of women's role, but as you go on, it becomes evident that yours isn't very different. You too hold that in the divine order of things women are for men, as they are men's 'calm', their anchor. What do you mean by this?

At this point, I quoted a passage from Ayatollah Javadi-Amoli's book, where he, like Soroush, bypasses *feqh* Rulings and tries to place the whole gender debate on a spiritual plane – even invoking the same Qur'anic verse.³⁴ Unaware that Javadi-Amoli was Soroush's most articulate and powerful clerical adversary, I pointed out how Soroush's position and understanding of gender in sacred texts, even some of his arguments, resemble those of Javadi, whose approach is theological. As I blundered on, Soroush kept repeating (probably in disbelief): '*Ajab!* *'ajab!* (how odd!). I went on:

You close your discussion of women and gender roles by inviting your audience to look for the answer in history. That is, you tell them implicitly that women's roles in society will be the same as before, since there is a reason why they have played such roles so far. There are several problems with this argument. History has many narratives: the one you are talking of is written by men; the history of mankind might be natural, as you say, but that doesn't mean it's just; there's no reason to say that the Lawgiver wanted it to be this way, or that it will always remain such; slavery was with us for much of our history, and other examples abound. Gender equality is a Principle, a prevailing value of our age; whether it's here to stay, or a passing fashion, is another matter. The question then is why you, a religious intellectual, also choose to ignore it. What does Revelation have to say on this? What is your own understanding?

Incidentally, you employ a rhetorical device – like the *ulema* when they talk of pre-Islamic views and practices. You criticise past thinkers' outlandish views on women, which somehow diverts attention from a

discussion of current views. For instance, you quote views such as those of Feiz Kashani [woman is an animal created so that man will be inclined to mate] . . .

AKS: He takes it from Ghazzali.

ZMH: And Feiz develops it. That is, you give the men in your audience a false sense of generosity and pride that they don't think like that, and women a sense of gratitude that they aren't thought of that way. I don't know whether or not you do this deliberately, but it sets the tone and the course of the debate. You also do the same when dealing with feminism: focusing on excesses and pre-empting a debate.

AKS: [laughing] You're rather angry!

ZMH: I do find what you say infuriating! I can't accept the basis of what you say there.

AKS: And what is that basis?

ZMH: Perhaps if there's an anger, it's because of the ambivalence in what you say. You say there's a status for women, there's a purpose, but you never say clearly what they are. You reduce this purpose for woman to being man's calm, his anchor in life. But the same could be said of men. And there's more to feminism, to women's demand for equality, than what you told your audience; there are many debates and positions within feminism; no one says that women are identical to men, difference is now brought into the picture, some even argue that apart from their bodies women differ from men in psychology and the way they relate to the world.

AKS: Look, there's a need for these debates, they've mellowed feminists, earlier they went too far and these [religious] counter-arguments gradually made them aware that woman should demand status by keeping her womanhood. I'll give some general explanations and hope they address your questions.

First, we must make a distinction. The majority of our *ulema* – even men of politics – when talking about women, their guide is *feqh*, that is, their ideas, their images come from a set of Rulings they have in mind, then they create an image of women to reflect it.

ZMH: But behind these Rulings lie world views, value systems . . .

AKS: Exactly. I mean, we have two points of departure: if your guide is *feqh* then you define women as such to conform with its Rulings. I claim to be the greatest critic of such thinking. Among the objections I have raised is that *feqh*, as the lowest-ranking religious science, shouldn't become the centre of religious thought. I took the basis of this argument from Ghazzali, and expanded it in a lecture I gave at Harvard last year, entitled 'The Place of Feqh in Islamic Teachings' . . . One of the main differences I see between pre- and post-

revolutionary Islam is that our present Islam is *feqh*-based, whereas before it was spiritual. That Islam was appealing; Islam since the revolution no longer appeals, it displays a stern legalism. In my last article in *Kiyan*, based on a talk I gave at UNESCO, when I reach *feqh* I say it's a kind of stern legalism that brings alienation.³⁵ . . . Of course, it isn't easy to talk of *feqh* in these terms . . . [but I continue to do so] since I see it as one of the ills of current religious thinking, precisely because of what you mentioned: *feqh* holds within itself a world view, but some ignore this, take its Rulings as immutable, then go on to define women accordingly. In a recent article, I argue that a religious Ruling is not the same as a *feqh* Ruling; I discuss [the *ulema*'s] understanding of religious Rulings as like *feqh* Rulings.³⁶ This fallacy must be eradicated.

I want you to know how I think on such issues. *Feqh* is not my point of departure, and the question of women . . .

ZMH: But you can't totally ignore or bypass *feqh*.

AKS: No, I'll get there in the end. The question is where *feqh* should be placed, at our point of departure or at our destination. To enter a debate on the women's question via the path of women's rights is incorrect, and I consciously don't pursue it. Not because I don't believe in them or want to ignore them, but because I believe that this isn't a starting point and will lead us astray. I start from your question: what's the status of women? Women's status mustn't be reduced to law; it's much broader. In the past, women's status wasn't what we say. Look at the religious literature. When I first quoted what Hakim Sabzevari said on women, some [*ulema*] got angry, and denied the authenticity of my quotation. In the text Molla Sadra wrote that several types of animals are created, one of which, woman, is created for men to mate with. Then Hakim Sabzevari comments on the text, saying the great man made a just point; he relies on it too in his interpretations of the religious texts: men are guardians of women because women are animals whom God gave human faces . . . Someone even wrote that I made this up. I had quoted it from memory, but when I checked, it was correct; I have given the reference in an article which came out in *Sturdier than Ideology*.³⁷ It's important that someone like Molla Sadra had such views, I tell you our jurists thought the same.

ZMH: Some still do.

AKS: I'd be surprised if it were otherwise. What school teaches them otherwise? These texts are still taught in the Houzeh, there isn't one on human rights. They base their logic, the Principles of Jurisprudence, on these philosophers' views. Unless a people's understanding of the women's question is changed, there'll be no basic

change; women will remain less than second-class citizens; if they're given rights, it's from charity or necessity. Look, this is the milieu in which I'm talking, as a person; this is where the status of women must be corrected; in my opinion, we'll get nowhere by haggling about women's legal rights.

ZMH: Mr Motahhari, and today others, didn't think like this.

AKS: I accept that. I'm talking about the dominant rule; they're exceptions, all influenced by outside [the Houzeh]. I don't believe one can enter a legal debate with these gentlemen [*ulema*]; they can produce a hadith to silence you, but not if we start with broader concepts. We must first establish whether woman is human or, as Hakim Sabzevari says, animal; how God conceives of them, regardless of their place in relation to men. Is association with women defiling or enhancing to men? We must say that men can attain spiritual growth through love and friendship with women. This is a path I've been following in recent years in my teachings on Hafez. Hafez believes that humans aren't brought into the world to be ashamed; they've a right to exist and must honour this right. Someone like Rumi or Ghazzali didn't think this way. If we can correct such ideas then we can easily take the next step. That's why I see legal debates as secondary, and favour theoretical and philosophical debates. At present in our society, among our students, we have a problem: how to look at women with religious eyes. Once ideas and views change, laws will change . . . In the West too, ideas on these matters changed first, then women's place in life, in work, and family changed accordingly. *Zanan*, or anyone who works on women, should devote 70 per cent to these broader debates and 30 per cent to legal ones.

ZMH: Do you know that so far *Zanan* has had no article on [philosophical rather than legal views on women]?

AKS: Yes, that's a failing. Not many dare to write on this. It's also a difficult matter.

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

Kiyan, which considers them outside the realm of concern for religious intellectuals.

AKS: No . . . but they're involved in other debates; perhaps one day they will; perhaps they think there's no need, since there's *Zanan*. But I accept that in the realm of religious intellectuals, the women's question is neglected.

ZMH: Why do you think it's neglected?

AKS: Women are always seen through the eyes of *feqh* . . . Women themselves – including socially active intellectuals – tend to define themselves through a series of *feqh* duties. This is an important point.

ZMH: Of course, only some – that is, they've accepted . . .

AKS: I don't mean they shouldn't accept *feqh*; after all, a Muslim man or woman has a set of duties they must fulfil. What I mean is that they don't know their own 'existence', as existentialists would say. I see the difference between old and new men, old and new women, as lying in self-knowledge. That is, in recognising what it is to love as a woman, to be anxious as a woman, to demand rights as a woman. These they [old women?] lack; they think it's a sin to think about men, and don't see themselves as having the right to know. This is the problem: we must first make women aware of themselves. It's extremely difficult. It's like swimming in acid, which is heavy and burns your limbs. It takes a long time to explain to these women that there are some issues that have nothing to do with religion; these are meaningless taboos which are not imposed by God and His Messenger, you have imposed them on yourself and have distorted human relations. What is a woman with this image of herself to do with equal rights? That's why I say: debates on rights should come later. In our society, delicate theoretical work is needed, and when women know themselves, then you can say: now define your relationship with men, define your status, and yet remain Muslim and live according to the *shari'a*. These relations [defined in *feqh*] aren't sacrosanct, they come from minds with distorted world views; many arose in situations when women didn't undertake social responsibilities. In our society, women work and are present, but some still want to enforce outmoded ethics. No one says where they came from, what era they belong to. The only thing that's done is to tell girls not to wear this or that.

ZMH: It's after all a transitional stage . . .

AKS: Of course, but this transitional stage must be paved with awareness, for us to reach more fundamental issues . . . We must change the image humans have of themselves . . . In my talk on *Houzeh* and university,³⁴ I said [to the *ulema*]: if you have a Women's Day in this country, then you must also declare that you reject what

Hakim Sabzevari says: you publish it in your books, yet without criticising it, and if you don't, someone like me will – and then you'll protest . . .

If you ask the same question about men—what's the purpose in their creation? – I would say, I don't know; certainly there's a purpose, but we don't know.

ZMH: Then why do you raise it [when it comes to women]?

AKS: Permit me. I mean that one level of the story goes to God, but at the other level, if you ask the question in broader terms – that is, what's the purpose in creation of mankind, which is divided into two sexes? – my answer is: what men, what women are we talking about? Men or women of yesterday or today? The answers differ. In my opinion, men and women should know each other and define their relationships. The only thing I can say is that we think women can be this or that and assume this or that role. Now whether [what we think] really is their purpose, I don't know. One thing is that in religious thought the greatest status a creature can be accorded is to be on the road to his or her spiritual perfection, not to be a director or a prime minister. In my talks I made it clear that, contrary to Ghazzali's view – that women are among Satan's army and their very essence is to prevent men from reaching God – I say that it's to help men. It's important for women for such a status to be recognised; on that basis their rights will be regulated. Looked at from a religious viewpoint, I think this is the story, and it's worth saying it, since when it's accepted that women bring men closer to God, then we must ask, what women? A woman who doesn't know herself and has no place in society? Or a woman who's found herself and has social rights?

ZMH: These things must be debated; they haven't yet been. When our religious intellectuals don't bring them up, then the field is left to the *ulema* and those who address them outside the realm of religion.

AKS: If there's moderate thinking in the realm of religion, then I think women have a very good position. I know some women who have good places and use them properly, depending on their tact and knowledge.

ZMH: Look, what you say implies inequality; the very fact that you think women must have a place . . .

AKS: No; why inequality? Obviously, if it isn't there you must talk about it for a long time in order to establish it. Don't you accept this? Second, women *are* different from men, this difference is undeniable, so their roles are different.

ZMH: Certainly. But when we say that women's purpose in creation is to restore peace to men and enable them to get closer to God, then

it follows that they should stay at home to care for the children, to cater for his needs, enable him to fulfil his role and duties, and so on.

AKS: This is one job woman can have, and it's an important one. If a woman can only do this, she shouldn't feel ashamed; it's a valuable job and men should be grateful. But it's not right to make it an imperative [woman should only do this, or never do it]. These days it's thought that a woman should feel ashamed to be a housewife, when her husband is doing well in society. In my view, it's no less important than any other [role]. Many of our mothers lived like this, burned like a candle and gave light to others. One characteristic of our society is that it doesn't allow exclusive roles for women; they can work and perform roles, which bring changes in defining their rights in relations with men, etc. We see that these things have happened, and changes are coming about naturally. But a proper basis for them must be established, it mustn't be allowed to take a pragmatic and unconscious course. We must start from a basis that's acceptable to people themselves, that is, from what Rumi and Ibn Arabi said. True, they were people of their time, but their insights can come to our aid. Rumi says: 'Love belongs to the world of humans and doesn't define relations between males and females of other species.' We must start from here, or what Ibn Arabi says, or some of the ahadith of the Prophet; then you can open the way and proceed step by step. But I admit that the issue hasn't been tackled from this angle; or if it has, little work has been done; or it took a legal turn, or certain considerations intervened, or they wanted to introduce something in line with *feqh* Rulings, which to me is a misguided approach. I accept what you say, that the debate is in the hands of those who didn't know how to approach [the *ulema*] or the non-religious ones.

Now let's see what secularists have done in recent years. What they did at the time of the Constitutional Revolution [1906–09] was very positive and achieved things without which women would have little place in our society . . . They yielded their fruit at the time of the Islamic Revolution; nobody then imagined women demonstrating in the streets. But now the secularist slogan is faded; they've nothing new to say. Unless we go to the roots, nothing will change . . . What we want from secularist thinkers is to contribute to debates at root level, for instance what elements of feminism they accept.

We talked for a while about the recent work and ideas of those dealing with women's issues in Iran and outside, and about gender developments since the revolution. I said that, judging from my own work in Qom and following the debates there, I felt that we were on the threshold of a major shift in discourses

and perspectives on women. Soroush reiterated the necessity to go to roots and fundamentals, and develop theoretical grounds, but saw little prospect of this: 'Our society – both men and women – is now too ideological . . . even intellectuals still take their models from *feqh*, they haven't severed that umbilical cord.' He admitted that some important changes have taken place in large towns, but was not optimistic that they would lead to a fundamental shift in perspective, since 'they need theoretical backing', and this was missing.

To me, Soroush's ambivalence on gender comes from the very framework and agenda he set himself. Like Shari'ati, his refusal to address the issue of women through *feqh* leaves him little choice but to talk in abstractions. This brings his views and position on gender close to those of Javadi-Amoli, despite vast differences in their visions and approaches to Islam. Both men bypass *feqh* – Javadi-Amoli taking a theological turn and Soroush, as he puts it, a 'phenomenological' one – and they end up with similar readings and understandings of sacred texts when it comes to gender.

Notes

¹ A group of religious and political zealots who emerged in the spring of 1995, becoming prominent through their violent disruptions of Soroush's lectures. The group is small in numbers but reportedly enjoys the support of Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati (a member of the Council of Guardians) and has links with the Revolutionary Guards and the Ministry of Information (Intelligence).

² For details and dates, I have relied on 'A Biography of Dr. Abdol Karim Soroush' dated July 1996, available at 'Seraj Homepage', a website 'dedicated to coverage and analysis of his ideas': www.seraj.org.

³ After the revolution the Iranian government bought the building (*imam-bareh*); it is now called Kanun-e Touhid (Centre of Unity) and is run by students closely linked to the Iranian ruling establishment.

⁴ In an April 1997 interview with the Seraj website, Soroush responds to criticism about his role in the cultural revolution, which is a sore point and a major reason why he is rejected by secular intellectuals.

⁵ 'Abdol Karim Soroush, 'Horriyat va Rouhaniyat' (Liberty and the Clergy), *Kiyan*, 24 (1995/1374), pp. 2–11.

⁶ Another spur to the disruption was probably Robin Wright's article calling Soroush the 'Luther of Islam'; 'An Iranian Luther Shakes the Foundations of Islam', *Guardian*, 1 February 1995 (reproduced from the *Los Angeles Times*).

⁷ *Kiyan*, 25 (1995); 61.

⁸ For the English text see 'Seraj Homepage'.

⁹ See 'Abdol Karim Soroush, *Qesseh-ye Arbab-e Ma'rifat* (The Tale of the Masters of Knowledge) (Tehran: Sarat Cultural Institute, 1994/1373), Preface, p. 29.

¹⁰ Such as Alan Ryan's *The Philosophy of the Social Sciences*; E. A. Burt's *Metaphysical*

Foundations of Modern Physical Sciences, D. Little's *Varieties of Explanation in Social Sciences*.

¹¹ 'Abdol Karim Soroush, *Tafarraj-e Son'*: *Gofar-ha'i dar Ma'qulat-e Akhlaq va San'at va 'Elm-e Enسانی* (Essays on Ethics, Arts and Human Sciences) (Tehran: Sarat Cultural Institute, 1994/1373)[the volume].

¹² 'Abdol Karim Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Te'urik-e Shari'at* (Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of the Shari'a) (Tehran: Sarat Cultural Institute, 1994/1373).

¹³ Nouchine Yavari-d'Hellencourt, 'La difficile réémergence d'une presse indépendante en Iran: *Kiyan*, une revue en quête de modernité islamique', *Cahiers d'Etudes sur la Méditerranée Orientale et le Monde Turco-Iranien*, 20 (July–December 1995), pp. 91–114. [In 1995 . . . *Kiyan*. See] Ziba Mir-Hosseini, 'Women and the Shari'a in the Islamic Republic of Iran: A Changing Relationship'. Paper presented at the Carsten Niebuhr Institute of Near Eastern Studies Conference, 'Women, Culture and Modernity', Copenhagen, 18–21 February 1996.

¹⁴ Valla Vakili, *Debating Religion and Politics in Iran: The Political Thought of Abdol karim Soroush* (Studies Department Occasional Paper Series, no. 2) (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, 1996) and Robin Wright, 'Islam and Liberal Democracy: Two Visions of Reformation', *Journal of Democracy*, 7(2), pp. 64–75; for his contribution to modern Islamic discourse, see Mehrzad Boroujerdi, 'The Encounter of Post-Revolutionary Thought in Iran with Hegel, Heidegger, and Popper', in Serif Mardin (ed.), *Cultural Transformations in the Middle East* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), pp. 236–59; Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press); John Cooper, 'The Limits of the Sacred: The Epistemology of 'Abd al-Karim Soroush', in John Cooper et al. (eds), *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1998); Afshin Matin-asgari, 'Abdolkarim Soroush and the Secularization of Islamic Thought in Iran', *Iranian Studies*, 30(1–2), pp. 95–115.

¹⁵ 'Abdol Karim Soroush, *Qabz va Bast-e Te'urik-e Shari'at* (Theoretical Contraction and Expansion of the Shari'a) (Tehran: Sarat Cultural Institute, 1994/1373), pp. 81–3; 'Abdol Karim Soroush, *Farbehtar az Ide'uluzhi* (Sturdier than Ideology) (Tehran: Sarat Cultural Institute, 1994/1373), p. 39.

¹⁶ Nabia Abbott, 'Women and the State in Early Islam', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 1, pp. 106–26; Denise A. Spellberg, 'Political Action and Public Example: 'A'isha and the Battle of the Camel', in Beth Baron and Nikki Keddie (eds), *Women in the Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

¹⁷ I later asked Soroush who the man had been. He said he was sitting close by but he thought it was the first time he had come to the mosque. He had asked Soroush to talk to his son, who had a number of questions to ask, but he never came again.

¹⁸ 'Abdol Karim Soroush, *Hekmat va Ma'ishat* (Wisdom and Life), vols 1 and 2 (Tehran: Sarat Cultural Institute, 1995/1373; 1997/1376).

¹⁹ The first time I heard Soroush in person, in Imperial College, London, in May 1996, the large Iranian audience was electrified; later I attended his lectures on Rumi's *Mathnavi*, which he clearly knew by heart, talking without notes.

²⁰ *Nahj ol-Balagheb*, pp. 434–5, Letter 31 (Will).

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 81, Sermon 13.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 257, Sermon 154.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 539, Saying 235.

²⁴ Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), Ziba Mir-Hosseini, 'Stretching the Limits: A Feminist Reading of the Shari'a in Iran Today', in Mai Yamani (ed.), *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives* (London: Ithaca, 1996), pp. 284–320.

²⁵ The recording of the first session ends with Soroush's talk, a reading and recitation of a mystical story from the *Mathnavi*. If there was a question/answer follow-up, as in other sessions, it was not recorded.

²⁶ *Nahj ol-Balagheb*, p. 515, Saying 123.

²⁷ Reynold A. Nicholson, *The Tarjuman al-Ashwag* (Interpreter of Desires): *A Collection of Mystical Odes by Muhyi'ddin Ibn al-Arabi* (London: Theosophical Publication House), p. 8.

²⁸ Barbara Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an: Traditions and Interpretations* (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 50–61.

²⁹ He refers to Molla Sadra's *Asfar*, which has a chapter on love, and Molla Hadi Sabzevari, who defines love as sexual gratification.

³⁰ Forugh Farrokhzad, *Tavallod-e Digar* (Another Birth) (Tehran: Morvarid, 1991/1370), p. 24. For her life and poetry, see Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press), pp. 127–52.

³¹ Forugh Farrokhzad, *Tavallod-e Digar* (Another Birth) (Tehran: Morvarid, 1991/1370), p. 55.

³² The audience's questions ask for clarifications, and elicit no new points. For instance, one asks why the Prophet and Imams were polygamous, and why Ghazzali reached such high status without love.

³³ I found it liberating and promising that, despite its devotion to Soroush's ideas, *Zanan* validated Forugh Farrokhzad, whose poetry Soroush had described as 'too worldly'; see *Zanan*, 16 (Winter 1993), 20 (Autumn 1994), and 25 (Summer 1995). It is interesting that in early 1998 Soroush gave a series of thirty-five talks on Hafez and his philosophy, in which one of the main themes was the importance of earthly love.

³⁴ 'Abdollah Javadi-Amoli, *Zan dar A'ineh-ye Jalal va Jamal* (Women in the Mirror of Glory and Beauty) (Tehran: Reja' Cultural Press, 1993/1372), pp. 38–9.

³⁵. 'Abdol Karim Soroush, 'Zehniyat-e Moshavvash, Hovviyat-e Moshavvash' (Confused Mentality, Confused Identity), *Kiyan*, 30 (1996/1375), pp. 4–9.

³⁶. 'Abdol Karim Soroush, 'Tablil-e Maflum-e Hokumat-e Dini' (Analysis of the Concept of Religious Rule), *Kiyan*, 32 (1996/1375), pp. 2–13.

³⁷. 'Abdol Karim Soroush, *Farbehtar az Ide'uluzhi* (Sturdier than Ideology) (Tehran: Sarat Cultural Institute, 1994/1373), pp. 39–40.

³⁸. 'Abdol Karim Soroush, *Farbehtar az Ide'uluzhi* (Sturdier than Ideology) (Tehran: Sarat Cultural institute, 1994/1373), pp. 21–43.

CHAPTER 14

Women's Political Rights After the Islamic Revolution¹

Mehrangiz Kar

Translated by Haleh Anvari

Mehrangiz Kar was born in 1944 and educated at the College of Law and Political Science at the University of Tehran. After graduating she worked for the Institute of Social Security and began to publish on social and political issues in respected journals and magazines. By her own admission, Kar has been politically active since the age of twenty-four, and her writings reflected her disagreement with the politics of the Pahlavi regime. On the other hand, she was recognised for being non-religious, which became a problem with the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1978. Nevertheless, Kar continued her politico-academic works and published a number of books including two volumes of The Quest for Identity: The Image of Iranian Women in Pre-History and History (co-edited with Shabla Lahiji), Women and the Iranian Labour Market (1974), The Legal Structure of the Family System in Iran (1999), and Violence Against Women in Iran (2000). The conflict between Kar and elements within the Islamic Republic came to a head following her participation in a conference in Berlin (in April 2000 entitled 'Iran After the Elections') and she was subsequently charged on a variety of counts, including 'spreading propaganda against the regime of the Islamic Republic' and 'violating the dress code at the Berlin conference'. Kar was held in Evin prison but released on bail, and subsequently was permitted to leave Iran to receive medical treatment. (Her jail sentence was initially for a period of four years, but was later reduced to six months.) Having been released on bail, Kar was able to leave Iran to receive medical treatment, and she is currently in the USA. Her troubles have not yet ceased, as her husband, the journalist Siamak Pourzand, disappeared in Tehran, and it became clear that this was an attempt by the anti-Kar factions within the Islamic establishment to silence her and her daughters while abroad, but their policy failed, as she has spoken out about her