On Reason

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Religious intellectuals in Iran are striving to redefine the relationship between reason and revelation, and, despite Pope Benedict's belief to the contrary, consider Islam to consist precisely of multiple interpretations, writes Abdolkarim Soroush. Reason's greatest rival is not religion, then, but revolution. Speaking from personal experience of Iran's Cultural Revolution, which he supported, Soroush warns: "The first resource that is squandered in a revolution is rationality and the last thing that returns home is rationality. If it ever returns."

A good deal of truth is contained in Richard Rorty’s comment that, in the Middle Ages, God was god; that in the Age of Enlightenment and modernity, reason became god; and that today, in the postmodern age, there is no God. The idol or the god of reason has been shattered. Today, the beloved notion of “rationality”, once one of the most lofty and sacred of terms, conveys little more than a suspect, ambiguous, and modest meaning. Aristotelian reason, Cartesian reason, Kantian reason, Hegelian reason, religious reason, historical reason, dialectical reason, theoretical reason, practical reason, and all the other varieties of reason, have smashed the mirror into a thousand pieces, so as to make it impossible to see any whole and undistorted image reflected in it.

Today when someone speaks of reason, they are referring either to the logical methods of deductive and inductive reasoning, proof and refutation, and so on, or to the products of reason, including philosophy, language, morality, science, and the like. Since these products are all fluid and mutable, it is considered axiomatic in our times that reason changes (or evolves and is infinitely perfectible). Modern reason and classical reason are different because the products of these two reasons, in other words their science, philosophy, morality, politics and economics, are different. Since this is the case, submitting to a kind of relativism is unavoidable. This is exactly the situation in which we live and breathe today.

Some Muslim philosophers view theoretical reason as a set of theoretical, self-evident truths, and practical reason as a set of practical, self-evident truths. Regarding this definition, it has to be said that self-evident truths have changed; what seemed self-evident to people in the past no longer seems self-evident today. The existence of God was something akin to a theoretical, self-evident truth in the Middle Ages, whereas today it has lost this standing. Conversely, human rights are considered to be self-evident
truths in our times, whereas in the past they were not. The Age of Enlightenment believed itself to be enlightened and described the Middle Ages as the dark ages. And, of course, people in the Middle Ages would have taken the opposite view: they would have said that they were enlightened and that the holders of any rival views were living in the dark.

The fact that hardly anyone uses the expression “the dark ages” anymore itself testifies to a major change of stance on knowledge. It has become clear that both the Age of Enlightenment and the Middle Ages were caught up in and delimited by their own paradigms or self-evident truths; that the inhabitants of the two (epistemic) paradigms could hardly have raised their heads above their own ramparts to criticize themselves. It was only when these ramparts fell away that eyes were opened and tongues could speak. Our situation in the postmodern age is similar. The point we have learnt from Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault, among others, is that we do not have one single rationality but rationalities.

The lesson for us in all of this is rational modesty. In the past, it used to be said that arrogance and selfishness were impediments to rationality; now, we have to say that arrogance equals irrationality and that modesty is one of the essential virtues of rational people and seekers of learning.

Extracting general, universal, ahistorical rulings from the heart of “absolute, ahistorical reason” and considering them applicable to all people in all ages has become more difficult today than ever before. Humanity has arrived at a healthy and beneficial pluralism and relativism, the fruit of which is modesty and the rejection of dogmatism. We must be thankful for this and see it as a good omen. But reason has not only been faced, internally, with a host of shattering, reason-crushing forms; it has also had to contend with many external rivals. I will mention three of these rivals, of which I have personal experience.

**Reason and revelation**

Pope Benedict XVI, in his controversial Regensburg speech, boasted of the collaboration between Christianity and Greek philosophy, describing their reconciliation and alliance as auspicious and epoch-making. He criticized Islam and Protestantism for not having established as strong a link as they should have done with rationality, particularly philosophical and Greek rationality. He even described the God of Islam as an irrational God or even an anti-rational God.

This is not the place at which to assess the Pope’s at times inaccurate and ill-judged remarks. The point is that the relationship between reason and revelation has never been smooth and altogether friendly. Revelation-independent reason has always been viewed as a rival of revelation and prophets never liked being called philosophers. Theologians, who made religious belief reasoned and rational, and saw themselves as serving religion in this way, were considered traitors by religious orthodox followers. The latter were of the opinion that rationalizing religion meant subjecting religion to reason and measuring its truth and veracity on the scale of rationality, and that this was, at the very least, a suspect and useless thing to do. Believers maintained that revelation had come to assist reason; how, then, could this relationship be turned on its head by having reason assist
Cooperation between reason and revelation was, of course, another option. The basis for this cooperation was the idea that the God who created reason was the same God who sent us revelation. Many great Christian and Islamic philosophers, such as Avicenna, Farabi, and Thomas Aquinas, belonged to this line of thought. Sadreddin Shiraz, the seventeenth century Iranian philosopher, went so far as to say: “Woe betide any philosophy that is not confirmed by God’s religion!” The Mu’tazilite school of theology, which unfortunately suffered a devastating historical defeat at the hands of its Ash’arite rival, was founded on the basis of the compatibility of reason and religion and was also on good terms with Greek philosophy. The God of the Mu’tazilites was a just and moral God, whose conduct was in keeping with rational criteria. This was also the Mu’tazilites understanding of the prophet Mohammed and his teachings. Reason in this school was so corpulent as to make religion seem emaciated by comparison; unlike the Ash’arite school of theology, which had a corpulent religion and an emaciated rationality. The Sufis, for their part – who were a different creed altogether – had attained a corpulent love, alongside which both religion and reason seemed emaciated.

At any rate, the discoveries of empirical reason in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, and the conflict between science and scripture, suddenly awakened the dormant battle between reason and revelation and sent perilous waves crashing through this ocean again. I believe that the conflict proved auspicious for both sides, in other words, for both science and religion. It taught both to become more modest, to make fewer claims, and made them more sensitive to the sophistication of the truths that are discovered in different realms. Of course, the battle – alongside the emergence of Protestantism and the bloody conflicts between the different Christian sects – paved the way for the onset of full-blown secularism. When states began proclaiming independence from religion, the hegemony of one religion over all others was broken.

Although Islamic revelation has on occasion been on good terms and on occasion on bad terms with non-religious reason (and especially philosophical/Greek reason), it was never confronted by empirical reason, simply because modern empirical science did not develop among Muslims. Therefore they neither suffered the perils of this battle, nor did they benefit from its blessings. When science arrived victorious in the Islamic countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Muslims, far from quaking in their boots, rejoiced that the victor that had vanquished Christianity would now be befriending Islam. It is interesting to note that modern science and philosophy met almost no resistance in Islamic countries. First, the doors of universities and then the doors of seminaries were thrown open to the new disciplines and they became the subjects of study and discussion. This was also the case in Iran after the Islamic Revolution. I remember how, as a member of the Cultural Revolution Institute after the revolution, an Italian reporter asked me whether the theory of evolution would be eliminated from university curricula. I told him that it would not and then thought to myself that such a notion had never occurred to me or my colleagues. Of course, Marxism should be bracketed off in this respect: clerics have always seen it as a materialist and anti-religious theory.

Today, religious intellectuals in Iran are striving to redefine the relationship between
Reason and revelation; basing their approach on the interpretation of the Quran in particular, they are seeking assistance from modern hermeneutics and the experience of Christianity. Despite what Pope Benedict seems to think, far from fearing multiple interpretations of the Quran, or deeming these to be a violation of the Quran’s status as divine revelation, these religious intellectuals believe that Islam consists precisely of such multiple interpretations, and that it is virtually impossible to reach religion’s pure kernel.

**Reason and love**

The lofty and sturdy tradition of Islamic Sufism was a reaction to two things: first, to the unrestrained corruption, materialism, and pleasure-seeking of the courts under the Umavid and Abbasid caliphates; and second, to the terrifying, tyrannical, and omnipotent God described in the Ash’arites and the Mu’tazilites relentless philosophical digressions into God’s attributes and actions, particularly his justness. The first reaction produced ascetic Sufism, the second, the Sufism of love. The Sufism of love drew a line under both reason and fear. It wanted to love God, not to fear God. And it wanted to be enchanted by God, as a lover is enchanted by the beloved, not to unravel God, as a philosopher solves a puzzle. Mansour Hallaj, the renowned ninth century Sufi, conveyed the condensed essence of this approach as follows: “The beloved is brimming with allures, not secrets.” In other words, God is an object for lovers. And love was such that it went to war with reason. Perhaps the word “war” seems too strong, but perusing the works of Sufis conveys nothing less than this.

Love became the rival of both theoretical reason and practical reason. For one thing, Sufis claim that love grants a lover eyes to see vistas that are beyond the realm of reason. Jalal-al-Din Rumi, the greatest Iranian-Afghan mystic and poet, born in 1234, says to his master and friend Shams-e Tabrizi: “Shams-e Tabriz, love can know you, reason cannot.” In other words, love grants knowledge. It is capable of making discoveries and its findings have cognitive import. Another aspect of Sufism is the belief that reason is a selfish, profit-seeking, and conservative creature not prone to selflessness, benevolence, and self-sacrifice. Love, on the other hand, reduces selfishness to zero, “kills the self”, makes the lover generous, good-natured, hardy, and gallant, and heals all the lover’s spiritual ills.

Although this love is the kernel of religiosity, it in fact lies beyond the believer’s duties. Most believers seek some benefit and reward from their religiosity; although there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this, it is far from the lofty heights attained by the lover, who leaves behind the realm of benefits and rewards and takes the course of a lover’s gamble. A Sufism built on this kind of love is cheek by jowl with revelation and more or less views prophets as great mystics who placed the products of their contemplations at people’s disposal. Mystics who are not prophets have no such mission.

At any rate, the relationship between Sufism and philosophy or love and reason – like the relationship between reason and revelation – has not been smooth. Muslim philosophers have benefited from mysticism just as they have benefited from revelation, and have understood neither as being contrary to pure reason. The least that can be said is that philosophers have taken on board those mystical findings that have lent themselves to reason and have opted for silence on the rest. But mystics preferred minds that were unencumbered by philosophy and considered philosophical musings and “attachment to
causes” to be incompatible with a lover’s position. Moreover, although the pre-conceptual and pre-theoretical understanding of mystics could be poured into philosophers’ conceptual moulds, in doing so they lost their novelty and authenticity – this made mystics steer away from philosophy.

Having taught both philosophy and mysticism, I have dwelt in the heart of this duality all my life and have watched my students well to see which way they would jump. I have rarely come across anyone who can endure this tug-of-war and continue to hang on to both ends. Ultimately, either reason or love has triumphed; more often than not, love has proved stronger.

Reason and revolution

Revolution is a blistering explosion of hatred and the discharged energy of this ruinous emotion. It has no affinity with the coolness of analytical reason. What affinity can there be between a hatred that wants to destroy tradition, monarchy, property, and so on, and a reason that wants to know and understand?

In revolutions, love and emotions are invariably given their due, but reason is not so well served. Much time passes before a revolution’s leaders rein in the destruction and turn to rationality and construction. To be fair, revolutions are not without rationality, but their rationality mostly manifests itself as the rejection of the outgoing rationality. Revolutionaries know what they oppose, but they are a long way from knowing what they favour.

Revolutionaries are fiery idealists who are deluded about what they can achieve. They imagine that they can change traditions and human beings quickly and replace them with new traditions and new human beings. All revolutions are anarchist to some extent – if there is no component of anarchism within revolution, it is not a revolution. In revolutions, the colourful spectrum of reality pales into monochrome and everything is reduced to black and white: the past is bad, the future is good; a counterrevolutionary is bad, a revolutionary is good; and so on.

In this way, the door is shut to analytical reason, which seeks more subtle and realistic categorizations. In revolutions, there is just one single measure for good and bad: the revolution itself. And this is tantamount to abandoning all measures: not only is the revolution good, but the revolution equals good! When something becomes its own measure, irrationality has arrived.

The task of rational people in the middle of revolutions is not to turn back the revolutionary wave; this is beyond their abilities. Their task is to reduce the destruction and to guide energies away from chaos and destruction and towards rebuilding. Having experienced a revolution myself and been charged with responsibilities within it, I have seen this truth first hand. Anyone who has witnessed a revolution recognizes the culpability of those who leave the people no option but to resort to a revolution. The first resource that is squandered in a revolution is rationality and the last thing that returns home is rationality. If it ever returns.

Of these three-fold rivals of reason – revelation, love, and revolution – it is the third that
is the most merciless. Revelation has more or less conducted a reasonable historical exchange with reason, which can be beneficial to both sides. Love, for its part, has always been a rare good, in the possession of a small minority. While it stirs up excitement, it has not stirred up wickedness. But, when faced with all-embracing revolutions, which have neither love’s beauty nor revelation’s sanctity, people can only seek refuge in God; for revolutions rob people of both life and reason. The wise ones in any community have a duty to steer political, social, and economic policies towards a rational and just system, so that the need never arises for revolutionary destruction and irrationality. It behoves them to spread justice to keep the revolution at bay.

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