

THE ONTOLOGY OF MYSTICISM AS THE FOUNDATION OF DELIBERATIVE RATIONALITY IN THE THOUGHT OF ABDOLKARIM SOROUSH

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Abstract: *The crisis of religious authority, identity polarization, and informational disruption in the contemporary public sphere indicate a tension between religious truth claims and the demands of deliberate rationality within plural societies. Abdolkarim Soroush's thought offers a conceptual distinction between religion as a transcendent reality and religious knowledge as a historical construction, thereby opening the possibility for a reinterpretation of the relationship between mysticism and political rationality. This study aims to analyze how the ontology of mysticism in Abdolkarim Soroush's thought establishes a normative foundation for deliberative rationality and inclusive political ethics in contemporary society. The research employs a qualitative design using normative-critical philosophical analysis. Data was collected through library research and analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The findings indicate that Soroush's ontology of mysticism generates an awareness of epistemic limitation that develops into epistemic humility as the basis of dialogical ethics. This awareness becomes the foundation of deliberative rationality, rejecting the absolutization of interpretation and affirming intersubjective argumentative validation. Within this construction, mysticism provides a normative orientation for inclusive political ethics that upholds interpretative pluralism and equality of arguments. It can be concluded that Soroush's ontology of mysticism offers a philosophical basis for integrating spirituality and public rationality. Epistemic humility strengthens deliberate legitimacy in plural societies and contributes to the development of deliberative democracy grounded in metaphysical awareness and argumentative responsibility, while encouraging more inclusive, reflective, and ethically oriented public dialogue efforts.*

Keywords: *Abdolkarim Soroush, Deliberative Rationality, Mysticism, Ontology.*

Abstrak: Krisis otoritas keagamaan, polarisasi identitas, dan disrupsi informasi dalam ruang publik kontemporer menunjukkan adanya ketegangan antara klaim kebenaran religius dan

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tuntutan rasionalitas deliberatif dalam masyarakat plural. Pemikiran Abdolkarim Soroush melalui pemikirannya menawarkan distingsi konseptual antara agama sebagai realitas transenden dan pengetahuan agama sebagai konstruksi historis, yang membuka kemungkinan reinterpretasi relasi antara mistisisme dan rasionalitas politik. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana ontologi mistisisme dalam pemikiran Abdolkarim Soroush membentuk dasar normatif bagi rasionalitas deliberatif dan etika politik inklusif dalam konteks masyarakat kontemporer. Penelitian ini merupakan studi kualitatif dengan analisis filosofis normatif-kritis. Data dikumpulkan melalui studi kepustakaan dan dianalisis menggunakan teknik analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa ontologi mistisisme Soroush menghasilkan kesadaran keterbatasan epistemik yang berkembang menjadi kerendahan epistemik sebagai dasar etika dialog. Kesadaran tersebut menjadi fondasi rasionalitas deliberatif yang menolak absolutisasi tafsir dan menegaskan validasi argumentatif intersubjektif. Dalam konstruksi ini, mistisisme menyediakan orientasi normatif bagi etika politik inklusif yang menghargai pluralitas interpretasi dan kesetaraan argumen. Dapat disimpulkan bahwa ontologi mistisisme Soroush memberikan dasar filosofis bagi integrasi spiritualitas dan rasionalitas publik. Kerendahan epistemik memperkuat legitimasi deliberatif dalam masyarakat plural serta berkontribusi pada pengembangan demokrasi deliberatif yang berbasis kesadaran metafisik dan tanggung jawab argumentatif, sekaligus mendorong upaya dialog publik yang lebih inklusif, reflektif, dan berorientasi etis.

Kata-kata Kunci: *Abdolkarim Soroush, Mistisisme, Ontologi, Rasionalitas Deliberatif.*

Introduction

Empirical conditions in various contemporary Muslim societies indicate that the relationship between religious discourse and politics continues to face fundamental challenges concerning the legitimacy of religious interpretation in the public sphere and systems of governance. In the Indonesian context, this dynamic became particularly evident during the 2017 Jakarta Gubernatorial Election, when debates surrounding the interpretation of Q.S. Al-Mā'idah [5]:51 evolved into a central issue in public discourse and triggered social mobilization based on religious identity. The resulting polarization did not merely reflect differences in political preference but also revealed a contestation over the authority of religious interpretation in determining the legitimacy of political leadership (Hidayatulloh et al., 2023, 280).

This episode demonstrates that religious interpretation can function both as a source of legitimacy and as an instrument of mobilization within democratic deliberative spaces, thereby generating tension between theological truth claims and the principle of pluralism in modern political systems. The phenomenon correlates with the increasing polarization of religious interpretations that may hinder deliberative rationality in the public sphere (Mokhtari, 2024, 418). Traditional religious paradigms that position religious knowledge as final and absolute tend to produce resistance toward critical dialogue, thereby creating a gap between theological truth claims and the socio-political demands of modernity, which require openness, pluralism, and rational argumentation (Dabbagh 2023, 250).

More fundamentally, this condition reflects a philosophical problem rather than merely a political one, namely, the persistence of interpretive absolutism

that treats particular religious interpretations as final and unquestionable. Such absolutism closes the space for deliberation by excluding alternative perspectives and undermining the intersubjective validation of truth claims. In this sense, the Jakarta case exemplifies how rigid theological certainties can disrupt public rationality, transforming religious discourse from a medium of ethical guidance into a mechanism of exclusion. Therefore, the core issue lies not in political contestation itself, but in the ontological and epistemological assumptions that allow interpretive claims to be treated as absolute, thereby inhibiting the development of deliberative rationality in plural societies.

In discussions on religious authority and interpretation in the public sphere, Abdolkarim Soroush maintains that religious knowledge is inherently historical and therefore subject to revision, as it reflects human engagement with revelation rather than revelation itself (Soroush 2020, 108). This idea has been widely referenced in contemporary discussions on religious democracy in the Muslim world. Similarly, Asef Bayat, in his analysis of post-Islamism, argues that modern Muslim societies face the necessity of reconciling religious faith with public rationality and citizenship rights, as ideological Islamism tends to generate political exclusivism (Bayat 2023, 79).

In the contemporary context, this challenge has intensified in the post-truth era, where traditional interpretive authority is increasingly questioned, and the public sphere requires argument-based rationality that remains open to difference (Ahwadzy and Kafabihi 2025, 33). This condition reveals a gap between the ideal of inclusive deliberation and the rigid reality of religious interpretation, thereby underscoring the need to construct a new philosophical foundation that connects spiritual experience with deliberate rationality.

In the domains of philosophy of religion and political theory, several theoretical foundations are central to this study. The ontology of mysticism within the Islamic tradition refers to an understanding of reality that regards transcendental experience and spiritual consciousness as integral components of human existence. This perspective allows for a more dynamic conception of religious knowledge that remains open to historical context, thereby generating epistemic humility as a prerequisite for deliberative rationality (Mokhtari 2024, 423). Meanwhile, the concept of deliberative rationality in modern political thought, particularly as developed within contemporary political philosophy, emphasizes agreement achieved through open argumentation as the basis for the legitimacy of public norms (Hardiman 2019, 169). The relationship between the ontology of inner experience and the structure of public rationality thus constitutes a theoretical intersection that has not yet been conceptually elaborated in existing scholarship.

Several previous studies have examined various aspects of Abdolkarim Soroush's thought, particularly concerning the epistemology of religious knowledge and the relationship between religion and democracy. For example, Mokhtari emphasizes that religious knowledge is historical and contingent, rejecting interpretive absolutism and thereby opening space for dialogue between religion and science (Bunardi 2021, 99). Basit et al. demonstrate how the relativity of truth within

religious pluralism generates tension in public discourse (Basit et al. 2025, 171), while Akbar discusses the expansion–contraction theory as an interpretive mechanism that enables religious knowledge to remain relevant in modern contexts (Akbar 2022, 30). Furthermore, other studies highlight Soroush’s contribution in integrating rationality with a reformist orientation toward religious interpretation (Lantong 2022, 180).

However, these studies remain largely confined to epistemological analyses (how religious knowledge is formed) or political implications (how religion operates in public life) and have not sufficiently addressed the ontological dimension underlying Soroush’s thought. In particular, the role of mystical ontology as the foundational structure that shapes modes of knowing and forms of rational engagement has not been systematically elaborated. This indicates a critical gap: while previous research explains how religious knowledge becomes plural and dynamic, it does not adequately explain why such plurality is ontologically grounded in human limitation and spiritual experience.

The novelty of this study lies in its systematic linkage between the ontology of mysticism and deliberative rationality as the foundation of inclusive political ethics in contemporary discourse. Rather than focusing solely on epistemology or political outcomes, this study shifts the analysis to the level of ontology by examining how the structure of mystical experience—characterized by awareness of transcendence and epistemic limitation—functions as the generative basis of rational deliberation. In this sense, mysticism is not treated as a private spiritual phenomenon, but as an ontological condition that produces a non-absolutist, dialogical form of rationality. Accordingly, this research offers a new contribution both to contemporary Islamic philosophical theory and to ongoing discussions concerning normative legitimacy in modern deliberative politics.

The primary objective of this article is to explain how the ontology of mysticism in Soroush’s thought establishes a philosophical foundation for inclusive and ethical deliberative rationality within contemporary public politics. By elucidating how the structure of mystical experience supports dialogical openness, this article seeks to develop a theoretical model that connects inner spiritual experience with practices of rational deliberation relevant to present socio-political challenges.

The academic significance of this study lies in its contribution to addressing the theoretical gap between the Islamic metaphysical tradition and contemporary political philosophy, while simultaneously offering a critique of dualistic perspectives that separate spirituality from public rationality. More specifically, this study responds to two dominant impasses in modern discourse: on the one hand, secularism, which tends to exclude religion from the public sphere by confining it to the private domain; and on the other hand, religious fundamentalism, which excludes rational deliberation by absolutizing particular interpretations of truth.

By grounding deliberate rationality in the ontology of mysticism, this study proposes an alternative path that neither eliminates religion from public life nor reduces it to dogmatic authority but instead repositions spirituality as a source of epistemic humility and dialogical engagement. This research expands the scope of

Islamic philosophical inquiry by positioning ontology as a normative foundation relevant to modern political discourse. From a practical perspective, the findings of this study have the potential to provide a normative basis for strengthening cross-group dialogue within plural societies. The conceptual formulation developed herein may help reduce interpretive conflicts that often hinder deliberate processes in modern democracies by offering a philosophical justification for openness, rationality, and public responsibility in the articulation of religious discourse.

This study constitutes a qualitative inquiry employing a normative-critical philosophical approach combined with hermeneutic-conceptual analysis. Methodologically, it is situated within the tradition of contemporary Islamic philosophy, which emphasizes argumentative reconstruction and conceptual analysis of the structure of ideas (Gerring 2019, 53; Flick 2019, 12). Data collection was conducted through documentation and an in-depth literature review of Soroush's primary works, while secondary data were drawn from scholarly journals relevant to the focus of the study. This process involved identifying central themes and classifying key concepts. To ensure data credibility, source triangulation was applied by comparing various academic interpretations of the same concepts and conducting cross-readings between primary texts and contemporary critical studies (Nowell et al. 2017, 110).

To ensure data credibility, source triangulation was applied by comparing various academic interpretations of the same concepts and conducting cross-readings between primary texts and contemporary critical studies (Nowell et al. 2017, 113). In this study, triangulation was operationalized by systematically comparing Soroush's primary works, particularly *The Expansion and Contraction of Religious Knowledge*, with contemporary scholarly critiques and interpretations of his thought. This procedure enables the researcher to evaluate the consistency of key concepts, identify potential interpretive biases, and ensure that the reconstruction of Soroush's arguments remains both textually grounded and analytically coherent.

Data analysis was carried out through staged thematic and conceptual analysis. The first stage involved data reduction; the second stage consisted of conceptual coding to identify major categories; and the third stage entailed theme development and the examination of interconceptual relationships. This process followed a systematic qualitative analysis framework (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2020, 240) and a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2020, 87). Subsequently, conceptual analysis was employed to assess the internal coherence and logical consistency of the arguments, thereby producing an integrated theoretical construction.

The Ontological Foundations of Mysticism in the Thought of Abdolkarim Soroush

Ontological reasoning in the thought of Abdolkarim Soroush draws a clear distinction between religion as a fixed and divine reality and religious knowledge

as the result of human understanding of revelation, which is therefore relative and historical. According to Soroush, religion itself rests upon a transcendent dimension that is not subject to temporal change, whereas human interpretation and understanding of religion exist within an epistemic sphere that continuously develops in accordance with historical and cultural dynamics (Soroush 2020, 114-16).

In this study, the ontology of mysticism is not understood merely as a spiritual or epistemological method, but as a conception of reality in which human existence is structurally related to a transcendent source that can never be fully grasped. This ontological structure produces a form of consciousness grounded in limitation, which becomes the basis for epistemic humility and, subsequently, rational deliberation.

Syafaq et al. argue that within modern Islamic thought, metaphysics and ontology remain essential components in the formation of a coherent religious epistemology, such that every knowledge claim must account for the relationship between sacred reality and the cultural dynamics that surround it. Within this framework, mysticism functions ontologically by situating human knowledge within a reality that exceeds cognitive mastery, thereby preventing closure in interpretation and enabling openness to rational contestation (Syafaq et al. 2023, 253). Accordingly, the structure of reality constructed by Soroush places inner experience and epistemic reflection as central elements in understanding the relationship between human beings and the sources of revelation, thereby implying that religious reality cannot be definitively grasped by any particular historical subject.

This distinction reinforces the premise that spiritual experience and human interpretation of revelation possess an ontological status distinct from divine reality itself, while simultaneously opening space for intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue in understanding contemporary religious reality (Soltani 2018, 200). Mystical experience, in this sense, does not produce knowledge in a positivistic manner but discloses the limits of knowledge, and this disclosure becomes the condition for rational reflexivity. Recent research further confirms that the transcendent constants within religiosity do not automatically guarantee epistemic certainty; rather, mystical experience functions as an indicator of dimensions of reality that cannot be fully articulated propositionally yet remain relevant as sources of metaphysical insight (Felsenthal and Agbaria 2025, 251).

In Soroush's thought, the relationship between revelation and spiritual experience is not conceived as a linear connection between text and interpretation, but as a dynamic interaction between the absolute divine dimension and the limited, contextual capacity of human understanding. This dynamic interaction constitutes the process through which mystical ontology is translated into epistemic awareness and further into a rational disposition that resists absolutism. Recent studies indicate that Soroush positions revelation as an entity that transcends human cognitive capacity, thereby rendering spiritual experience one means of approaching aspects of reality that cannot be fully explained solely through

rational-discursive methods (Badarussyamsi 2016, 58).

In contemporary Islamic epistemology, scholars argue that historically situated subjective experience, including mystical experience, constitutes an essential component in the construction of religious knowledge, facilitating intellectual openness without negating the authority of the text as the primary referent (Saumantri 2022, 289). Thus, mysticism contributes not as an alternative to rationality but as a precondition that shapes how rationality operates, namely, as a non-absolute, dialogical, and self-reflective process. Within this framework, spiritual experience does not function as the final substance of religious knowledge; rather, it serves as an epistemic referent that enables broader and more inclusive interpretations while distancing monolithic claims to interpretive truth. Accordingly, the relationship between revelation and spiritual experience in Soroush's thought affirms that religious understanding is grounded not only in textual sources but also in continuously evolving historical subjectivity. Research by Masaroh et al. finds that such epistemic dynamics integrating revelation, textual tradition, and personal experience often produce interpretations that are more adaptive to the complexities of contemporary socio-political relations (Masaroh et al. 2025, 19).

Human ontological humility emerges as a direct consequence of the distinction between the reality of revelation and religious knowledge. Soroush maintains that absolute truth claims regarding religious interpretation are indefensible due to the epistemic limitations inherent in human beings as historical subjects. This ontological humility is not merely a psychological attitude or ethical disposition, but a necessary consequence of the structure of reality itself: since divine reality is absolute while human cognition is inherently finite and fallible, any claim to absolute truth in interpretation becomes ontologically untenable.

According to Ahwadzy and Kafabihi, the assertion that religious knowledge is conditional and contextual demonstrates that absolute claims to textual interpretation are not only historically untenable but also counterproductive within contemporary intellectual pluralism (Ahwadzy and Kafabihi 2025, 35). Other philosophical literature extends this argument by asserting that an epistemic ontology conscious of human limitation constitutes a prerequisite for dialogical ethics in plural societies, since it establishes the premise that all truth claims must remain subject to ongoing rational evaluation (Hajam and Saumantri 2022, 122).

Accordingly, the ontology of mysticism in Soroush's thought does not entail ontological relativism but instead gives rise to a form of epistemological non-absolutism, wherein human understanding of divine reality remains conditioned by epistemic limitation, while spiritual experience cultivates awareness of that limitation and enables dialogical engagement. This is the key process: mystical awareness, epistemic humility, and dialogical rationality. Anti-absolutism, as a metaphysical consequence of Soroush's ontological construction, arises from the paradox between an absolute reality and fallible human knowledge.

Within this perspective, absolute claims to religious interpretation are rejected not as a denial of fundamental religious values, but as an acknowledgment that all

interpretive formulations produced by human beings are subject to contraction and expansion in accordance with developments in knowledge, culture, and historical context (Mokhtari 2024, 420). Muhammad asserts that this process of contraction and expansion represents an epistemic dynamic that recognizes intellectual evolution as an expression of human interaction with the source of revelation within a modern multi-normative context (Muhammad 2020, 145).

Theoretically, this implies that religious hermeneutics requires an ethical and open discursive space for argumentative exchange, not only within internal religious communities but also in interdisciplinary dialogue with the sciences and the humanities (Saumantri and Hajam 2023, 12). Therefore, the ontology of mysticism functions as the ontological grounding of deliberative rationality, not by replacing reason, but by structuring it as inherently non-absolutist, dialogical, and open to revision. Thus, Soroush's thought presents an ontological foundation that not only rejects absolutism in religious understanding but also advances the premise that epistemic openness and dialogue are necessary manifestations of the mystical structure of reality he proposes.

Furthermore, Soroush's ontological distinction between divine religion and human religious knowledge also reflects a broader philosophical critique of epistemological essentialism within contemporary Islamic thought. According to Ali, modern Islamic reformist discourse increasingly emphasizes the provisional and historically conditioned nature of religious interpretation as a response to the challenges of pluralism, globalization, and intellectual fragmentation (Ali 2023, 40). This indicates that Soroush's mystical ontology not only reconstructs the metaphysical relationship between humanity and revelation but also redefines the epistemic authority of religious interpretation within modern Muslim societies. In this context, the awareness of ontological limitations becomes the basis for rejecting monopolistic claims over religious truth, thereby enabling a more dialogical and deliberative epistemic culture.

This argument is reinforced by recent scholarship on contemporary Islamic hermeneutics. Research conducted by Jannah and Zulfa explains that the recognition of human finitude in understanding revelation constitutes a crucial foundation for the emergence of interpretive pluralism within modern Islamic intellectual traditions (Jannah and Zulfa 2026, 59). Their findings demonstrate that religious interpretation cannot be separated from socio-historical contingencies that shape the interpreter's worldview, educational background, and cultural experience. Consequently, Soroush's conception of mystical ontology may be understood as an attempt to preserve the transcendence of revelation while simultaneously acknowledging the inevitability of interpretive diversity in human engagement with sacred texts.

Moreover, the ontological function of mysticism in Soroush's thought can also be interpreted as a critique of rigid rationalism that reduces religious reality solely to formalistic textual reasoning. According to Wahyuningsih, the reduction of religion into purely legalistic and textual frameworks often marginalizes the experiential and existential dimensions of religiosity, thereby producing forms of

religious absolutism detached from ethical reflexivity (Wahyuningsih 2025, 95). In contrast, Soroush positions mystical consciousness as an epistemic mechanism that continuously reminds human beings of the incompleteness of their understanding (Soroush 2019, 122). This position suggests that spiritual experience does not negate rational inquiry; rather, it expands the horizon within which rationality operates by incorporating existential awareness, ethical sensitivity, and metaphysical humility.

The findings of this study further indicate that mystical ontology in Soroush's framework possesses significant implications for contemporary democratic and pluralistic discourse. According to Ridwan et al., non-absolutist epistemology within modern Islamic philosophy contributes substantially to the development of democratic ethics because it encourages openness toward disagreement, rational negotiation, and the legitimacy of multiple perspectives in public discourse (Ridwan et al. 2024, 48). This perspective aligns with Soroush's argument that no individual or institution possesses absolute authority over religious interpretation since all human understanding remains conditioned by historical and epistemological limitations. Therefore, mystical ontology becomes not merely a metaphysical doctrine but also a socio-intellectual foundation for inclusive and dialogical coexistence in plural societies.

In addition, recent interdisciplinary studies on religion and epistemology demonstrate that epistemic humility increasingly functions as a critical category in addressing ideological polarization and religious extremism. According to Bowes and Tasimi, epistemic humility enables individuals to recognize the provisional character of their beliefs without necessarily abandoning their theological commitments (Bowes and Tasimi 2025, 573). This finding is highly relevant to Soroush's conception of mystical awareness, wherein acknowledgment of human cognitive limitation becomes a necessary precondition for constructive dialogue and rational self-criticism. Hence, the anti-absolutist orientation in Soroush's thought should not be interpreted as theological relativism, but rather as an ontological and epistemological strategy for sustaining ethical engagement amid diversity and uncertainty.

The Historicity of Religious Knowledge and Epistemological Transformation

Within contemporary Islamic thought, this distinction serves as a foundational premise for understanding epistemic dynamics that continuously evolve alongside socio-cultural and scientific developments (Mustaqim 2019, 55). Research by Fadly et al. demonstrates that the firm separation between the dogmatic dimension of religion and the epistemic construction of religious knowledge constitutes a response to the challenges of modern intellectual pluralism, which rejects monolithic claims to singular traditional truth (Fadly et al. 2025, 17).

This ontological distinction between religion as a transcendent and immutable reality and religious knowledge as a historically conditioned human interpretation generates a conceptual framework that recognizes religious knowledge not as a

fixed entity but as a phenomenon that evolves contextually and historically. Wahid et al. explains that differentiating between the normative dimension of revelation and the interpretive dimension of human understanding is a prerequisite for developing a religious epistemology that remains adaptive to modernity without relinquishing its metaphysical foundation. Accordingly, epistemic transformation in modern Islamic thought seeks to preserve continuity between textual authority and the historical dynamics of society (Wahid et al. 2024, 133).

To explain these epistemic dynamics, Soroush formulated the theory of the expansion and contraction of religious knowledge as a philosophical mode of reasoning that describes shifts in the interpretation of religious texts. Conceptually, expansion refers to a phase of interpretation that opens the possibility of new meanings relevant to the needs of the time, whereas contraction denotes the process of revising or restricting meaning when previous interpretations no longer meet contemporary empirical or normative demands (Soroush 2019, 101).

Ismail, in his study of contemporary thought, affirms that this mechanism reflects the dynamic character of religious knowledge, allowing for shifts in meaning without negating the validity of its source. The expansion–contraction mechanism demonstrates that epistemic change is not arbitrary, but is bound to rational interaction between text, social context, and the historical experience of religious communities (Ismail 2019, 139). Contemporary Islamic hermeneutical studies further explain that such a theory functions as an internal regulatory mechanism to ensure that interpretive changes maintain methodological coherence and remain grounded in the normative principles of revelation (Bleicher 2017, 79).

The conception of truth within the context of epistemological transformation has also undergone a paradigmatic shift. In classical thought, religious truth was often understood as an absolute correspondence between the text and transcendent reality. However, recent research indicates a movement away from a static view of truth toward an understanding of truth as a dynamic process continuously tested through the interaction between textual sources and contemporary experience (Mokhtari 2024, 425). According to Saumantri, truth in modern religious discourse is no longer interpreted solely as conformity with metaphysical propositions, but as argumentative breadth that must withstand dialogical verification among interpretive communities (Saumantri 2022, 236).

This argument aligns with Soroush's framework, in which religious knowledge develops through contraction and expansion, rendering truth the outcome of an argumentative process rather than a fixed claim. From the perspective of religious epistemology, this shift reflects the adoption of a coherence-discursive model in understanding the validity of religious claims, whereby legitimacy is attained through rational interaction among subjects rather than through the authority of tradition alone (Landemore 2017, 280).

Table. Ontological and Epistemological Distinction between Religion and Religious Knowledge.

Aspect	Religion	Religious Knowledge
Status	Absolute	Historical and dynamic
Change	Immutable	Subject to contraction and expansion
Authority	Divine and transcendent	Discursive and intersubjective
Validity	Grounded in revelation	Dependent on argumentative consensus

This formulation ensures that while religious knowledge is subject to argumentative validation, such validation is not detached from the normative authority of revelation, thereby avoiding the reduction of Soroush's theory to radical epistemological relativism. This table reflects a significant epistemic shift: while religion remains within the domain of metaphysical constancy, religious knowledge exhibits a dynamic, contextual, and discursive character.

This perspective is supported by studies indicating that a flexible understanding of religion can enhance cross-traditional dialogue in plural societies (Saumantri et al. 2025, 165). According to Hardiman, in studies of religion and the public sphere, an epistemic model that acknowledges the historicity of interpretation contributes to deliberate stability in diverse societies by reducing the absolutization of singular interpretations (Hardiman 2020, 185). Thus, epistemological transformation is not merely a normative phenomenon but represents the evolution of an interpretive system that develops in response to contemporary social, cultural, and scientific challenges.

Furthermore, the historicity of religious knowledge in Soroush's framework demonstrates that interpretation is inseparable from the socio-intellectual environment in which religious subjects exist. According to Popa, religious knowledge is always mediated through historical consciousness, cultural structures, and linguistic frameworks that shape how revelation is understood within a particular era (Popa 2022, 291). This implies that interpretive activity cannot be reduced to a purely textual exercise detached from social transformation. Rather, the meaning of religious texts continuously interacts with changing realities, thereby producing new epistemic configurations capable of responding to contemporary ethical and intellectual challenges. In this context, Soroush's theory of contraction and expansion may be interpreted as an ontological acknowledgment of the historical situatedness of all human understanding.

This argument is strengthened by recent studies in contemporary Islamic hermeneutics. Research conducted by Sya'bani explains that interpretive flexibility within Islamic thought constitutes an important mechanism for maintaining the relevance of religious discourse amid scientific modernization and cultural pluralization (Sya'bani 2019, 17). His findings indicate that epistemological transformation emerges not as a rupture with tradition but as a process of reinterpreted continuity that preserves the normative authority of revelation

while simultaneously accommodating contextual changes. Accordingly, Soroush's epistemological project reflects an attempt to reconcile transcendental permanence with historical dynamism, thereby preventing the rigidification of religious interpretation into closed ideological systems (Soroush 2019, 124).

Moreover, the theory of contraction and expansion reflects a broader shift from foundationalist epistemology toward dialogical and intersubjective models of knowledge validation. According to Habermas, modern rationality increasingly depends upon communicative processes in which validity claims are tested through argumentative interaction rather than accepted solely through inherited authority (Habermas 2018, 282). This perspective aligns with Soroush's conception that religious truth cannot be monopolized by a single interpretive authority because understanding evolves through continuous engagement between text, reason, and historical experience. Consequently, religious knowledge acquires legitimacy not through dogmatic closure, but through its capacity to withstand rational scrutiny within plural interpretive communities.

The findings of this study also indicate that epistemological transformation within contemporary Islamic thought possesses significant implications for democratic coexistence and intellectual pluralism. According to Supriadi et al, the recognition of interpretive historicity enables religious discourse to participate constructively within modern democratic societies because it reduces exclusivist truth claims and encourages mutual recognition among different communities of belief (Supriadi et al. 2026, 120). This indicates that Soroush's theory does not merely function as a philosophical critique of absolutism, but also as an ethical framework for sustaining deliberative interaction in multicultural societies. Through this perspective, religious epistemology becomes inherently dialogical, self-corrective, and open to revision without undermining the transcendence of revelation itself.

In addition, recent scholarship on religious epistemology emphasizes that epistemic openness constitutes a necessary response to the acceleration of scientific and technological change in contemporary society. According to Adiyono, Ni'am, and Akhyak, modern religious discourse increasingly requires adaptive interpretive mechanisms capable of engaging interdisciplinary knowledge without dissolving theological identity (Adiyono et al. 2024, 183). Their research demonstrates that the inability of religious thought to engage historical and scientific developments often produces epistemic stagnation and social polarization. Therefore, Soroush's conception of epistemological transformation may be understood as an effort to construct a dynamic model of religious reasoning that remains rooted in revelation while simultaneously responsive to the evolving conditions of human civilization.

The Ontology of Mysticism and the Formation of Deliberative Rationality

The discourse on the relationship between ontological mystical structure and deliberative rationality in contemporary political theory implies that spiritual experience is not merely intuitive in nature but also constitutes an epistemic disposition relevant to dialogical functions within the public sphere. In

Abdolkarim Soroush's thought, the phenomenon of epistemic humility is rooted in the recognition that human subjects never possess final access to divine reality due to their cognitive and historical limitations (Soroush 2019, 113).

According to Syafaq et al., epistemic humility not only indicates the cognitive limits of subjectivity but also strengthens the commitment to engage with alternative interpretations within plural contexts, thereby contributing to a participatory and non-dogmatic ethics of dialogue (Syafaq et al. 2023, 154). From the perspective of philosophy of religion and political theory, the acknowledgment of epistemic fallibility functions as a normative prerequisite for deliberative legitimacy because it prevents the absolutization of moral positions in the public sphere (Donatus 2023, 50). Deliberative democracy requires an epistemic ethos that recognizes the limits of knowledge as a basis for avoiding symbolic domination in public debate.

In addition, studies in religious epistemology interpret spirituality as a rational disposition that does not conflict with the norms of deliberation but rather functions as a source of moral orientation that facilitates argumentative openness. Husni and Hayden explain that spirituality can serve as normative capital that strengthens commitment to the principle of mutual respect in public discourse, as it is rooted in the rejection of absolute domination over singular truth claims (Husni and Hayden 2024, 188). In line with this, research on religion and the public sphere (Aliyanto 2022, 13) demonstrates that reflective forms of religious participation correlate with higher levels of deliberative tolerance compared to exclusive forms of religious participation. These findings indicate that reflectively internalized spirituality reinforces dialogical dispositions rather than functioning merely as symbolic identity.

Deliberative rationality, as understood in modern political philosophy, refers to a configuration of rationality that requires argumentative validation through reflective communication among public participants (Viktorahadi 2018, 283). When linked to the ontology of mysticism, awareness of epistemic limitation arising from spiritual experience becomes the foundation for upholding deliberative principles that respect the legitimacy of alternative arguments. According to Hardiman, within twenty-first-century deliberative theory, a style of rationality that values plurality and argumentative openness tends to reduce monological conflict and facilitate the formation of collective normative legitimacy (Hardiman 2019, 189). Habermas explains that the integration of religious motivations into the public sphere does not contradict deliberative rationality, provided that normative claims can be translated into an argumentative language that is intersubjectively comprehensible (Habermas 2018, 173). Thus, spirituality does not negate rationality but rather expands the motivational basis for deliberative participation.

Moreover, mysticism functions as a foundation for public inclusivity in the sense that spiritual experience provides a normative orientation supporting the recognition of interpretive diversity. This view is also articulated by Nasution, who explains that models of religious interpretation acknowledging epistemic plurality enhance the stability of cross-identity dialogue in plural societies (Nasution 2022,

32). According to Saumantri, a transcendent awareness not monopolized by a single interpretation strengthens inclusive legitimacy in plural communities by preventing the absolutist politicization of religious symbols (Saumantri 2023, 38).

In this model, however, mysticism operates not merely as a normative background but as the driving force that motivates individuals to translate their particular truth claims into forms that are accessible within public reason. The awareness of epistemic limitation generated by mystical ontology compels subjects to recognize that their beliefs cannot claim final authority, thereby encouraging them to engage in processes of argumentative translation and intersubjective validation. In this sense, mysticism functions as the inner mechanism that transforms exclusive convictions into dialogically negotiable claims, making deliberative consensus possible in plural societies. Therefore, mysticism cannot be reduced to an individualistic phenomenon; rather, it possesses a normative function in shaping an inclusive public rationality.



Figure. An Integrative Model of the Ontology of Mysticism and Deliberative Rationality.

The figure illustrates that the recognition of epistemic limitation leads to a form of rationality that is reflective and argumentative, which subsequently functions as the normative basis of inclusive political ethics. In moral philosophy, as explained by Magnis Suseno, awareness of the limits of knowledge strengthens commitment to fair and participatory deliberative procedures (Suseno 2018, 112). Accordingly, the constitution of deliberative rationality within the ontology of mysticism is not merely a normative assumption, but rests upon theoretical and empirical

foundations in contemporary studies of religion and democracy.

Furthermore, the relationship between mystical ontology and deliberative rationality in Soroush's thought reflects a broader epistemological transition from authoritarian models of religious reasoning toward communicative and participatory forms of rationality. According to Thompson and Modood, contemporary democratic societies increasingly require moral frameworks capable of integrating spiritual motivations into public discourse without transforming them into coercive ideological instruments (Thompson and Modood 2025, 601). This indicates that mystical consciousness, when grounded in epistemic humility, can function as a mediating structure between personal transcendence and collective rational deliberation. In this framework, spirituality contributes not by imposing metaphysical certainty upon the public sphere, but by cultivating ethical dispositions that encourage openness, reflexivity, and dialogical engagement among participants.

This interpretation is reinforced by recent studies in political theology and deliberative democracy. Research conducted by Baxter explains that religious actors who acknowledge the provisional nature of their interpretations are more likely to participate constructively within democratic deliberation because they perceive disagreement not as a threat to truth, but as an inevitable consequence of plural social existence (Baxter 2020, 490). Such findings align with Soroush's argument that awareness of human epistemic limitation prevents the absolutization of religious claims and encourages argumentative translation into publicly accessible language. Therefore, mystical ontology functions not only as a metaphysical orientation but also as an ethical mechanism for sustaining democratic coexistence in plural societies.

Moreover, the ontology of mysticism in Soroush's framework can be interpreted as a critique of instrumental rationality that dominates many contemporary political structures. According to Kadioğlu, modern societies frequently experience crises of communication due to the dominance of technocratic rationality, which prioritizes efficiency and control over reflective understanding and ethical dialogue (Kadioğlu 2021, 460). Within this context, mystical awareness introduces a form of rationality grounded in existential reflexivity and moral humility, thereby counterbalancing tendencies toward domination and ideological rigidity. This perspective suggests that deliberative rationality requires not only procedural norms of communication but also existential dispositions capable of sustaining mutual recognition among participants with differing worldviews.

The findings of this study further demonstrate that mystical spirituality possesses an important socio-political function in strengthening inclusive citizenship. According to Friberg-Fernros and Karlsson Schaffer, democratic deliberation becomes more stable when citizens are able to transform particular moral convictions into arguments understandable by individuals from different cultural or religious backgrounds (Friberg-Fernros and Schaffer 2024, 964). In Soroush's thought, this transformative process is enabled by mystical consciousness, which compels individuals to recognize the incompleteness of their own interpretations

while remaining committed to ethical dialogue. Consequently, mysticism operates as an inner normative force that encourages translation, negotiation, and intersubjective validation within public reasoning processes (Akbar 2017, 319).

The Implications of Deliberative Political Ethics in the Contemporary Context

The formulation of the ontology of mysticism, which gives rise to epistemic humility and deliberative rationality, has direct implications for pressing issues in contemporary society, particularly the crisis of religious authority. Digital transformation and the fragmentation of the public sphere have shifted traditional structures of legitimacy from institution-based authority to authority grounded in networks and public opinion. According to Fitria and Saumantri, there has been a shift from a hierarchical model to a competitive model that reinforces interpretive plurality while simultaneously increasing the potential for symbolic conflict (Fitria and Saumantri 2024, 85).

Rachman et al. explain that the digitalization of religious authority results in the de-institutionalization of legitimacy, namely a condition in which religious claims compete within a fragmented media ecosystem without stable normative mediators (Rachman et al. 2025, 113). This indicates that digital transformation accelerates interpretive competition while weakening traditional mechanisms of authoritative clarification. In this context, the ontology of mysticism, which affirms human epistemic limitation, provides a normative basis for rejecting absolute claims to singular interpretations and offers ethical legitimacy for dialogical practices among religious authorities.

Polarization and radicalism are also consequences of the absolutization of identity and the reduction of the complexity of truth into a single narrative. According to Abd Khahar et al., epistemic exclusivism correlates with tendencies toward intolerance and the delegitimization of others within the public sphere (Khahar et al. 2025, 77). Similarly, Risbayana explains that absolutist rhetoric in religious identity increases affective distance between groups and heightens the likelihood of radical mobilization (Risbayana et al. 2022: 149). These findings reinforce the argument that awareness of epistemic limitation serves a normative function in reducing monological tendencies and extreme polarization.

In such circumstances, deliberative political ethics grounded in the recognition of epistemic limitation performs a preventive function against the absolutization of identity. Deliberative rationality requires the validation of arguments through intersubjective communication, such that legitimacy derives from the quality of argumentation rather than symbolic superiority. Habermas affirms that deliberative democracy requires the translation of normative claims into a language that is publicly accountable (Hardiman 2019, 186). According to Wowor, deliberative participation accompanied by acknowledgment of epistemic fallibility strengthens political legitimacy by reducing tendencies toward rhetorical domination and symbolic violence (Wowor 2018, 118). This aligns with Soroush's ontological construction, in which awareness of human limitation constitutes the basis of

dialogical ethics within plural communities (Soroush 2020, 129).

Another relevant challenge is the phenomenon of post-truth, namely the dominance of emotion and identity over rational verification in the formation of public opinion. The spread of disinformation has increased significantly within digital ecosystems lacking mechanisms of argumentative correction. Research by Saumantri and Zikrillah demonstrates that repeated exposure to identity-based narratives reinforces confirmation bias and hinders evidence-based deliberative processes (Saumantri and Zikrillah 2020, 147).

In this context, epistemic humility derived from the ontology of mysticism acquires critical relevance. Individuals shaped by a mystical-deliberative awareness are less likely to absolutize their own perspectives and more inclined to subject information to reflective scrutiny. This disposition reduces susceptibility to confirmation bias and mitigates the tendency to adopt extreme identity-based narratives uncritically. Thus, epistemic humility functions not only as a philosophical principle but also as a cognitive-ethical mechanism that enhances resilience against post-truth dynamics. Under such conditions, deliberative rationality grounded in epistemic awareness requires not only openness to alternative arguments but also a commitment to factual clarification and argumentative responsibility.

Furthermore, spirituality as a rational disposition has implications for the formation of participatory politics. Reflective and non-exclusive forms of religious participation correlate with higher levels of civic engagement in deliberative processes (Hidayatulloh and Saumantri 2023, 110). Empirical studies on religion and democratic participation likewise conclude that religious orientations emphasizing universal ethical dimensions enhance the tendency toward cross-identity collaboration in public forums (McConville et al. 2020, 133). In this sense, spirituality does not function as a theological legitimation of power, but rather as a source of participatory ethics that upholds the equality of arguments. Accordingly, mysticism provides a moral orientation for dialogically grounded public participation and strengthens the normative foundation of contemporary deliberative democracy.

Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the ontology of mysticism in the thought of Abdolkarim Soroush carries significant epistemological and political consequences. The distinction between religion as a transcendent reality and religious knowledge as a historical human construction generates an awareness of the epistemic limitations of interpreting subject. This awareness develops into epistemic humility, which rejects the absolutization of interpretation and opens space for argumentative validation within public interaction. Thus, mysticism does not remain confined to individual spiritual experience but functions as a normative foundation for deliberate rationality that requires reflective communication, recognition of interpretive plurality, and commitment to intersubjective legitimacy.

The theoretical implications of this study affirm that spirituality, within Soroush's ontological horizon, can be conceptualized as a rational disposition

that strengthens inclusive political ethics. Deliberative rationality grounded in awareness of epistemic limitation contributes to the reduction of monological truth claims, the mitigation of identity polarization, and the reinforcement of argumentative public participation. Accordingly, the ontology of mysticism provides a philosophical foundation for cultivating a political culture that values dialogue, equality of arguments, and normative legitimacy in contemporary plural societies. This study demonstrates that the integration of metaphysical dimension and public rationality is not antagonistic in nature, but rather a constructive relationship relevant to the strengthening of deliberate democracy.

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