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Historical Studies Profile: Dr. Soroush Dabbagh

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## Historical Studies Profile: Dr. Soroush Dabbagh

I am a Muslim  
My Mecca is a rose.  
My mosque is a spring, my prayer stone the light.  
Fields make my prayer rug.  
I make ablution with the heartbeat of the windows.  
Moonlight flows through my prayers, the spectrum too.  
My Kaaba<sup>1</sup> lies by the water  
My Kaaba lies under the acacias  
My Kaaba travels like the breeze.  
From one garden to the next,  
From one town to another.

- *Sohrab Sepehri (1928-1980)*

From one town (Tehran) to another (Toronto) travelled Soroush Dabbagh to pursue post-doctoral work with University of Toronto with the support of UTM Professors Shafique Virani and Mohamad Tavakoli. When I went to interview Dr. Dabbagh in an office lined with leather-bound books which houses UTM's scholars of religion, a bright-eyed eight-year-old darted out and showed the way. His daddy would soon be going off to London to speak at a BBC panel accessible to a worldwide audience, on the question of Intellectualism and Religion in Iran. Like his own father, Dr. Dabbagh is a brilliant exemplar of an academic who is a public intellectual. He theorises and publicises ways to bring new meaning to centuries-old religious traditions of Persia – or modern-day Iran – where, as in so much of the world, shades of belief have been deeply divisive.

For the Historical Studies Department, the special appointment of this visiting scholar to our campus this year has resulted in two new course offerings, HIS350H5: Islam and Human Rights, and HIS450H5: Ethical Dimensions of Islam. Students have filled up with a number of

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<sup>1</sup> Kaaba is the cube-shaped building, attributed in the Koran to Abraham and his son, which is the holiest site for Muslims, in which direction they face during prayers.

Muslim and some non-Muslim attendees. They have read and thought about such questions as: Is there such a thing as a secular ethics within Islamic ethical tradition, as Dabbagh's reading of Tabatabaie (an Islamic commentator) may suggest? To what extent are ethics socially constructed? Is there room for situational and particularistic ethics? Which are the essentials, and which the accidentals, within Islamic jurisprudence? The classes are not without controversy. Their discussions cast a wide net across both ancient and modern interpreters within Islam.

In speaking to Dr. Dabbagh, one is aware of being in the presence of a penetrating and deeply curious mind. He ranges with perfect ease and sharp insight over a wide range of philosophers from both western and eastern traditions. He is also a devotee of poetry. He states simply that he has "lived for the past eighteen years with Sepehri," alluding to Sohrab Sepehri, the poet quoted above. Following in the path of Rumi and certain classical poets, Sepehri has had a deep appeal to young Iranians. He represents a joyful, pantheistic openness to the presence of divinity and transcendence in the world around us, in the gardens, the moonlight, the water and breeze which beckon the beholder to a form of modern mysticism. "The world is alive, and it has ethical elements as well," says Dr. Dabbagh, who has written five papers relating to aspects of Sepehri's poetry and of modern mysticism.

The Historical Studies Department is fortunate to host this outstanding scholar, to offer a way station on an odyssey that is both intellectual and geographic. Soroush Dabbagh and his wife have travelled a long road from the days when they were both pharmacy students in Iran. Dr. Dabbagh speaks to his own community at Toronto's Iranian school – where he teaches a course on the message of the Sufis for today – in classes which open with a sampling of classical Persian music. His eight-year-old takes a class there too, as he adjusts to the classroom of his

Mississauga public school, where he is now comfortable enough in English to say what he means. In Toronto and Tehran, other bright-eyed children may one day take inspiration from his father's tireless, transcontinental explorations of what is most deeply moral, most deeply human.

*From a Feb.2012 Interview conducted with Dr. Soroush Dabbagh by Prof. Jan Noel*