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Mohammed Arkoun: towards a radical rethinking of Islamic thought

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Introduction

MOHAMMED ARKOUN is one of the pioneers amongst contemporary scholars and thinkers in the field of Islamic Studies, challenging both Muslim and non-Muslim perceptions and approaches to Islam. He confronts the field of Islamic Studies – as well as Islamic thought within the orthodox framework – with the unthought or unthinkable, by calling into question putative certainties and by going beyond the limits established and defended by orthodoxy (and that includes the kind of orthodoxy produced by and within Islamic Studies).¹ He goes beyond the boundaries of Islamic Studies by appropriating methods that traditionally are not part of what is considered to be Islamic Studies or the study of Islam. In this sense, he moves beyond the methodological framework usually ascribed to the field. Furthermore, he strives for a radical change of paradigm by coming out against the established symbolic and semantic system of how to approach Islam, at the same time as calling it into question and outlining counter-strategies. The reactions and the silences – as a particular form of response – concerning Arkoun’s contribution to Islamic thought reflect the significance of his critique.

Of particular interest for this essay² is Arkoun’s project of a critical reading of Islamic reason, and the consequences it has for
new approaches to the Qur’an. The pillars of Arkoun’s edifice of ideas are several concepts that emerged in the course of his search for an alternative, that is, a new, understanding of Islamic thought as a counterpoint to the orthodox version. Apart from the concept of the *imaginaire* whose origin goes back to the French Annales school of historians, other concepts such as *Qur’anic* and *Islamic fact/event* (*fait coranique* and *fait islamique*),⁵ *societies of the Book/book*,⁴ the *unthought* and the *unthinkable*, all bear Arkoun’s mark. He has applied all of them to Islamic Studies with ever-increasing sophistication and has enlarged them over the course of time.

These concepts portray the structure of Arkoun’s thought, which might be described through the metaphor of an infinite pattern of stars on the Moorish faience, especially when seen in relation to the broader context of his vision of a religious anthropology, and his intention to give Islamic Studies in general new impetus. At the same time, they also provide the necessary tools for comprehending Arkoun’s approach.

The complex dynamics of and correlation between the different concepts he describes make some introductory remarks necessary, all the more so considering that Arkoun himself has not systematised his thought. Instead, he develops one concept out of another, refers regularly to his earlier work, and completes propositions made elsewhere without explanation and without reiterating the central points thoroughly. Nevertheless, an in-depth analysis of his writings brings to light the fact that Arkoun creates a complex network of thought and concepts which become even more important when they are explicitly related to each other and applied as a synthesis. With some exceptions, Arkoun develops his ideas largely on a theoretical level⁵ although, regrettably, he does not provide the necessary systematisation for his readers to enable them to apply his ideas to other contexts. Consequently his readers are confronted with several difficulties: a detailed analysis of his thought firstly demands the management of a large body of literature, and secondly, enough time in which to establish a systematic overview.⁶ Furthermore, the majority of Arkoun’s articles and books are published only in French with
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only a small number of English translations available, and translations into Arabic are easier to obtain in Paris or London than in Arabic-speaking countries.

This essay brings together the interconnected concepts of Arkoun’s thought within the context of his approach to the Qur’an. After an overview of his life and career, his main works are introduced and their significance discussed. The main part of the essay then focuses on the impact of Arkoun’s thought with regard to the Qur’an.

Biographical considerations

Mohammed Arkoun is a Berber. He was born in 1928 in Taourit Mimoun in Algeria and grew up in an extended family with a rather poor background and almost no influence within the structures of the village. His family led a traditional and religious life. During his first years of primary school the nine-year-old left Kabylia in order to join his father who owned a grocery shop in Ain-el-Arba, a wealthy village of French settlers east of Oran. He was meant to follow in his father’s footsteps while continuing at primary school. The move to where his father now lived encapsulated aspects of a culture shock and was a formative experience in his life. For the first time he was confronted with the marginalisation and contempt concerning the Berber population in Algeria for being neither Arabophone nor Francophone. Simultaneously he had to resolve the inner conflict of making a distinction as to whether the rejection arose from the colonial system and therefore affected the entire ‘indigenous’ population or whether it arose from the conflict of different social statuses between Arabophone and Berberophone Algerians. Furthermore he had to learn two languages at the same time in order to achieve social status and to be able to communicate outside the Berber regions. Bearing in mind Algeria’s history one can imagine that this is but one example amongst many of the experience of being ostracised.

Finally it is thanks to the commitment of an uncle that Arkoun did not become a grocer but received a good education, being
one of the few Muslims attending a French school. Thanks to a bursary, he completed his graduating examination and went on to study Arabic literature in Algiers. In comparison with the stimulating classes at grammar school with the White Fathers, the university seemed to him something of an intellectual desert, leaving his thirst for knowledge unsatiated. Therefore in addition he attended classes in law, philosophy and geography and entered the field of Arabic philosophy. Two factors during his university years in Algeria were decisive for his intellectual and academic development: firstly, there were the bad conditions for students and limitations of the prevailing structures of knowledge and research; and, secondly, there were serious difficulties with Henri Pérès, the general inspector for the study of Arabic in Algeria, who constantly tried to place obstructions in Arkoun’s way. He was strictly opposed to Arkoun’s plans to leave for Paris in order to finish his studies in France. Both factors nurtured a rebellious attitude and the desire for different academic approaches.

On the eve of the war of independence Arkoun left Algeria for Paris to register for study at the Sorbonne University under Régis Blachère, Charles Pellat, Evariste Lévi-Provençal, Robert Brunschvig and Henri Laoust, for the Agrégation-diploma in Arabic language and literature. In 1956 he passed the examination and left for Strasbourg to teach at both school and university. It was Claude Cahen, also teaching at Strasbourg University, who made him familiar with the ideas and concepts of the Annales School of Historians and their innovative approach to the history of the Muslim Orient. Furthermore, Arkoun’s intellectual formation and motivation were shaped by the general climate of new departures in the 1950s and 1960s in France. The field of humanities at the time was characterised by a search for new perspectives and approaches, which led either to the creation of new intellectual movements and schools, or to the consolidation of existing theoretical and methodological approaches (for example, structuralism, structural anthropology, critical discourse analysis or the school of Annales). In 1970 Arkoun submitted his Doctoral dissertation on Miskawayh and Arab humanism in the tenth century. After having been maître assistant at Sorbonne University and
maître de conférences in Lyon he held a chair of Islamic History of Ideas at the University of Vincennes (Paris VIII), then at the Sorbonne. In 1980 he was offered a professorship at Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris III), including the Deanship of Arabic and Islamic History of Ideas. Since 1993 he has been Professor Emeritus. As well as various fellowships and lectureships abroad he is visiting professor at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. He has been awarded the highest French honours (the Chevalier de la Légion d’Honneur and the Officier des Palmes Académiques) and he recently received the prize of Levi della Vida.

The research on Miskawayh made Arkoun familiar with the field of medieval studies and philosophy and changed his perspective because he gradually realised that it was not only in the field of Islamic studies that Islam was mostly reduced to Sunnism and Arabism. On the one hand, he was impressed by the openness and receptiveness of Miskawayh and his contemporaries to other traditions like the Greek and the Persian ones. On the other hand, he discovered that within adab religious reason could integrate parts of philosophical knowledge without provoking disapproval amongst theologians and jurists/legal scholars. Miskawayh represents a formative impulse in Arkoun’s thought: the correlation of socio-cultural and socio-political circumstances, and the success or failure of intellectual currents, all of which corresponds to the reflection on modalities of mental structures at a certain time in a certain place. Therefore the study of Miskawayh, in the context of the history of Arabic and Islamic thought, provided impetus for undertaking the long-term project of a critique of Islamic reason embedded in the generic context of religious thought. This critique is at the heart of Arkoun’s approach and reveals his self-assessment as a scholar. He describes himself as the combination of a researcher and thinker or a ‘reflective researcher’ (chercheur penseur), that is, a critical thinker applying modern methods of humanities and social sciences in order to analyse Islamic thought according to a philosophical critique.

Arkoun focuses on the hermeneutics of sacred texts – that is, texts declared to be sacred and, as such, providing meaning and
transcendency. His approach is simultaneously historical, philosophical and anthropological and should not be confused with a general critique of religion as such. Instead he tries to unravel the unthought and unthinkable within Islamic thought in order to open up new horizons, while leaving the fixed scope of revelation and religious dogmatics undisturbed but, at the same time, pleading for a rethinking. Thus he analyses and deconstructs the different epistemes, while still remaining in effect within various discourses. Arkoun assumes that any historical analysis should be preceded by a critical assessment of the prevailing epistemes because this analytical category facilitates the emergence of implicit postulates shaping the creation of a discourse.\(^{13}\)

If one glances at Arkoun’s life it seems almost obvious that biographical factors set the pattern for his thought. One might even be encouraged to go further in assuming that the continuity in his approach towards Islam can be put down to these early experiences. From early on he continually traversed the borders between Berber, Arabic and French cultures, languages and traditions. This explains how a varied and complex understanding of Islam was always part of his reality, and how, at the same time, his experience of the oral tradition within the Berber culture was an important element of his cultural heritage. However, he did not encounter in other contexts the self-evidence of the coexisting forms of Islam (considered to be equal to each other), associated with his Berber origins. On the contrary, as a student he was confronted with orthodoxy and thus with the priorities set by the custodians of orthodoxy, whose judgement served as the basis for the creation of the ‘other’. Being of Berber origin he became part of the ‘other’. These experiences account for his commitment both to contribute to an archaeology of the hidden, repressed and marginalised spheres regarding Islam, and to analyse both the reasons and the processes of their disappearance or marginalisation, in order to integrate them while emphasising the importance of what he calls exhaustive tradition.\(^{14}\) Being sensitive, because of the colonial experience, to the phenomenon of Eurocentrism and Western hegemony, he searched for an endogenous way, but without
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taking up the ideas of Muslim reformers like Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida or others. He pursued a more radical approach in departing from orthodox delimitations and dogmatic enclosure (clôture dogmatique). Finally, it should be mentioned that Arkoun himself insists on the fact that existential experiences shaped his intellectual development.\textsuperscript{15}

**Reflections upon Arkoun’s main works**

On closer examination of Arkoun’s publications it is obvious that he is a versatile and exceptional scholar making his way despite numerous difficulties and mixed responses to his ideas and concepts.\textsuperscript{16} The list of books and essays is overwhelming.\textsuperscript{17} A thorough introduction to the entirety of his work is beyond the scope of this essay, especially since it consists mainly of collections of essays partly published in periodicals and journals that are not readily available. For reasons of clarity, the concepts and premises of Arkoun’s Qur’anic approach will be presented separately because they cannot be identified with one single collection or essay. They will be seen in relation to a general view of Arkoun’s thought. Therefore only those collections which serve to elucidate his approach in dealing with the Qur’an are referred to here.\textsuperscript{18}

Although Arkoun never composed a specific *muqaddima* or prologue to his critique, our reflections on his work here begin with some general remarks concerning the project of a critical reading of Islamic reason. This is both the kernel of his approach and the connecting theme for the different concepts, running like a *leitmotif* throughout his work. This critique includes a radical rethinking of Islam as a cultural and religious system. In addition it gives rise to a general critique of epistemology. Hence it necessarily follows that a philosophical perspective should be adopted in combination with an anthropological and historical approach. Such a framework provides the possibility of leaving aside theological and dogmatic ‘a priori’, and enables the scholar to focus on philosophical and mental structures regarding Islamic reason.
This constitutes a first step; the second is to embed these in the corresponding social, historical and socio-cultural context, in order to provide documentation of a dialectic interrelationship. The latter is alive likewise on the level of religious reason, revelation, truth, history and orthodoxy, scriptural or literate culture (in contrast to oral tradition) and the established power.19

Arkoun considers Islamic reason as a specific manifestation of reason in general and a branch of religious reason in particular. The framework for reason in general is set up by the cultural and social context and its inherent systems and visions:

One shall insist that the modifiers occidental and Islamic appended to reason refer to particular rationalities that construct themselves and succeed in imposing themselves more or less permanently under changing linguistic, social, cultural, historical and anthropological conditions.20

Needless to say, the different forms of reason interact.21 Islamic reason emerged in the context of the Qur’anic and Islamic fact/event and in the course of what Arkoun calls ‘the experience of Medina’, that is, concrete historical events that were transformed into ‘the model of Medina’, in other words, into a history of salvation.22 Hence Islamic reason (or the dogmatic reason of Islam) is a form of reason which

accepts to function within religious postulates. That means that it will agree not to discuss the latter but rather to take them as starting points for all constructions and to work at their most fundamental level.23

The premise of a logocentric and dogmatic enclosure (clôturedogmatique), in existence since the tenth/eleventh century, underlies Arkoun’s thought.24 It defines the sphere of Islamic reason, Islamic thought and Islamic discourse and cannot be separated from the phenomenon of orthodoxy. Dogmatic enclosure is a decisive break within the history of Islamic thought putting an end to the innovative period of philosophical thought while contributing to the closing of the bab al-ijtihad.25

The term 'dogmatic enclosure' applies to the totality of the articles of faith, representations, tenets and themes which allow a system of
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belief and unbelief (q.v.) to operate freely without any competing action from inside or outside. A strategy of refusal, consisting of an arsenal of discursive constraints and procedures, permits the protection and, if necessary, the mobilisation of what is presumptuously called faith (q.v.)... No green light has ever been given to a deconstruction of the axioms, tenets and themes that hold together and establish the adventurous cohesion of every faith.26

Dogmatic enclosure guarantees consistency and coherence of the corresponding tradition or orthodoxy because the group members share the same framework of perception and representation/expression. Furthermore, it explains the fact that discontinuities within Islamic thought and history have not been picked out as a theme but rather disappeared in the sphere of the unthought and unthinkable. That is exactly what needs to be deconstructed in order to establish the prerequisite for a reassessment. Moreover a deconstruction of the putative continuity explains the variety within Islamic thought and brings to light the need for the apparently unbroken lines within Islamic thought to be considered as constructs and projections.

The generic focus of Arkoun’s interest is expounded in his first anthology Essais sur la pensée islamique (Essays on Islamic Thought),27 namely, the above mentioned critique within the field of Applied Islamology28 outlining the fundamental principles of his approach in terms of the chosen perspective, methodology and hypotheses. Furthermore, Arkoun emphasises the necessity of a meta-level for topics in the field of history of ideas. He considers a meta-level indispensable for the reassessment of cultural actions, their meaning and implications. Reassessing or rethinking Islamic thought requires analysis of the way in which discourses are integrated within the logocentric and dogmatic enclosure, and thus the modalities of how reason was put into the service of religious truth and used in order to consolidate the monopoly of interpretation held by the representatives and supporters of orthodoxy.

Further details about Arkoun’s perspective regarding the Qur’ān are set out in La pensée arabe (Arab Thought), a small volume addressed to a wider public.29 He approaches the Qur’ān by including both the written word and the liturgical speech,
while stressing the transition from speech to text. Therefore he introduces the concepts Qur’anic and Islamic fact/event firstly in order to comprehend the process of this transition, and secondly to provide further analytical tools for the critique of Islamic reason.

Lectures du Coran (Readings of the Qur’an) is probably his most challenging and inspiring collection of essays although it met with only little response.\(^{30}\) It must be stressed that the innovative aspects unfold even further if one combines the theses and findings here with Pour une critique de la raison islamique (For a Critique of Islamic Reason) and Essais sur la pensée islamique. These three collections complement each other as well as clarify and illustrate the critique of Islamic reason, which must be regarded as the starting point of Arkoun’s approach.\(^{31}\) The title Lectures du Coran itself points out the focus of his interest: a pluralistic approach and a rereading of the Qur’anic text, including forgotten or marginalised traditions and the application of new findings within social sciences and humanities to the field of Islamic studies. Analyses making use of the methodological tools and the theoretical background of linguistics and semiotics bring to light the implicit and inter-textual level. Such analyses also illuminate the development and transformation of mental structures with regard to changing socio-political contexts which in turn contributes to the creation and consolidation of a new imaginaire within the community.\(^{32}\) The findings further an anthropology of revelation, that is, of the holy scriptures of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and thus a religious anthropology. This takes into account the necessity of a comparative approach in order to emphasise the generic category of the religious fact/event (fait religieux) inherent to a philosophical perspective on the three monotheistic religions.

Pour une critique de la raison islamique provides further insights into Arkoun’s thought, aspects of which can only be comprehended while bearing in mind the content of Essais sur la pensée islamique, and Lectures du Coran.\(^ {33}\) The unifying element of this compilation of essays is the following guiding question: ‘Under what verifiable conditions does the idea of truth acquire such strength as to command the destiny of an individual or produce a
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collective history? This question can be regarded as one of the central leitmotifs of Arkoun’s entire work. It is based on the thesis that Islamic thought developed under the premise of belief in a type of reason with divine origin, which manifests itself in the Qur’an. Thus Islamic reason corresponds to the claim on the part of the Muslims that this reason is superior to any other form of reason, because it is visible in the Qur’an and yet transcendent. Therefore Islamic thought and Islamic reason cannot be separated. Reason came under the influence of the Islamic fact/event and the orthodox variant gained general acceptance. According to Arkoun, the deconstruction of the creation of Islamic reason and its influence on Islamic thought and the imaginaire of the Muslim community is a prerequisite for rethinking Islamic thought, while simultaneously disclosing the realm of the unthought and the unthinkable.

Despite increasing interest in Arkoun’s work, only one translation into English exists to date: Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers. In the form of questions and answers, Arkoun unfolds his thought along the lines of basic information about the nature of Islam. He points out his holistic approach to the reformulation of the exhaustive tradition, the disclosure of the unthought and unthinkable, and thus the breaking down of the monopoly of definition and interpretation on the part of the custodians of orthodoxy. His generic leitmotif of a ‘transhistorical, transcultural and simultaneously historical, sociological and anthropological approach to the religious phenomenon with the example of Islam’ is highly visible.

Arkoun impresses through his diversity and his extensive knowledge of both the Arab-Muslim and the Occidental-Christian culture and history of thought including recent discourses in social sciences and humanities, all coupled with a sharp awareness of overlapping and comprehensive correlations. Furthermore, he is talented at forging exceptional links which at times are daring and radically challenging. Finally, he has courageously pursued his visionary ideas about how to approach Islam beyond the borders established and defended by any kind of orthodoxy. In this, he has disregarded the serious consequences
for his position as a scholar, being attacked or ignored both by his colleagues within Islamic Studies and by the representatives of orthodoxy in the Muslim world. It is only in the course of the last decade that he received acknowledgement and recognition and is now regarded not only as challenging but also as an innovative vanguard in the field of the study of Islam.38

Arkoun’s pluralistic approach combines multi- and interdisciplinarity with a wide range of methods borrowed from social sciences and humanities and rearranged in a creative synthesis. It is encouraging because everything seems to be possible, and all receive a chance to speak. He pleads for the dissolving of dichotomies (such as margin and centre, superior and inferior, orthodoxy and heterodoxy), and for focusing on the equal coexistence of putative differences without levelling them out. At the same time his approach is daunting and maybe even alienating because of the inherent risk of eclecticism, and because of the requirement that a scholar be well-versed in Arkoun’s terminology, the achievements of social sciences and Islamic history. In addition, there is the problem of the lack of explicit systematisation of his thought in general and his concepts in particular.

Reactions and responses to Arkoun’s work

Although many of Arkoun’s articles and anthologies conveying his major concepts were already available during the 1980s, reactions appeared only from the 1990s onwards.39 Indeed only three monographs have been devoted to analysing Arkoun’s work,40 although there are some essays and chapters that discuss Arkoun as a representative of intellectual trends or critics of the Muslim world in general, and North Africa in particular.41 Of these, there is only one thorough introduction to Arkoun’s thought and critique. This is Ayadi’s essay ‘Mohammed Arkoun ou l’ambition d’une modernité intellectuelle’ (Mohammed Arkoun or the ambition of an intellectual modernity), in an anthology presenting contemporary North African thinkers.42 Lee operates on a generic level, homogenising Arkoun’s approaches according
to the thesis that he is a representative of Islamic authenticity. Although Lee does not present Arkoun’s concepts in detail, this essay (like Ayadi’s) is suitable for a first impression of Arkoun’s thought. Haleber focuses on the impact of other thinkers and philosophers on Arkoun’s thought, while asking whether Arkoun applies correctly the theoretical models or methodologies he has adopted, instead of analysing the content of his work. The reader’s curiosity (aroused by the title ‘Arkoun’s world’) is left unsatisfied because, according to Haleber, the features of this world are borrowed from Derrida, Baudrillard, Foucault and other intellectuals.43

The above-mentioned authors agree as to the difficulty in classifying Arkoun’s thought due to its impressive variety on the level of theory, methodology and content, which illustrates why Arkoun is considered an innovative and original scholar. While they pay special attention to the concepts of the Qur’anic and Islamic fact/event, they do not necessarily link these to the category of the societies of the Book/book (this is Arkoun’s basis for a meta-level guarantee of comparative analysis of the monotheistic religions in the context of the religious fact/event respective to the religious phenomenon).44 Although Arkoun’s critical remarks concerning the field of Islamic Studies meet general approval, his project of applied Islamology is rarely explained.45

The majority of the authors criticise Arkoun’s complex and elusive expressions, the abundant terminology and the lack of systematisation. Added to this is the fact that a profound knowledge of recent discourses and innovations in the field of social sciences and humanities are indispensable to a full appreciation of Arkoun’s work. This is not to mention the additional difficulties arising from Arkoun’s failure to provide a systematic overview for his readers, which means that they must acquire the relevant knowledge by consulting further articles. One of the sharpest reproaches is that, instead of putting already formulated concepts and suggestions in concrete form and applying them, Arkoun elaborates his theses and adds more questions without providing answers.46

Despite this critique the authors are not ungenerous in their praise. The assessments of Arkoun’s significance are impressive
and show a considerable approval. For example, he is described as a pioneer in the deconstruction of political Islam and for the reconciliation of a hermeneutics of Islam with the political discourse of modernity; a liberal interpreter of Islam, a critic of orientalism searching for a modern *ijtihād*; the most important Francophone Muslim scholar in the field of Islamic Studies; a liberal thinker contributing to a different image of Islam, and as someone who breaks 'the monopoly of traditional and neopatriarchal interpretation of Islamic history and the Qur’ān'. Robert D. Lee writes:

He pushed to the very frontiers of Western social science in an effort to free Islam not just from Western misperceptions and misconceptions but also from the grips of many of its most fervent advocates. In so doing, he put himself on the cutting edge of Islamic discourse, or beyond it.

Armando Salvatore adds:

In particular, reading Arkoun is helpful to situate the modern construction of Islam at the crossroads between processes of subjectification–interiorization, which are the complex and creative sources of any social distinction while taking them for granted.

In summary one should stress that although Arkoun’s contribution is regarded as innovative, important and challenging (numerous honours, invitations and conferences on his thought testify to this) the scholarly community has not really taken up the challenge inherent in his approach, including his critique of Islamic Studies. His concepts have not found their way into Islamic Studies or been applied in other contexts, nor has his critique been taken up seriously and discussed in order to initiate change.

**Concepts shaping Arkoun’s readings of the Qur’ān**

According to Arkoun the notion of orthodoxy is ‘one of the keys to rethink the whole theology of Islam’. Therefore a thorough analysis of orthodoxy is a prerequisite for an approach beyond dogmatic enclosure.
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Orthodoxy – in its Sunni or Shi'i version – is no more than the official religion resulting from the collaboration of a majority of the so-called ‘ulama’ [sic] with the state. This is very obvious with the Umayyads and ‘Abbasids; but we depend more on the historians and jurists who worked under the ‘Abbasids.57

Arkoun also elaborates elsewhere:

Orthodoxy is defined as the system of beliefs and mythological representations through which, and with which, a given social group perceives and constructs its own history. ... In this context, orthodoxy can also be defined as the system of values which functions primarily to guarantee the protection and the security of the group. That is why any orthodoxy is necessarily an ideological vision overwhelmingly oriented toward the subjective interest of the group to which it belongs. But the group considered as a ‘collective consciousness’ is never aware of its subjective, biased use of history; it sees its ‘orthodoxy’ as a genuine expression of its identity.58

Orthodoxy is one of the most important and influential factors for development and change within a given society. Social groups thus perceive and construct history by means of the system of belief and non-belief and imaginations established by orthodoxy. This is effected by excluding other social groups who, for their part, create their own orthodoxy. The group in power condemns any deviant opinion as heretical, claiming to represent the only possible expression of religion and the only authentic one.59

Thus the notion of orthodoxy is always used in a theological sense, yet has never been thought in a historical sense; however, it is daring to point out that it is the result of a slow historical process of selection, elimination and diffusion of names, works, schools, ideas according to the objectives aimed at in each case by the group, community and power in place. This is how tradition is formed that works like a security system for the religious or national community.60

Diagram 1 explains the implications of orthodoxy. These are crucial for Arkoun’s critique of Islamic reason, providing on the one hand the necessary conceptual tools and, on the other, setting the agenda for a departure from the fixed framework of theological ‘a priories’ established by orthodoxy.
Arkoun emphasises that the phenomenon of orthodoxy – and this is true for any kind of orthodoxy – is equivalent to an ideological, and therefore a historical, process.\textsuperscript{61}

Needless to say, this perception of orthodoxy goes hand in hand with a reconsideration of the notion of revelation. The socio-political and historical context of the formation and consolidation of orthodoxy, in combination with the shifts of discourses that illustrate this formative process (see below), provide the necessary analytical framework and categories for a critical and radical rethinking of Islam (at least as described by Arkoun). Revelation then needs to be perceived as a phenomenon which cannot be separated from orthodoxy and its societal implications. Such a perspective opens up new space for thought and interpretation and prepares the way for an open interpretation of the Qur’an, that is, a plurality of readings. At the same time, it lays the basis for a religious anthropology, including a comparative approach between the three monotheistic religions, having regard to the concepts of the Qur’anic and Islamic \textit{fact/event} and the \textit{societies of the Book/book} (see below).

Revelation is not a normative speech (\textit{parole}) that came down from heaven compelling man to reproduce indefinitely the same rituals of obedience and action; it is an offer of meaning for existence and can be revised (see the abrogating and abrogated verses in the Qur’an). It can be interpreted within the scope of the freely consented Alliance between man and God.\textsuperscript{62}

Diagram 2 shows the correlation between orthodoxy and other societal forces, co-operating in solidarity with forces sharing the same political and ideological interest (i.e. upper horizontal line); linked by a dialectic interaction (i.e. horizontal arrows). Simultaneously, the societal forces resist (i.e. vertical arrows) the counter-forces (i.e. lower horizontal line) which, in turn, co-operate with forces of the same orientation to which they are linked by a dialectic interaction.\textsuperscript{63}

Diagram 2

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}[scale=0.8]
  \node (state) at (0,0) {State};
  \node (writing) at (2,0) {Writing};
  \node (learned) at (4,0) {Learned Culture};
  \node (orthodoxy) at (6,0) {Orthodoxy};
  \node (segmentary) at (0,-2) {Segmentary Society};
  \node (orality) at (2,-2) {Orality};
  \node (popular) at (4,-2) {Popular/Populist Culture};
  \node (heterodoxies) at (6,-2) {Heterodoxies};

  \draw[->] (state) -- (writing);
  \draw[->] (writing) -- (learned);
  \draw[->] (learned) -- (orthodoxy);
  \draw[->] (orthodoxy) -- (state);

  \draw[->] (segmentary) -- (orality);
  \draw[->] (orality) -- (popular);
  \draw[->] (popular) -- (heterodoxies);
  \draw[->] (heterodoxies) -- (segmentary);
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}
The power in place (that is, the state) is based on a unified culture of writing that is fixed and legitimised by the representatives of learned culture. This lays the foundation for fostering the impression of social unity. In this way orthodoxy is formed and embraces the cause of securing and preserving the powers that be. The respective forces mutually legitimise and strengthen their position of power. It is important to recognise that orthodoxy is a phenomenon that occurs not only in the field of religion but also in other fields, for instance in language, literature or historiography. However, religious orthodoxy plays a prominent role; firstly, for holding the monopoly of definition and interpretation with regard to the sacred texts; and, secondly, for establishing the interconnection of theology with ethical-judicial concepts through the systematisation of ‘īlm al-ussul. This in turn results in intensifying the dogmatic enclosure and in defining the sphere of Islamic reason and its limits. Additionally, orthodoxy plays a central role in the shaping of the imaginaire in relation to the Qur’an and Sunna.

Arkoun’s notion of revelation is associated with the concept of the Qur’anic fact/event and the discourse attributed to it. It takes into consideration the historical, cultural and linguistic transformation in the Islamic fact/event that corresponds to the shift from an oral discourse into an official closed corpus of the sacred text and its corresponding discourse, that is, the transition from speech to text. Qur’anic fact/event and Islamic fact/event are concepts and analytical categories providing a superior framework in order to contribute to a historical, linguistic, hermeneutical and anthropological analysis which neither criticises religion as such nor adopts theological or orthodox postulates. For Arkoun, religion is ‘a way proposed to man to discover the Absolute’. The assumption that religion is a societal/social phenomenon is set against the orthodox and dogmatic a priori that religion is an extra-societal and transcendent phenomenon. In addition, Arkoun postulates an open perspective with regard to the potential meaning inherent to any religion. However, this open perspective was to be lost in the course of time in the context of a community where specific systems of belief and non-
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belief and interpretations were imposed in the form of theologies and/or orthodoxies. From this philosophical point of view, disregarding the commitment to any religious denomination, it follows that Islam is one specific expression of the religious fact/event that is the religious phenomenon.66

Let us start out from a heuristic definition: the religious fact/event is the totality of distinctive features that allow identification of the specificity of the religious instance (instance religieuse) with regard to political, cultural, judicial, ethical, aesthetic and economic instances.67

It goes without saying that Arkoun’s interest lies neither in questions of faith nor in criticising the truth of one particular faith or faith as such, nor in defending it. He seeks rather to put an end to the hierarchical and polarising perceptions of religion(s) or systems of belief, while accepting faith as one potential truth.68 Hence, according to Arkoun, any analysis of religion and the religious question needs to be embedded in the superior context of the question of meaning.69 This reflects his vision of a philosophy of theology respective of a religious anthropology which is not content with exclusive theological positions but rather takes up a position beyond dogmatic fixations and theological ‘a priories’.

Qur’anic and Islamic fact/event allow a differentiation between a linguistic event and the consolidation of the new religion, that is, between the period of revelation shaped by the Qur’anic or prophetic discourse which ended with the death of Muhammad in 632, and the fixation of revelation as a written document resulting in a determination of the reading which is supposed to have been effected from 661 on. Thus these concepts describe the historical process of the coming into being of a new religion, effected and supported by social, political and cultural actors.70 Furthermore, the concept of the Islamic fact/event takes into account that Islam, as a system of belief, has been used for ideological and political purposes in order to legitimise and maintain power. Such an approach to Islamic history or Islamic thought is not conceivable without taking up a position beyond theological and orthodox postulates.
The characteristic features of each fact/event are compared and confronted as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Qur’anic fact/event</strong></th>
<th><strong>Islamic fact/event</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occurred in the seventh century due to political, economic and moral experiences on the Arabian peninsula.</td>
<td>It is the concrete historical projection of the Qur’anic fact/event and the more recent event from a historical point of view.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can be interpreted as God’s appeal to human consciousness.</td>
<td>The Qur’an as a closed corpus of text is the axis of the Islamic fact/event.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It is of existential meaning and linked to a language, namely Arabic.</td>
<td>In the course of the formation of orthodoxy meaning and implications of the Qur’anic fact/event were usurped through arbitrary dissemination of selected meaning. The Qur’an as a text in a linguistic and historical understanding was used as a pretext, i.e. it was exploited for the cause of the social actors in power.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It belongs to the sphere of oral tradition.</td>
<td>Orthodoxy used the symbolic capital of the Qur’an in order to create an official and orthodox Islam and to impose this variant of Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Although the discourse as such has been concluded with the death of Muhammad, it is transhistorical, i.e. it has not lost its character as an appeal to men who are preoccupied with the question of meaning.</td>
<td>Ranges between the Arabic language and revelation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revelation in this kind of reality opens up horizons and is open with regard to its meaning; it is not systematised, there is no discontinuity between the mythical and the rational.</td>
<td>In this kind of reality revelation no longer has an open meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corresponds to the Qur’anic or prophetic discourse.</td>
<td>Corresponds to the Islamic discourse.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ursula Günther

The process of transformation and the societal forces supporting the latter are illustrated and clarified in Diagram 3 (p. 145).\textsuperscript{74}

The transformation of the Qur'anic fact/event into the Islamic fact/event manifested itself on two different but interrelated levels: firstly, the level of state and institutions, namely with regard to the necessity to integrate the conquered groups and societies ideologically into the Islamic realm; and, secondly, the level of confirmation of the doctrine. The linguistic, semiotic and historical conditions of the genesis of the Qur’anic fact/event elucidate the differences between the Qur’anic and Islamic fact/event.\textsuperscript{75} These concepts set up the analytical framework necessary for approaching the Qur'an as a reflective thinker (chercheur penseur), that is, as a scholar who simultaneously takes into consideration

\ldots the theological requirement of the believers, the philological imperative of the positive (but not positivistic) historian, the explanatory perspective of the anthropologist and the critical control of the philosopher.\textsuperscript{76}

Synchronously, this synthesis of perspectives allows the Qur’an to be read on different levels, while at the same time the cognitive bounds established by orthodoxy have ceased to be in force. Firstly, the Qur’an is considered to be a document of revelation, and thus the expression and source of universal consciousness. This corresponds to the full recognition of its religious meaning. Secondly, it is an historical and literary document. As such, and beyond the spiritual dimension, it reflects cultural and historical phenomena, the correlation of socio-political forces, currents within the history of thought and new or changing epistemes of the Qur’anic and Islamic discourse and mental structures.\textsuperscript{77}

It is necessary to open up the Qur’anic fact by situating it in a comparative approach not only within the three monotheistic religions but also within a historical anthropology of the religious event \ldots \textsuperscript{78}

In fact the broader context of the religious phenomenon or the religious fact/event provides a meta-level for pursuing the long-term project of a comparative approach that includes all
monotheistic religions. Therefore the concepts Qur’anic and Islamic fact/event must be completed by the analytical and historical category of the societies of the Book/book. It is the combination of these concepts that contributes to elucidating the process of the construction of history by means of revelation, and the corresponding orthodox interpretations. Thus the relationship revelation–truth–history is picked out as a central theme. Additionally, this concept discloses a psychological and cultural process within the respective monotheistic societies that is beyond the theological and ideological differences of the respective communities. This illustrates how the idea of revelation as providing meaning was to become the central idea and was (rather, is) crucial for the perception of history. This is because the mental image of the revelation as a book was formative for the communities’ imaginaire.

Before considering the implications of Arkoun’s concepts for a rereading of the Qur’an (and thus a rethinking of Islamic thought), the conceptual framework must be completed by introducing the historical categories of the unthought and unthinkable (and by implication the thinkable). These are inextricably linked with the Qur’anic and Islamic fact/event on the one hand (and therefore with the notion of orthodoxy), and on the other with the universally applicable historical category of the imaginaire.

Two premises are crucial for an understanding of unthought and unthinkable: firstly, any thought reveals at a given time a positive and negative part; and, secondly any tradition of thought comes into being by means of selection inwards and outwards while excluding and marginalising other trends. Therefore the unthought and the unthinkable (and by implication the thinkable) cannot be comprehended without taking into account the dogmatic enclosure and the orthodox understanding of truth. This is because orthodox discourses lay down the limits of the domain of the thinkable, fixing simultaneously the domain of the unthought and unthinkable. On closer examination, it is obvious that the thinkable corresponds to the contents within dogmatic enclosure.

The transformation of the Qur’anic fact/event into the Islamic fact/event (including the creation of an official closed corpus and
the definition of the limits of interpretation effected by the custo-
dians of orthodoxy) allows deeper insight into a domain that has
not been taken into account within the study of Islam, whether by
Muslim or non-Muslim scholars. The transformation hides three
turning points with regard to the development of the Qur’an,
altering the boundaries between the thinkable, unthought and
unthinkable. Firstly, revelation, i.e. Qur’anic fact/event or rather
Qur’anic discourse (610–623 CE). Secondly, collection and
canonisation of the mushaf (632–936), i.e. official closed corpus
and beginning of the Islamic fact/event or rather the Islamic
discourse. Thirdly, the period of orthodoxy (936–…), i.e., the
formation of a new imaginaire within the Muslim community and
the shaping of the thinkable, the unthinkable and unthought as well
as Islamic reason. In the long term this shift resulted in the
formation of a new imaginaire.

To sum up, one can say that the thinkable of a linguistic commu-
nity covers all that one is able to think and to express with regard
to the historical circumstances and in connection with their intel-
lectual possibilities. It shapes the discourse. Classical exegesis or,
rather, its approach and functioning, was decisive for the forma-
tion of the thinkable and the Islamic fact/event. Beyond the bounds
of the thinkable is the unthinkable, a further feature of a system of
thought and a particular time. It contains all that is forbidden
historically or politically to be thought or expressed. This ban
ensues in the name of the truth determining Islamic thought. The
unthinkable corresponds to a storage tank of taboos that might be
explained in terms of the cognitive bounds of the respective
socio-cultural system, or the fact that, by means of self-censor-
ship, the regulations of the dominant ideology have been inter-
nalised. With regard to Islamic thought, both historiography and
usul widened the sphere of the unthinkable by selection and exclu-
sion. This resulted in a construct of history that could be
controlled and channelled within the fixed bounds of orthodoxy.

The unthought is the equivalent to the total of the unthinkable.
Furthermore it embraces all that is at a particular time beyond the
bounds of knowledge (for example the idea of a heliocentric
system in the medieval ages). The assumption of the historicity of a discourse that became an official closed corpus is still part of the unthought. All that has been rejected and marginalized, as well as forgotten, is likewise part of the unthought.\textsuperscript{86}

According to Arkoun, the following taboos, rejected, suppressed and forgotten topics should be located in the storage tank of the unthought and unthinkable: the history of the text of the Qur’an and the hadith, the historical and cultural conditions of the formulation of the shari’a, the phenomenon of revelation, the question of the creation of the Qur’an, the transformation of religious symbolism into state-power, the legal codex, the status of the person, the legal status of women, tradition, orthodoxy. If these issues are discussed at all, it is in an apologetic way. Beyond the field of religion, Arkoun mentions the concepts of state, civil society, and individual liberties or laicism.\textsuperscript{87} Furthermore, one might add ‘all the cultures and systems of thought related to pagan, polytheistic, jahili (pre-Islamic), or modern secularized societies’.\textsuperscript{88}

To conclude, the unthinkable and the unthought may be regarded as the ‘negative’ of the concept episteme. These concepts complement the concept of the Qur’anic and Islamic fact/event. At the same time, they open up an additional perspective with regard to the long-term project of Arkoun’s critique of Islamic reason, as well as stimulating the investigation and discovery of a mental space beyond the fixed orthodox settings and bans (in the sense of an archaeology of the exhaustive tradition).\textsuperscript{89} Furthermore, these categories not only stretch the cognitive bounds of Muslim orthodoxy and theology but also those of orientalism. They are suitable for bringing out deeper underlying structures. The latter might contribute to a changing viewpoint concerning Muslim societies and in the long-term maybe even to a liberation of Islamic thought.

The last pillar of Arkoun’s edifice of ideas (that is, the concepts and theoretical framework that shape his approach to the Qur’an in particular, and his thought in general) corresponds to the imaginaire. This is another historical category of analysis introducing an additional concept in order to assess societal
phenomena on the level of symbolic structures which refer to the construction and perception of reality in a given society.\textsuperscript{90} Imaginaire completes the concepts of the Qur'anic and Islamic fact/event as well as the unthought and unthinkable. Like those concepts it is not only effectively beyond the definitions and bounds established by orthodoxy, and thus beyond the Islamic discourse, but it also deconstructs these as cognitive boundaries.

Thus the imaginaire becomes an essential key for an appropriate reading of societies; it allows explanation of the usual operations of mythologisation, sacralisation, mystification, ideologisation, even transcendentalisation that social actors support according to their positions and roles within society. [...] The imaginaire is associated in the usual language with the unreal, the imagination (affabulation), the fictitious, the legend, the mythical: all notions deviating from the real, the constant object of rational search.\textsuperscript{91}

Hence the imaginaire describes the realm of reception and combination of images and imaginations with regard to reality, that are accepted in a given social group sharing the same historical context. Arkoun distinguishes between three forms of imaginaire. Firstly, there is the religious imaginaire containing all convictions within faith that are accepted, thought and expressed as being true, and therefore do not allow critical reason to interfere. It is possible that the religious imaginaire dominates all fields of life. Secondly, there is the social imaginaire, a dynamic combination of ideas, forces, perceptions, interpretation and expression of reality linked with specific associations. It emerges from the ideological discourses and plays an important role for the idea of unity within a social group, society or nation. Thirdly, there is the individual imaginaire that is involved in creating the social imaginaire.\textsuperscript{92}

The Qur'an provides the axis and the basis for the imaginaire; it gives it shape, renders it dynamic and defines the values indispensable to Islamic ethics.\textsuperscript{93} Real historical events were transformed into paradigms and became an essential reference for human existence and therefore are embedded in the imaginaire of a society or a group. Religious consciousness is shaped by the paradigm of the ideal society, as perceived in the historical experience

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of Medina, which in turn underwent interpretations on the part of orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{94} The roots of this \textit{imaginaire} go back to the past to an extent that it does not make any difference whether the imagina-
tion of the ideal society corresponds to reality at the time or not. The meaning attributed to the model of Medina may be more real
than reality itself. The \textit{imaginaire}'s contribution as an analytical
category becomes obvious since it provides the necessary tools to
deconstruct perceptions of reality. As long as the \textit{imaginaire} is
taken for reality and not identified as imaginations about reality
there is a risk of its becoming an instrument of politics.\textsuperscript{95}

Arkoun describes the impact of the \textit{imaginaire} for a rethinking
of Islamic history and Islamic thought as follows:

To elucidate how the working of the imaginaire, in the present and
in the past, gets the better of positivistic reason of the historian
philologist, to follow the recurrent operations this imaginaire
reproduces itself with and continues to be crucial to the historical
stages of societies, to introduce a requirement for intelligibility in a
domain that is abandoned to the blind forces of the collective
psyche. These are in my opinion the new, innovative and liberating
tasks of the historian of Islam.\textsuperscript{96}

The implications of Arkoun’s conceptual framework with regard
to methodology and its application to the study of Islam, including
the study of the Qur’an, are challenging since his project of a
rethinking of Islamic thought requires a considerable versatility
and flexibility on the part of the scholar. The conventional
approaches of philology and history are neither adequate nor suit-
able methods for deconstructing the pillars of Islamic thought or
sifting out ideological elements and demystifying its constructs.

Diagram 4 (p. 152) illustrates the different levels of Arkoun’s
approach and the mutual correlations that can be characterised
as pluralistic in every respect.

There is no doubt that Arkoun’s pluralism is challenging. It
exposes omissions and deficiencies regarding the study of Islam
and is directed both at Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. Arkoun
gives the study of Islam in general and the study of the Qur’an in
particular new impetus. His broader project of a critique of
Islamic reason (which is inextricably linked to a rethinking of Islamic thought) confronts any scholar with a dilemma that is difficult to resolve. This is the deconstruction of centuries of Islamic thought, at the same time bearing in mind the entire conceptual and methodological framework referring to a meta-level, in order to avoid the trap of any cognitive boundary. This demands a considerable expenditure of energy, time and familiarity with both Islamic and Occidental-Christian history as well as recent developments and discourses in the field of humanities and social sciences. Thus attention must be given to the application of linguistics, semiotics and critical discourse analysis while
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interpreting the Qur’an. Classical exegesis must be revisited in order to disclose its contribution to the formation and consolida-
tion of the imaginaire and the unthought and unthinkable. Furthermore, an approach comparable to Tillich, Bultmann or Barth should also be adopted by Muslim theologians. And the comparative potential of, for example, the societies of the Book/book, must be taken into consideration. These are but a few examples of the challenges and opportunities awaiting scholars who wish to take up Arkoun’s concepts.

Concluding remarks

Arkoun’s contribution to the study of Islam is unique for several reasons. First is its holistic approach that replaces conventional analyses, while at the same time refraining from employing polarising analytical categories, and focusing on a radical plurality of meaning and complexity. Second is its radical call for a departure from the cognitive bounds established by any kind of orthodoxy. Third, it includes a critical revision of reason as such, and calls into question the achievements of modernity and its hegemonic character. Fourth, it aims at an integration of ‘Islam and Muslim culture into a global critical theory of knowledge and values’.

The metaphor of the rhizome might in different respects throw light on Arkoun’s approach. It symbolises a shift of paradigm that has already occurred at different levels of modern life. It stands for integrity, wholeness and plurality in contrast to dualism, decomposition and particularism. A rhizome is a system without centre and without hierarchies; it is defined by correlation, mutual completions and inner dynamics through a constant expansion in complexity. In this respect Arkoun’s approach bears features of postmodernism.

Although Arkoun provides some examples of how to apply his concepts, the importance of his work consists in offering an outstanding conceptual and theoretical framework with regard to the study of Islam. Although many questions remain unanswered, and in fact even generate further questions, one would not do
justice to Arkoun by expecting him to be as productive on the level of application as he is on a theoretical and conceptual level.\textsuperscript{103} His kind of approach can only be assessed in the fullness of time, especially if one takes into consideration that Arkoun regards himself as somebody kindling fire,\textsuperscript{104} hoping that the vital spark will be spread. The extent to which the persistence and the potential of his critique will stimulate ongoing enquiry and reformulation remains to be seen.

NOTES

1. In the following, Arkoun’s specific concepts appear in italics, in addition to the concept of imaginaire. Arkoun did not create this category of historical analysis yet he was among the first (if not the first) to apply it systematically to Islamic Studies and he still advocates fervently its integration into any kind of study of Islam.

2. Thanks are due to Gordon Mitchell for his kind comments on an earlier version of this paper.

3. The translation of the concepts fait islamique, fait coranique and fait religieux presents some difficulties, especially because they are not consistently translated in English texts: sometimes we find Islamic fact, sometimes Islamic event and sometimes Islamic phenomenon (the latter’s correspondent in French is often used synonymously by Arkoun himself). See e.g. Mohammed Arkoun, ‘Contemporary Critical Practices and the Qur’an’, in Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden, 2001), vol. 1, p. 415 (event); Arkoun, ‘Islamic Studies: Methodologies’, in The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Modern Islamic World, ed. John L. Esposito (New York, 1995), vol. 2, p. 337 (phenomenon); Robert D. Lee, ‘Arkoun and Authenticity’, Peuples Méditerranéens, 50 (1990), p. 91 (fact). This discussion uses fact/event in referring to Arkoun’s synonymous employment of fact and phenomenon in order to emphasise the association of a dynamic character, in contrast to the character of a fait accompli (that might be associated with fact). With regard to the concept imaginaire the French term is retained since it can be regarded as a technical one, used in the context of the School of Annales as an epistemological category.

4. Arkoun uses an orthographic trick to illustrate the ambiguity of book: Holy Book vs. book in the sense of a cultural product. For detailed explanations concerning this concept, see below.


6. This might explain the small number of detailed or systematic studies on his thought.

8. See Arkoun, ‘Avec Mouldou Mammeri’, pp. 9–12; Arkoun, Rethinking Islam Today, pp. 1–2. The quotation marks used for the term ‘indigenous’ are intentional. It is the French and therefore synonymously the colonial expression for the Algerian population, i.e. Arabs and Berbers.

9. On 1 November 1954, all Algerians were called to armed resistance. This was the beginning of the struggle for liberation. See e.g. the chronology and documents in Sigrid Faath, Algerien. Gesellschaftliche Strukturen und politische Reformen zu Beginn der neunziger Jahre (Hamburg, 1990).


11. See Arkoun’s article on Miskawayh in EF², vol. 7, pp. 143–4 and ‘Le cheminement d’une critique’, pp. 217–218. In the context of Miskawayh, the meaning of adab includes a philosophical component and means culture in the sense of humanitas and the literature connected with this, i.e., it is more than belles lettres.

12. Correspondence with author in which Arkoun confirmed that it is the very first time he used this term.


14. Exhaustive tradition is another term established by Arkoun. It stands for a holistic and inclusive view of traditions within Islamic thought, taking into account the parts characterised by orthodoxy (or the official religion) as heterodox, and therefore marginalised and repressed. It is another example of Arkoun’s way of creating space beyond the scope of orthodox definitions. The notion of exhaustive tradition explains inner discontinuities within Islamic thought, such as with regard to a pluralism of doctrines, or a cosmopolitan attitude on the basis of a great cultural variety within the Islamic realm. Simultaneously, it detects external discontinuities in being connected with Europe and/or the Western world and intellectual modernity. See e.g. the manuscript L’Islam actuel devant sa tradition et mondialisation, p. 19; also the slightly modified version Arkoun, ‘L’islam actuel devant sa tradition’, in Joseph Doré, ed., Christianisme, Judaïsme et Islam. Fidélité et ouverture, pp. 103–51. See further Ursula Günther, Mohammed Arkoun: ein moderner Kritiker der islamischen Vernunft (Würzburg, forthcoming), especially the glossary of Arkounian terms.

16. It is only since the very late 1980s and clearly since the 1990s that his work has been seriously taken into account.
17. For a complete bibliography, see Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun*.
18. For a detailed introduction to Arkoun’s works, see ibid.
19. For further details, see below.
21. Arkoun introduces three forms of reason: ‘religious reason’, ‘scientific (teletechnical) reason’ and ‘philosophical reason’. As soon as one restricts the development of free and critical thought while setting cognitive limits and claiming the sole representation it is a matter of a specific feature of reason, namely hegemonic reason. Both Islamic and Occidental reason need to be classified as hegemonic. See Arkoun, “Westliche Vernunft kontra “islamische” Vernunft? Versuch einer kritischen Annäherung’, in Michael Lüders, ed., *Der Islam im Aufbruch? Perspektiven der arabischen Welt*, 2nd edn (Munich, 1992), pp. 265–66, 269; Arkoun, ‘Du dialogue inter-religieux’, p. 106. Recently Arkoun has introduced a fourth category of reason, namely ‘emerging reason’ (*raison émergente*), emphasising that this form of reason needs to be situated on a meta-level. See Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun*, especially the chapter *Darstellung und Analyse der wesentlichen Thesen und Konzepte Mohammed Arkouns*. This refers to interviews conducted with Arkoun in Paris, and to the manuscript *Toleration, Intolerance, Intolerable: A Comparative Approach of Religious Reason and Modern Reason*; Arkoun, ‘Du dialogue inter-religieux’, p. 104 where emerging reason is mentioned for the first time. A thorough reading leads to the conclusion that emerging reason is the sophistication of critical reason which takes into account the challenges of intellectual modernity.
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connaissance) and acceptance of revelation, since the existence of an official closed corpus of the Qur'an implied the existence of the truth. According to Arkoun this form of reductionism is equivalent to the end of intellectual independence; see ibid. Along with several other Arabic intellectuals, Arkoun regards Ibn Rushd's death (1198) as marking the failure/breakdown of Arabic philosophy and the end of Arabic rationalism. See e.g. Arkoun, L'Islam. Morale et Politique, p. 112; 'Mohamed [sic] Arkoun: Passer au crible de la pensée islamique', interview produced by Paul Balta, Arabies, 13 (1988), p. 69; Arkoun, "Westliche" Vernunft kontra "islamische" Vernunft? p. 273.

26. Arkoun, 'Contemporary Critical Practices' p. 427. Arkoun's critique with regard to the dogmatic enclosure does not exclude orientalist scholarship from operating within the borders established and defended by Muslim orthodoxy. According to him, orientalist scholarship does not question the hegemony of orthodoxy concerning the discourse on Islam. On the contrary, it is almost tantamount to the reproach that the scholarly position of the majority within the field of Islamic Studies fosters the intellectual imprisonment created by dogmatic enclosure on the one hand, and the persistence of the taboos laid by orthodoxy with respect to the discourses on Islam or Qur'anic studies, on the other; see ibid. See also Arkoun, 'Islamic Studies', p. 337. Scholars working in the field of the study of Islam contribute 'to consolidating and spreading the unthinkable and the unthought in the scientific discourse of Islam beyond Muslim discourse itself because they restrict themselves solely to transferring various Muslim discourses into European languages without calling it into question or trying to rethink it; ibid.

27. Essais sur la pensée islamique is a collection of ten essays partly developed from the context of his Ph.D. on Miskawayh and the tenth century. At the time of its publication all essays had already appeared in different journals.

28. The concept of Applied Islamology arises from the fact that Arkoun's critique of Islamic reason leads necessarily to a calling into question of conventional approaches within Islamic Studies because his innovative perspectives bring to light the methodological deficiencies of the field. Applied Islamology can be regarded as a counter-strategy and completion to the predominantly philological and historical methods within Islamic Studies. For details, see the introduction in Arkoun, Essais sur la pensée islamique, pp. 7–12; 'Pour une islamologie appliquée' in Arkoun, Pour une critique, pp. 43–63.

29. La pensée arabe is part of the encyclopaedic collection Que sais-je? published by Presses universitaires de France.

30. One might offer several reasons for this lack of interest. Firstly, Arkoun's multidisciplinary approach demands detailed knowledge of the discourses within social sciences especially with regard to theoretical settings and methodology (semiotics, deconstruction, discourse-analysis, structural and cultural anthropology and the approaches of the School of Annales are not common practice in the field of Islamic Studies). Secondly, one has to bear in mind that the innovative
aspect of Arkoun’s thought – especially on the level of theory, methodology and epistemology – includes a sharp critique of the established approaches within Islamic Studies which exposes the deficiencies and omissions of the field. Thus working on Arkoun, or rather, applying his concepts, inevitably implies further investigation with regard to the self-restrictions of the field. This kind of challenge is not always welcomed within Islamic Studies, which has established its own kind of orthodoxy. Thirdly, as a consequence of the fact that Arkoun has not worked out a systematic overview of his thought, it is incumbent upon the reader to break down the correlations of the interlinked and interlaced concepts. This is a task requiring so much time and energy that it often will not be undertaken.

31. Arkoun himself emphasises the correlation between *Lectures du Coran* and *Pour une critique de la raison islamique* and recommends that his readers consider them as a complementary pair. See Arkoun, *Lectures*, p. 32. The first edition being out of print, references here are to the second one, where two important essays have been added: *De l’Ijtihad à la critique de la raison islamique* and *The Notion of Revelation*, pp. 127–151, 257–81.


33. Arkoun’s readers are confronted with the dilemma created by his implicit assumption of their familiarity with his concepts and other writings. This might explain the fact that he refers to other essays without additional explanation. Furthermore, one has to bear in mind that he has been continuously refining his critique over the course of decades.

34. Arkoun, *Pour une critique*, p. 33; Robert D. Lee’s translation in ‘Arkoun and Authenticity’, p. 89.

35. See e.g. Arkoun, *Pour une critique*, pp. 311f. and 369f.


37. See Arkoun, *Der Islam: Annäherung an eine Religion* (Heidelberg, 1999), p. 12, Arkoun’s emphasis. This is the translation into German of *Ouvertures sur l’Islam*.

38. The relative silence or lack of attention concerning Arkoun’s thought in the 1970s and the early 1980s, and the sudden and gradually increasing interest from the late 1980s on, might be explained by means of the general shift of paradigm due to the fall of the Iron Curtain and the sudden focus on Islam as a new threat and new enemy for the Western
world, as Islamic fundamentalism also gained ground. The consequence of this was that contemporary expressions of Islam became a special focus of attention and critical voices were heard as a counterbalance to the one-sided representation in the media. If one glances at publications of the very late 1980s and the 1990s it is obvious that new intellectual trends among Muslims, e.g. regarding the discourses on heritage and modernity etc., took an important place in research. See e.g. Halim Barakat, *The Arab World: Society, Culture and State* (Berkeley, 1993); Issa J. Boullata, *Trends and Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought* (New York, 1990); Collectif, ed., *Penseurs maghrébins contemporains* (Casablanca, 1993); Richard C. Martin and Mark R. Woodward with Dwf S. Atmaa, *Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu’tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol* (Oxford, 1997); Armando Salvatore, *Islam and the Political Discourse of Modernity* (Reading, 1997); Hisham Sharabi, ‘Cultural Critics of Contemporary Arab Society’, *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 9, 1 (1987), pp. 1-19; idem., ed., *The Next Arab Decade: Alternative Futures* (Boulder, 1988); idem., ed., *Theory, Politics and the Arab World: Critical Responses* (London, 1990).


40. Ron Haleber (with P.S. van Koningsveld), *Islam en humanisme: De wereld van (Mohammed) Arkoun* (Amsterdam, 1991); the doctoral dissertation of Suadi Putro, *Mohammed Arkoun Tentang Islam & Modernitas* (Jakarta, 1998); and Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun*. Arkoun alerted the author to the Indonesian thesis: it is not referred to here. Haleber strives in the joint study with van Koningsveld for a complementary perspective, combining his own sociological and philosophical approach with van Koningsveld’s perspective of theology and Islamic Studies. Finally, it should be pointed out in passing that some unpublished MA theses on Arkoun’s thought have been submitted at American, African and Asian universities.

maghrébins contemporains, pp. 43-71; Sharabi, ‘Cultural Critics’ and the revised version in Sharabi, Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society (New York, 1988). For chapters or sections see Boullata, Trends and Issues; Leonard Binder, Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies (Chicago, 1988); Abdallah Labdaouï, Les nouveaux intellectuels arabes (Paris, 1993); Martin et al., Defenders of Reason in Islam: Mu’tazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol; and Salvatore, Islam and the Political Discourse. The few available studies in Arabic are mostly of a polemic nature and do not contribute to deeper insights into Arkoun’s thought (quite the contrary: the argumentation is dubious and references are missing). See e.g. Nu’man ‘Abd al-Razzaq al-Samarra‘i, Al-Fikr al-‘Arabi wal-fikr al-istishraqi bayna Dr. Muhammad Arkun wa Dr. Edward Sa‘id (Riyad, 1989); Ma‘ruf al-Dawalbi, ‘Kitab Arkun ‘an naqd al-fikr al-Islami yatadammanu ara’ munkara waqi’an wa ta’rikiyyan!! Limadha yatadaqaq Arkun min intishar al-Islam fi al-gharb?!’, Akhbar al-‘alam al-Islami, 1092 (17-10-1988/7; Rabi’ al-awwal 1409), p. 4.

42. See above.

43. A detailed analysis of Haleber and van Koningsveld’s study is beyond the scope of this essay, principally because it does not contribute to a better understanding of Arkoun’s approach as the latter deals with the Qur’ān. For further details see the chapter ‘Stimmen zu Mohammed Arkoun’ in Günther, Mohammed Arkoun. A few remarks should suffice. Haleber’s approach is descriptive rather than analytical. It lacks a central theme; he often deviates by discussing for example the controversy between Levinas and Derrida or comparing Levinas with Spinoza. It is not clear why he emphasises supposed models or impulses in Arkoun’s thought instead of analysing whether his approach can be considered a creative synthesis of already existing trends or a new creation and whether Arkoun’s originality lies in this. Van Koningsveld regrets the missing systematisation in Arkoun’s work without contributing to changing this. He presents some of Arkoun’s concepts without leaving the established settings of Islamic Studies. He even suspects Arkoun of being ‘a modern apologist for Islam’, see p. 213.

44. Regarding the concept of the Qur’ānic and Islamic fact/event see Ayadi, Mohammed Arkoun ou l’ambition d’une modernité intellectuelle, pp. 59ff, 65; Haleber, Islam en humanisme, pp. 20ff, 27ff, 213ff; Lee, ‘Arkoun and Authenticity’, pp. 90-91; Martin et al., Defenders of Reason in Islam, p. 217; Sharabi, ‘Cultural Critics’, pp. 4, 6; Souriau, La conscience islamique dans quelques œuvres récentes d’intellectuels du Maghreb, p. 96. Only Ayadi outlines the conditions of a meta-level and the context of the religious fact/event; see Ayadi, Mohammed Arkoun ou l’ambition d’une modernité intellectuelle, p. 56. He also stresses the importance of the analytical category imaginaire, mostly neglected or not mentioned at all.

45. For references to Arkoun’s critique with regard to Islamic Studies, see Ayadi, Mohammed Arkoun ou l’ambition d’une modernité intellectuelle, pp. 44-45; Boullata, Trends and Issues, p. 79ff; Haleber, Islam en humanisme, pp. 20 and 136ff; Lee, ‘Arkoun and Authenticity’, p. 87; and Martin et al., Defenders of Reason in Islam, p. 204. For references to Applied Islamology, see Ayadi, Mohammed Arkoun ou l’ambition d’une modernité intellectuelle, p. 48;
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Boullata, Trends and Issues, p. 84; Sharabi, Theory, Politics and the Arab World, p. 24; and Watt, ‘A Contemporary Muslim Thinker’, p. 68.

46. See e.g. Haleber, Islam en humanisme, pp. 201, 239; Sharabi ‘Cultural Critics’, p. 12; Watt, ‘A Contemporary Muslim Thinker’, p. 10. With regard to the reproach of missing concretisation, see e.g. Lee, ‘Arkoun and Authenticity’, pp. 96–98; Haleber, Islam en humanisme, p. 33; and Boullata, Trends and Issues, p. 84.

47. Salvatore, Islam and the Political Discourse, pp. 248–9.


53. Salvatore, Islam and the Political Discourse, p. 252.

54. E.g. the international conference entitled Rencontre autour de l’Œuvre de Mohammed Arkoun, 17–18 December, 1993 in Carthage, or a recent conference in Amman on his thought.

55. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss this in greater detail: see the chapter Impulse für die Islamforschung in Günther, Mohammed Arkoun.


58. Arkoun, Lectures, pp. 258–9, italics in the original.

59. See e.g. ibid; Arkoun, Rethinking Islam Today, p. 7. Arkoun assumes (as does Bourdieu) that orthodox systems operate on the basis of mutual exclusion, reflected in the polarities orthodoxy vs. heterodoxy and orthodoxy vs. heresy. Literature classified as being heretical provides an impressive documentation of currents existing besides orthodoxy. See also Arkoun, Essais sur la pensée islamique, p. 34; and Arkoun, Pour une critique, p. 307. Regarding the dichotomy orthodoxy vs. heterodoxy see also Bourdieu, Pierre, Entwurf einer Theorie der Praxis (Frankfurt, 1975) and the diagrams in this chapter.


61. See Arkoun, ‘Islamic Studies’, p. 337.

63. Concerning the diagram and comments on it, see Arkoun, ‘Islamic Studies’, pp. 337-8, Günther, ‘Weder Modernismus noch Fundamentalismus’, pp. 554-5. For further explanations with regard to the balance of power, see Arkoun, L’Islam: Morale et politique, p. 31. Bearing in mind the general approach of Islamic Studies, the diagram also points out that referring primarily to written sources is equivalent to repeating the hierarchical structures established by orthodoxy, as well as working within the fixed framework and borders of dogmatic enclosure. Thus the field of Islamic Studies contributes to the construction of a certain image of Islam. This is one of Arkoun’s sharpest points of critique with regard to Islamic Studies: see e.g. Arkoun, ‘Discours islamiques, discours orientalistes et pensée scientifique’, in Lewis, Leites and Case, eds, As Others See Us: Mutual Perceptions, East and West, p. 109, endnote 25. See also the chapter Impulse für die Islamforschung in Günther, Mohammed Arkoun.

64. See e.g. Arkoun, Penser l’Islam aujourd’hui, pp. 20–21. See also Bourdieu, Entwurf einer Theorie der Praxis, who stresses the same dialectic interaction.


67. Arkoun, ‘Du dialogue inter-religieux’, p. 117, italics in the original, author’s translation; see also Arkoun, Pour une critique, p. 51.

68. Arkoun, Lectures, pp. 54–55. This philosophical point of view could result in a changing assessment of the Qur’an as being regarded as a document of universal consciousness. This is equivalent to the vision of a philosophy of theology. The Qur’an would no longer be considered as the ultimate revelation on the one hand and a brilliant construction on the other; see ibid., p. 55. A believer would obviously have serious difficulties in accepting this point of view.


70. Arkoun, La pensée arabe, pp. 7–11.

71. See e.g. Arkoun, Essais sur la pensée islamique, p. 311; Arkoun and Gardet, L’Islam, hier–demain, p. 142; Arkoun, Lectures, p. 274.

72. See e.g. Arkoun, Lectures, pp. 270–71; Essais sur la pensée islamique, p. 311; L’Islam: Morale et Politique, p. 23; Penser l’Islam aujourd’hui, p. 48;

73. The notion ‘official’ refers to the assumption that a political decision on the part of the powers that be favours one interpretation and tries to eliminate deviant forms. The notion ‘orthodox’ refers to the assumption that political power designates experts as being responsible for a correct interpretation, i.e. in line with the powers that be. The issue of sacralisation and transcendentalisation of law and institutions must be highlighted as a theme in this context.

74. It attempts to integrate the diagrams in Arkoun, Lectures, p. 270 and in Arkoun, Pour une critique, p. 221 with the author’s readings and understanding of Arkoun’s concepts.
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75. See e.g. Arkoun, *Penser l'Islam aujourd'hui*, pp. 287–8 where he explains this in more detail.


77. See ibid., p. 12.

78. Arkoun, ‘Contemporary Critical Practices’, p. 429. He emphasises the concept of the closed official corpus [sic] providing the necessary tools for a comparative approach of the religious fact/event since Christian and Jewish tradition went through similar developments with regard to the genesis of a closed official corpus.

79. See e.g. Arkoun, *Lectures*, pp. 73, 224, 257–81; Arkoun, ‘*Le concept de sociétés du Livre-livre*’.

80. Arkoun stresses that the unthought and unthinkable are historical categories rather than philosophical ones since they are subject to changes according to historical or socio-political circumstances; see e.g. Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam Today*, p. 13.


84. Ibid., p. 11.


90. As already mentioned, this concept or analytical category goes back to the School of Annales. Arkoun has consistently applied it to Islamic Studies; he emphasises the innovative aspect of the concept for a rethinking of Islamic thought. He refers especially to Georges Duby and Cornelius Castoriadis, who rendered outstanding services to the elucidation of the imaginaire. See e.g. Arkoun, *Penser l'Islam aujourd'hui*, pp. 290–1 or the manuscript *L'Islam actuel devant sa tradition et mondialisation*. Arkoun stressed these references during a conversation with the author (2000).

91. Arkoun, *Penser l'Islam aujourd'hui*, p. 224, italics in the original, author’s translation.


94. Arkoun emphasises that in the course of the formation of the Islamic fact/event the concrete experience of Medina was transformed into the model of Medina and thus became crucial for the history of salvation. This transformation is almost equivalent to a transcendentualisation. See Arkoun, *Pour une critique*, pp. 15, 222, 225. The construct of the ‘golden age’ is another example of the Muslim imaginaire. See Arkoun, *Penser l'Islam aujourd'hui*, pp. 290–1. *L'Islam: Morale et Politique* elucidates thoroughly the concept while applying it to concrete historical and/or socio-political circumstances. See ibid., pp. 55ff.

95. It is hardly necessary to mention the impact of the imaginaire on
Islamic fundamentalism and on the mobilisation of the collective imagnaire.

96. Arkoun, *Discours islamiques, discours orientalistes et pensée scientifique*, pp. 100, 109, n. 25.

97. Arkoun illustrates this reading of the Qur’an impressively in *Lectures du Coran*, e.g. pp. 77–101, 103–125.

98. See e.g. Arkoun’s articles in *Essais sur la pensée islamique* and *Lectures du Coran*.

99. See Arkoun, ‘Islamic Studies’, p. 334, where he complains of the deficiency in this development within Muslim theology.

100. For a discussion of the impact on believers of plural readings of the Qur’an in the sense of Roland Barth see Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun*.


103. This does not mean that he does not provide any illustration of his concepts.


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