

**Arkoun and Authenticity**

by

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Prepared for presentation  
at the annual meeting of the  
Middle East Studies Association  
Toronto, Canada  
November 15-18, 1989

From Muhammad Qutb to Mohammed Arkoun the psychological distance is greater than the geographical distance between Cairo, where Qutb lived and died, and Paris, where Arkoun teaches; greater than the contrast in physical circumstances represented by Qutb's cell in Nasir's prisons and Arkoun's university chair. Historian, critic, skeptic, Arkoun overwhelms his reader with sophisticated methodologies selected from the realms of contemporary semiotics, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. Qutb mentions few sources besides the Qur'an and hadiths; he seems enmeshed in the "Islamic reasoning" that Arkoun rejects as part of a medieval mentality the Arabs must abandon if they are to come to terms with the present. In fact, Arkoun dismisses the "fundamentalist," "integralist," "authentic" movements within Islam as hopelessly ahistorical, idealistic, unscientific, exclusivist and intolerant, wedded to formulas and rhetoric which serve to mask the ugly realities of the present and to exacerbate tensions in the Islamic world. It strikes me as most unlikely that Qutb, if he had lived, would have been any more sympathetic to Arkoun's brand of social science than is Arkoun toward Qutb's formula for Islamic revolution.

Notwithstanding this apparent contrast, I will argue that Arkoun is himself an exponent of Islamic authenticity, one step more radical than Qutb in a theoretical sense and, perhaps, two or three steps less radical on a practical level. They confront the same questions: how can Muslims act truthfully and effectively in an age when neither abstract reason nor mere faith seems sufficient as a guide? How can Muslims escape the frontal collision of tradition and modernity without losing their own sense of self-worth or their ability to compete in a world dominated by Western technology? Like Qutb, Arkoun confronts what I would call--but he would not--the problem of authenticity.

For Arkoun, "authenticity" in the context of Arab-Islamic thought translates "'asala" in Arabic, a word linked to the Islamic revival movement. The root, 'sl, is also the root of "'usul" as in ''usul al-fiqh or ''usul al-din, foundations of jurisprudence, or foundations of religion;<sup>1</sup> a call to ''asala suggests a return to the framework of orthodoxy bolstered by "Islamic reason," an apparent reinvocation of the transcendent ideas Arkoun takes to be a cause of alienation in the Arab world. Yet the ''asala movement reflects social conditions of the period since World War II: the tensions between developed and underdeveloped worlds, rich and poor, literate and illiterate, bearers of traditional culture and those who paste together fragments of revolutionary ideology, Western culture and the Arab-Islamic heritage.

The discourse of ''asala expresses indirectly all these gaps together with all the individual and collective anguish, the living sickness (mal de vivre) they bring. In effect, in place of brutally making dramatic diagnoses--which would have the effect of demobilizing energy in a crucial phase--, it espouses the quiet, recognized way of exorcising an illness, the affirmation of self, as a way of rising above obvious difficulties. For that reason, the discourse of ''asala is structurally better adapted than other [forms of discourse] to the sociocultural framework of understanding and historic action in the contemporary Maghrib.<sup>2</sup>

In short, the call to authenticity reflects contemporary realities (though "indirectly"), but it is escapist in its invocation of orthodoxy as a route to rediscovering the self.

For Arkoun, the ''asala movement asserts an exclusive claim to the truth without confronting the problem of truth itself and the historical conditions under which Islamic truth

emerged. It is "sociologically true, epistemologically unacceptable."<sup>3</sup> He dissociates himself from the term 'asala, or authenticity, for that reason. Arkoun, however, wrestles with the same problem of finding a standard of truthfulness from which the Islamic world can take its bearings in a world of chaotic change, the problem of locating firm ground which Muslims take to be genuinely theirs and which simultaneously serves them as a link with the world around them. Arkoun describes himself as driven "1) to understand the Arab-Muslim personality claimed by the nationalist movement, and 2) to determine the extent to which the modern civilization, represented by the colonial power, should be considered a universal civilization."<sup>4</sup> Finding both these standards based in myth, he searches for a kind of truthfulness to which he can commit himself. In deference to modern European philosophers, especially Sartre and Heidegger, such truthfulness may be called "authenticity."

Arkoun aspires to authenticity defined as the "sentiment of being,"<sup>5</sup> as a way of "being in the world" in a truthful manner,<sup>6</sup> as the capacity to work, think and feel from "inner necessity," from "deep personal choice" and with "joy"<sup>7</sup>, as the opposite of externally defined virtue, as creativity and willfulness as opposed to rotteness, everydayness and repetition. Writing about development in the Maghrib he asks:

How can one cure this painful feeling that a large part of what is written or said about the personality of the Maghrib never penetrates the real country [reste extérieur au pays réel] and is inadequate or straight out false in the light of the various sorts of testimony groups would provide about themselves if a confining ideology did not limit their creativity, their routes toward intellectual and cultural achievement?

Truth must thus be concrete, lived, felt, particular. Ideologies, deduced from abstract universals, whether those of the Qur'an or those of Plato, cannot reflect such truth and in fact prevent its emergence. They alienate.

Why does one encounter in so many citizens of the Maghrib that irrepressible nostalgia for possibilities that are deeply felt but always put off, pushed back and put down: the possibility of a consciousness coinciding with the immediate circumstances of a territory, an environment, a history, a social order, a language;

The radical hope of overcoming alienation lies deep within human nature, obscured by "false consciousness." To be at home in the world, to be at one with others and with one's surroundings one must presumably resist those who "put off, push back and put down."

the possibility of a national culture liberated from conventional abstract models (music, poetry, decorative arts, architecture) from the imitation of genres and imported works, from the ideas and tastes of an Arabized or Westernized intelligentsia;

The phrase could be lifted from 19th-century German historicist writing; genuine culture springs from within; if culture shapes consciousness, how can consciousness be genuine, if culture is not? Or conversely, how can culture be genuine if consciousness is not? It is not clear which must come first.

the possibility of an integrated sociocultural life, capable of attenuating the sort of internal and external exile that inspires so much literature and popular music and of avoiding the brutal substitution of Saharan and peasant values with those of the industrial world, and of overcoming the longstanding opposition between enlightened, managing elites and the masses attracted by "counter-revolution;"

The emergence of a new consciousness promises fraternity, and in unity lies the potential for human control over the seemingly inexorable march of modernity. The route to a reassertion of human voluntarism depends on a comprehension and transformation of human consciousness in the context of the world to be managed.

the possibility of a thought finally free to attack, working from the Maghribi example, all the problems we have enumerated à propos of Islam, the Qur'an, the Prophet, etc.<sup>8</sup>

The underlying assumption is that modern thought, freed of dependence on universals, can diminish alienation by synchronizing consciousness with social reality.

The themes of authentic thought are all there: insistence that truth must emerge from the particular; radical dissatisfaction with conventional wisdom, both traditional and modern; assertion of the need to liberate human volition from the constraints of ideology and the passivity bred of disuse; and an assertion of the oneness of existence, condition for the overcoming of divergences between internal and external realities.

Arkoun's position on three frontiers--ethnic, geographical, and methodological, gives his work special interest. His Berber origins make him sensitive to the oppressive potential of Arab-Islamic orthodoxy. As a student of Islam who works in France, he relishes his position on the line dividing the Orient from Orientalism and identifies with both and with neither. He empathizes with the complaint of the East about Western scholarship but reproaches both Orient and Orientalism for the same sins: attachment to universals, identification of truth with essences, and neglect of history.<sup>9</sup> A Muslim historian, he pleads for the help of non-Muslims and non-historians in reassessing the relationship of Islamic thought to text, to language, to groups, to power, to time and to place in order to discover those "positivities" that could underpin an "objective" understanding of the "totality" of the Islamic tradition.

Arkoun's search for authenticity, broader than the demand for 'asala, can be understood as a search for foundations in the reconstructed collective memory of the community. It is a search which he says must be carried on in languages equipped with the requisite social-scientific terminology and concepts--hence not Arabic, the language of the Qur'an, much less Berber. It must be conducted in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom, beyond the reach of governments whose authority depends in part upon the defense of Islamic orthodoxy.<sup>10</sup> "The emotion-charged atmosphere prevailing in modern Muslim societies rules out the possibility of scientific study of a large number of sensitive problems."<sup>11</sup> Not surprisingly, Arkoun's methodology directly reflects the influence of Westerners such as Weber, Durkheim, and Derrida, and indirectly the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger.<sup>12</sup> Arkoun roams the frontiers of social scientific thought in a quest for inner passage between East and West, modernity and tradition.

## PARTICULARISM

Arkoun distinguishes himself from writers such as Qutb or Iqbal by his concern for methodology. Iqbal revived old literary forms to assert the preeminence of human will over orthodoxy and reason, attempting, like Nietzsche and Pascal<sup>13</sup>, to avoid a scholastic critique of scholasticism. Qutb tried to cloak his radical interpretations of the Qur'an in the garb of orthodoxy,<sup>14</sup> claiming in effect that transhistoric revelation authorizes the historicization of itself. For Arkoun, the epistemological question is prior to all others: "How must one proceed to know

what is in ancient and contemporary societies?"<sup>15</sup> [*Italics in original.*] He would ask Iqbal and Qutb how one can verify the primacy of revelation or of the autonomous individual. The answer, of course, is that one cannot by the rules of science verify those assumptions.

Phenomena constitute Arkoun's point of departure. "The absolute is not thought anywhere except in a phenomenal world, in contact with positivities such as matter, life, work, language, power, possessions, value."<sup>16</sup> The statement, a truism, does not foreclose the possibility of absolutes nor deny the power of abstract ideas over human behavior. It merely rejects the possibility that universals can be brought to mind somewhere outside of human experience. If, then, Muslims seek the truth about themselves, they must reexamine not simply the "truths" of revelation but all the particular ways in which those "truths" have been felt, understood, elaborated, justified, fashioned into orthodoxy and experienced in context, over time and within geographical space. They must comprehend, among other things, the modern revivalist use of Islam "as a refuge, a den, a springboard for all kinds of opposition, social protest, psychological reactions, cultural expressions." [*Italics in original.*]<sup>17</sup> Such an enterprise would require the methods of modern anthropology, psychology, sociology, semiotics, linguistics, economics, philosophy and perhaps other disciplines.

Arkoun calls for interdisciplinary investigation of the process by which revelation became orthodoxy in Islam. The Qur'an is 1) a set of revelations reported orally by Muhammad to his followers, 2) a diverging set of recitations in the newly emergent Arab Empire, 3) a written text developed in an effort to reduce diversity and solidify Arab rule, 4) a foundation for a corpus of codified law designed to unify the judicial practice of a multiethnic, multilingual empire and 5) a reflection of universal truth as revealed to the Arabs.<sup>18</sup> For Arkoun, understanding Islam means comprehending how and why the fourth and fifth conceptions of the Qur'an ultimately predominated, while alternative understandings virtually disappeared from the collective consciousness of Muslims. He asks why certain ideas gained currency and earned inclusion in orthodoxy while others, earnestly advanced and defended, lost legitimacy. One hypothesis, derived from observation of the contemporary scene: the state always seeks to reduce Islam to a single set of symbols.<sup>19</sup>

Following the logic of Nietzsche and Weber, Arkoun sees the first centuries of Islam as similar to those of every charismatic religion in its efforts to transcendentalize events, actors and scriptures. Muhammad, the Leader, became Muhammad, the Prophet-Model-for-all-men. Judicial practice based on pragmatic efforts to combine Qur'anic precepts with local custom gradually lost ground to the discipline of fiqh. The Companions of the Prophet, themselves innovators by necessity, became exponents of orthodoxy through the hadiths, which, sorted, selected and elevated in status, supplemented the Qur'an as a source of the shari'a. And from the Qur'an reciters and the students of the hadiths, divided on many critical matters (such as the status of a Muslim who had committed grave sins)<sup>20</sup>, emerged the Sunni `ulama to claim discovery of a fixed and unchanging law from which honest dissent was not possible. Arkoun emphasizes Shafi'i's role in sacralizing the sunna and empowering the `ulama to maintain the transcendental nature of the law in the name of science.<sup>21</sup>

These changes occurred under identifiable historical, sociological conditions. Every dispute reflected struggles for power.<sup>22</sup> The codification of the shari'a helped legitimize the role of both political leaders and the `ulama. The transformation of positive law into divine law broadened the authority of the `ulama and, inevitably, benefited some groups while it penalized and excluded others. Saints, mystics and marabouts gradually extended the domain of the sacred to virtually every aspect of life,<sup>23</sup> solidifying the power of the country against the city. Even al-Ghazali's effort to reconcile the rationalism of the Mu'tazila with the mysticism of the Sufis "speaks to the human conscience from a given sociocultural situation [*italics in original*],"<sup>24</sup>

Arkoun reminds us. Yet this historicity of the shari`a and of Sunnism more generally is, for him, an "unthought of Islamic thought."<sup>25</sup> The particularistic diversity of Islamic thought has faded in the collective memory by dint of the temporal success of all-too-human advocates of transcendental doctrine.

This constatation leads Arkoun to a position of ambivalence toward the Mu`tazila and the *falasifa*, the rationalist tendencies within the Islamic tradition. As one who pleads for the use of reason in understanding the Islamic past, he necessarily admires those tendencies and regrets their marginality. At the same time, a convinced historicist, he argues that Greek rationalism, by its emphasis on first substance and unchanging essence, reinforced the logocentrism of the Islamic tradition.<sup>26</sup> Reason and revelation together produced a medieval mentality that prevailed in the Islamic world through the 19th century, long after an analogous mindset had, he says, undergone erosion in Christian Europe.

Islamic logocentrism resulted from the superposition of philosophy on religion. The Greek concept of reason (which Arkoun terms "dogmatic") as leading man toward Being and pointing toward the True, the Good and the Beautiful helped define the attributes of God. The logical search for first cause led to proofs of his existence and logical, schematic accounts of the creation. From the nature of reason, the attributes of God, and consequent deduction from revelation came the essential axioms for the codification of Islamic law: the Prophet cannot lie, the community cannot agree on error, the companions were reliable authorities on the life of the prophet, etc. Once extracted and developed, these definitions and codes supported the Qur'anic claims of universality and diminished the status of ethnicity.<sup>27</sup> The search for meaning became identified with the application of logic to text; done right, it is done forever. Only the result need be repeated. Repetition becomes equated with truth.

According to Arkoun, logocentric discourse masks reality and represses the deeper, creative impulses of human beings. "In place of searching for reconciliation with that which is unavoidable in the human condition, it seeks to compensate for the weaknesses of this condition with the promise of future Happiness."<sup>28</sup> The "unavoidable" would seem to include differences of perception and language, diversity of economic, social and political condition, conflict among groups of Muslims, all the particular problems of living and dying. In the logocentric vision, those problems appear irrelevant or resolved once and for all; for example, Muslims cannot fight other Muslims, even though they do. The "truth" as it is felt and lived in all its particularity disappears behind the universal as a result of the sacralization of scripture and the transcendentalization of the formative period of Islam. Nietzsche made a similar point about Paul's role in the development of Christianity:

The life, the example the teaching, the death, the meaning and the right of the entire Gospel--nothing was left once this hate-obsessed false-coiner had grasped what alone he could make use of. Not the reality, not the historical truth!... The Church subsequently falsified even the history of mankind into the pre-history of Christianity.<sup>29</sup>

Far from permitting himself such intemperate language, Arkoun cloaks his assault in social scientific jargon but, like Nietzsche, he aims to critique rationalism in the name of history. He does it by emphasizing the intent of Islamic thinkers rather than their impact. For example, the arguments of the Mu`tazila that both God and the Qur'an could not be outside of time, i.e. "uncreated," if there were only one God, constituted a step toward the historical understanding of Islam. It also provided an opening wedge for the use of reason in the elaboration of ethical judgments, an opening pursued by the philosophers,<sup>30</sup> who sought to engage in "independent, rigorous and critical reflection," even though their work ultimately served, like that of the

Mu` tazila, to reinforce an orthodox view. Similarly, Ibn Khaldun can be admired for his attempt at a sociology of belief and power, even though he did not manage to apply his critical methods to the emergence of Islam itself. As a consequence, his dynamic model reflects the substantialist immobility of medieval Islam.

Arkoun argues that Muslims escaped the constraints of logocentrism only in love and death, which were the special preserve of mystics, prophets, and some poets, as opposed to the domain of the theologians, philosophers, jurists, moralists and great literary figures.

It is there [in some interior space] that there occurs the ultimate struggle between an interior discourse, coincident in fleeting fashion with the feeling of a different and original truth, and an exterior, conventional discourse, which, in order to assure communication, is obliged to depend upon repetition. ...It is in the light of that distinction that one can understand the meaning and significance of all the conflicts that have marked religious and philosophic thought.<sup>31</sup>

Like other authenticics, Arkoun identifies with the "different" and "original" truth against the conventional, with the interior against the exterior, with that which is felt against that which is thought, with ethnic and sectarian minorities against orthodoxy, with the particular against the universal. Particularity constitutes for him the richness of Islamic culture and the proper focus of the modern historian, who must study the production of universalizing myths and values and the subsequent interplay of myth and reality, universal and particular.

## **RADICALISM**

From this notion of Islam as a vast concatenation of particular impulses and feelings, Arkoun derives his radical opposition to all forms of conventional ideology: democratic, nationalist, socialist, or fundamentalist. Each selects abstract postulates from the tradition and erects upon them an exclusivist claim to legitimacy. Arkoun denies, in the name of science, objectivity and positivity, all such exclusivist claims for their ahistoricism, their neglect of felt realities past and present, their willingness to propagate "false consciousness." "It is a question of subverting all types of traditional discourse about the truth," he writes.<sup>32</sup> Like Nietzsche, Arkoun means to attack assertions about essence and substance, whether those assertions are in the theological or philosophical mode. He seeks to undercut what he calls Islamic Reason,<sup>33</sup> the foundation of the Islamic tradition, as a condition for the reconstruction of an authentic (the term is again mine) way of being Muslim in the 20th century.

Although Arkoun sees his own task as intellectual rather than political, his work represents a commitment to, even if not a call for, revolution. "The struggle for the emancipation of human beings from the kinds of servitudes they fashion for themselves is inseparably intellectual and political."<sup>34</sup> Regimes depend on ideologies, ideologies utilize and cultivate myths that bind and constrain, and these myths depend on the traditional conception of truth for their plausibility. Thus Arkoun's assault on Islamic Reason and upon the "false consciousness" it perpetuates is necessarily an attack upon the regimes, including all existing Arab governments, whose ideologies exploit this consciousness in any fashion whatsoever. It is a plea to hear those muted voices and overlooked experiences which are casualties of the official and scholarly preference for orthodoxy. "... Only those scholars who harmonize their thought with their concrete engagement and their engagement with their thought are engaged in the continuous fight to create new spaces of freedom, to give new intellectual articulations to the silent voices ...."<sup>35</sup>

Consciousness is false, for Arkoun, when it does not reflect critical reason and sociological reality. The notion of a transhistoric shari`a, essential to the position and appeal of the establishment `ulama as well as to groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, cannot be sustained against evidence of painstaking efforts of the jurists to transcendentalize scripture, sayings and practice. Similarly, the effort to portray Islam either as opposed, in essence, to secular authority or as supportive by nature of any and all governments ignores parts of the historical record, since Islam has at various times and places been both. The transformation of the "Medina experience" into the "Medina model" of Islamic government further obfuscates the truth. Finally, any vision of Islam as abstract, rational, monotheistic and universalistic--the Islam dear to reformers of a the salafiyy movement--neglects the enormous diversity in the way Islam has been lived over the centuries. It denies the sociological reality of popular Islam.

Arkoun's radicalism carries him a step beyond Qutb. Qutb was no less indiscriminate in his attack upon regimes, none of which measured up to his standard of divine government. But for Qutb that standard could be found in the shari`a, itself founded upon the Qur'an and the hadiths, viewed as a set of transhistoric principles ready for implementation according to the needs of time and place. Authentic Muslims not only believe in those principles but, like the founding generation of Muslims, interpret them and act upon them in accordance with historical circumstances. This is the sociological condition for truth. But, unlike Arkoun, Qutb does not expose the principles themselves to the critique of modern historical research. He does not ask how and to what extent the principles he enunciates in Social Justice in Islam reflect the worldly conditions of the scholars who elaborated them; he accepts the existence of abstract, universal ideas even if human beings can never fully understand or implement them. Arkoun rejects that position as indistinguishable from the apologetics of the `ulama. "The true truth is thus in a structural situation of tension, of conflict, of mutual exclusion with the official truth." writes Arkoun.<sup>36</sup>

This demand for the "true truth", valid by both epistemological and sociological standards, secures Arkoun's position among the authentic. At moments Arkoun speaks of the need to know the "objective" content of the Qur'an to utilize the "positivities" of all modern social scientific findings.

We must undo the intolerable amalgamations, the abusive simplifications, the emotional formulations, the arbitrary demands, the neurotic obsessions that feed false consciousness, which is utilized nonetheless to raise the consciousness of the masses for the realization of an historic mission; we must at the same time reinsert in the area thus liberated the positive findings of a critical reexamination of the whole Islamic tradition in the light of the most recent conquests of scientific understanding.<sup>37</sup>

Science has usually meant externality and abstraction, and modern social science has dedicated itself to rendering external, hence comprehensible at a different time and place, that which is initially internal and time-bound. Arkoun calls upon social science to understand "l'imaginaire"--that sedimentation of consciousness and conviction that governs so much behavior in any society--and to achieve "if possible . . . a direct and totalizing reading of the real."<sup>38</sup> But how can Arkoun believe it is possible? Why is not science itself, built on transhistoric procedures and axioms, equally vulnerable to critical examination of the historicist sort? Where does one seek verification of this truth as the subverter of all others?

In the face of such questions, Arkoun backs off from the dichotomy of true and false:

One can only speak of an continuous epistemological critique to reduce to a minimum the error factor of the consciousness. In this sense, one can say that "false consciousness" is that one which is not concerned with turning criticism back upon itself.<sup>39</sup>

He resorts to a disclaimer: there is no such thing as innocent discourse or innocent method, which is to say that he, too, works from a particular perspective in history. Yet there reverberates through Arkoun's work an underlying faith in the truth-producing capacities--if not at this stage then at the next--of modern social science.<sup>40</sup> His revolutionary fervor stems from a faith that the pursuit of knowledge will liberate human beings from the strictures imposed by the coincidence of state, party, religion and national culture--a coincidence he calls "heavy with threat for the quality of the civilization that Muslims wish to found."<sup>41</sup> He would free human beings from the realm of myth generated by the purposeful propagation of exclusivist, arbitrary visions of the past by exposing them to "true truth" and "true reality."

Arkoun suggests that the contemporary revival movement seeks to replace one sort of alienation with another.<sup>42</sup> It combats the inroads of Western idealism with a reassertion of Islamic essentialism; it fosters a widening of the gap between the realm of myth (le réel imaginaire) and the pluralistic, particularistic realm of popular belief, which is a part of the réel vrai.<sup>43</sup> For Arkoun, the scientific study of Islamic history would eliminate alienation by validating all dimensions of collective memory and undercutting the capacity of any one dimension to advance itself as the proprietor of truth. As the totality of the Islamic experience--thought and unthought, external and internal, learned and popular--the truth frees Muslims to be themselves.

It is also possible that science, by according legitimacy to a vast range of behavior and identifying truth with the understanding of that totality, effectively isolates every individual, save the scholar, from truthful behavior. If there exists no truth divorced from the social circumstances in which it is formulated, what is the significance of liberating the human will? One is "free" to will anything one's circumstances permit (perhaps one should say "compelled" not to will anything but that which is sociologically true) or one is "free" to will the scientific truth either by an act of faith (false consciousness?) or because one is "compelled" by reason. Where, then, lies the domain for autonomous human action that underlies Arkoun's radical attack on the strictures of Islamic Reason and the regimes that exploit them?

## VOLUNTARISM

As a radical, Arkoun believes in the capacity of human beings to reshape their world. As a historicist, he takes all truth to be a product of human mediation. As a philosopher-historian, he understands history as a product not simply of material circumstances but of the ways in which human beings have understood those circumstances and sought to manipulate them. He believes intellectuals have a duty to be committed because they have the capacity to make a difference. But as a critic of substantialism in both its Greek and Islamic versions, he rejects the notion of the autonomous individual, endowed by nature with reason and free will, and as social scientist he regards human beings as less free than they would like to think they are.<sup>44</sup> He is, in short, ambivalent about the ability of human beings to shape their own destiny.

Arkoun's understanding of the role of intellectuals in history accounts for at least some of this ambivalence. Like others, he is critical of the traditional Orientalist enterprise of squeezing from the great texts the essence of Islamic civilization--not so much because the Orientalists

overestimated the impact of ideas and neglected the material factors but because they did not emphasize the human origins of the ideas, the development of the doctrines, the gradual transcendentalization of certain notions and the delegitimation of others. Concrete human beings mediate truth. Thus, to understand Islamic truth one must understand the actions of its mediators from the Prophet through the Companions to the Qur'an reciters, the `ulama, the Mu` tazila, the philosophers, the great sufis, etc. It was the mediators, the intellectuals, who generated orthodoxy--and it was they who, both intentionally and unintentionally, closed off the escape from a "medieval mentality."

They did not, of course, spin out ideas in disinterested fashion. Arkoun notes the degree to which ideas emerged to cover dynastic solidification, the bid for influence of the `ulama, the popular effort to undercut religious authority or the effort to lift Islam from its position as creed of the Arabs to that of universal religion. Ideas reflect circumstances imperfectly; as a result, the "collective conscience" to which they give rise may diverge significantly from both the original and subsequent historical circumstances. This is the origin of "false consciousness" seen as affecting the behavior of the masses more than that of the elites, whose critical reason can and should carry them beyond. The vital question, for Arkoun, is why the efforts of the Mu` tazila, the philosophers and Ibn Khaldun to rethink the truth in the light of experience withered for lack of pursuit. He accepts the judgment of a Von Grunebaum<sup>45</sup> and others about the stagnation of medieval Islamic thinking but wants, by searching for reasons, to explore avenues of escape. That's what he means by "applied Islamology"<sup>46</sup>--an Orientalism that is both scientific and practical, rather than an Orientalism in which "one is more and more content to note the differences in mentalities and the uselessness of any effort to reduce them."<sup>47</sup>

For Arkoun, the Mu` tazila took a first step toward historicism. By bringing the Qur'an into the created realm, they opened the way to understanding the hadiths as the imperfect efforts of human beings, starting with the prophet, to elaborate and interpret God's will as expressed in the Qur'an--efforts necessarily subject to the critique of human reason. They challenged the efforts of the `ulama to solidify their own power at the expense of the caliphs by posing as the guardians of a fixed, eternal shari`a, unamenable to amendment through human reason, and they opened the way toward innovation, which, by the emerging standards of mainstream theologians, constituted blasphemy.

Arkoun applauds this radical, historicizing thrust of the Mu` tazilites but notices both sides of the sword. He writes of them:

Reason must intervene independently of revelation, as is established by the existence of aesthetic judgments outside the Islamic framework. In this case, reason is based upon natural, necessary--and therefore universal--knowledge: that is how the Mu` tazilite method . . . relates to that of the philosophers.<sup>48</sup>

By imbibing Greek essentialism, they located the foundations of reason beyond history even as they were attempting to bring the understanding of revelation more thoroughly within it. They sacralized and desacralized at the same time, a fact which made it possible for someone like al-Ashari to strengthen orthodoxy by incorporating aspects of the reasoning developed by the Mu` tazila, while rejecting most of their doctrine. The Mu` tazilite effort ultimately contributed to the reinforcement of the "medieval mentality," antithetic to human voluntarism and to a complete understanding of the Islamic tradition.

Like Gramsci (and like Said, who cites Gramsci), Arkoun sees human action mainly as a product of a hegemonic collective consciousness<sup>49</sup> whose roots lie both in unreflected adherence to immemorial ways and in essentialist, rationalist dogmas that serve to legitimate those mores.

For most individuals, and even for most intellectuals, the collective consciousness (*l'imaginaire*) guides action, but he calls upon the few capable of critical reason to undertake the Mu'tazilite enterprise of separating the power structure of the Islamic world from "all the theology of serf-will (*serf-arbitre* as opposed to *libre-arbitre*) developed during the centuries in the societies of the Book."<sup>50</sup> The question modern intellectuals must ask is this: "Under what verifiable conditions does the idea of truth acquire such strength as to command the destiny of an individual or produce a collective history?"<sup>51</sup> [*italics in the original*] By inquiring about the origins of truth and understanding the mechanisms by which it is propagated, they escape the clutches of both the Islamic tradition and Cartesian visions of modernity. By asking why one version of truth prevailed over another and why certain avenues of thought were traveled while others were not, the intellectuals reconstruct the Islamic past as a series of human actions and inactions in which further episodes are possible but not necessary.<sup>52</sup> It is the intellectuals who rescue human voluntarism from essentialism and determinism via an understanding of the totality of the Islamic experience.

## UNITARISM

One is tempted to say that Arkoun thinks the intellectual can step outside the stream of Islamic history and then, enriched by a complete picture of its meanderings, walk purposefully back into it without fear of being carried away. Yet Arkoun would reject that analogy for its similarity to Plato's parable of the cave and the suggestion that the shadowy multiplicity of life is mere illusion, to be stripped away if essential truth is to be understood. For Arkoun, the very idea of escaping shadows and illusions is itself illusory. In fact, every trip outside the cave constitutes an historical event, identifiable in space and time, and every intellectual who reenters to preach the Truth contributes to division and even anarchy. There is no innocent discourse. There is no stepping outside history. But is there then no escape from anarchy? Does Islam explode under the pressure of historicist criticism into a thousand fragments all deprived of truth value? Arkoun's particularism and voluntarism lead him (and other authentics) to the brink of nihilism, from which he must fashion a retreat if he is to seek solutions to the problem of false consciousness as he promised in undertaking practical Islamology. His commitment drives him toward the search for meaning within history.

Arkoun seeks to demonstrate the oneness of the Islamic experience. His critique of the manipulation of Islam for both conservative and radical purposes depends upon an empirical confirmation that the Islamic reality is plural and upon an historical account of the development of plurality out of a single tradition. The Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islam of revolutionary Islam are false not only because they are not what they pretend to be, i.e. representatives of the only true Islam, but because they underrate the degree to which the Islamic tradition is one in all its diversity. Liberation comes from the reconstruction of wholeness. The problem, he says, is to "re-member a domain of meaning that has broken up (*éclaté*)."<sup>53</sup> This double invitation to recall and to put back together is the key image of his unitarian impulse.

What is one to recall? What is one to put back together? Arkoun speaks of the "Qur'anic fact" as the basis of, and quite intellectually separate from, the "Islamic fact" to which it gives rise. For him, there exist certain axiological values, articulated in the Qur'an, which constitute the bedrock of Islamic discourse. The Qur'an distinguishes positive from negative values by sets of criteria. By the names it assigns to God, by its discussion of the need for Witness, by its assertion of the concepts of Community and Law, it established a framework for thought and action.<sup>54</sup> Islamic history can be understood as the projection through time of this axiology.

Arkoun sets down ten propositions that help define such a projection. They deserve comment:<sup>55</sup>

*1. The Qur'an is a set of meanings that give rise to many doctrines.*

In place of essentialist commonalities shared by all human beings, nonetheless divided (even Muslims) by experience, Arkoun suggests an experiential unity of all Muslims stemming from the "Qur'anic fact."

*2. The Qur'an includes both transhistoric messages and practical, ideological advice.*

"Messages" necessarily suggests problems of transmission, decoding and interpretation. The unity of the "Islamic fact" lies not then in the truth-bearing content of the Qur'an but in the factual unity of the all messages and advice it has generated.

*3. The interpretation of the Qur'an cannot be "closed."*

He refers to the efforts of the jurists to codify the shari`a, elevating selections of hadiths to the level of Qur'anic revelation and declaring the season for interpretation "closed." Unlike reformists who tried to demonstrate the irrationality of closure in the light of the transhistoric rationality of the Qur'an, Arkoun's "cannot" represents an assertion that it is impossible to circumscribe factual multiplicity with essentialist rules. The perceived need to "close" demonstrated the openness and plurality of the tradition.

*4. The Qur'an cannot be reduced to ideology.*

Ideology links ideas with action. But Arkoun has already said that Islam has been understood as sets of both abstract ideas and recipes for practical action or inaction. Puritanical, revolutionary Islam has periodically insisted upon tight linkage between principles and action in its assaults upon both the abstract Islam of the Sunni establishment and the political passivism of sufism and popular Islam. Reduction to ideology would constitute closure.

*5. The totality of interpretations constitute the whole tradition.*

This seems to be a tautology, if "tradition" is understood as a stream of history generated with reference to the Qur'anic fact, rather than some fixed set of ideas or practices located in a single period and place. Yet there may be more: the assertion that a totality of particulars does in fact constitute something unitary and therefore whole. Wholeness connotes health, solidarity, community, lack of alienation, autonomy, authenticity.

*6. The whole tradition deserves anthropological **investigation**.*

The focus must be on the human elaboration of the tradition--the material culture, the myths, the texts, the doctrines--in the totality of its manifestations which constitute its wholeness. Why? Not just because the "Islamic fact" is there to be studied but because the salvation of the Islamic world depends upon a correct understanding of the tradition as a whole. The search for authenticity drives investigation.

*7. Each part of the tradition has functioned as an exclusive system.*

8. *After reconstruction of the whole tradition, each particular tradition must get rid of its exclusivity, its intolerance.*

Here is the normative political message. Each group, confronted with knowledge of the whole historical tradition, understood with the tools of modern social science, must overcome its false consciousness as privileged purveyors of truth.

9. *There currently exists no privileged way to determine what is true Islam.*

This seems contradictory, for Arkoun has just proposed a proper way to understand Islam. He seems to mean that no essentialist argument, built upon unprovable assumptions about ultimate reality, can prevail over others, while social science, denying itself such assumptions, may eventually succeed in supplying a satisfactory alternative--perhaps not "true," and hence not exclusivist, but truthful in its portrayal of the human situation, hence authentic.

10. *Disputes must get first attention; the corpus of selected, "authentic" hadiths must be reexamined to understand temporal reasons for selection and deselection.*

Arkoun acknowledges that the process of reexamining the Islamic tradition may be a long one, even if many scholars, Arabs and non-Arabs, Muslims and non-Muslims, participate in the task. For one thing, Arkoun wants a survey of not just what has been thought but that which as remained unthought, by which he means that which is unthinkable (e.g. atheism); that which is beyond the limits of scientific thought, hence not yet thought; that which is masked or hidden; that which is rejected in the course of scientific development; and that which is simply forgotten.<sup>56</sup> Burdened with this enormous task, applied Islamology must begin at points where need is most acute. Scholarship must be imaginative and committed to the reduction of conflict through scientific elaboration of a unitary "Islamic fact". That is his project.

Does the project lie within or outside the Islamic fact? If it lies within, then how can it qualify to provide a privileged truth? If the truth is not privileged, how can it be used as a weapon against false consciousness? If it is privileged, must not its claim precede and exclude all others? Must it not be intolerant of intolerance? If the project lies outside the experience it describes, then it seems not to differ substantially from European Orientalism. Enhanced, perhaps, in its ability to produce privileged truth by virtue of distance, it is also diminished in its capacity to transform by persuading those within from a perspective of understanding?<sup>57</sup>

In recent work, Arkoun suggests ever more insistently that a satisfactory understanding of Islam must go beyond the "Qur'anic fact" to reflect upon the religious impulses that gave rise to all three "societies of the Book."

And because the Bible had already introduced these same figures [found in the Qur'an] with the same dialectical opposites and the same intention of ontological fixation, we can say that human unity is rooted in a religious imagination that goes beyond the strict Koranic formulation. Thus we are referred to a more radical unity--that of the myths and symbols that have nourished and produced the entire history of man in the realm of what can be called societies of the Book, that is those subject to the phenomenon of Revelation, handed down in the Holy Scriptures.<sup>58</sup>

He laments the historical movement of Islam, through the development of legalism and orthodoxy, away from this sense of unity. Even the introduction of philosophy pushed in quite a different direction, toward an "imagined unity," which ultimately served to further separate revelation from history. Only the mystics, and especially Ibn `Arabi, preserved a feeling for "man as religious subject"--drawn toward the immersion of self in God.<sup>59</sup> It is not surprising that the modern revival movement has used mysticism to rally its troops. But Arkoun finds this an inadequate shortcut through the forest of divisive traditions of the Islamic world. Unity comes not from mysticism but from a critical, anthropological understanding of mysticism as well as all other manifestations of religion in the societies of the Book.

Arkoun's project seems to lie both inside and outside the Islamic experience: it seeks to reconcile within and without, understanding and explanation, particularism and unity, sociological and epistemological truth. The starting point must be from within--from the side of understanding, particularism, and sociological truth: Islam as it is felt and practiced. But reflexive thought necessarily seeks explanation of such a particularistic understanding and its sociological validity; it moves beyond its own limits to see itself as one aspect of the particularistic chaos of Islamic life and Islam as one example of a scripture-dominated society, one of the societies of the Book. Then, fortified with a persuasive account of its place in the world, the project eliminates the exclusivist claims of its initial, internal belief structure. Internal truth, thus reformed, coincides with external reality. Epistemology reinforces sociology as grounds for legitimacy, and explanation coincides with understanding, theory with practice, thought with action. The drive for authenticity, seemingly particularistic in its thrust to discover the true Arab-Muslim personality, ends up pulling Muslims toward a unitaristic perspective without universals.<sup>60</sup> Such is the difficult path Arkoun tries to walk.

## **PROBLEMS**

The commonalities between Arkoun's ideas and those of a committed revivalist such as Muhammad Qutb stem from their common dedication to the problem of authenticity. Confronting the inadequacy of either faith or abstract reason as a basis for action, they ask how Muslims can reshape their world without abandoning either reason or faith. The reformists (salafi) such as Muhammad `Abdu tried to bring together reason and faith, but Qutb and Arkoun impose a further requirement: the reconciliation of reason and faith with sociological realities. They work within the same field but from different premises with different methodologies and different approaches to concrete political problems.

### ***Modernization***

The call for authenticity arises from a rejection of both tradition, as the legitimation of customary behavior, and modernity, understood as belief in a rational, secular truth producing economic and social progress. Arkoun's position fits that conception of authenticity. Yet, unlike Qutb, Arkoun identifies with the modernist, Westernist camp by arguing that modernism has been misunderstood. In the Islamic world, the name Mustafa Kemal, who applied Enlightenment ideas in Turkey, has been equated with modernism. But he did not understand, any more than had the Enlightenment itself, "the real game of social forces at work"<sup>61</sup> behind the ideas, the relationship between ideas and context. For Arkoun, modernism itself (or perhaps one should call it postmodernism for the sake of clarity) has come to reject the essentialist

understanding, characteristic of both the theological perspective and of Enlightenment philosophy.

For Arkoun, the most advanced, progressive elements in the West no longer espouse any version of essentialism, whether it be Cartesian rationalism, liberal secularism or Marxist determinism; as a consequence, the zealots need not "exhaust themselves" in polemics against values no longer held in the West, i.e. against Kemalism.<sup>62</sup> Instead, the East must join the West in an effort, barely begun, to achieve historical understanding of human hopes, fears, myths, truths and action. Historicism constitutes the core of what Arkoun thinks is the modern (or postmodern) attitude, and defined in that way, modernity becomes for him--as it seemed to be in the age of the nahda--a global imperative. The Enlightenment, like Islam, becomes not just a source of values but an object of inquiry: what does it owe to all three major monotheistic religions? to what extent is it an accidental, internal product of the West? to what extent does its secularism constitute a phase of human maturation in society?<sup>63</sup>

This unambiguous endorsement of modernity, or postmodernity, seems to put Arkoun in quite a different camp from Qutb. His faith in social science, his language, his frank distaste for those who repeat old wisdom in defense of their positions, his contempt for "integralism"<sup>64</sup>, his image of himself as a part of a scientific community rather than a religious one--all these factors set him apart from Qutb and apart from the contemporary revival movement as a whole. Yet this apparent distance narrows as one compares visions of the future.

Qutb and Arkoun both contemplate new beginnings. Arkoun deplores the efforts of a Qutb to search for first principles, saying that the origins of these truths must be reexamined, if human beings are to be rediscovered in all their potential. In a sympathetic critique of Ibn Tufayl's Hayy ibn Yaqzan, he discerns an intuition that "la table rase or the radical beginning of knowledge is possible"<sup>65</sup>--a hint, for him, of Ibn Tufayl's incipient modernity. Arkoun himself seems to believe in attempting a table rase through the reconstruction of history. "Still today we are witnessing fresh vigor in the demand for a radical beginning: not only on the terrain and with the means of philosophy, but in the more and more rigorous practice of all the human sciences."<sup>66</sup> For him the starting point for a new "Founding Action" must be an anthropological conception of the state of nature rather than a return to the principles of revelation--man as essentially nothing rather than something (such as "self", as Iqbal suggests.) "Radical thinking refers to the biological, historical, linguistic, semiotic condition shared by people as natural beings."<sup>67</sup> Yet Arkoun's belief in the possibility of a radical recommencement remains just that: a belief, like others. While its character is derivative of human knowledge rather than revealed, it is the basis of the knowledge from which it derives. While it liberates, it cannot liberate from the burden of that first principle, which is a problem for him but not for Qutb, who acknowledges the necessity of faith as a point of beginning.

Both Arkoun and Qutb contemplate a coming together of Muslim and even non-Muslim worlds. Arkoun calls for the immediate participation of all scholars in a grand campaign to understand the particularistic nature of all truths including those passed on by Islam. For him, social science will increasingly permit the interpretation of particularity as function of totality and enable Muslims to be at one with themselves and with the rest of the world. The overcoming of the gulf between East and West through the common endorsement of scientific methodology paves the way toward reconciliation within Islam. Qutb, on the other hand, foresees a world increasingly subdued by a newly triumphant, regenerated Islam. Unity comes from action rather than reflection.

Both seem to believe in progress despite distrust of Enlightenment ideas in which the Western notion of progress has been based. For Arkoun, part of what is lacking in the

"medieval" understanding characteristic of the Islamic world until the 19th century is the idea of progress. God dominated all levels of existence in that mentality, science and thought were confined to sacred space and time, observation and experiment were contested, and knowledge was seen as a kind of intellectual dreaming about essential truth.<sup>68</sup> Yet Arkoun, like Qutb, finds neither idealistic nor materialist thought an adequate foundation for a doctrine of progress. What has made the West surge forward, according to Arkoun, is not just the victory of reason over faith but the triumph of science over reason. Western science moved beyond its essentialist foundations, while Islamic philosophy and science, ensnared in a theological ambience, lost its critical impulse and the capacity to reexamine its own assumptions. Ibn Khaldun, empiricist and social scientist though he was, could see no escape from universal necessity. Neither could Sir Isaac Newton or Karl Marx, but the West moved beyond Newton and Marx, and the Islamic world did not rethink the conclusions of Ibn Khaldun, or even pay much attention to them.

Can progress, then, represent any more than a possibility? Qutb and Arkoun both try to demonstrate the capacity for human improvement. For Qutb that capacity is innate. For Arkoun, it comes from reflection about the historical generation of human culture. Both insist that human beings are responsible for making what they will of themselves; improvement appears problematic, accidental, possible but scarcely inevitable. Both thinkers, products of the 20th century, nonetheless insist upon the inevitability of progress among human beings free to choose it.

That apparent contradiction hangs especially heavy over Arkoun. Social science cannot establish unambiguous definitions without resort to "false bourgeois universalism,"<sup>69</sup> he warns. Its vocabulary "depends on the social dialectic characteristic of each society and each historical phase."<sup>70</sup> How then can one define in an unambiguous way a pattern of evolution one might call "progress?" He speaks of the inevitable march of science and the concomitant decline in the ability of religion to monopolize the production of truth. But I see not what makes that march inevitable nor how one could call that march "progress," if one eschews an essentialist definition of the concept. He says the task of social science is to "articulate the multiplicity of human discourse by means of the constantly revised principles and methods of objective knowledge."<sup>71</sup> But if principles and methods are constantly revised, whence comes the unchanging standard by which one may judge whether revision constitutes progress or retrogression? And why does ever greater knowledge of human diversity free human beings from the perceived necessity of going in any particular direction, including the way in which science is presumably marching?

Arkoun sees reality as the standard. Science produces ever more accurate images of reality, which is itself changing. Science must change to keep up and to respond to its own self-critique, constantly abandoning the standards it creates. But, as Nietzsche observed, such an exercise demobilizes and demoralizes. Zarathustra finds consolation in the hypothesis of eternal recurrence, but Arkoun prefers to retain the doctrine of progress through a double act of faith: a belief that science can elaborate a truth within history that goes beyond history, and a belief that such a truth will be followed. Qutb at least acknowledges an unverifiable belief in an enduring standard. He is, however, no more explicit than Arkoun in recognizing as mere conviction the belief that human beings, re-exposed to the truth, will choose it with greater consistency in the future than in the past.

Every society depends to some degree on myth, l'imaginaire; there can be no complete escape. Perhaps Arkoun would say that the myth of progress constitutes the prerequisite for constructive action in the twentieth century. Is not the myth of progress a fixed part of the modern world like the scarcity of oil or the existence of atomic weapons? Can one compete in a progress-oriented world without embracing the myth and behaving as if it mattered? The myth of progress necessarily perpetuates an element of false consciousness insofar as it offers images

of a lifestyle that may well be unachievable; it represents compromise of the radical historicist project to subvert all inherited values; it cannot be guaranteed without sacrificing human responsibility. Yet it must for practical reasons be preserved as a foundation for hope and an incentive for group action. Such might be Arkoun's response.

### *Equality and Group Action*

As a revolutionary strategy, Arkoun's position suffers not just from its relative lack of utopian lure. It also depends upon free speech as the condition for intellectual activity, upon the intellectuals as a force for mobilization of the society, and upon the legitimation of all subgroup identities as a means of generating unity. However logical and laudable these presuppositions, they tend to further diminish the plausibility of group action. Free speech guarantees argument about what should be done, intellectuals have rarely been able to mobilize mass support, and equal status for subgroups creates a plurality from which unity must be painstakingly constructed.

Arkoun writes admiringly of Tawhidi, who expressed bitterness against a society that, despite Qur'anic injunctions, continued to value persons more for their backgrounds than for their actions.<sup>72</sup> Tawhidi showed interest in some of the questions Arkoun deems vital: Why do societies tend to reject those who are different? How do standards of conventionality emerge? How can one jurist declare illicit that which another permits? Arkoun sees Tawhidi as a defender of equal human subjectivity.

For Arkoun, Tawhidi's instincts push the modern historian toward an extended range of interests. He or she must look at all ethnic and professional groups, at the forgotten as well as the renowned, at those who were not guardians of high Islam as well as those who were. Equal subjectivity means each national and subnational area deserves historical, sociological and anthropological analysis with the aim of understanding how norms were imposed and how values lived.

Equality means, from Arkoun's perspective, the equal right to speak and be heard, but such a right can only be exercised if free speech is permitted.

To let all sectors of the society speak is a new demand that can in reality be satisfied only under political regimes won over to freedom of thought, of expression and of publication.<sup>73</sup>

For this reason, existing regimes in Muslim countries constitute, by their intolerance of dissidence and of scientific research, double obstacles to the achievement of group identity with the totality of the Islamic experience: by their heavy propaganda on behalf of a mythical past, they render dangerous the position of a scientific historian bent upon reexamining the inherited wisdom, and they repress in the name of national unity all popular expressions of minority culture. Opposition groups are no less dedicated than the government to the utilization of Islam for political purposes and no less opposed to all critical study of Islamic issues.<sup>74</sup> Minority groups seldom speak for themselves, and intellectuals are not free to explore the historical terrain in which minorities and majorities diverged--the terrain from which genuine, authentic unity might be reconstructed.

As one would expect from an intellectual, Arkoun expects more from himself and his colleagues than from the masses. It is they, the intellectuals, who must examine the whole of the

Islamic tradition and communicate the result to the "undivided and naive consciousness of the believers."<sup>75</sup> For that reason, they must work from within that consciousness, avoiding excessive intellectualization; they cannot ignore popular belief, as did the exponents of nahda, whether salifiyy or liberal, in the late 19th and early 20th century.<sup>76</sup> They cannot dismiss the whole of the Islamic tradition as irrelevant to the present, as did the exponents of Arab revolution in the 1950s and 60s. Nor, conversely, can they steep themselves in the tradition, neglecting both critical epistemology and sociological realities, as have the establishment `ulama. For Arkoun, citing Weber and sounding like Gramsci, it is the intellectuals who must elaborate meaning for a society. But where are those intellectuals in the Arab-Islamic world today? Too many "false intellectuals" have accepted cooptation by repressive regimes in return for all too hasty training, he says.<sup>77</sup>

In an early work, Arkoun joined Iqbal in emphasizing the role of modern poets in portraying the Arab-Muslim condition in concrete, comprehensible terms.

One is justified in saying that it is in and through the new poetry that the most radical revolution has been accomplished in the Arab-Islamic milieu since the 1950s: not a destructive revolution (haddama), as the opponents claim, but a transmutation of the collective sensibility, an enlarging and reanchoring of the imaginary.<sup>78</sup>

He saw poetry as a critical link between the intellectuals and the masses.

It is in modern poetry, much more than in official pronouncements, that marginal persons and petits salariés can, to the extent that they have access to it, find the most adequate expression of the deaths, births and renaissances of which they have been more or less confusedly the subjects.<sup>79</sup>

Even if such poetry explicitly rejected religious belief and propounded Marxist ideology, it nonetheless put Arab Muslims in touch with themselves and their past. The poets represented those who, themselves capable of getting outside the Islamic experience and gaining perspective, could potentially move the public imagination from within.

The passage of but a few years, marked by the sharp successes of the Islamic revival movement, seems to have undermined Arkoun's optimism about the role of the poets. It is the followers of Qutb, cloaking a revolutionary message in traditional terms, who have won the ear of the masses, not the secular, revolutionary poets. The revivalists have successfully mobilized group action on the basis of "true faith" against believers and non-believers alike. In Arkoun's view, such groups are bent on injecting a new sort of false consciousness, a new source of alienation to replace older ones, further complicating the task of demythification, which falls to the "genuine" intellectual. It is not clear to me from Arkoun's later work how under these conditions he thinks the "true" intellectuals might be able to generate an effective political movement to compete with either the establishment or the revivalists. His own work, largely written in French and filled with philosophical and sociological terminology, is inaccessible to any but the community of scholars.<sup>80</sup> Between his conception of the Islamic "totality" and the mobilization of a popular consciousness of that "fact" there would seem to be chasm of Himalayan proportions.

### ***Institutions***

Institutions constitute the key to authenticity and the great stumbling block, for Arkoun as for other authenticists. Amidst repressive institutions, intellectuals cannot perform their essential roles. Under the barrage of propaganda emitted by the authorities, the masses seem unlikely to escape false consciousness. Shored up by fragments of Islamic revelation and elements of Western reason, institutions depend upon coercion as a substitute for constitutional solidity. They must eventually crumble. But on what grounds can more durable institutions be constructed in the absence of essential truth?

Arkoun says constitutional fragility characterizes both East and West. In the Islamic world, power is traditionally seen as derived from the caliph but divine authority lies in texts. The caliph, at least in the Sunni community, can and must apply a universal shari`a to an enormous diversity of peoples attached to differing statutes and differing versions of the shari`a. If he seeks to unify by coercion, as did the Umayyads, he appears illegitimate; if he concerns himself with a highly abstract law, far removed from the diversity of Islamic life, he consigns himself to the dustbin of history, as did the later `Abbasids. The Islamic attachment to text puts authority in the hands of the `ulama, who have fashioned not one truth but many of them in time and space. Contemporary historical analysis portrays the `ulama as creators of the texts they have come to guard, defenders of both orthodoxy and dissent, partisans of order and, occasionally, advocates of revolt.<sup>81</sup> Yet, without the caliph, the `ulama lack power just as the caliph, without the backing of the `ulama, lacks authority.<sup>82</sup> Only the Shi`i belief in the imams, direct inheritors of the spiritual powers of Muhammad, avoids such a dilemma by bestowing divine sanction upon an institution, the imamate.<sup>83</sup>

In the West, according to Arkoun, the problem is different but analogous. Power lies with mere human beings but legitimacy depends upon Divine Reason. Popular sovereignty conflicts with self-evident truths. Liberalism proposes a secularization of authority which, if ever completed, would deprive the liberal faith of its certainty and authority. Western institutions stand, in fact, upon a contradictory mixture of faith and reason that may be no less precarious as a foundation for contemporary government than is Islamic theory. Legitimacy depends upon processes created upon a presumption of absolute truth that has been eroded, leaving the processes themselves hanging without visible support.

Arkoun sees threat in this generalized crisis of legitimacy. "Paradoxically, the more the foundations of authority are contested, the more the hold of the State is strong and omnipresent."<sup>84</sup> In both East and West, says Arkoun, the state has used propaganda as well as force to compensate for inadequate legitimacy. In the West the propaganda overemphasizes the discreteness of religious and political domains, whereas equivalent propaganda in the Islamic world often presumes their identity. For Arkoun, no state has ever foregone the use of religion, heroes, and historical memories in seeking to justify its authority; on the other hand, in contrast with most advocates of revival, he believes that no state could utterly obliterate the distinction between religion and politics.

We should not forget that man agrees to obey, to be devoted, and to obligate his life when he feels a "debt of meaning" to a natural or supernatural being. This may be the ultimate legitimacy of the state understood as the power accepted and obeyed by a group, community, or nation. The crisis of meaning started when each individual claimed himself as the source of all or true meaning; in this case, there is no longer any transcendent authority. Relations of power are substitutes for relations of symbolic exchanges of meaning. To whom do we owe a "debt of meaning?"<sup>85</sup>

Although Arkoun criticizes existing Muslim states for their manipulation of Islam and the Islamic opposition for its ideological use of religion for secular purposes, he sees both the personal and political need for religion as a source of ultimate meaning in East and West alike.

The question is whether religion is central or marginal to political life. It has been central in the Islamic world, he says, because the bourgeoisie has not been sufficiently strong to impose separation and because the clergy, steeped in theology, have exercised judicial power.<sup>86</sup> Centrality comes from historical development rather than revelation; the societies of the book, despite similarities in revelation, have taken rather different paths. Arkoun favors marginality because it leaves more room for a plurality of meanings and personal freedom.

What happens to the real status of the person when the right to think, to self-expression, to publish, sell and buy all kinds of writings is strictly controlled by the ministry of information or "national guidance?" ...For a Muslim ... the struggle for the *right of the mind to truth* [italics in original] has always been waged from within a closed dogmatic system.<sup>87</sup>

Commenting upon the efforts of the contemporary Islamic movement to construct model constitutions and to formulate an Islamic declaration of the rights of man, Arkoun writes:

Thus the political vision of these great texts is directed more toward the propagation of a mobilizing vision of utopia in response to the Western challenge than toward proposing precise programs for institutional reform, for the conquest of citizen rights, for an emancipation of civil society such that the State would lose its monopoly of legitimate violence.<sup>88</sup>

That sentence may well sum up Arkoun's own agenda by default. He shuns mobilization, but how does one set about the "emancipation of civil society" without mobilization, and how does one mobilize without myth? The ability of the intellectuals to articulate a comprehensive understanding of the Islamic past and to liberate the masses from "false consciousness" depends upon their ability to work and think freely; it presupposes institutional reform of a revolutionary sort, which seems implausible as long as the State uses "false consciousness" to bolster its monopoly over the legitimate use of violence. Intellectuals on the outside, operating from safe, liberal, Western redoubts, must lead the way. "The emotion-charged atmosphere prevailing in modern Muslim societies rules out the possibility of scientific study of a large number of sensitive problems."<sup>89</sup> For Arkoun, Western-style political institutions, permitting Western-style social scientists to function, seem to be a prerequisite for the achievement of Islamic authenticity.

Such a formulation of Arkoun's argument is unfair in at least one respect. Arkoun sees Western social scientific methodology as the route toward comprehension of the Islamic experience, and he appears to regard elements of the Western political tradition as fundamental to the process of reconstruction--not in either case, however, because of, or in spite of, their being Western. Authenticity means moving beyond negative identification and retaliation,<sup>90</sup> beyond the "ideology of combat."<sup>91</sup> The freedom to rethink one's past depends upon freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The validation of all aspects of the Islamic experience implies tolerance, group autonomy, mutual respect of rights--polyarchy, perhaps, to use Dahl's term, rather than the *millet* system.<sup>92</sup> The rejection of essentialism and exclusivism necessarily drives religion towards marginality and the State toward a secular paradigm. In short, Arkoun appears to endorse the findings of Western political science, not for their origins in the West but for their basis in science. Social science conducts the search for Islamic authenticity, and social science directs construction of new institutions consistent with that tradition.

In some sense Arkoun's project is my own. From the failure of social science to either describe or prescribe the course of development, he deduces not the need to abandon social science but a caveat for its improvement. His quest for authenticity depends upon a social science that is both objective and subjective, capable of understanding the world as it is and as it has been, capable of founding judgments about what should or should not be done, yet mindful of the "cognitive respect"<sup>93</sup> due all human beings and the possibility of ultimate meaning. He attempts to reconcile truth as feeling with truth as understanding.<sup>94</sup> The task is perhaps impossible, yet the alternative is a choice between utter relativism, in which every felt "truth", however objectionable, enjoys equal status, and the elevation of an abstract truth, whether Islamic or Western, to a position from which all others can be criticized and excluded. In the first case, social science has a large audience and nothing to say; in the second, it proclaims with conviction to the believing few, without regard (or perhaps with disdain) for those who disagree and disobey. As a social scientist, I share with Arkoun a distaste for such a choice, and am compelled, therefore, to empathize with his endeavor.

A part of the attractiveness of his proposal resides in its relatively low propensity for generating violence, compared with other theories of authenticity. By showing why history belies the claim of any group to a monopoly on Islamic truth, he wishes to dampen the fires of sectarian conflict. By defending popular Islam as a sociological truth deserving of the same respect as Sunnism, he puts himself at odds with the impulses of the salifiyy movement and of secular, nationalist thought, both dedicated to the unification of belief and the centralization of power. By suggesting that the totality of the Islamic experience constitutes the truth from which reconstruction can begin, he hopes to forge unity without the kind of conflict engendered by claims of exclusivism. "One would try not to defend the truth of a faith but to understand faith as truth."<sup>95</sup> Moreover, Arkoun speaks little of struggle (*jihad*), with its violent overtones, and has backed away from poetry, with its tendency to focus on the individual search for authenticity even unto death, as the vehicle by which the masses could come to comprehend the true Islamic past. It is the intellectuals who must open the way for Muslims to come to terms with themselves by reckoning scientifically with past and present alike--in an atmosphere of tolerance, free speech and free publication. Unlike Qutb and Nietzsche, Arkoun extols not the will to act but the will to think.

There may nonetheless lurk behind Arkoun's project a latent potential for violence. While he opposes all groups who proclaim their version of utopia, he speaks of discovering the truth about Islamic history. How all portions of the community would shuck their false consciousness--i.e. their confidence in the truth-value of their beliefs--and embrace this "remembered" truth he does not explain. Who are the intermediaries between intellectuals and masses? If not the poets, and if not the clerics, then who? By failing to lay any plausible basis for group action, he avoids both potential conflict and any chance for realizing goals. Although it might be plausible to argue that the truth would prevail within liberal institutions--themselves almost entirely foreign to the totality of the Islamic experience--his case for those institutions does not go beyond the need for freedom of expression. That they could emerge everywhere in the Islamic world without a group to champion and defend them seems unlikely, at least as unlikely as Qutb's conflict-avoiding idea that true Muslims will submit voluntarily to the sovereignty of God, after revolting against the sovereignty of mere mortals.

The problem with Arkoun's formulation lies with its rejection, on one hand, of any and all privileged truths, and its espousal, on the other, of the superior truth-generating capacity of social science. Critical of those who start from an act of faith in the "true Islam" and exhort believers to

struggle in its behalf, Arkoun nonetheless evinces a faith of his own, qualified though it is by acknowledgment that social science has not yet achieved truth and that no discourse is innocent. Yet he seems to believe the truth can be found, false consciousness overcome. While he is not yet prepared to do battle for the glimmer of truth-to-come, and while he himself might well have scruples about doing so in any case, why would others show such restraint? His all-encompassing tolerance could scarcely afford to brook the intolerance of those who regarded it as just another truth among many. Such status would transform its character, just as it would entirely alter the nature of Qutb's Sunnism, maraboutism in the High Atlas, Ismailism or any of the other variants of the Islamic tradition Arkoun sees as mere fractions of a total truth. Exclusivism is intrinsic to the truths they represent, just as it is intrinsic to the idea of social science he advocates.

Arkoun appears overly sanguine in his hope for more more general tolerance and understanding. His starting point for common understanding among Muslims is the "Qur'anic fact." He directs us to turn back still further, to the religious instincts common to societies of the Book, for a more general framework of mutual comprehension. "One must hope that gratuitous sermons, false promises and calls for struggle among men will be less and less important obstacles to the return of creative and liberating expression, in the domain of culture as in that of religious testimony in behalf of the Absolute."<sup>96</sup> But does not Arkoun's insistence upon radical beginnings--man as nothing before the onset of culture--necessarily presuppose particularism and division? Even if one begins from the societies of the Book, the question is still how common experience distinguishes this group of human beings from another--from East Asians or Africans, for example. To see Muslims as fundamentally shaped by the "Qur'anic fact" is to see them as different from non-Muslims, as well as diverse in their historical experience with the Qur'an. Starting with particular aspects of human experience, can one ever build a persuasive case for the oneness of Islam much less societies of the Book or humanity as a whole? Can one ever demonstrate that the human species is united in its experience though not in its essence? The aspiration may be more flawed than Arkoun's pursuit of it in the study of Islamic history.

# # #

This piece was published as "Arkoun and Authenticity," *Peuples méditerranéens*, 50 (Jan.-March, 1990), pp. 75-106.

## NOTES

1. Mohammed Arkoun, *Pour une critique de la raison islamique*. (Paris: Maissoneuve et Larose, 1984) 303, note 6.
2. *Critique*, 303-304.
3. *Critique*, 111-112.
4. Mohammaed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam Today*, Occasional Papers Series, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 2.
5. Trilling's distillation of the romantic view. See Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1972).
6. My shorthand for the Heideggerian idea.
7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, in *Twilight of the Idols/The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale. (Middlesex: Penguin, 1987) p. 122.
8. Preceding excerpts all from *Critique*, 374.
9. See his "Discours islamique, discours orientalistes et pensée scientifique," in *As Others See Us*, ed. Bernard Lewis, *Comparative Civilization Review*, 1985-86, Nos. 13-14.
10. Arkoun argues that most academic scholarship has tended to serve the interests of new regimes by portraying a unified, unchanging, Arab-dominated Islam. See his "Society, State and Religion in Algeria (1962-1985)," in *The Politics of Islamic Revivalism*, ed. by Shireen T. Hunter, Indiana University Press, 1988, 184.
11. Mohamed Arkoun, "The Topicality of the Problem of the Person in Islamic Thought," *International Social Science Journal*, August, 1988, 414.
12. See Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), Part II, on this point. It seems strange for this reason that Arkoun himself uses "authenticity" as a derogatory label for opponents he deems essentialist rather than existentialist.
13. Geneviève Léveillé-Mourin, *Le langage chrétien, antichrétien de la transcendance: Pascal-Nietzsche* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1978), Part III.
14. See, for example, Gilles Kepel's analysis of Qutb's definition of *jihad* in *Le Prophète et Pharaon* (Paris: La Découverte, 1984), Chap. 2.
15. *Critique*, 206.
16. ("L'absolu ne se pense pas ailleurs que dans un monde phénoménal...."), Mohammed Arkoun, *L'Islam: morale et politique* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1986) 174.
17. "Algeria," 183.
18. See Mohammed Arkoun, *La pensée arabe* (Paris: Presses universitaires, 1975), 5-7, for a succinct treatment of this theme, which he develops in various ways in many of his works.
19. "Algeria," 23.
20. See W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1973).
21. *Critique*, Chap. 2.

22. Discussing contemporary Algeria, Arkoun writes: "Islam is thus shared, used, disputed, manipulated at many levels, by all social actors with various ambitions, through different cultural tools. The game is social, political, secular; the instruments of the game are found in Islam because it is a rich stock, an illuminated legacy of symbols, signs, signals. That is why I speak about a mimetic competition for the control and exploitation of the symbolic capital, without which no group can gain, keep or exercise power," "Algeria," 184.

23. *Morale*, 51.

24. Mohammed Arkoun, *Essais sur la pensée islamique*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1984), 234.

25. The "unthought" is a theme that recurs in Arkoun's work. For one of the most thorough discussions, see *Critique*, 307ff. See also *La Pensée Arabe*, 88-89.

26. *Essais*, Chap. 5; also *La pensée arabe*, 36-45.

27. *Essais*, 195.

28. *Essais*, 231.

29. *The Anti-Christ*, 155.

30. *Morale*, 100

31. *Essais*, 195.

32. *Critique*, 33.

33. See *Critique*, Chap. 2, "Le concept de raison islamique."

34. *Critique*, 38.

35. Mohammed Arkoun, "The Concept of Authority in Islamic Thought: La hukma illa lillah," prepared for *Islam: State and Society*, (London: Curzon, 1988), p. 31 in typescript. This is my reworking of the typescript: "But the only scholars engaged in a continuous fight to create new spaces of freedom, to give new intellectual articulations to the silent voices, are those who harmonize their thought to their concrete engagement and their engagement to their thought (al-`ilm bi'l-`amal wa'l-`amal bi'l-`ilm)."

36. *Critique*, 33.

37. *Critique*, 111.

38. Mohammed Arkoun, *Lectures du Coran* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1982), 24-25.

39. *Critique*, 150.

40. In talking about his concept of committed Orientalism, "Islamologie appliquée," he writes: "Le problème se pose, ici, de savoir comment l'islamologie peut et doit intervenir. Il ne suffit sûrement pas de s'en tenir à la méthode 'neutre' descriptive, non engagée de l'islamologie classique; mais on ne saurait non plus opposer aux postulats de l'attitude croyante ou aux certitudes agressives du discours idéologique, la marche 'assurée' de la pensée scientifique. Il nous semble indispensable d'assumer à la fois toute la complexité de la situation historique vécue par les musulmans et toutes les inquiétudes de l'intelligence contemporaine en quête de vérité." Is he warning here against arrogance and contempt, or is he expressing reservations about the reliability of modern social science? I see some of both. *Critique*, 50.

41. *Essais*, 303.
42. Arkoun argues that the current movement of Islamic resurgence continues the islahi mode of thinking rather than reexamining the genesis of that thinking and its role in Islamic history. *Rethinking*, 8.
43. Mohammed Arkoun, "Imaginaire social et leaders dans le monde musulman contemporain," *Arabica*, XXXV, 1988, p. 28.
44. He speaks of achieving liberation from the Cartesian mode and softening Marxism. *Essais*, 306.
45. See *Essais*, Chap. 8.
46. *Critique*, Chap. 1.
47. This is judgment about what he sees as "retrogression" in French Orientalism. *Essais*, 306.
48. *Morale*, 100.
49. *Critique*, Chap. 3.
50. *Critique*, 38.
51. *Critique*, 33.
52. *Essais*, 306
53. *Critique*, 7.
54. *Morale*, 40.
55. *Critique*, 132-133. I have paraphrased.
56. *Critique*, Chap. 10.
57. See his reproach to Von Grunebaum, *Essais*, Chap. 8.
58. Mohammed Arkoun, "The Unity of Man in Islamic Thought," trans. R. Scott Walker, in *Diogenè* 140 (1987), p. 54.
59. "Unity," 58.
60. The reference is again to the two impulses Arkoun says have guided his intellectual quest: "1) to understand the Arab-Muslim personality claimed by the nationalist movement, and 2) to determine the extent to which the modern civilization, represented by the colonial power, should be considered a universal civilization." *Rethinking*, 2.
61. Mohammed Arkoun, "Positivisme et tradition dans une perspective Islamique: Le cas du Kémalisme," *Diogenè* 127(July-September, 1984), p. 92.
62. *Morale*, 180.
63. "Positivisme," 93-94.
64. See his discussion of al-Jundi, *Critique*, 105-112.
65. See *Critique*, Chap. 11.
66. *Critique*, 347.

67. "Rethinking," p. 8.
68. *Essais*, Chap. 1.
69. "Positivisme," 106.
70. *Critique*, 208.
71. *Critique*, 121.
72. *Essais*, 108.
73. *Critique*, 215.
74. Mohammed Arkoun, "Algeria," 184.
75. *Critique*, 112.
76. See *La Pensée Arabe* for a discussion of the evolution of modern thought.
77. *Critique*, 239.
78. Mohammed Arkoun and Louis Gardet, *L'Islam: Hier. Demain.* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1978), 244.
79. *Hier. Demain.*, 245.
80. He recognizes the problem and argues that one must work from "within" the "integralist" position, which is sociologically "true," in order to "maintain communication." See *Critique*, 111-112.
81. See *Morale*, Chap. 2.
82. Arkoun defines orthodoxy as "official religion resulting from the collaboration of a majority of the so-called ulama with the state." "Authority," p. 11 in typescript.
83. *Morale*, 134-146.
84. *Critique*, 156.
85. *Rethinking*, 24.
86. *Critique*, 210.
87. Mohamed Arkoun, "The Topicality of the Problem of the Person in Islamic Thought," *International Social Science Journal*, August 1988, pp. 407-422.
88. *Morale*, 162.
89. "Topicality," 414.
90. The reference is to Nietzsche.
91. *Pensée arabe*, 117.
92. Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy* (New Haven: Yale), 1976.
93. Peter Berger, *Pyramids of Sacrifice* (Garden City: Anchor, 1976).
94. See Jean Duvignaud, *Change at Shebika*, trans. Francis Frenaye (Austin: U. of Texas, 1970), for an interesting discussion of that problem in the analysis of a Tunisian village.
95. *Lectures*, 21.

96. Mohammed Arkoun, "Islam: Les expressions de l'Islam", in *Encyclopedia Universalis*, 212.