Remarks on the Thought of Mohammed Arkoun

Delivered orally at a conference honoring Arkoun at New York University in 2010.

I must start with a reminder that I am unqualified for this task. I am not a scholar of the Qur'an but rather a student of contemporary Middle Eastern politics. I am not an historian of Islam, although I have taught courses that bear on this history. I am not a philosopher or an anthropologist or a semiotician. To appreciate in full the work of Muhammad Arkoun I would like to be all of those things, and more.

Instead, I am a person who has written about the political implications of his scholarship, and I worked with him in translating one of his books, *Overtures sur l'Islam*, which became *Rethinking Islam* in English. I have read much of what Arkoun wrote, I have listened to him lecture at my own institution and elsewhere, and I have enjoyed his friendship and encouragement. I am saddened by his death, which has created this need for me to speak for him.

Those of you who knew Mohammed Arkoun know that he was anything but the uncommitted scholar. Although his writings abound in scholarly references, post-modernist jargon, and a style that bespeaks erudition, the passion with he wrote volume after volume, essay after essay and the passion with which he lectured, betrayed a deeply felt commitment. At the lectern he often sounded to me like a campaigner for political office or a preacher. Like such actors he worried that he didn't have a following, that his voice was ignored. He complained that no one listened. And his response was to turn out yet another book or give yet another lecture propounding his vision. His attitude betrayed deep commitment.

It is easy to know what Arkoun opposed. He believed that medieval Muslim theologians had used the tools of logic inherited from the Greeks to mold interpretations of Quranic texts to enhance their own power or that of the caliph. They created something he called "Islamic reason"—a sort of strait jacket that continues to restrain contemporary Muslims. He denounced governments that employ versions of this orthodoxy to bolster their legitimacy and restrict the academic freedom of intellectuals to teach and write things critical of orthodoxy. He denounced the official scholars, the ulama, who propagate official Islam. He rejected Orientalist interpretations of Islam that privileged reason over myth and faith. He decried Islamist movements that, revolting against the orthodoxy, invent new ideologies that they seek to impose on others, insisting full while that Muslims who do not join the movement are not true Muslims. Although he sympathized with reformers battling simultaneous pressures from the ulama from above and populist conservatism from below, he also criticized reformers for their unwillingness to tackle what he considered the heart of the problem—the repression of innovative thought in the Muslim world.

Arkoun seemed to be against everyone; some thought he opposed Islam itself. He often counted—on very few fingers—the number of Muslim-majority countries where he was welcome to expound his views or even sell his books.

It is perhaps more difficult to understand what Arkoun was *for* than what he was *against*. I believe that Arkoun was an idealist, one whose passion came from believing that his ideas were true, and the truth was a key to saving and resurrecting a unified Muslim consciousness and perhaps even a unified human consciousness.

A key word in his vocabulary was "remembrer." You will notice that it has something in common with the word "remember" in English, but in French it means "collecting into one or more parcels that which is dispersed." Both the English and French come from a Latin root that conveyed the idea of memory. We could translate it as "putting back together." Arkoun thought he knew how to make "Muslim consciousness" whole again in such a way that all believers, whatever their sect, whatever their sophistication, whatever their geographical or cultural situation, would feel at home. Not just that, he thought his analysis would show that peoples of the Book—Christians, Jews, Muslims—were fundamentally united in belief. He believed his ideas could help to "remembrer" the peoples of the Book and the Mediterranean region. These are lofty goals; it is easy to see why Arkoun became discouraged and frustrated in pursuing them.

My question is now this: How does Arkoun's treatment of the Quran fit into this his general objective of "remembering" Islam? Much of what I am going to say comes from a book he published in 1982 called *Readings of the Quran*.

He starts from what he takes to be the Quranic fact, the prophetic moment. This is the moment of revelation, when Muhammed ibn Abdallah encounters the Angel Gabriel and begins to recite poetry that eventually becomes a part of the written Quran. The trouble is we do not know very much about these revelations, how they were recited, how they were understood and received, how and when they were written down, how they were edited, collected, and ordered, how and why they were assembled into the *mushaf*, what Arkoun called the Closed Official Corpus, that is, the Quran as it was assembled either under the Caliph Uthman or somewhat later than that.

Arkoun proposes that Muslims must do what has been unthinkable in the Islamic tradition: to analyze this document as if it were a work of literature, using all the modern tools now at the disposal of scholars, in order to tease out a larger truth about the nature and impact of the prophetic moment which preceded it. It was in that prophetic moment, when Muhammad was alive, that believers were united and perhaps saw themselves as united with other believers, Christians and Jews, in one great monotheistic movement, the movement of Believers.[1]

In his book, *Readings of the Quran*, Arkoun treats two suras in some detail, the Fatiha and Sura 18 (The Cave.) His readings of these two suras give a good indication of his approach to the Quran.

The Fatiha appears at the very beginning of the traditional Quran, although it is regarded as 46th in the order of revelation. Let me read it, since it is short. From the N. J. Dawood translation:

In the name of Allah the Compassionate and Merciful,
Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Creation,
The Compassionate, the Merciful,
King of Judgement-day!
You alone we worship, and to You alone we pray for help
Guide us to the straight path
The path of those whom You have favoured,
Not of those who have incurred Your wrath,
Nor of those who have gone astray.

Arkoun entreats us, first, to remember that this is part of a text, the Quran, that is seen as complete and whole; hence this sura cannot be understood in isolation from the rest of the text. Next he asks us to submit the text to linguistic analysis: he looks first at articles, adjectives and pronouns; then at verbs, nouns, and syntax; and finally at accents, intonation, intensity. For Arkoun, this preliminary analysis already suggests the possibility of multiple meanings.

When he comes to look at content, Arkoun insists one must take account of all of interpretations of that sura that commentators have developed from the medieval period to the present day. He writes:

> It is possible that sifting layers of meaning created by the sedimentation of the exegetical tradition, as in archeological digs, may yield only a few rare objects or the reconstruction of some fragments that amateurs may go contemplate in a semiotic museum. But it is also possible that we can acquire a "connaissance *remembrée* de l'homme"—maybe we could translate it as a "reconstituted knowledge of human beings—and, consequently, a more balanced, better grounded set of reflections on the problem of ultimate meaning.[2]

There is that word "remembrer." Notice the he is not seeking to diminish the validity of any of the traditional interpretations. Rather he is trying to show why all of those interpretations are plausible. This is what Arkoun calls the historical approach. It means looking at everything that sura has ever meant to Muslims.

He also insists upon an anthropological approach. That means trying to understand the society into which this sura was revealed so that we can imagine how it was received. What were the perspectives of this society on life and death, what was the concept of time, or love? What were attitudes toward prestige, power, the sacred, and violence? Arkoun would have us try to understand the way in which words and images might have been absorbed as they were recited. The reception of words would have depended on the state of the Arabic language in that moment. The reception of images would have depended on the symbolic universe that Meccans and Medinans then shared.

Arkoun sums up his analysis of the sura:

> The vocabulary and syntactical structures of the fatiha are so general, so open to all the possibilities of meaning that they function like a symbolic field from which all sorts of judgments follow or can be projected. However, there is not any knowledge or any cognitive system that would be able to exhaust the meaning or definitively determine it.[3]

For Arkoun, this plurality of meanings is an entirely positive phenomenon. Every interpretation, every use of the sura in ritual or daily life, deserves respect, but there is no way to legitimate any one of them as "true." The truth lies in the totality of interpretations, in plurality itself.

About Sura 18, The Cave, Arkoun makes a somewhat different set of observations. Because the Sura is long, I will not read a translation, but I will start where Arkoun starts, by observing that there are identifiable sections of that sura that do not seem to cohere.

The first eight verses of the sura evoke various themes that relate to Quran as a whole but do not seem related to the rest of the sura. These verses come from the Medinan period, but much of the rest of the sura is from the Mekkan period.

Verses 9-25 offer a narrative of seven men walled in a cave who miraculously emerge alive after sleeping 300 years. Louis Massignon, the French scholar, compared the story to the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, a tale that emerged somewhat earlier, in the Christian tradition.

Verses 27-59 only appear attached to what precede and what follows by common elements characteristic of Quran as a whole. They resemble verses 1-8 in this regard.

Verses 60-98 provide another narrative in which the faith of Moses is tested. These verses seem independent of the rest of the text.

Verses 99-110 constitute what Arkoun terms a preaching discourse.

Arkoun notes that al-Tabari, the great historian of the ninth century, sought to provide a unified interpretation of the sura by explaining it in terms of a popular story: that Muhammad had been confronted by Jews and challenged to confirm his prophecy by coming up with answers to three questions. That story provides answers to those questions and gives the whole sura a meaning that transcends the verses that compose it. Tabari's interpretation came to command great allegiance in the Islamic tradition, exactly the sort of allegiance that Arkoun regards as a product of "Islamic reason." It offers a rationale for a text where any clear rationale is seemingly missing. It applies logic to pieces of the revelation that are rich in symbolism, references to previous history, evocative, poetic, contributive to the Quran as a whole but not necessarily coherent in a logical sense. Arkoun calls this a misapplication of the logos.

In analyzing this sura, Arkoun sets out three criteria for a modern exegesis of the Quran:

1. One must look at the semantic structure of the text, how it relates to other writings of the period. How is this text received in its original context and in all the other cultural contexts in which it has been received? That means understanding religion and culture in the pre-Islamic period and trying to recuperate Arabic texts that may have been purposely destroyed.

2. One must investigate the ways in which all the societies of the Book—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—have sought to transcendentalize their texts. It is in this process that rigidities, exclusion, intolerance, prejudice, and violence arise. It is why he spends so much time and energy analyzing and critiquing what he calls "Islamic reason."

3. One must study the "real stakes" of historicity.[4] What was at stake as Quran reciters went out of Medina to follow conquering armies? What was at stake when a corps of ulama assumed the

task of providing definitive interpretations of the Quran and authorizing collections of hadith? Arkoun insists that the interpretation of the Quran is a product of human beings acting for reasons related to the struggle for power. By looking at interpretation in this historical sense and acknowledging the validity and the limitations of all such interpretations, one liberates the interpretation of the Quran from the strait-jacket of Islamic reason.

Such an exegesis reflects certain philosophical assumptions, which Arkoun calls preconditions of exegesis. He writes:

1. "Man is a concrete problem for man." This is an assertion of humanism that he attributes to the 10th century writer and philosopher, Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi.[5]

2. "Appropriate knowledge of what is real (the world, living beings, meaning, etc.) is my responsibility as a human being." In other words, I am impelled as a human being to seek such knowledge.[6]

3. "[The search for] this knowledge—in this moment of history and existence of the human species—requires an effort to go behind the constraints of biophysics, economics, politics, and linguistics, constraints that limit my condition as a living but mortal being. . . ."[7]

4. "[The search for] this knowledge requires me to venture repeatedly outside the confines that tend to mark every cultural tradition that has undergone a long period of intense elaboration. To undertake this venture means permanent risk taking."[8]

5. This venture can be compared to the spiritual quest of mystics, who never pause in their march toward God, and to the militant-researcher's understanding that every scientific formulation can only be a "provisional approximation."[9]

Arkoun took great intellectual risks. He attacked the inherited tradition of interpretation characteristic of Sunni and Shii orthodoxies by suggesting that they were ideological interpretations of Islam that reflected the struggles for political power of bygone eras. He attacked contemporary Muslim regimes that hold to these ideologies, or invent new ones, to bolster their political legitimacy. He attacked Islamist movements that pick and choose their Quranic verses and their traditional authorities to mobilize the masses in favor of narrow-minded, intolerant, and even violent projects. He attacked those who seek to sacralize particular attitudes and behaviors that serve worldly interests and to denigrate the behaviors of Muslims who do not conform. He blamed all these uses and abuses of Islam for creating domains of what he called the "unthought" in the Islamic tradition and of making many ideas and approaches completely "unthinkable." He urged fellow Muslims to probe the unthought and even what was unthinkable—for example, the idea that the compiled Quran cannot be regarded as a completely faithful echo of what Gabriel revealed to Muhammad, by virtue of the very fact that it is written, the revelations were oral!

Arkoun took risks with his analysis of the Quran as a literary document—somewhat disorderly, repetitious, contradictory, illustrative, symbolic, open to all sorts of interpretation and understandings. That analysis is the foundation of his radical idea that the whole of the Muslim tradition can and must be "remembered," put back together again. That word appears on p. 1 of

his Critique of Islamic Reason. Chapter 4 in that book is entitled, "*Pour remembrer la conscience musulmane*," "Toward Remembering [Restitching?] the Islamic Consciousness," and he writes in that chapter:

> The Quran is an open text that no interpretation can close in definitive and orthodox fashion. To the contrary, so-called Muslims schools of thought are ideological movements that support and legitimate the will to power of social groups competing for hegemony. . . . As of now there exists no spiritual authority, no objective criterion, no privileged work that can infallibly identify the true Islam.[10]

For Arkoun, the truth about Islam lies in accepting and understanding all that it has been, might have been, and still could be. Muslims must be free to pursue that truth. And it is that truth that will set them free to remember their relationships to each other, to the other peoples of the Book, and to humanity as a whole.

Robert D. Lee

# # #

Notes

1. Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

2. "Il est possible que la traversée des couches de sens sédimentées qui constituent la tradition exégétique ne ramène, comme les fouilles archéologiques, que des pièces rares, ou des reconstitutions fragmentaires que des amateurs iraient contempler dans des musées sémiotiques. Mais il est possible aussi que l'on acquière une connaissance *remembrée* de l'homme et, par conséquent, une réflexion plus équilibrée, mieux fondée sur le problème vital du signifié dernier." Mohammed Arkoun*, Lectures du Coran* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1982), 59-60.

3. " . . . Le vocabulaire et les structures syntaxiques de la fatiha sont si généraux, si ouverts à tous *les possibles du sens* qu'ils fonctionnent comme un champ symbolique d'où procèdent et où se projettent toutes sortes de déterminations. Cependant, aucun savoir, aucun système cognitif ne sauraient en épuiser, ou en fixer définitivement le sens." *Lectures*, 65.

4. "enjeux réels de l'historicité." *Lectures*, 63.

5. "L'homme est un problème concret pour l'homme." *Lectures*, 49.

6. "La connaissance adéquate du réel (le monde, l'être vivant, le sens, etc. . .) est *ma* responsabilité," *Lectures*, 49.

7. "Cette connaissance—en ce moment de l'histoire et de l'existence de l'espèce humaine—est un effort pour dépasser les contraintes biophysiques, économiques, politiques, linguistiques qui limitent ma condition d'être vivant (donc mortel), parlant, politique, historique, économiques (donc travailleur)." *Lectures*, 49.

8. "Cette connaissance est une *sortie* répétée—donc un risque permanent—hors de la *clôture* que tend à constituer toute tradition culturelle après une phase d'intense élaboration." *Lectures*, 50.

9. "Cette sortie correspond *à la fois* au geste spirituel des mystiques qui ne se stabilisaient dans aucune étape au cours de leur marche vers Dieu; au refus épistémologique du chercheur-militant qui sait que tout discours scientifique est une approximation provisoire." *Lectures* 50

10. "Le Coran est un texte ouvert qu'aucune interprétation ne peut clore de façon définitive et 'orthodoxe'. Au contraire, les écoles dites musulmanes sont des mouvements idéologiques qui soutiennent et légitiment les volontés de puissance de groupes sociaux en compétition pour l'hégémonie. . . . A l'heure actuelle, il n'existe aucune autorité spirituelle, aucun critère 'objectif', aucune oeuvre privilégiée qui permette de désigner de manière infaillible l'Islam vrai." Arkoun, *Critique de la raison islamique* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1984), 132-133.