

The Religious and the Qur'anic Phenomenon: A Critical Approach to the Arkounian Project

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Abstract

The Qur'an, as the central sacred text of Islam, is examined through a critical and deconstructive lens inspired by modern Western epistemology. Mohammed Arkoun approaches the Qur'an as a historical and linguistic phenomenon shaped by social and cultural contexts, emphasizing symbolism, myth, and collective imagination. His method applies comparative and critical tools to understand the Qur'an alongside other sacred texts, highlighting its evolving meanings. While offering new insights, this approach raises debates about the limits of applying Western methodologies to a text considered divine and sacred in Islamic tradition.

Keywords: Qur'an; Mohammed Arkoun; Deconstruction; Epistemological critique; Islamic thought; Qur'anic interpretation.

Introduction

Modern Qur'anic studies constitute an independent critical attempt apart from traditional Islamic Salafism, and these studies seek to open wide horizons for Arab-Islamic thought through their application of neoteric human sciences methodologies to the study of Islam, and through the use of modern historical methodology in Islamic thought in order to achieve a scientific understanding of the historical reality of Muslim societies in the past and present.

This scientific methodology prevents the triumph of sectarian and ethnic fanaticisms. Hence, Mohammed Arkoun represents an intellectual and epistemological project aimed at opening a new field of knowledge in contemporary Islamic studies, and he prefers to call it "Applied Islamology," which is a modern rational method in the study of Islam and the Qur'anic text.

Given the importance of this Arkounian project, we will endeavor to approach it in terms of method and vision. Accordingly, we will focus on two main axes in the following elements:

- The cognitive and epistemological (theoretical) aspect of the methodology of "Applied Islamology" in comparison with the methodologies of the Orientalists.
- Understanding its applications through his reading of the Qur'anic discourse (particularly Surat al-Fatiha and the humanist tendency in the fourth Hijri century).

His intellectual project aspires to bring about a radical break with traditional Islamic studies, which are marked by a static vision, as they have not yet reached the level of engagement with the questions of critical reason, and that is done by relying on a set of methodologies and tools produced within the framework of the development experienced by the human sciences in the

West, particularly the Foucauldian deconstructive method (attributed to Michel Foucault) as a foundation for critical reading and for the study of the Qur'an.

Therefore, the primary objective of Arkoun's methodology is to establish or construct new theories in dealing with heritage based on critiquing its structures and mechanisms through his adoption of Western methodologies of thought.

In Arkoun's Methodology

What is the methodology that Arkoun proposes in his study of the Qur'an and Islamic heritage? Or in other words: What are the systems of thought that he discussed in his reading of the Qur'an?

Mohammed seeks to affirm his methodology and the epistemological tools he proposed a decade ago, and these tools do not abide by a particular school or field of knowledge; rather, they draw from all contemporary fields of knowledge, aiming to build "Applied Islamology." This is done by attempting to apply scientific methodologies in the study of the Islamic Qur'an, thus subjecting the Qur'anic text to the test of comparative historical criticism, deconstructive linguistic analysis, and philosophical reflection related to the production of meaning, its expansions, and its transformations.

The field of knowledge on which Arkoun works is personally called by him "Applied Islamology," by which he means the study of Islam in its different historical stages through the application of the methodologies and terminology of the human sciences. Further, the Arkounian project in general aims at denouncing and deconstructing Islamic reason, and his critical project has been met with many attempts of criticism, refutation, and opposition, whether within Islamic circles or outside them which has intensified the disagreement between him and classical Orientalism, or what he calls "Classical Islamology." This disagreement is manifested as the following:

- Classical Islamology (or traditional Orientalism) studies Islam as a system of abstract ideas endowed with a life of their own, as if they were rigid essences that neither change nor transform; that is, they are not subject to historicity, and that is the perspective of traditional history, which believes that ideas exist independently of the surrounding social and material circumstances.
- Whereas Applied Islamology studies Islam as a complex religious phenomenon through its relationship with psychological and historical factors, psychoanalysis (Mohammed, 1996, p. 43) (individual and collective psychology), history (that is, the study of the development of Muslim societies and the changes that have occurred to them throughout history), and sociology (the study of Islam's influence on the societies in which it spread, and also the complete influence of these societies on Islam, on the contrary to what traditional believers think, Islam is also influenced by the society in which it takes root and takes on its stamp and color. In this regard, one can speak of an Indonesian Islam, a Pakistani Islam, an Arab Islam, and perhaps a Moroccan Islam and an Eastern Islam, etc.) (Mohammed, 1992, p. 14).
- Thus, we ratiocinate that Islam has come to be studied through the multiple angles of these human and social sciences, and this new meaning in study is what Arkoun calls for with all his strength through the intellectual fronts in which he conducted his distinctive intellectual engagements diverse fields of knowledge: heritage through the Qur'anic phenomenon, the

literature of the fourth Hijri century, and dogmatic Orientalism that attempts to rescue Islam from the enclosure in which traditional Salafisms (and the Orientalists) have imprisoned it, that is, to extract Islam from its eternal particularity that suspends the mechanisms of critique and deconstruction. For, according to their perspective, Islam is of one kind and other religions are of another kind, and merely comparing it with other religions diminishes its value. This means that Mohammed Arkoun strives diligently to read classical and contemporary Orientalism and to apply strict and varied critical methodological tools against it, even holding it responsible for pale and literal epistemological results in reading Arab-Islamic heritage.

He links this to the philological linguistic methodology that has long constrained this Orientalist vision, for the latter constitutes only the first stage and not all its stages as Orientalists claim. Here lies the fundamental difference between their methodology and Arkoun's. In view of the fact that Philological methodology cannot explain why the Qur'anic text succeeded in producing its immense impact on souls and spirits. For, if it were merely an imitation of the sacred books that preceded it, it would not have exerted such influence. Thence, there is something new in it, something particular to it alone. Further, it is true that the Qur'an takes multiple elements from the sacred books that preceded it and from the stories of ancient peoples, but it kneads and fuses them until they emerge as something else. Seeing that, only modern linguistic and semiotic analysis methodologies are capable of analyzing this astonishing alchemical process of melting old meaning and generating the new one. Thus, Arkoun places Islamic Salafism, traditionalism, and Orientalism in one balance, and he even mocks those Europeans with whom he intellectually and methodologically agrees.

- From all that has been presented, we deduce that Applied Islamology is more ambitious in terms of epistemological and methodological openness than Classical Islamology, which seeks to replace Classical Islamology (or Orientalism) with Applied Islamology and that means that the former (Applied Islamology) is characterized by its practical and applied nature rather than theoretical or abstract study of its subjects. For, it proceeds from the issues raised by Muslims in their daily lives, understanding the present first requires understanding the past, that is, understanding the objective content of the major Islamic texts, foremost among them the Qur'an (meaning that descriptive study is not sufficient; it must be supplemented by deconstructive critical study in order to extract general judgments).
- Unlike Classical Islamology, Applied Islamology studies Islam within a broad anthropological perspective. Given that, it considers Islam as a mere manifestation of the religious phenomenon or "the phenomenon of the sacred". Considering that, it is an anthropological phenomenon, something present in all human societies, whether primitive or civilized, even within Western thought. Only the degree of its intensity and the forms of its manifestation differ from one society to another according to its level of social and cultural development.
- Within this vision, Applied Islamology differs radically from Classical Islamology, knowing that the aim of Orientalism is to present accurate and descriptive information about Islam to a Western audience that knows nothing about it, while completely excluding comparative critical study with other religions such as Christianity and Judaism.

- Accordingly, what Arkoun aims at through this new and innovative methodology that he personally invented is to enable the field of Applied Islamology to critique Islamic reason in its various forms, manifestations, and cultures. Besides, critique here takes on a radical and fully deconstructive meaning, thus entering into intellectual confrontation and engaging with a long-standing heritage of reverential traditionalism.

He also considers Applied Islamology to possess scientific effectiveness in relation to contemporary thought. For that reason, he studies Islam as he studies Judaism and Christianity, in order to contribute to enriching religious anthropology. For, Arkoun saw the study of religions through comparison between them and the discovery of the points of similarity among them.

- Here lays his intellectual path, centered on issues of scientific discovery and new research, and among these issues is “the Qur’an” or “the Qur’anic text,” which he introduced into the circle of contemporary scientific research that is he subjects the Qur’an to the test of historical and comparative criticism, then to deconstructive linguistic analysis and philosophical reflection that focuses on how meaning is produced and on the conditions of its dissemination and transformations. In view of the fact that, it is neither eternal nor primordial; rather, it unravels and dissolves just as it was assembled and formed. It unravels after the community has lived by it for a certain period of time (Mohammed, 1992, p. 44).
- This is what Arkoun means by “Applied Islamology,” the new methodology he personally invented in order to transcend the Classical Islamology of the Orientalists, he thus allowed religious discourse to speak freely and other scientific discourses to speak freely, then established comparison among them, thereby addressing the difficulties that have arisen throughout history and that continue to arise before our eyes, difficulties that have remained outside the field of study in what he calls “the unthought.” The matter concerns a comprehensive comparison between religious discourse and scientific discourse (Mohammed, 1992, p. 47).
- Here are manifested the most important fundamental principles of Arkoun’s methodology: not underestimating the human religious experience and not neglecting the spiritual and transcendent dimension as researchers, positivists, and materialists in particular do; yet he refuses to submit to the claims of various religious orthodoxies to possess absolute truth and thereby subject human reason to them without condition.
- In juxtaposition, Arkoun believes in the necessity of applying the principles of critical epistemology to these major religious experiences witnessed by humanity over centuries. Moreover, these epistemological principles occupy a transcendent position similar to spiritual transcendence purified from worldly purposes. For, contemporary epistemology represents the culmination of humanity’s scientific experience throughout history; therefore, its methods, tools, fields, and terminology should be adopted and utilized. Unfortunately, contemporary Arab thought remains incapable of achieving this; it is an ideological discourse rather than a cognitive or epistemological one (Mohammed, 1992, p. 201).
- Within this deconstructive critical methodology, Arkoun was able to bring about numerous shifts not just a single shift in the arena of Arab-Islamic thought and to generate a cognitive revolution, for religious and faith-based reason, as thus formed, rejects the principle of

epistemological rupture. Furthermore, Arkoun sees that this requires undertaking an internal liberation of Islamic thought, starting from the epistemological principle articulated by Gaston Bachelard when he said: “Scientific thought cannot advance in any field until it has destroyed the erroneous knowledge that dominates that field.”

Arkoun says: “Because we were raised within the domain of a particular religion, we believe that everything we received is correct and everything else is error and misguidance; therefore, we must begin by liberating ourselves from ourselves.” (Mohammed, 1996, p. 72)

- Modern science shows the vast distance and clear rupture between classical philology and modern linguistics (semiotics), and consequently between the old methods of interpretation and current methodologies of textual study, or more broadly between the interpretive system and the modern intellectual system, and this does not at all mean avoiding the Qur’an’s historical or sociological conditionality. The advancement of the human sciences in the West has radically overturned the conditions for practicing scientific thought, whereas Arab-Islamic thought suffers from a delay exceeding three centuries.
- Through this new methodology for studying Islam and this new illumination of reading, he sought to renew the reading of the Qur’an in the broadest sense of the word. He wants to renew our understanding of reading as a cultural, historical, and social phenomenon and considers it sensory. He sees exegesis, theology, and jurisprudence as expressions of the Qur’anic phenomenon. This leads us to apply deconstructive methodology using modern methods in reading the Qur’an such as linguistics, semiotics, and all sciences associated today with what is called discourse analysis. Finally, this intellectual project aims to bring about a radical break with traditional Islamic studies characterized by a static vision, which have not yet reached the level of engaging with the questions of critical reason. This is done by relying on a set of methodologies and tools produced within the framework of the development experienced by the human sciences in the West, particularly the Foucauldian deconstructive method (attributed to Michel Foucault) as a foundation for critical reading of heritage and of the Qur’an. Hence, the primary objective of Arkoun’s methodology is to establish or construct new theories in dealing with heritage based on critiquing its structure and mechanisms through his adoption of Western methodologies of thought.
- From here, we can point to a set of concepts in his critical analyses key concepts in this project that have their own references shaping this methodology. What, then, are they?

The Key Concepts of the Arkounian Project:

What is the nature of the methodologies that Arkoun uses in his reading of the Qur’an?

Mohammed Arkoun derived a number of concepts to affirm his deconstructive and applied methodology from different fields of knowledge. These are contemporary concepts drawn from the modern human sciences, and they do not adhere to a specific school or a particular field of knowledge; rather, they draw from all contemporary fields of knowledge, despite of the strong presence of certain philosophers, sociologists, and anthropologists can be noted. We can therefore identify the concepts he used in his critical analyses beginning with:

1. The Foucauldian Concept of the Unthought:

This concept was taken from the French philosopher Michel Foucault when he published his book *The Order of Things* in 1966. It was employed in the new methodology to mean that the

Arab-Islamic heritage, when measured by its time, possesses such richness that it does not need such projections and practices that are very common. Further, by this term he also means everything that Arab-Islamic thought has been able to think about throughout its long history (the thinkable), and everything that it has not been able to think about (the unthought) within the sciences of the Qur'an. Besides, he believes that what Islamic thought has not thought about is more important and of greater significance than what it has thought about, and his task today, as a renewer of Islamic thought, is to open that vast continent of the unthought which has remained closed for a long time. The unthought is nothing but an accumulation of what is impossible to think across several successive stages of history, and according to Mohammed Arkoun, this is due to religious, social, political, or other reasons. (Mohammed, 1992, p. 281) In other words, it can be said that Arkoun today thinks about everything that Arab-Islamic thought did not think about throughout fourteen centuries of time, as well as everything it did think about, so as to study it and critique it from within.

The project of Mohammed essentially aims at “a new rewriting of the entire history of Islamic thought and Arab thought.” Further, the main objective of this writing is to trace the hidden spaces that have remained far from the field of critique and reflection, and everything that falls within the circle of what he calls “the unthought.” Perhaps this is the central axis around which the Arkounian project revolves as a whole. Arkoun says in this regard: “Most of the questions that should be posed to heritage fall within the circle of the ‘unthought’ or the ‘unthinkable.’ This means that the question raised is not: what are the things and subjects? Rather, it is: what are the things that have not yet been thought about? And what are the subjects that have not yet been addressed?” This comprehensive approach is what establishes the concepts of Arkoun's discourse and formulates his theses in the form of questions that often do not provide clear and specific answers, and here appears one of the fundamental characteristics of this discourse, which conceals itself within the search for “the unthought” within heritage. For this reason Arkoun says: “The total heritage must be subjected to a patient and profound archaeological examination in order to find its aborted, excluded, and despised parts and to rewrite their history or reconstruct them if possible, not only to focus on its fixed formulas or its established tendencies largely linked to the official state and the official religion.” In other words, he works to “break prohibitions and violate taboos” that “excluded all the questions that had been raised in the early and primitive stage of Islam, then were sealed and closed upon.”

Arkoun wants to exercise his critical mechanisms on heritage through “a cumulative and successive set of ages and historical periods. These long centuries are accumulated one upon another like the geological or archaeological layers of the earth. Further, in order to reach the deep layers, it is necessary to penetrate the first and middle surface layers, and the historian of thought, as Michel Foucault says, must be an archaeologist of thought.”

We also find him using the concept of the “epistemic condition” within the meaning defined by Michel Foucault in his book *The Order of Things*, according to this meaning, the episteme of the Middle Ages was governed by the play of resemblance and imitation, such that the sign was necessarily and naturally linked to the thing it indicated, while divinization and magic permeated the face of the world (Mohammed, 1996, p. 91).

Arkoun also refers to the term “epistemic rupture”, which had been theorized by Michel Foucault in his methodological book *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Considering that, it was

Foucault who brought down, under the blows of his critical thought, the myth of transcendent historical objectivity that had dominated classical metaphysics and Western thought until the arrival of Karl Marx. Then the idea of transcendence reappeared again through orthodox Marxists that distorted Marx's critical thought and once again endowed it with attributes of transcendence and sanctification. This continued until the arrival of the modern intellectual revolution led by thinkers such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Gilles Deleuze which sought to rescue thought once again from traditional frameworks.

2. Symbolic Capital: Pierre Bourdieu

Arkoun relied on the concept of symbolic capital used by Pierre Bourdieu and Max Weber, which means the transformation of cultural and symbolic values into social and political action (Mohammed, 1996, p. 92).

What is meant by symbolic capital is non-material and non-economic capital. For instance, in ordinary life we may say: "So-and-so has great capital in terms of trust," or "so-and-so enjoys wide fame," or "possesses great cultural capital," and so on.

The term here, within Arkoun's context, refers to Islam in its early stage when it was still open to the Absolute. Later, however, it was transformed into rituals, ceremonies, and coercive and obligatory laws, as happened with other religions, all this occurred at the hands of jurists and the founders of orthodox schools of various kinds, Arkoun here calls for a new symbolization to replace the previous symbolization and the current vacuum, for the human being does not live by material things alone but also needs spiritual fulfillment.

Arkoun's conception here of the importance of imagination and the imaginary also aligns with the latest theories in the fields of sociology and anthropology. In view of the fact that, it is known that Pierre Bourdieu gives utmost importance to the symbolic factor in moving history. Additionally, the same applies to thinkers such as Georges Balandier, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Georges Duby, among many others. In other words, the superstructure is no longer something secondary or always subordinate to the infrastructure; rather, it has become important with a relative independence and sometimes even decisive, influencing society profoundly (Mohammed, 1992, p. 78).

3. Deconstruction (Jacques Derrida):

Deconstruction means exposing the mechanisms of thought that produced the diverse theories and various ideological formations, all with the aim of stripping them of their apparent self-evidence and revealing their origins, historicity, and thus their structure. Furthermore, deconstruction consists of discovering the hidden or obscured parts of a discourse or of any work, then separating these concealed parts after placing them on the table of analysis in order to understand how they function within the general structure of thought. In this way, one can identify their weak and strong points, their valid and invalid aspects, and thus reach greater possibility and efficiency.

Here the deconstructive methodology of Mohammed Arkoun appears in historical research. seeing that, he seeks to show that the aim of using deconstruction as a methodology of reading is not to demonstrate the scientific validity of the doctrines of faith, nor on the contrary their lack of scientific or rational character. Rather, it aims to excavate their foundations through a genealogical methodological approach, and through the perspective developed by Friedrich Nietzsche for the critique of value. For, this approach divulges how Islamic faith emerged

through specific linguistic and historical processes. In this way he studied the Qur'an carefully and connected it with the conditions of its era in order to reach this understanding. Moreover, it is known that this faith later became the powerful driving force behind Islamic expansion and the Islamic conquests, and it is linked to the foundational moment. Therefore, Arkoun achieved an important objective: the study removed from the verses the covering of transcendence in order to root them within historicity.

In this sense Arkoun wants to demonstrate the difference between the concept of the Islam of the Qur'an and the Islam of the jurists, and to measure the distance between them. Considering that the weakening of historical awareness among the contemporary Muslim leads him to believe that the concept of Islam has remained the same from the time of the Qur'an until today without change or transformation. In doing so he ignores the synchronic meaning of terms and concepts and thus ignores or denies the historicity of things. Besides, revealing the synchronic meaning is very difficult because it is covered by layers of meanings formed by past ages; therefore it must be excavated archaeologically, just as archaeologists dig into the depths of the earth.

4. The Exploratory Reason (the new or emerging exploratory reason):

It is a new term and a new rationality as a substitute for the "enclosed dogmatic reason," which Mohammed Arkoun sometimes calls orthodoxy. For, he refuses to call this rationality "postmodernity" or "postmodern reason," as many philosophers in Europe and America do. Instead, he invents a new name for it: the new exploratory reason, which is a reason that both includes the reason of modernity and transcends it at the same time. In doing so, it saves modernity and filters it so as to discard its negative aspects and retain only its positive ones, then forms a broader and more open rationality one that goes beyond Enlightenment reason. It is a rationality that does not despise the spiritual dimension of the human being as positivist rationality did since the nineteenth century, which dominated the West until recently.

This term was inspired by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas and his concept of "communicative reason". We also notice that there is a political and cultural stimulus that prompted Arkoun to move from religious reason to exploratory or emerging reason (Mohammed, 2001, p. 29). It is a reason capable of contributing to a constructive critique of modernity and, at the same time, to the deconstruction of contemporary Islamic discourse from within. This discourse, in Arkoun's view, is no less arrogant or inclined toward domination and control than the Western discourse that claims to confront or oppose it (Mohammed, 2001, p. 30). Arkoun thence finds himself, so to speak, between two forms of reason: an Islamic reason and a dominant reason. The first seeks to impose truth through fundamentalist movements, while the second imposes it through globalization. In view of the fact that, the dominant reason today is undoubtedly Western reason, which imposes itself as the supreme and obligatory standard for judging any scientific or cultural production.

Therefore Arkoun began directing his critique toward the dominant Western reason, hoping through practicing critique on both fronts for the upgrowth of the exploratory reason, which he describes almost as an imagined picture of the reason he calls for. It also resembles an operational (applied) reason concerned with tools and research methodologies.

These are the most important concepts and terms used by Arkoun in his critical analyses, which are contemporary concepts drawn from different fields of knowledge, from which he benefited

in the epistemological field within what he calls in his project “Applied Islamology.” In this he attempts to establish epistemological foundations similar to those proposed by Gaston Bachelard in the philosophy of science, or from the anthropological field of Claude Lévi-Strauss, especially the concept of myth, which he applies to Arab-Islamic societies and cultural formations and their influence on society. He also relied on the linguistic field (semiotics) associated with Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, and finally on the sociological field represented by Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu through the concept of symbolic capital.

Through these concepts, terms, and various fields of knowledge, we notice that Arkoun did not remain committed to a single method, a single school, or a single field of knowledge. Rather, he moves across all modern methodologies. Despite the flexibility of his method and the continuity of his intellectual influence, this influence remains very limited in the Arab world.

He belongs to the generation of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, who brought about an epistemological and methodological revolution in Western thought. Arkoun produced a similar revolution in Islamic thought, which created a strong conflict between him and classical Orientalism. As we have seen, he conducted linguistic, historical, and anthropological studies and attempted to combine several methodologies that he applied to Arab-Islamic heritage methods similar to those used by French scholars in studying their Latin Christian European heritage. At the outset, Mohammed was influenced by Régis Blachère, a specialist in philology. From him he learned the methodology of editing texts, verifying them, comparing them, and studying them according to the positivist historical method (Mohammed, 1996, p. 145). Arkoun did not stop with Blachère, however, but was also influenced by Lucien Febvre, particularly by his methodology in the field of history. In the 1960s he became interested in linguistic methodology, through which he read the Qur’an and the major Islamic texts: the prophetic biography, Nahj al-Balagha, Al-Risala, and the writings of Ibn Rushd, Ibn Khaldun, and others. Be that as it may, Arkoun remained particularly inclined toward Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi through his intellectual and academic thesis “Humanism in the Discourse of al-Tawhidi.” He considered him a spiritual brother because they shared two main characteristics: first, intellectual rebellion against every constraint imposed on reason; and second, the rejection of any separation between thought and behavior. Arkoun believed that al-Tawhidi represented one of the essential moments in the history of Arab-Islamic thought. Al-Tawhidi had assimilated the dominant philosophical culture of the fourth Hijri century, including Sufi culture, in addition to his mastery of language. Arkoun was also influenced by Miskawayh and other philosophers and writers of the fourth Hijri century. Furthermore, in his critical analyses he drew upon concepts from the heritage of earlier scholars, such as the notion of al-ta’aqul and al-ays, meaning non-being, which appeared in the works of Al-Kindi. This thinker, along with al-Tawhidi continues to represent an intellectual reference and inspiration for Mohammed Arkoun (Mohammed, 1992, p. 81).

Mohammed Arkoun sought, in his project, to build Applied Islamology by attempting to apply these scientific methodologies to the Qur’an and by adopting modern Western philosophical methods such as anthropological history, linguistics, and semiotics for reading Islamic heritage. Arkoun says: “The urgent task is to reread the entire Islamic heritage in the light of the most recent linguistic, historical, sociological, and anthropological methodologies, that is, in

comparison with other religious traditions, including those that have been applied to Christian texts.” (Mohammed, 2018, p. 292)

He also pursues to highlight the broad epistemological dimensions that the Arabic language has been unable to absorb, express, or demonstrate. He summarized these principles in the expression “the dialectic of thought, language, and history.” (Mohammed, 2003, pp. 54-55)

But if we ask the question: How did Arkoun apply this methodology to the Qur’an? Or in other words: How did he deal with the Qur’anic text? And is there anything that makes this reading subject to the measure of critique?

After reviewing the methodology of Mohammed Arkoun in “Applied Islamology,” which he proposed for the study of the Qur’an and Islamic heritage, and after presenting the concepts that shape this methodology and how he derived the references of these concepts from different fields of knowledge while comparing them with the methodologies of the Orientalists this constituted the theoretical aspect of that methodology. Hence we now move to its applications through his reading of the Qur’anic discourse, particularly Surah Al-Fatiha, and then to understanding how he applied it to the humanistic tendency in the fourth Hijri century.

The Arkounian Reading of the Qur’anic Discourse: (The Qur’an / Revelation / Surah Al-Fatiha).

The way Mohammed Arkoun deals with the Qur’anic text starts from considering it part of the heritage that requires critical reading and the rewriting of its history according to the parameters of the project he adopts. Meaning the Qur’an is no more than a text that was historically formed under certain conditions, like other texts contained in the intellectual heritage of Islamic civilization similar in this respect to pre-Islamic poetry or Abbasid poetry or other products of human thought across different eras, which means removing the sacredness from it as a divine text with its own particularity, by subjecting it to deconstructive critique and archaeological reading through the use of all possible methodologies in order to impose a historical reading upon it (Mohammed, 1996, p. 150). From there it is subjected to the test of comparative historical criticism, deconstructive linguistic analysis, and philosophical reflection related to the production of meaning, its expansions, transformations, and even its dissolution (Mohammed, 1996, p. 209), aiming to make it speak about its legitimacy and modernity, revealing its more material, worldly, every day, and even more common and ordinary historicity (Mohammed, 1995, p. 76).

Accordingly, his position toward the Qur’an does not differ in any way from his position toward heritage in general. Although he considers that “the scientific study of the sacred does not mean undermining it or violating it, but rather means achieving a better understanding of all its manifestations and transformations, and warning certain groups or individuals against manipulating it for personal or authoritarian interests.” This means, according to Mohammed Arkoun that processes of alteration and manipulation occurred in the Qur’an during the transition from the stage of oral discourse to the stage of the official closed textual codification that is the stage of the written muṣḥaf. This process, in his view, did not occur without many operations of deletion, selection, and linguistic manipulation that usually happen in such cases. For, not all oral discourse is preserved; some things are inevitably lost along the way, this is

said while knowing that some manuscripts were destroyed, such as the muṣḥaf of Abdullah ibn Masud, for example (Mohammed, 2001, p. 40).

Arkoun does not conceal his skeptical tendency in his study of the Qur'an. In this context he says: "I can say that the sacred we live with today has no relation to the sacred that existed among the Arabs in the Kaaba neither before Islam, nor even to the sacred that prevailed during the time of the Prophet." (Mohammed, 2001, p. 92)

Based on this, Arkoun questions and critiques the official Islamic narrative of the story of the collection of the Qur'an. He says: "The third caliph Uthman ibn Affan (one of the members of the family opposed to the family of the Prophet) took a final decision to gather together the various previously written fragments and the oral testimonies that could be collected from the mouths of the early companions, this compilation resulted in the formation of a complete text that was definitively imposed as the authentic muṣḥaf of all the words of God as they had been revealed to Muhammad. Thence, later caliphs rejected all other testimonies that affirmed their authenticity, which made any possible modification of the text formed under Uthman impossible." (Mohammed, 2018, p. 47)

After raising these doubts about the transmitted reports regarding the reality of writing and collecting the Qur'an whether during the lifetime of the Prophet or during the time of his successors, especially Uthman ibn Affan, Arkoun moves on to define what he considers urgent tasks required by the critical revision of the Qur'anic text. He says: "First, the story of the formation of this text must be completely rewritten, that is, the official narrative of its formation established by the transmitted tradition must be subjected to radical critique. This requires us to return to all the historical documents that have reached us, whether they are of Shi'i, Sunni, or Kharijite origin. In this way we avoid any theological deletion of one side against another. What matters then is not only verifying the authenticity of the documents but also attempting to search for other possible documents, such as the Dead Sea Scrolls." (Mohammed, 2018, p. 59)

This means that the Qur'an, as stated by Arkoun, needs a reestablishment of its first version through returning to implicit or hidden documents in order to understand how it was historically formed. He says: "Thus we find that the battle that once took place to produce a verified critical edition of the Qur'anic text is no longer pursued today with the same boldness as in the time of Theodor Nöldeke or Régis Blachère. Researchers no longer dare to undertake it or similar attempts for fear of the reaction of strict Islamic fundamentalism; this critical edition would include in particular a chronological classification of the surahs and verses in order to discover the first linguistic units of the oral text. However, the struggle today for the critical study of the Qur'an has not lost its importance at all, because it determines the extent of our ability to reach a more credible historical reading of this text... It is favorable to draw lessons from the irreversible situation that resulted from the systematic destruction of the valuable documents related to the Qur'an, unless new manuscripts are discovered that clarify for us the history of the text and how it was formed more clearly." (Mohammed, 2003, pp. 54-55)

Among the results that Mohammed Arkoun reached through his deconstructive methodology concerning the Qur'an is that the Qur'an is the oral discourse of the Prophet Muhammad before a group of listeners, and that it expanded over time as a result of social and cultural circumstances. He points out: "Let us now move to what people generally call the Qur'an. This

word is extremely charged with theological work and ritual practice, and with Islamic ceremonies that have continued for hundreds of years, to the point that it is difficult to use it as it is. It therefore needs prior deconstruction in order to reveal levels of meaning and significance that had been obscured and forgotten by the pious heritage, this situation has continued for a long time, that is, since the transition from the oral stage to the written stage and the dissemination of the manuscript of the muṣḥaf first in handwritten form and then through writing more generally. These processes favored the rise of a class of religious scholars and increased their importance at the level of intellectual and political authority. Besides, this situation contradicts the initial social and cultural conditions for the emergence and expansion of what may be called the first Qur'anic discourse, the Qur'an, or the heavenly book, or simply the Book which was recited accurately and faithfully, aloud, before a gathering or specific listeners. Let us therefore call this Qur'an the prophetic discourse." (Mohammed, 2003, pp. 29-30)

He also notes: "Here is the fundamental and decisive criterion: the subject of research is a historical corpus that has not yet been clarified or unveiled. Then this corpus was raised to the level of the sacred book through the enormous and continuous work of generations of historical actors."

But if we ask about the motives and reasons that make such a critical reading a scientific reading:

The fundamental motivation for such an approach is the attempt to unify the vision regarding the monotheistic religions, considering them as manifestations of the phenomenon of the revealed book, and what arises from that in terms of the formation of a shared imaginary among scriptural societies whose central axis is "the transcendent, sacred, and normative word of God." where everyone has become accustomed to presenting the monotheistic religions as a revelation given or as a descent of God into human history, according to the Qur'anic metaphor of revelation (al-tanzīl), which finds its counterpart in the Christian doctrine affirming the incarnation of God the Father in Jesus Christ the Son. This given revelation is transcendent and sacred and guides human beings in their worldly history so that they may ultimately obtain their destiny in the hereafter (Mohammed, 1996, p. 58). Under this interpretation, according to Mohammed Arkoun, the Qur'an is a text similar to the Torah and the Bible as well as the sacred texts of Buddhists and Hindus, and it has undergone expansions similar to those that affected them. Arkoun mentions: "I say that the Qur'an is only one text among other texts that contain the same level of complexity and meanings. Every foundational text among those that founded Buddhism and Hinduism has undergone certain historical expansions and may undergo other expansions in the future. If the Torah and the Gospels have been subjected to critique and deconstruction and have had all contemporary textual methodologies applied to them, then the Qur'an since it shares with them the same general characteristics of all revealed books should not be an exception and must be subjected to the same critical standards in order to reach similar results." Thus Arkoun regrets that while the two previous religions have had their scriptures critically examined, Islam and consequently the Qur'an "has remained outside the upheavals and doubts of modernity." (Mohammed, 1996, p. 59) His critical revision of the Qur'an therefore also satisfies his need to create a vital field for applying the accumulated knowledge he drew from the human and social sciences.

The critical reading that Arkoun undertakes of the Qur'anic text falls within a particular conception of the phenomenon of revelation. His central idea can be summarized as follows: the Qur'an is the book of revelation, and revelation has a metaphorical and symbolic language that is open to many horizons and possibilities of meaning. Therefore, this transcendent language should not be reduced to a narrow juridical or legal language by claiming that it has no other meaning. Such a reduction restricts the metaphorical meaning and limits the process of revelation, which should not stop because it is open to the absolute meaning, to the horizons of existence, and to the possibilities of future life. It continually renews its meaning as societies, peoples, and eras change (Mohammed, 1992, p. 55). For Arkoun, the concept of revelation is extremely broad: it includes the known manifestations in the three monotheistic religions and even extends to encompass major moments such as scientific discovery and human creativity. Through this understanding of revelation, Arkoun attempts to strip it of its sacred character, arguing that this sacredness is a mantle that was later imposed upon it through transforming it into a fixed and defined text in the muṣḥaf. This transformation allowed it to be used as a set of normative formulas that determine what can be thought at the epistemological level and that also define institutions and law at the political and judicial level (Mohammed, 1996, p. 215). In addition, this transformation occurred through a process of mythologization that affected the first foundational historical event and turned it into a mythical event (Mohammed, 1996, p. 216). By the first foundational event he means the descent of revelation. In this way the Qur'an appears as a kind of myth. According to Arkoun, myth is an expression of an ideal meaning open within historicity, relying on artistic symbolism in which the imaginary and the rational intermingle. Thence, in his view, the Qur'anic discourse is a model of mythical expression. Arkoun mentions: "The biblical narratives and the Qur'anic discourse are wonderful models of mythical expression."

If we examine the aspect that the Qur'anic text represents according to the view of Mohammed Arkoun, we find that he considers it part of the heritage expressing a mythical meaning manifested through its ideal discourse and its intellectual structure, which reflects a form of transcendence and a surpassing of history. On that basis, Arkoun criticizes the orientalist for "presenting the Qur'anic stories, the prophetic traditions, and the biography of the Prophet as rational and inferential formations, whereas they are indebted to the imagination that shapes the myths related to the origins of every group or collective self, myths that contribute to founding it and shaping its identity."

In addition to this, Arkoun attempts to give a mythical character to the data of the Islamic experience and its various values by establishing a kind of opposition between mythical thought and scientific thought. He says: "Mythical or ideological thinking alone is capable of speaking in the name of objective Islamic norms and formulating these norms in a reassuring and confident way. Scientific thinking, however, considers that these norms do not exist as fixed entities waiting to be discovered; rather, they must continually be sought, established, or expanded." This means that the norms that originally emerged from the Qur'anic discourse cannot express their true nature except through a mythical model that appears in reality in a natural and accepted form, because it already carries within itself the seeds of that model. In this sense, these norms possess a mythical content and structure through which their external

manifestations are formed. For that reason, they cannot easily be subjected to scientific reformulation that would reshape their concepts or redefine their practical image.

Consequently, it becomes clear that Arkoun, in his analysis of the relationship between the mythical and the sacred, links the two closely together. For him, each expresses the other, since their formation historically occurred in a parallel and interconnected manner. Each of them was shaped through the other and by means of the other; therefore, they cannot be separated. This idea forms the basis upon which Arkoun builds his readings of the entire Islamic heritage, including its texts, figures, and historical events related to Arkoun.

Conclusion:

In this study we have examined an issue of great importance related to the most sacred text of Muslims, namely the Quran, its reading and interpretation, we have taken the example of Mohammed Arkoun through his epistemological critical reading of the Qur'an, employing the method of deconstruction, which Arkoun and other researchers have explained. However, it can be said that in spite of the apparent effectiveness of these European positivist methodologies, they cannot be applied to the Qur'anic text. This is because such methods do not take into consideration the sacredness of the text or the reality of divine revelation; rather, in reality, they aim to strip it of its sacred character and then approach the Qur'anic text through what they call the "infinite readings" of the text, which is considered an error. Even though this deconstructive critical methodology is based on the assumption that there is no single reading of a text as Arkoun himself previously explained it is well known that the Qur'an has indeed been interpreted by various groups such as the Sufis, the Mu'tazilites, the theologians, and the jurists, among others, these groups differed in their interpretations, indeed, but such differences never reached the level of questioning the Qur'anic text itself or describing it with purely human characteristics, as Arkoun suggests. Among the results of the Arkounian reading of the Qur'an which he considers one of the outcomes of modern Islamic studies, he states: "All the types of readings that we have reviewed so far lead to the same conclusions and observations," namely that the progress of Qur'anic studies has largely been achieved through Orientalist academic scholarship since the nineteenth century.

These are among the most important conclusions reached by Arkoun through his application of Western methodologies and concepts, which he considers necessary as a starting point for achieving a civilizational renewal of the Muslim intellectual tradition with regard to the Qur'an. Notwithstanding, this approach is not free from many drawbacks and methodological problems, both in terms of the method itself and its practical application.

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