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The Humanisti Heritage of Muhammad Arkoun*

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Abstract

This article presents Muhammad Arkoun's (1928-2010) key ideas on ethos, civil society, and secularism. Following reflections on adab, Arkoun's inspiration for rethinking Islamic heritage (turāth), this contribution shows how Arkoun reconsiders the impact of philosophy, both in theology as well as academic scholarship. The paper displays his hopes for generating an innovative intellectual education, which eventually leads to a humanistic consciousness within the Islamic as well as the non-Islamic realm. The paper closes with a display of Arkoun's thoughts on the emergence of individual citizenship.

Keywords: *Arkoun, adab, humanism, Qur'an, hermeneutics, secularism, de-mythologization, philosophy of religion, contemporary Islam.*

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This article presents Muhammad Arkoun's (1928-2010) key ideas on ethos, civil society, and secularism. Following reflections on *adab*, one of Arkoun's inspirations for rethinking Islamic heritage (*turāth*), this contribution reflects on how Arkoun reconsiders the impact of philosophy, both in theology as well as academic scholarship. The paper shows how Arkoun hoped to generate an innovative intellectual education, which would eventually lead to a humanistic consciousness within the Islamic as well as the non-Islamic realm. Arkoun's analytical project does not rely on Islam as a remedy for social challenges, but rather on an emancipated secularism in whose realm a patient pedagogy will lead humanity to establish stable values as bases for fighting “underdevelopment, ignorance, eruptions of violence, corruption, and intolerance”(Arkoun 1994: 86). The paper closes with a display of Arkoun's thoughts on the emergence of individual *citizenhood*.

The intent of this paper is to engage thoroughly with Arkoun's thought and, in consequence, to offer sufficient learning material for students of Islamic theology and philosophy of religion to gain a broader picture of the wide spectrum of contemporary Muslim thought. It aims at providing an incentive for the pursue of critical-reflective scholarship in the field of modern Islam

Source of Inspiration: *adab*

Arkoun's philosophical project is inspired by a holistic approach to education, called *adab*.¹ In its frame, education is a task which ultimately leads to the emergence of a ‘new ethos’ within what he calls a solidarity project among cultures. According to Arkoun, the tradition of *adab* embodies an Islamic concept of holistic learning, which carried the prospect for this 'new ethos'.

In Arkoun's narrative, *adab* belongs to a body of knowledge, which was for a period of time oppressed or silenced by dominating orthodoxies, or what Arkoun terms the *hegemonic reason*. Such marginalized knowledge needs to be brought to light and examined as to which degree and in which way it could and did contribute to human knowledge about the world and our being in it (Arkoun 1994: 76). *Adab* is a tradition of writings on human ethics, education and behaviour and sometimes also identified as Islamic *humanism* or Islamic humanist

culture itself.² One representative of this humanist tradition is Ibn Miskawayh (932-1030 AD), a Persian neo-Platonist, humanist and ethicist, on whose work Arkoun wrote his doctoral thesis.³ Ursula Günther suggests that it is this initial study on Islamic humanism, as presented by Miskawayh that set the foundation of Arkoun's "long-term project of a critique of Islamic reason embedded in the generic context of religious thought"(Günther 2004: 129). And indeed there exist striking parallels between elements of Miskawayh's *adab* and Arkoun's deconstructivist approach.⁴ Commonalities include the openness towards diverse, also non-Islamic sources of knowledge, the necessity to overcome borders of religious doctrines, and the liberalization of thinking.⁵ Expected results are no less than all-penetrating mental and cultural "renewal and creativity"(Arkoun, 1994: 77). Arkoun, throughout his work, consequently attempts to unravel and deconstruct cultural and religious restraints. He promotes multi-level scientific communication and sharing of knowledge ('collective birthright of humankind') and the application of numerous scholarly disciplines in order to germinate a more inclusivist approach to religion.⁶ Another parallel between *adab* and Arkoun's approach is the hope that enhancing human sciences means to agree on a practical ethical framework which instructs people towards, both moral thinking and behaviour. As Goodman formulates Miskawayh's views on humanity: "Society", Miskawayh argues, "is our means to this end: Each of us is necessary to someone else's perfection, and all of us must cooperate to provide the material base necessary to humanize our existence." This incorporated the idea that humankind ought to be developed into an educated and hence moral culture as part of the "fulfilment as individuals and as a species" and to seek "inner sustenance [...] in the clarity and learning of the mind, the rule of reason, nourished not by the sunna of the Prophet but by *paideia*, the *adab* of humanity"(Goodman 2006: 109). Already here we can glimpse a possible tension between the philosophical approach to life and knowledge as opposed to the traditional theological advance. As I mentioned earlier, much of the hopes for the contemporary Muslim world, according to Arkoun, rests on rethinking the Greek heritage, specifically the sciences and philosophy. Arkoun applies the same critique to humanities as practised at Western institutions of education, as we will encounter later.

Referring to the prosperous times of philosophy and natural sciences within the Islamic ruled realm of the medieval ages, Arkoun contends that within the exclusivist interests of the self-established orthodoxies “neither the Qur’an nor the Prophet encouraged the study of these subjects; quite to the contrary [...].”(Arkoun1994:74).

In contrast, “Miskawayh’s philosophical interests centred mainly upon ethics and political thought. He presents philosophy as the sole ‘true education’ (*adab haqiqa/ alethine paideia*), and as the way to salvation (*najah/soteria*).”⁷ Some might detect that the dichotomy of religion ('Qur'an' or 'Prophet') and philosophy is artificially constructed, and indeed, this construction is found in numerous references to Arkoun's thought. Still, even though Arkoun does very rarely delve into contexts of eschatology, he agrees with Miskawayh’s idea that philosophy is the main deliverer of holistic education, while at the same time Arkoun looks into the Islamic social and scriptural heritage to find dynamics towards his anticipated philosophical project. Arkoun's project anticipates how Islamic thought reviews its often marginalized (also Hellenist-based) heritage and generate autonomously a reliable way of formulating authentic values for today’s (also culturally religious) societies. Here Arkoun's project also brings up questions about identity and management of cultural (politico-religious) heritage that this article will touch up in later paragraphs.

Ethos, Islamic Studies and Philosophy

Arkoun promotes the development of an ethos which goes beyond principles of Western enlightenment and renaissance. Some contemporary thinkers of Muslim descent contend that the transfer of models of 'development' from one culture (here 'the West') onto another culture (here 'the Muslim-majority countries') is the only remedy for socio-economic challenges of contemporary Muslim -majority countries. These accounts are based on the artificial dichotomy of 'the West' and 'the Other' and do no justice to the complexity of inter-cultural dynamics and influences, shared and contesting histories, as well as the manifold factors that play into current impacts on countries' social well-being. In contrast to such fast-fixing approaches of - woefully much too often - far dispatched-from-reality-intellectuals,

Arkoun attempts an all-around critical evaluation of the entire mental heritage of cultures that are historically connected. Arkoun addresses foremost the realm of civilizations that has developed around the Mediterranean Sea. Arkoun admitted that it is not possible for him or any single person to conduct such a critical project. It is, he proposed, a project of solidarity among those cultures, with the aim of betterment of the social conditions for all. Arkoun was hence a stern promoter of the discipline of Mediterranean Studies within the humanities. Here Arkoun shows similarity to the project of Fazlur Rahman, who endeavoured a spirit towards the better of each individual, which then spills her goodness into the wider society.⁸ We see that Arkoun's ideas of course reach beyond Islamic traditions such as the *adab*. This is because all intellectual movements are for him only a portion of all possible rich sources of inspiration.

One project that tries to define stable social values with reference to religious consciousness is the *Weltethos* project formulated by the German scholar Hans Küng. Muhammad Arkoun is one of the representatives of religious denominations who were frequently addressed and asked for advice and support by Hans Küng for this project. Muhammad Arkoun amongst other scholars signed the "Universal declaration of global ethos" presented 1993 at the first parliament of world religions.⁹ The tenets of this declaration were as follows: "Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life, commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order, commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness, commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women." I take it that the establishment of these values is what lies in some form or another at the heart of Arkoun's overall project. When we speak of an Arkounian 'new ethos', it must contain in a narrow sense at minimum these above mentioned tenets.

Considering such tenets as goals of Arkoun's work, I take a look at his more specific proposals of reform, here with regard to scholarship of Islamic Studies. Arkoun pins much hope on innovation within the academia, the realm in which he was active most of his scholarly life. He opts for a reformation of both, confessional and Western Islamic scholarship. A distinction between these two Islamic studies is

important to draw. In institutions of higher learning within some non-Muslim majority countries with a significant proportion of Muslim citizens Islamic studies exists of both, non-confessional and confessional discipline. In Germany, for example, students can choose to study Islam as a curriculum portion from within cultural studies or inter-religious non-Islamic courses (often within departments of ethnology, anthropology, cultural studies, Christian Protestant and Catholic institutes). Since some years, students can also choose the confessional study of Islam at state-universities. Here they are instructed in the classical disciplines of Islamic sciences (*tafsir* (تفسير), *asbāb al-nuzūl* (أسباب النزول), *fiqh* (فقه), history of Islam etc.) leading towards a degree that enables these students to enter professions such as religious school teachers, imams, and pastoral councillors.¹⁰ The difference between these two types of Islamic studies is not to be found so much in the degree of trust to scientific measurements (for that also scientific findings about the history of Islam and the Quran can be included in confessional Islamic studies, as they are similarly applied within confessional Biblical and Christian studies), the distinction is found in the choice of profession. The confessional degree enables students to take on roles of religious guides while the non-confessional degree enables students to inquire Islam as a cultural phenomenon.

Ursula Günther delivers a thorough account of Arkoun's critique of both scholarships. Hence I mark what is important for our purpose. On bottom line Arkoun states that confessional Islamic studies should open up for additional disciplines like social sciences and overcome the limits of thinking as set by orthodoxy. Non-confessional Islamic studies should give up their clear-cut box-thinking -studying a subject from only one hermeneutical perspective- and they should become engaged in a dedicated discourse about current issues, cause and effects in the Islamic world, which means to include knowledge about the social circumstances and cultural factors that play a role in the system (especially to the religiously informed patterns of thinking and praxis). Both confessional and non-confessional scholars must reach what Arkoun calls a meta-level on which both types of scholars achieve autonomy and where it does not matter from which cultural or religious background the scholars come (Günther 2004: 107). I think Arkoun also

addresses here, amongst others, the Islamic world which includes Muslim Diaspora communities and the new generations of Muslims born in non-Muslim countries. Arkoun himself taught many students with this background.

For the inner-Islamic debate, as we already know, he most strongly recommends a reassessment of *turāth* (heritage). Islamic historiography uses, in the eyes of Arkoun, mechanisms of selection and distortion, for example, apotheosis of heroic acts and mythologization of authorities (Günther 2004:112). Of these mechanisms one always needs to be aware when dealing with scriptural writings. In addition, he heavily criticizes the low intellectual quality of inner-Islamic religious discourses, speaking of what he calls the “scandalous shortcomings of Islamic discourses.” (Günther 2004:108). Apparently – and of course we know this from the cases of the trials against Abu Zayd in Egypt and against Fazlur Rahman in Pakistan– even if Muslim intellectuals have something to add to the religious discourse, they are often excluded from the discourse.¹¹ The fate of being excluded from the religious discourse in core Islamic countries is that of several modern Muslim thinkers who often need to pronounce their words in the non-Islamic realm.

Arkoun sees in some Western Orientalist accounts of Islam (which I tend to distinguish from value-open non-confessional religious studies approaches) the propensity to support the exclusion of non-mainstream Islamic thought. What Arkoun portrays here is a 'scholarship' that contributes to the exclusion of already marginalized thought that has been produced by Muslims for Muslims. Also Western scholarship should adopt a more critical and detailed perspective on Islam, since Islam is diverse and not represented solely by a dominant orthodoxy.¹² It must be the task of Western scholarship to inform students and in consequence the public about this diversity in order to shape awareness of the many facets and hence more realistic picture of Islam.

Since Arkoun is deeply rooted in the philosophical tradition and the Parisian school of deconstructivism, he finds a starting point for reform within the academic humanities. He pleads for reforms within all disciplines, including the confessional as well as scientific Islamic

studies and calls for introducing philosophical learning and teaching in, both, curriculum and methodology. He considers such things as crucial for expanding the horizon of education since the “philosophical attitude is the basis for the mental flexibility and openness” (Günther 2004:108). Hence philosophical studies will contribute to holistic education, which is necessary for aiming at the new ethos. We see again that Arkoun closely links education with an emerging humanism. This becomes apparent in his critique of the history of philosophy in confessional Islamic studies. He makes out a decline of culture of knowledge in Islamic culture since the 10th century, more specifically since the dominance of the theological thought of al-Ghazali. Arkoun acknowledges specifically the diminishing of *ijtihad*, individual thinking applied to Quran and *hadith* in order to derive legal opinions.¹³ Along this line Goodman mentions al-Ghazali’s opposition to much of Miskawayh’s humanistic and secular elements.(Goodman 2006:113). Here I assume that Arkoun adopts an assertive position towards *adab* and Miskawayh’s draft of humanist thought while also taking on a critical stance to al-Ghazali’s hostility to elements of Miskawayh’s thought. Arkoun recognizes the negative influence of the line of thought established by al-Ghazali, on which Islamic orthodoxy heavily draws on. But he wants to make clear that Islam is not inherently anti-humanistic or anti-philosophical. He contends that it is a misconception that with al-Ghazali’s critique of philosophy there was “put an end to the successes of Greek thought by contributing to the victory of orthodoxy.”(Arkoun 1994:75). What must truly occur is a recovery, or in Arkoun's term an archaeology, of suppressed and marginalized streams of Islamic thought, especially those in the fashion of Averroism. In all, deconstruction of Islamic thought is the decisive tool for this archaeology.

Secular and Muslim Civil Society

I understand Arkoun’s proposals for reforming education to be ultimately geared at changing society, by means of evolving responsible, self reflective and critical citizens. In this endeavour solidarity of sciences must go hand in hand with solidarity of ethics. Politics should aim at building and preserving a civil society of tolerance (*Toleranzgesellschaft*). The system in use must be an

institutionalized democracy which constitutes a society that is equally progressive and moral.¹⁴ Arkoun criticizes governments of Islamic countries, which do not allow freedom of thought, equal rights, education, and universal suffrage. He seems indeed quite sceptical towards the possibility of establishing democracy and civil societies in Islamic countries (Hendrich 2004: 306). On the other hand he is also critical of secular democracies. We will find that Arkoun often embraces certain outcomes of secularism, but at the same time also investigates them critically. One could call this a love-hate relationship of Arkoun towards liberalism and secularism. In example, France is, in the eyes of Arkoun, not truly enlightened, since it actively and forcefully opposes public expressions of faith. He calls the French state system a “militant secularism” which attempts to be a model of an enlightened secular state (Arkoun 1994:77). However, a truly enlightened state is aware of the religious fact (*fait religieux*) and its mechanisms within society and does not on the contrary chose to ignore or even fight it. He says the religious reality is part of social reality and cannot be successfully denied. According to Akroun, ignoring the *fait religieux* leads to a gap within society, from which one side will favour a religious leadership and the other support rational and secular leadership. The study of Arkoun's writings has led me to the conclusion that Arkoun anticipates that religion is an impending factor of all societies, and that he takes this for granted and does not explain how he comes to believe this, other than maybe observation. However, it is certain that he pleads for an emancipated secularism that is aware of the penetrating dimension of religion. Arkoun seems to say that reality cannot be divided into that of belief and that of secular history, since both interact and perforate each other.¹⁵ With this conscience then politics must lead towards an autonomous civil society under the guidance of the proposed solidarity of science and ethics. On this depends nothing less than a ‘common future of all peoples.’(Cf. Arkoun, ‘Auf den Spuren, 145.’) Discourse about this common future must take place in an atmosphere of freedom of will and thought. Ideologies (in Marx’s sense of the term) will not be able to enhance the establishment of a responsible civil populace. Attempts of reading from the Quran that Muhammad was a socialist or democrat or that all modern natural-scientific findings are already prescribed in the Quran,

become, in Arkoun's view, ridiculous enterprises. These readings are reactions to modernity, but they do not constitute a modern way of inquiry. They project our own beliefs onto religious writings. According to this line of thought, Arkoun rejects the idea of the need for establishing a theocratic society in order to deliver people from mischief. Of course, some Muslim responses to modernity try to read the necessity of a unity of state and religion from Islamic history and Islamic scriptures (Quran, *sunna* and *sīra*). And Arkoun admits that Muhammad reinvested religious symbols, the symbolic capital, in order to make the eschatology of the new religion relevant for the people at that time and place. Yes, the new path to salvation must have been paved with new rules for society. But the actual "making of Islam into a state" took place due to the demand for a centralized administration of the fast expanding Islamic empire. Arkoun seems to say that neither Muhammad nor the Quranic text suggested such a unity, but that the demand for it was a late sociological phenomenon. He writes, "since the death of the Prophet, Islam has never recovered the special circumstances permitting its double expression as symbol and politics [...]." (Arkoun 1994:21).

Reflecting on a potential frame for a civilian society, Arkoun is indeed sceptical about French laicism, or 'militant secularism'. However, he was a member of the 'Committee for Laicism' in France.¹⁶ Arkoun's view on secularism is mainly a critique of the idea that separating state and religion on legal and administrative levels is at all possible, because religion still influences society. He is not denying the need for such artificial divisions, but - as we have seen above - calls for a secularism which is not blind to the religious fact as social fact. Further, in his remarks on nationalism, Arkoun objects the feasibility of seeking a unity of a pantocratic *umma* as long as the freedom of the individual is not guaranteed.

Arkoun believed that nationalism of Islamic countries always relies on a mythologized Islam, which in form of the '*ulama*' supports its interests. Nationalism is a political system favoured by numerous Islamic countries and such an attempt at unifying Islamic people is the establishment of the *Arab Islamic League*. This creation of unity must be understood as a reaction by Islamic countries to what is perceived as Western dominance in an effort to 'cure' Islamic cultures. But as long as

an artificial unification is enforced on a still illiberal people, democratic structures have no future. Arkoun notes: “[...] these people possess a wealth of resources still poorly understood, poorly interpreted, and insufficiently exploited. In vain they request means of democratic expression; explosions of anger are quickly repressed, dismissed as ‘betrayal’ of the national cause, [...]” Arkoun makes clear that “in the end, genuine unity must result from the freely expressed will of all citizens, but the path that leads there remains long, muddy, and disconcerting.”(Arkoun 1994: 29). We see here again a reflection of the goals of a global ethics projects as Arkoun embraces the freedom of will and expression and human rights.

Arkoun as a well-established intellectual observed and commented on movements of thought on both, the Islamic and the non-Islamic academic and political realms. He proposed that intellectuals play a crucial part in sharpening the awareness of the need for the rights of people. But Arkoun is questioning the intellectual and epistemological abilities of intellectuals who address issues of human rights like free choice of religion, freedom of thought and expression. This is because intellectuals are themselves often caught in a vicious circle. Their role is to critique and rethink conditions of society. They ought to contribute to shaping public opinion by making background information of political and social issues comprehensible and accessible to the public, and to communicate their critiques. But if rights of freedom of speech and opinion are not granted to them in the first place, they can hardly contribute to shape the awareness of the need of such rights for an oppressed populace. How can deliverers liberate the conscience of the people, if they are not free themselves? Here Arkoun reflects again back on Islamic history and finds positive impulses. For example, he believes that the original *umma*, during the lifetime of the Prophet, had the merits of an ideal community due to its “spiritual quality” (Arkoun 1994: 53). Such quality was determined through the immediate and intense link between God and the hearts of the people within the Quranic discourse. Arkoun does not think this original community, where the spirit dynamically informed people towards change, is something today’s Muslim communities could revive or imitate. Today’s societies’ source of change is the constant act of rethinking truth-claims, as held e.g. by the three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam).

These truth claims are mostly thought as ultimately mutually exclusive and any thinking based on exclusivism cannot contribute to holistic and critical enquiry into the human condition. Here Arkoun pleads for a paradigm shift: “A reciprocity of consciousness as a base for an exchange of rights and duties on a level of legal equality would come only after there occurred an epistemological, hence mental, break with the concept of theological truth developed in the three revealed religions.”(Arkoun 1994: 54). The mental break with exclusivist truth claims will enable intellectuals to enter a meta-level from which all strive to reveal mechanisms behind human phenomena, regardless, as said above, of their own backgrounds or affiliations. Above all, a common formulation of the values of an ideal society must occur outside religious exclusivist thinking. Although Arkoun did not compose a list of the often mentioned base-values for the new ethos, he was concerned with finding a methodology to discover ways of maximising freedom from political, ideological, religious manipulative powers.

Intriguingly, even if Arkoun pleads for overcoming the borders of religious thinking and truth claims, he still finds inspiration for a model of the ideal community in divine revelation or as Arkoun calls them, the ‘vistas of liberation.’¹⁷ This stance might illustrate Arkoun’s internal conflict between Islamic/religious and non-Islamic sources of inspiration. Arkoun believes that the event of revelation plus the religious texts potentially create a positive force for the advancement of the person towards responsibility, which entails awareness of rights and duties.¹⁸ At this point in his writings I can only find reference to the Quran as an example of scripture that implies such liberating powers. This Quranic material operates with narratives which speak of personal responsibility towards the will of God. Arkoun admits that the ‘modern’ notion of citizen has no immediate foundation in the scriptures. But it seems for him that scriptures lay down basic criteria for a kind of God-fearing *citizenhood*. The evolution of a person towards a responsible citizen is one of Arkoun’s central issues that invokes the question of personhood and human rights. In this context he admits that “Muslim theological thought has not committed itself to the kind of modern interpretation that would highlight” ‘problems’ “in contemporary discourse on human rights.”(Arkoun 1994: 56). As we shall see,¹⁹

Arkoun's reading of sura 9 suggests that a discussion about human rights might have already been initiated by the Quranic discourse. The above quotation shows that to him the Quran contains the dynamic for forming a responsible and autonomous individual. Regarding sura 9 he writes "the fundamental message of sura 9 is not outmoded," (Arkoun 1994: 56) and he says one efficacy of the Quranic discourse is the "deployment of the free person." (Arkoun 1994: 57).

The birth moment of the Muslim personality is charged with rich symbolic investments of formerly profane actions. Violence is one of these notions that the Quran turns into a sacred action, when carried out for the defence of *al-haqq*. Arkoun pays much attention to sura 49 and 9 when it comes to talking about the emergence of the person, even though, as mentioned above, it is not clear how he hopes to establish his ideas from the Quranic material. One reason for Arkoun to have chosen to dedicate a great deal of notice to sura 9 could be that it includes themes particularly important for formulating Islamic beliefs: the pact between Muhammad and others (9:1), covenant between God and God's people (112) [1], believers/unbelievers (9: 20, 23-4, 29, 30, 54, 71, 75, 80, 84) [2], oaths between believers and opponents [3], victory and triumph (9:14, 72, 89, 100, 111), gaining paradise (9:72), dooming in hell (9:35), belief/unbelief in afterlife (9:85), fight against unbelievers/warfare (9:5, 16, 20, 24, 41, 44, 73, 81, 86, 88, 90-94), *al-haqq* (9:29), ethics (9:100), *hajj* (9:3). The sura clearly states what the person has to do in order to gain salvation.²⁰ It becomes clearer now that Arkoun is concerned with the sociological and anthropological reading of the Quran.²¹

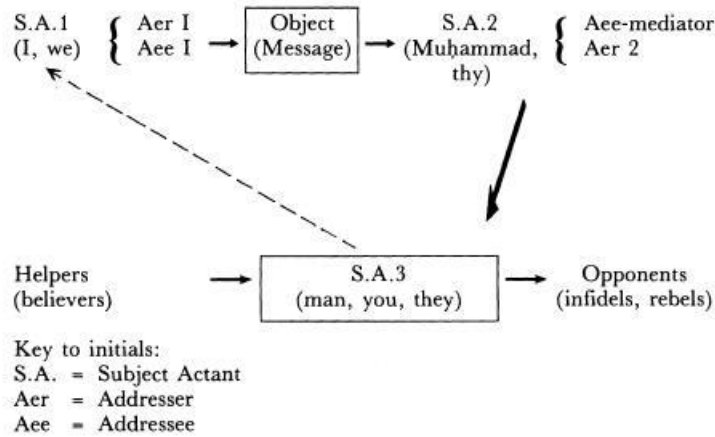
The discourse of transcendence and of absoluteness opens an infinite space for the promotion of the individual beyond the constraints of fathers and brothers, clans and tribes, riches and tributes; the individual becomes an autonomous and free person, enjoying a liberty guaranteed by obedience and love lived within the alliance. The consciousness of the person, thus liberated, does not even require the mediation of another human consciousness, as it does in Christianity, which depends on the mediation of Jesus; the ontological access of a Muslim is direct, total, and irreversible. [...] Qur'anic discourse has broadly demonstrated its efficacy as a space for the emergence, training, and deployment of

the free person, who enjoys guarantees of life, property, family, and private domicile not as “citizen” of a civil society managed by elected representatives or by universal suffrage (sovereign of the nation founded in 1789 by the French Revolution) but as God’s partner in an eternal compact (Arkoun 1994: 57).

Arkoun also explores the dialogical nature of the Quran. Arkoun identifies a general technique of the Quranic discourse which is mostly comprised of: “‘**We**’ of the addresser (called God in the discourse of faith), the ‘**thou**’ (Muhammad), the ‘**you**’ comprising the believers, ‘**he**’ and ‘*they*’ (man and the people still outside the new emerging space of communication). This configuration of pronouns establishes the basic, constant space of communication and meaning in the entire discourse of the Qur’an.” Throughout the Quranic discourse there is a tension amongst these protagonists (addressee and addresser, subject and object): “[...] through which there emerges a consciousness of **culpability**. Through it, man thereby comes to be transformed into a conscious, reflective subject in the sphere of ethics and law. He becomes responsible for every thought, action and initiative in his life.”(Arkoun, ‘Revelation Revisited’, 12-3.)

From this third perspective, it suffices to establish that what can be called the qur’ānic stage, the instantiation of a new religion, is a complex historical process engaging simultaneously social, political, cultural, and normative factors. These are entangled with ritual, customs, ethics, familial structures (see family; tribes and clans; kinship), competing structures of the imagination and the collective interactive memory of such entities as Jews, Christians, Sabians (q.v.), polytheists (frequently termed “pagans”), and all cultural groups of the ancient Near East. All these modes and manifestations of the historical existence of such social groups in Arabia are not only present in the qur’ānic discourse but transformed. They have been sublimated, uprooted from their local conditions to constitute an “existential paradigm” of the human condition. Divested of its particularity, this qur’ānic paradigm is capable of producing and informing individual and collective existence within the most diverse cultural and historical contexts.(Arkoun, ‘Islam’, EQ)

Furthermore he suggests a semiotic analysis as displayed in a diagram in the article “*Notions of Revelations.*”



Sura 9 delivers all material for this “dramatic structure” of the Quranic discourse and reading it, according to the diagram, restores its possible meaning to the first audience in its historical context. As said before, the sura needs to be read in the light of the different protagonists, whose interaction establishes profound tension within a “historical paradigmatic drama.” (Arkoun, *Reform or Subvert*, 126.) In the context of reading sura 49 and 9 Arkoun writes:

*The groups of protagonists are transformed into protagonists of a **spiritual drama** [sic]. The political and social situations and what is actually at stake are sublimated into paradigms of conduct and recurrent choices inexorably involving the ultimate destiny of every soul (person) confronted at the same time with temptations, constraints and solidarities of the immediate life (al-dunyā, or ‘society’ as we could call it today) [...]. (Ibid, 127f.)*

The Quran involves the addressees into a dialogue that leaves them transformed. The drama displays the individual’s struggle for salvation against the odds of its own social, political and historical reality.²²

According to Arkoun, Quranic revelation contributed to the liberation of the person from tribal codes. The new allegiance is based on obedience of the individual to God. Surely there is a tension between such a model of personhood and that of the 'Western ideal' (however

authentic or feasible) of moral autonomy. Arkoun speaks explicitly of the “Muslim person”, or the “person of Islam” who appeared first when the people of the former *jāhilyya* committed “to the faith and to fighting (*jiḥād*) for the Prophet’s cause, the small group of early believers (*mu’minūn*) [...]”(Arkoun 1994: 89). The growth and recurrence of this person he says comes down to the normative character and mythological structure of Quranic discourse, the force of ritual and the promise for salvation, the centralization of state “which took ‘true religion’ (orthodoxy) under its protection and drew legitimacy from it in return”, and the image of original Islam and the narratives of “universal ‘Islamic’ history” as “initiated by the Prophet for individual and collective behaviour.”²³ As Arkoun notices, “the emotional climate that predominates in Muslim societies today renders the scientific study of a large number of delicate problems impossible”(Arkoun 1994: 93). Still, he, in contrast, mentions the importance of the image of the initial Islam for the beliefs and developments in Islamic societies. He does not judge whether this widespread and traditional image of early Islam is wrong or misleading, but stresses its impact:

One can never overemphasize the role and recurrent power of the politico-religious imaginary put in place by what I have called the Medinan experience. All historical activity of any significance in the Islamic domain has been a result of this imaginary. These activities themselves presuppose the production of a type of person who has internalized all the representations, all the ideal symbolic images carried by traditional Islamic discourse. [...] The person should be studied as a haven of liberty; choices are made, options eliminated, and combinations put together to make up each *personality* and eventually to confirm the *selection* of the personage, the leader, the imam at the level of local group, the nation, and the community of believers. Such a study becomes indispensable to a reconstruction of the delicate mechanisms that definitively order both individual destinies and the historical development of societies.²⁴

The basic personality receives, according to Arkoun, the meaning of the initial set up of the Muslim person; in other words, what it means to belong to Islam according to the context of the ‘Medinan experience.’ Arkoun is aware that this concept of person is not the same as a modern notion of responsible individual with particular freedoms. However, he

seems to attribute a positive effect to the notion of revelation and the dynamics of the first Muslim *umma*.

Reflections

This article sets out to contribute to filling a lacuna of scholarly representation of minority Muslim intellectual thought on religion, Islam, the Quran, society and reform. Especially within English speaking scholarship Muhammad Arkoun's work is rarely reflected upon in a thorough fashion. He is often mentioned amongst other names listing 'progressive Muslims', 'contemporary Muslim thought', 'reformism in Islam' etc. It is not uncommon to find his and other names in sometimes more polemic than scholarly pieces which try to either seize his project for the points being made, or to criticize and reject his approach, without having formerly attempted to understand his concepts. Consequently, the search for details of his project results often in vain. Hence, I believe it is essential to present voices like his in a close-to-objective and representative manner, before one enters into controversial discussions about the contents. Only by a proper engagement with the scholarly accounts of these self-proclaimed Muslims, a scientist of religion can begin to compare and discuss them towards specific questions, frame them within current discourses in social and theological studies.

Through a consideration of what we have found above, portray of Arkoun's concepts can be summed up as follows. Arkoun draws on both, concepts from Islamic heritage as well as the non-Islamic intellectual sphere. He views religion as an immanent part of social reality and tries to reconsider some dynamics of Islam that seem helpful in the project of liberating people from all backgrounds from constraints on thought, politics, ideology etc. Nothing less than the formulation of a new ethos is on his mind. There is no one possible frame in which this liberation can take place, neither the re-projection of a supposedly known past, nor the un-reflected attempt to imitate *adab*, nor the adoption of some principles of enlightenment, often termed and quickly rejected as a product of the West. He asks cultures from shared histories around the Mediterranean to join into a critical reflection process towards a project of formulating values that will be the basis for a living together where the individual as well as the society benefit broadly from

development (mental, social, political, economical). Whether this constant reflection and criticism might one day overcome the religious fact, Arkoun does not touch upon. For him religion is and remains a fact of the social and historical set-up of all civilizations involved, whether they call themselves Muslim, Christian or secular. However, only in a frame of 'healthy' secularism, a process conscientisation can take place. Such secularism, in the broadest sense, encourages evolution of thought and does not dictate thoughts in any direction, e.g. pro or contra religiosity. Arkoun seems to believe that the most effective impulses for a liberation-of-the-mind project will be given from within academia and consequently in all learning institutions, where philosophical reflection, freedom of thought and individual responsibility is taught and encouraged. He promotes an advancement of education on all levels in order to enable an autonomous civil society that is then empowered to make reflexive decisions and to gain responsible suffrage. In the context of Muslim-majority countries such progressive education must entail critical engagement with the own heritage (*turāth*), the reconsideration of marginalized Islamic philosophies and the inclusion of non-Islamic sources. It does not suffice, in the eyes of Arkoun, to either reject religion as a hindrance to modernity, nor to mythologize religion into an absolute remedy. Through education, this is Arkoun's hope, democratic structures will be erected and existing ones stabilized, freedom of thought and expression strengthened, as well as autocratic regimes and ideological infiltrations (e.g. extremism) challenged.

The liberating elements of religion can only be discovered when truth-claims of self-established orthodoxies are overcome, horizons are broadened and a plurality of world views can be accepted. This also means to overcome internal power struggles of religious and political elites, in order to instead concentrate on analysing the prerequisites which are necessary for an improvement of the human condition. Arkoun's ideas open a huge spectrum of possibilities of how to talk about religion and society, in a fashion that is respectful and constructive. His philosophy contributes to a global advance of contemporary humanistic thought, and deserves integration into the curriculum of both, Islamic theology as well as non-confessional religious studies.

Notes:

1. Greek counterpart: *paideia*. In ‘ancient Greek’ *paideia* meant “a system of broad cultural education” or formally “the culture of a society.” *The Oxford Dictionary of English*.

2. The term *adab* existed in similar use in pre-Islamic time. *Adab* in its oldest meaning “implies a habit, a practical norm of conduct, with the double connotation of being praiseworthy and being inherited from one’s ancestors.” (Gabrieli, ‘Adab’, EI)

3. Arkoun’s PhD thesis on Miskawayh from 1970 is discussed in detail by Günther in her PhD thesis *Mohammad Arkoun*, 161-7. Arkoun also wrote an entry on ‘Miskawayh’ in EI², vol.7, 143-4.

4. Groff, *Islamic Philosophy*, 6: *Adab* “comprises knowledge of poetry, rhetoric, oratory, grammar and history, as well as familiarity with the literary and philosophical achievements, the practical-ethical wisdom and the exemplary individuals of the pre-Islamic Arabs, Indians, Persians and Greeks. It can be said to encompass the natural sciences as well, although its primary focus is always on the human. [...] at its apex, the *adab* tradition – at least as interpreted by Islamic humanists such as Abu Suleyman Muhammad al-Sijistani, al-Tawhidi and Miskawayh – gave rise to the cosmopolitan ideal that wisdom and moral exemplars could be drawn from many cultures, and that their insights were the collective birthright of humankind.”

5. Arkoun, “Auf den Spuren,” 148. Arkoun on *adab*: “[...] in what I have called the philosophical *adab* (*paidaia*) of the 4th [AH] or 10th [AC] century, we can see a liberalisation of the cognitive activities, similar to those of the European Renaissance [...]” He asserts though that even Renaissance as well as enlightenment were not absolutely free from theological influences.

6. Arkoun often mentions the necessity and usefulness of a range of disciplines which he would like to link through a general sense of philosophical scrutiny. Those disciplines are linguistics, philology, semiology, literary studies, anthropology, psychology, history, philosophy, archaeology and sociology. Since he regards religion as one of the most succinct expressions of human existence, the disciplines of researching this element of the complexity of humankind must be versatile. Arkoun takes up positively from *adab* two aspects which are worth being carried over into present academia: “Intellectualizing scientific disciplines (*al-ulum*) [...]” and “liberalization of cognitive activities.” ([...] Intellektualisierung der wissenschaftlichen Disziplinen (*al-ulum*) [...] and “Liberalisierung der kognitiven Aktivitaeten.” Arkoun, “Auf den Spuren,” 148.)

7. Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam*, 231. Kraemer refers to Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-akhlāq*, 49-50. See also how Walzer reflects on translations from philosophical works in Greek into Arabic, “Some Aspects of Miskawayh’s *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*,” cited in Kraemer 232-3.

8. Völker, Katharina (2015), ‘Two Accounts of Quranic Revelation – Fazlur Rahman and N.H. Abu Zayd on Muhammad’s *Contribution*’, in: *Journal of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*. Eds. University of Birmingham (UK) and Monash University (Australia) (London: Routledge, 2015), 271-286.

9. Küng, *A global Ethic*, 47. Cf. *Declaration toward a Global Ethic* (<http://www.urbandharma.org/pdf/ethic.pdf>). Regarding the critique of instrumentalising religion for state-power interests interesting parallels exist between Küng and Arkoun. Küng believes that in the early 4th century, Catholicism was instrumentalized by the Roman Empire, which was best demonstrated by symbolically attaching the Cross of Jesus Christ the bringer of peace, to the shields with which the Roman Empire set out to oppress other people to be conquered. Similarly, Arkoun contends that the merge of state and religion was a socio-political necessity at the time of the expansion of the Islamic Empire.

10. Völker, Katharina (2013), ‘A Danger to Free Research and Teaching in German Universities? The Case of Muhammad Sven Kalisch’, in: Paul Morris, William Shepard, Toni Tidswell, Paul Trebilco (eds.), *The Teaching and Study of Islam in Western Universities* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 175-85. Proceedings to the conference: *The Role of the Study of Islam in the Western University*, CSIMCNZ (Centre for the Study of Islam and Muslim Cultures, New Zealand), University of Otago, 2009. See also my discussion in: Völker, Katharina (2014), ‘Parameters of Teaching Islam *Freely*’, in: Erich Kolig, *Freedom of Speech and Islam* (London: Ashgate, 2014), 209-224.

11. Günther, *Mohammad Arkoun*, 109. Günther writes with reference to the Abu Zayd case: In most countries of the Near and Middle East the socio-political circumstances do not allow for a development of innovative streams. The frame, in which discourses are enabled, are strictly determined. Intellectuals hence criticize that when they are resisting the dominant conventions, public opinions and official ideologies, they face isolation from the scientific community, in worst case scenarios they'll have to suffer a fate similar to that of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd [...].“ (my translation) of: „In den meisten Ländern des Nahen und Mittleren Ostens sind die sozio-politischen Bedingungen nicht gegeben, die notwendig sind, damit sich innovative Strömungen entfalten und etablieren können. Der Rahmen, innerhalb dessen Diskurse stattfinden können, ist weitgehend vorgegeben. Darum kritisieren

Intellektuelle, die sich weigern, sich den herrschenden Konventionen anzupassen, d.h. der öffentlichen Meinung und der offiziellen Ideologie zu folgen, eine Isolierung als der jeweiligen wissenschaftlichen Gemeinschaft, schlimmstenfalls müssen sie ein vergleichbares Schicksal wie Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid in Kauf nehmen [...].”

12. Arkoun finds that Western scholarship promotes the dominance of orthodoxy when it considers it to be the only representative of Islam being worth studied and taught. He explicitly refers to van Ess as an example. Even further he writes “certain renowned Orientalists have helped to enrich the apologetic literature on Islam.” (Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam*, 102.)

13. cf. Völker, Katharina (2014), ‘Mohammad Arkoun: The Quran Rethought - Genesis, Significance, and the Study of the Quran’, in: Edmund Weber et al. (eds.), *Journal of Religious Culture*. Goethe-University, Frankfurt am Main - Institute for Religious Peace Research. No. 189 (2014). (<http://web.uni-frankfurt.de/irenik/rekultur189.pdf>)

Ghazali's critique of philosophy has been often studied towards its actual impact on the intellectual development of Islamic thought. However the scholars do not agree on the *potenz* of this impact. Ghazali's critique often serves as a practical marking point for the teaching of Islamic history in order to simplify a chronology of Islamic intellectual endeavour (in the fashion of Islamic thought 'pre-Ghazali' and 'post-Ghazali').

14. Hendrich (*Islam und Aufklärung*) writes with reference to Arkoun that democracy is “Voraussetzung einer neuen Kultur der Kreativität und des moralischen Konsensus.” See also Hendrich's remarks on Arkoun's assessment of develop democratic structures, 306.

15. “Secularism with its juridical, philosophical underpinning continues to prevail in most Western, societies, but many churches, religious institutions, and civil organizations are making claims for articulating an encompassing theological-philosophical vision integrating the three concepts, person-individual-citizen, which they regard as inseparable.” (Arkoun, “The State, the Individual, and Human Rights.”)

16. Cf. Arkoun's CV on the ‘Ibn Rushd Fund for Freedom of Thought’ webpage (www.ibn-rushd.org/English/CV-Arkoun.htm).

17. Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam*, 34. Arkoun's detection of liberating dynamics within revealed book-religions finds similarities in the liberation philosophies of Paolo Freire, Fazlur Rahman, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Hans Küng, Farid Esack, Amina Wadud, and Asma Barlas.

18. “Revelation as collected in the sacred writings contains starting points, strong roots, and carrier concepts for the emergence of the person as a subject

equipped with rights and as an agent responsible for the observance of obligations toward God and peers in the political community. The idea of peers does not coincide, of course, with the modern idea of citizen [...].” (Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam*, 55.)

19. Völker, Katharina (2012), 'The Emergence of the Responsible Person', in: K. Völker, *Quran and Reform: Rahman, Arkoun, Abu Zayd*, p. 151-153.

20. In sociological terms we can say that Arkoun speaks of the ‘myth of probation; (*Bewährungsmythos*) and the origin of the basic Muslim personality (this last expression is used by Arkoun numerous times). The sociologist Ulrich Oevermann uses the term *Bewährungsmythos*, to describe the myth of religion that claims the necessities for gaining salvation.

21. Schönberger, p.11 comments on Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 50. “Although the Qu’rān is the basis of the imaginaire, it is not a static concept; it is rather a dynamical one that is interdependent with the ethic of Islam. In doing so, Arkoun’s anthropological orientation is to unearth the ‘myth of origins’ and the ‘regimes of truth.’”

22. Regarding the emerging of the consciousness of the self see Arkoun, *Reform or Subvert*, 279-80 (re. Qur'an verse 9:5).

23. Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam*, 89. As a remark: If one takes these criteria for the success of the Muslim person, it is understandable if researchers conclude a different image of early Islam, which then cannot serve anymore as this support for the constructed Muslim identity today. See studies on early Islam by the ‘Saarland School’, and research by Cook/Crone, and Kalisch.

24. Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam*, 90. Arkoun’s understanding of the Muslim person seems to resemble what he calls the ‘basic personality’. He explicitly refers in this context to neo-Freudian psychoanalyst and ethnologist Abram Kardiner, who formulated that every culture brings forth a concept of personality, which then finds variation and development: “[...] with the help of the Islamic example, one could revive the concept of basic personality launched not long ago by the psychiatrist Abram Kardiner but left behind by anthropologists.” Here a description by the sociologist Renner: “Die Basispersönlichkeit setzt sich zusammen aus denjenigen Persönlichkeitselementen, die die Mitglieder einer Gesellschaft aufgrund der gemeinsamen Erfahrungen in der frühen Kindheit miteinander teilen. Danach ist die Entstehung einer basalen Persönlichkeitsstruktur vor allem in den Sozialisierungspraktiken und –erfahrungen wie Stillen, Entwöhnen, Reinlichkeitstraining begründet... “Renner, Kulturtheoretische und kulturvergleichende Ansätze,” 182.

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