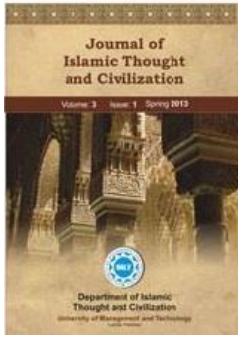


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## Islam and Postmodernity: M. Arkoun on Deconstruction

Dr. Usman Khalil

Ms Abida Khan

### Abstract

*Ideologies are directly albeit not always perceptibly related to methodological and epistemological themes. Social psychology also reveals that knowledge depends upon the policy of rejection or incorporation of various philosophies. In the journey of human thought dawned the age of reason with the Era of Enlightenment. Gradually, universal values and the scientific method gained supremacy. And then all the grand narratives stood redundant and rejected, giving rise to the need to re-search, re-analyze, and re-think every work done thus far with the aim to de-construct the now-discarded. This research studies the greatly admired post structural theory of deconstruction and its proponents in the Muslim civilizations to evaluate its impact on contemporary Muslim thought. The rationale of the study is a critical appraisal of the theoretical concepts in the Muslim world in response or reaction to the current epistemological influences from the West. This exploration led to the conclusion that the scholars of the Islamic world missed the point by going a bit too far as the Holy Quran and collections of authentic Ahadith explicitly state what Muslims should reject or incorporate. The remedy comprises in updating the conventional way of thinking and interpreting things, acquiring the ability to think the unthinkable and the previously unthought, honest hard work, incessant striving for excellence, as well as discarding getting overwhelmed by whatever gains 'currency' in the largely impulsive Western thought.*

**Keywords:** Deconstruction, Epistemology, Rethink, Critique, Qur'an

### Islam and Post Modernism

Ever since the commencement of the 19th century, Revivalism, Reformism and Radicalism along with Nationalism and Islamic Socialism seem to be the most significant movements and inclinations of Islamic thinking in the contemporary Muslim world. Over the years, the restraining hegemony of the Western scientific way of thinking "applied to foreign cultures or concepts" not falling within the sphere of 'Christian Europe and secular Western civilization'<sup>1</sup> has been expanded to the field of Islamic studies as well. Empiricism has always forced "its classifications, categories, definitions, distinctions, concepts, and theories on"<sup>2</sup> other disciplines and philosophical ideas without apprehending any condemnation or negation. In fact, this excessive reliance on reason and senses as the only tools of learning or the logocentrism/logosphere, i.e., focusing solely on reason/*aqal*, ignores or neglects other sources of understanding and thinking, e.g., ethos {morals}, mythos {myths and legends/history} and pathos {emotions} along with a complete disregard of the divine sources of human guidance. On the other hand, the Muslim world is "yet to come up with its own conceptual view of its history, culture,

<sup>1</sup> <http://lrd.yahooapis.coml=http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0395> accessed: 5/18/09.

<sup>2</sup> [http://lrd.yahooapis.com/\\_ylc=X3http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0395](http://lrd.yahooapis.com/_ylc=X3http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0395) accessed: 5/18/09.

and religion to challenge the hegemonic perspective”<sup>3</sup> of the West so as to make them see the actual point of view.

The universal and sweeping nuances of scientific investigations make mankind the purpose as well as the cause of investigation. At present, rational interpretation supported by empirical, operational, and creative knowledge and motivated by financial reasons has attained a standing and supremacy equivalent to the ‘theological-legal’ rationale ‘of the Middle Ages or to the Enlightenment reason’ due to the pressing stipulations of the industrialized countries. Modern-day political specialists expressing the “threat” to “Western values” caused by Muslim “religious fanatics” rarely talk about the “economic mistakes” of the “scientific experts.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus their investigations never inquire about the major hegemonic mode of thinking that goes on to situate main concerns founded on scientific logic and falls short of endorsing research methods or plans, embedded in the social sciences. As ignorance continues to increase in the supposedly politically sovereign nations of the Islamic world, the science of “man and society” in the West follows its mission of capricious partition of the world and disintegration of reality.

Certainly hermeneutics realizes the central role history and language play in any understanding. As language along with its ‘content’ of thought is not just a way of communication, therefore a series of models of construing the natural world influenced the language of each era/episteme. And in turn religious language manifested the impact of this alteration, ending up in the escalation of a secular mindset. Hence the degree the language of Islamic theology has made an impact as well as “been affected by the expressions of other scholarly exercises, e.g., Greek philosophy, pre-Islamic Persian culture, ever changing Western trends, etc. during the past history as well as present times depends upon the matter of Islamization and de-Islamization of the Muslim mindset.”<sup>5</sup>

In the conspicuous absence of a neutral or value-free science of the West, Islamic values with their obligatory sense of responsibility can be very relevant along the boundary between science and moral responsibility. Emphasis must be laid on knowing the main features of Islamic thinking and culture, viewpoints, and ways of living of the most important religions and modern secular civilizations of the world to inculcate authentically Islamic knowledge.

Contrary to this post modern belief that words are worn-out and over and over again inverted from their original meaning, the perceptions as well as conceptual words are in fact containers of 'higher' and more 'original' meanings to which man responds with flexibility to an objective and higher truth. If meaning actually vanishes as manifested by the modern 'diversification' of meanings and various post structural theories, then this world is on the brink of yielding to purposelessness.

“The rudiments of the dîn - tradition or 'religion' are the channels through which man can restore his animal instincts, his ego (nafs) and eventually become the vice-regent of Allah (khalîfah) in this world to truly justify his being a human. In the other world (al-âkhirah)

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<sup>3</sup> [http://ird.yahoapis.com/\\_ylc=X3http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0395](http://ird.yahoapis.com/_ylc=X3http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0395) accessed: 5/18/09.

<sup>4</sup> [http://ird.yahoapis.com/\\_ylc=X3http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0395](http://ird.yahoapis.com/_ylc=X3http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0395) accessed: 5/18/09

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/apr95/7.html> accessed: 4/20/12.

man will be created in a shape and form corresponding to his intentions and deeds in the life of the world (*dunya*), and the judgment would be Allah's alone. This philosophy of the Real was compelling and legitimate in the old days of the 'Golden Ages' and this teaching is valid today, be it termed modernism or post-modernism, the times we live in,"<sup>6</sup> and it is going to remain so till the end of time no matter what the ever shifting manmade theories say. The major issue today should be living to the best of one's capacity and ability "as a true believer and as a Muslim in the (post-) modern world, walking the course of uncontaminated religion (Islam), honest and truthful, seeking Allah Almighty's Good Pleasure (*rada*) only."<sup>7</sup>

There is just no turning "back to the Middle Ages or to change back both the Orient and the Occident into some conventionally leaning religious society. But tracing the traditional tenets back to their metaphysical roots, and then trying to apply them"<sup>8</sup> once more with a new vigor examining every aspect of post modernism separately in this light is the most needed thing now. Man has certainly lost much more comparatively than what he has supposedly gained through the process of modernization. Liberty, independence, rule of law, human rights, freedom of speech, and healthcare are the oft quoted gains of humanity although they are accompanied by "negative individualism and consumerism for the 'fortunate few' in this world."<sup>9</sup>

Contemporary science or empiricism often estranged from religion is portrayed "as one of the main instruments of the abandonment of time-honored religions in the current world. From the 17th century onwards, the sanctified and the spiritual surrendered to a"<sup>10</sup> self-sufficient worldview deprived of any kind of divine intervention. In particular, the German and French philosophers, psychologists, and scholars gradually forced religion to give an explanation and to rationalize itself both as a social tradition as well as a compilation of basic items of faith about the world and its various functions. Consequently secularization as a philosophical agenda developed in the Western psyche leading "to the secularization of the community and its detachment from its spiritual issues."<sup>11</sup>

Affiliated queries about integrity, harmony, psychology, politics, etc., also played an essential role in this dilemma. The materialization of modern mentality and the predicament of post modernity, on the whole, is thus neither a local nor an isolated occurrence; it entails a complete theoretical modification. The exaggerated stress and reliance of post modernism on intellect, reason and sense has belittled the significance of morality and mysticism and disturbed the balance among the various aspects of human body (physical, corporal, intellectual, psychological, mental, emotional and spiritual, etc.) essential for the holistic growth and development of a man.

On the other hand, the royal rank of religion is in its pledge to search for the deepest and the highest achievable level of perception. The most intense human stimulus of the innate urge is to be able to appreciate the experience, to achieve a consistent and gratifying knowledge of the world, and connect science and theology both as attempts to discover and investigate distinct characteristics of everything tangible and unsubstantial. Both

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.livingislam.org/mmt\\_e.html](http://www.livingislam.org/mmt_e.html) accessed: 7/11/12.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.livingislam.org/mmt\\_e.html](http://www.livingislam.org/mmt_e.html) accessed: 7/11/12.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.livingislam.org/mmt\\_e.html](http://www.livingislam.org/mmt_e.html) accessed: 7/11/12.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.livingislam.org/mmt\\_e.html](http://www.livingislam.org/mmt_e.html) accessed: 7/11/12.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/apr95/7.htm> accessed: 4/20/12.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/apr95/7.htm> accessed: 4/20/12.

religion and science survey the world of experience from their own particular point of view. Consequently, areas of contact are probable between the two. However, once we become conscious that we do not have to agree to the metaphysical view of the world often connected “with science, the communication between human and the Divinely-revealed knowledge”<sup>12</sup> can be observed in a whole new perspective. This reciprocal interaction between the acquired and the revealed knowledge can be considered a prospective opening instead of a conflict. Besides, in any case both theology and science, though at different levels of achievement “in their awareness of the definitive reality and truth, are creatures of the same Creator. Therefore the most important responsibility of religious thought at present is the analysis and critique of the metaphysical basis of modern human sciences.”<sup>13</sup>

From the Islamic point of view, the predicament appears to be even more complicated. The present day Muslim world lacks self-confidence because of its weak socio-economic standing. The impact, tests and trials created by the rise of post modernity not only weaken Muslim intellectuals but also put them at a great risk. Thus an appropriate rejoinder and a suitable approach towards such a challenge are imperative. "Isolationism" today is neither feasible nor desirable because the speed and frequency of modern ways of communication has practically left us no place to hide.

Moreover Islam makes it an obligation for each one of us to manage a complete prudence which contains everything at its reasonable and appropriate place. The pursuit for a broader perspective of the world calls for taking into account every type of knowledge and fuse them all into one particular splendid system. To make Islam an essential “part of social and intellectual action and play the role it once did in the world history”<sup>14</sup>, preparations must be made to the best of our abilities to face the ever shifting circumstances of post modern life and thought head-on.

### **Deconstruction**

The analytical technique post structuralists use to analyze a text is called deconstruction. ‘Deconstruction can perhaps best be described as a theory of reading which aims to undermine the logic of opposition within texts.’<sup>15</sup> While deconstruction does not intend to discover the real meaning of a text it does involve two things, which are;

1. A consideration of what is missing from the text, and
2. Foregrounding in the text, the absent or the missing

The term 'deconstruction', means to see the way the essential message of the text is betrayed or destabilized by the 'accidental' attributes of a text. As a philosophy of meanings, deconstruction deals with the ways writers, texts, and/or readers construct meaning. “In linguistics, philosophy, and literary theory, it means exposing and undermining metaphysical assumptions involved in systematic attempts to ground knowledge, especially in academic disciplines.”<sup>16</sup> Deconstruction, a major theory associated with structuralism proposes that human logic has given some speculative and abstract opposites, set in an order in a transcript. For example, “the binary pairs of

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/apr95/7.htm> accessed: 4/20/12.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/apr95/7.htm> accessed: 4/20/12.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/apr95/7.htm> accessed: 4/20/12.

<sup>15</sup> David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 121.

<sup>16</sup> Hugh J. Silverman, Ed. *Continental Philosophy II; Derrida and Deconstruction* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1989), 57.

Enlightenment/Romantic, male/female, speech/writing, rational/emotional”<sup>17</sup>, signifier/signified, symbolic/imaginary, etc.

As a well-established but still controversial philosophical theory, deconstruction is aimed at the (re)reading of all theoretical works. In accepted practice, deconstruction depicts analytical taking apart of conventions and conventional approaches of thinking. Deconstruction considers every written work as “a complex, historical and cultural process rooted in texts’ relations to one another as well as in the institutions and conventions of writing.”<sup>18</sup> Broadly speaking, deconstruction is a sequence of strategies and a deposit of theoretical statements about words, their connotations, and reading texts. The verb “to deconstruct” is frequently employed as a synonym to criticize or show the discrepancy of a point in a text.

“As a school of philosophy Deconstruction made an enormous impact on Anglo-American criticism of literature, psychology and philosophy. It overturns the Western metaphysical tradition and represents a complex response to a variety of theoretical and philosophical movements of the 20th century, e.g. Husserlian phenomenology, Saussurean and French structuralism, and Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis.”<sup>19</sup>

Jacques Derrida coined the term deconstruction in the 1960s by building up on Ferdinand de Saussure’s claim of ‘arbitrariness of verbal signs’<sup>20</sup>. In his book *Of Grammatology* (1967), he applied “Martin Heidegger’s concept of Destruktion or Abbau, to textual reading”<sup>21</sup> referring to “a process of exploring the categories and concepts that tradition has imposed on a word, and the history behind them.”<sup>22</sup>

Deconstructive arguments and techniques are also related with other theories like pragmatism, feminism or critical theory. Being an offshoot of post structuralism, deconstruction is not only a meta-language itself but also an expositor of all languages and discourses. The only way to correctly understand meanings requires deconstructing the hypotheses and systems of information which create the misapprehension of an odd meaning. This deconstructive operation can turn a male into a female, change speech to writing, and convert rational into emotional.

Deconstruction investigates the basics of Western thought but neither to eliminate their inconsistencies and paradoxes nor to break away from the demands of the traditional nor to set up its own system. Derrida described deconstruction as “an unclosed, unenclosable, not wholly formalizable ensemble of rules for reading, interpretation and writing.”<sup>23</sup>

Criticism of the Enlightenment, of literature and of metaphysics, especially the original writings of Plato, Rousseau, and Husserl is the central concern of deconstruction without making any of these works pointless. To a certain extent, deconstruction shows these classics to be teeming with manifold and at times incompatible connotations. Furthermore, deconstruction does not assert that conceptions are limitless; it simply states that concepts can be interpreted in diverse ways by putting them into innovative perspectives. Deconstructive analyses confirm that certain peculiarities and

<sup>17</sup> J. A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 59.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (London: Routledge, 1994), 49.

<sup>19</sup> *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 329.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/155306/deconstruction> accessed: 5/3/2012.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time, Introduction, Part II*. 5.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 40.

[http://lrd.yahooapis.com/\\_=11geg11gv/http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Seferin](http://lrd.yahooapis.com/_=11geg11gv/http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Seferin)

disagreements do not have any normative consistency opening conceptual oppositions to reinterpretation in which the two terms have at the same time “conceptual dependence or similarity as well as conceptual difference or distinction.”<sup>24</sup>

Deconstructive argument explores the ways ‘this similarity or difference’ is concealed or disregarded, and lays emphasis on the significance of the situation in pronouncing a decision besides studying the ideological effects of the use of conceptual oppositions. It sees whether their disguised or suppressed instability lends unnecessary plausibility to legal, philosophical, religious and literary arguments and doctrines. “Rarely has a critical theory attracted the sort of dread and hysteria that deconstruction has incited since its inception in 1967.”<sup>25</sup>

As a special type of exercise in reading, a technique of analysis and a form of critical investigation, Barbara Johnson explains the term in her book, *The Critical Difference* (1981): “Deconstruction is not synonymous with 'destruction', however. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word 'analysis' itself, which etymologically means 'to undo' -- a virtual synonym for 'to de-construct.'”

“If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. It is a reading which analyses the specificity of a text's critical difference from itself.”<sup>26</sup>

Derrida’s philosophy criticizes structuralism also. Therefore Derrida states that:

“the motif of deconstruction has been associated with poststructuralism although it was a word unknown in France until its “return” from the United States.”<sup>27</sup>

In fact, Derrida is in favor of the corruption of the unpolluted “origins by the structures of language and temporality. Manfred Frank has even referred to Derrida's work as Neostructuralism”<sup>28</sup> which contained his initial apprehensions about the structure of the texts. Indeed, deconstruction is tied up with both structuralism and anti-structuralism, something which Derrida terms “structural problematic.” He considers his first use of the word deconstruction during the peak of “structuralism an “anti-structuralist gesture” because “Structures were to be undone, decomposed, desedimented.” He thinks that both Genesis and Structure are necessary forms of explanation and the difficulty to reconcile the two is the tension of the structural problematic. Therefore:

“some objects need to be described in terms of structure while others in genesis,”<sup>29</sup> structural problematic is that “beneath the serene use of these concepts [genesis and structure] is to be found a debate that...makes new reductions and explications indefinitely necessary.”<sup>30</sup>

In the Western philosophical tradition, deconstruction identifies and targets a:

“metaphysics of presence”, logocentrism or phallogocentrism which holds that speech-thought (the logos) is a privileged, ideal, and self-present entity, through which all discourse and meaning are derived.”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Jack M. Balkin, "Deconstruction", *A Companion to Philosophy of Law and Legal Theory*, ed. Dennis Patterson 2<sup>nd</sup>. Ed. (UK: Wiley- Blackwell, 2010), 117

<sup>25</sup>David Macey, *The Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 464.

<sup>26</sup>Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference* (USA: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 121.

<sup>27</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation With Jacques Derrida* Ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 3.

<sup>28</sup>M. Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?* trans. S. Wilke & R. Gray. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 211.

<sup>29</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 19.

<sup>30</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 53.

Martin Heidegger on philosophy as the mission of destroying ontological conceptions including commonplace implications of terms like time, history, being, theory, death, mind, body, matter, logic, etc.:

“When tradition becomes master it 'transmits' is made so inaccessible, proximally and for the most part, that it rather becomes concealed. Tradition takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence; it blocks our access to those primordial 'sources' from which the categories and concepts handed down to us have been in part quite genuinely drawn. Indeed it makes us forget that they have had such an origin, and makes us suppose that the necessity of going back to these sources is something which we need not even understand”.<sup>32</sup>

Heidegger believes that custom can become calcified:

“If the question of Being is to have its own history made transparent, then this hardened tradition must be loosened up, and the concealments which it has brought about dissolved. We understand this task as one in which by taking the question of Being as our clue we are to destroy the traditional content of ancient ontology until we arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being—the ways which have guided us ever since”.<sup>33</sup>

In Europe, deconstruction being a reaction to structuralism is considered a poststructuralist philosophy. Deemphasizing the subjects' autonomy in determining cultural meanings, structuralists claimed that linguistic structures shaped personal thinking thus breaking up the subject matter into superior powers of civilization. Deconstruction hits at the so called unwavering, universal, or ahistorical assumptions about structures of meaning. Like other communal philosophies which try to diminish individual contemplation and achievement to enrich constructs, deconstruction is also thought to be an antihumanist theory, especially in the United States where its thoroughly subjectivist assertion makes transcripts signify anything an individual desires them to represent.

### **Dr. Mohammed Arkoun**

French-Algerian researcher and philosopher of Berber origin, Professor Mohammed Arkoun (1928--2010) is a very significant secular scholar in Islamic studies supplementing modern rational Islamic restructuring. For some 30 years, he remained a reviewer of the concerns about Islam and Islamology, supporting Islamic modernism, as well as promoting secularism, and humanism.

Primarily taken as either an Islamist intellectual or an all-too-liberal detractor of the Muslim way of life, Mohammed Arkoun gradually got a standing among the most important contemporary scholars of the Islamic world. German, Middle Eastern, and the Arab world mostly disregarded or questioned Mohammed Arkoun's stimulating views and theories on contemporary Islamic culture till Hashem Saleh translated his French works.

Arkoun uses the tools and methodologies of history, sociology, psychology and anthropology to critically assess different belief-systems, traditions of exegesis, theology and jurisprudence to liberate reason from dogmatic constructs. Arkoun explores the epistemological options underlying different discourses, development of facts, events, ideas, beliefs, performances, institutions, works of art and individual biographies based

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<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 57.

<sup>32</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 43.

<sup>33</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 44.



on reliable archives. Considering Islam as both a religion and a time-honored tradition of thought, Arkoun attempts to surmount the restrictions of a purely descriptive and chronological handling of history by advocating a critical analysis of the entire Muslim thought, from the Qur'anic worldview to the variety of contemporary discourses.

### **Arkoun and Deconstruction**

The elaborative study Arkoun offers is somewhat different from the other Islamic scholars' work. Influenced by structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction with their emphasis on linguistic analyses, Arkoun tries to 'reemphasize the marginalized meaning', the hidden or the forgotten or the ones contaminated by external factors because of the numerous coverings and freezing processes Islamic thinking has gone through. Nonetheless, Arkoun believes that a "reconstruction" of a discourse should follow deconstruction after that discourse has been made free of the limitations, freezings, and the distortions covering it.

Insisting on a transcendental signifier of the oral language, Arkoun relates the move from verbal to written form of language as a shift from the language of the Prophet SAW into a teaching discourse in the restricted circumstances of human condition open to a variety of contexts. An inflexible perception with an inclination towards a closed interpretation rejecting other interpretations explained and classified the Prophet's SAW teaching discourse. Consequently, "a "text" into "pretext" (arguments), simply repeated frequently without much thinking contributed to the validation of a certain group authority."<sup>34</sup>

Asking to be critical on traditional Islamic reasoning models and opening up the holy texts of Islam for the historical and modern linguistic investigations, Arkoun suggested to the Islamic intellectuals to deconstruct past thinking as well as the classical interpretations of the holy texts. He employed the deconstruction method to reconstruct scientific traditions of classical Islam believing that without stimulus and the discipline of openness of the standards of modern Western research, the standard of Islamic knowledge cannot come upto the mark in the eyes of traditional Islamic experts, the orientalist and the world at large.

By means of his critical approach, Arkoun explained that two trends authorizing the history of Islamic thought were the tendency to make the text and the tradition sacred and the tendency to uncover the sacredness of it. An interaction between universalism and pluralism is required for an updated Islamic thinking. The crises of religious institutions strongly indicate that religion must be authoritative and original, not lost and distorted by the historical processes at work over the centuries to liberate it. The conversion of religion into an "hierarchical" institution where the authorized was an "authority" having the right to speak about the truth on behalf of the "absolute authority", whether God, the authoritative or others resulted in limiting multi-interpretations.<sup>35</sup>

Apart from the official interpretation legalized by the authorized institution, the truth of the other interpretations is made impossible to recognize. The Holy Book formerly opened to multi-interpretations became one single interpretation (monophonic exegesis)

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<sup>34</sup> [http://journal.ui.ac.id/upload/artikel/04\\_Siti%20Rohmah%20-%20Revisi.pdf](http://journal.ui.ac.id/upload/artikel/04_Siti%20Rohmah%20-%20Revisi.pdf) accessed: 2/14/11.

<sup>35</sup> [http://journal.ui.ac.id/upload/artikel/04\\_Siti%20Rohmah%20-%20Revisi.pdf](http://journal.ui.ac.id/upload/artikel/04_Siti%20Rohmah%20-%20Revisi.pdf) accessed: 2/14/11.

which gave rise to an inquisition institution (*mihnah*) in al-Makmun era in Islam and in Reformation era in Christianity.<sup>36</sup>

When a religion becomes an institution monopolized by a certain authority, it loses its nature as a liberal religion. Getting a new and fresh continuous interpretation to keep it open to the changing time and progress becomes extremely difficult, making the whole society stagnant. The domination of a particular religious discourse produces an hierarchical structure, placing the dominant in the “central” position and the other(s) in the “marginal” (periphery) position excluding certain religious discourses, or conquering, subordinating and repressing them.<sup>37</sup>

The strategy required to reinterpret this hierarchical interpretation structure in the over institutionalized religious processes and to delegitimize the “central”, “origin” and “primary” claims of the dominant discourse is the deconstruction method.

Arkoun declared that using Derrida’s deconstruction strategy in a complementary manner in religious discourses can form a new perspective to study Islam and its discourses critically through historical inquiry on religious practices indirectly as well as socially to expose a working area of power relation. Besides, the practical aspect of this perspective yields to the “historical ontology” in the field of power relation, mainly to be a part of the struggle of converting repressive types of power relation into positive ones.

To apply deconstruction strategy to a religious text, Arkoun suggests to

1. “separate the mono linear relationship between the text and the meaning (the interpretation)
2. uncover the belief of the existence of a final relationship between the text and the meaning
3. open the possibility for a wide range of interpretations of the text
4. discover the layers of knowledge covered by orthodoxies and
5. distinguish between the important and the unimportant”<sup>38</sup>

Another sociological consequence of deconstruction of a text is uncovering interpretation monopoly on a certain authority which talks about “one truth” in the name of God, state or the ruler. Believing a certain authority also means assuming “The Transcendence I”<sup>39</sup> which, if put aside can make way for many different possibilities of interpretations making it democratic and no longer a monopoly of any one patronized interpretation.

Arkoun deconstructed “the transcendence I” through the concept of the “logos historicity”. When the one authority loses its support, a plurality of interpretation alternatives emerges. Thus deprived of the supremacy of a certain interpretation, the text becomes alive and open to all sorts of interpretations as “the freezing of a text” in both religion and ideology gives birth to all kinds of other frozen thinking in a society.

<sup>36</sup> S. R. S. danUlil-Abshor-AbdallaHerdi, “*Demolishing the Hegemony of Islamic Interpretation, Reviving the Texts*”, dalam Journal Ulumul Qur’an No. 3, Vol. V, 1994, 84-85.

<sup>37</sup> R. H. Alam, “*Perspective of Post-Modernism in Religious Studies*”, dalam Journal Ulumul Qur’an No. 1, Vol. V, 1994, 33.

<sup>38</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *Al-Fikr al-Islami: Qiraat al-Ilmiyyah*, translation HashimShaleh. (Beirut: Markaz al-Inma’ al-Qaumi, 1987), 29.

<sup>39</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, “*Towards the New Approach of Islam*”, dalam Journal Ulumul Qur’an No. 7 Vol. II 1990/1411 H October-December 1990, Jakarta: LSAF.

Opening up discourses on the religious texts democratically results in quite an analytical, plural and dynamic religious life for the humanity.<sup>40</sup>

This approach is distinct from analysis by a good number of Islamicists and political scientists. Instead of paying attention to Islam's undeniable precision as a hierarchical power, a type of fiend enduring for centuries and controlling the destiny of all those embracing the religion, it focuses entirely on "Islam". This structure makes it possible for the Islamicists to investigate the powers compelling the leading roles "at all levels of the society e.g. social classes and groups, the privileged versus the less fortunate, as well as intra-group arguments arising in the social as well as political spheres".<sup>41</sup>

Thus the intellectual is concurrently liberated from the constricted ideological ties intrinsic in the selection of studying a civilization internationally through the literature generated and amended "by an elite group or to restrict one's research to an in-depth study of a particular ethnocultural group cut off from the larger socio-historical"<sup>42</sup> procedure. Regrettably, historical and anthropological studies endeavoring to deal with the weak points and threats innate in both these approaches are still rare.

Arkoun tries to harmonize tradition and modernity through a new method. Several commentators from among the orientalist as well as Islamic scholars of the Quran use an historical and linguistic critique, e.g. the internationally renowned Islamic studies scholar and an expert on Quranic exegesis, Jane Dammen McAuliffe's "*Quranic Hermeneutic: The views of Al-Tabari and IbnKatsir*" emphasizes interpretation method and social horizon. Contemporary Muslim intellectual Dr. Fazlur Rahman talked about it with the 'double movement interpretation', whereas Arkoun did it 'with his circle of language-history thinking'. Arkoun declares that the 'integrated interpretation connects language and thinking with their historical aspect'. The first stage of this hermeneutical interpretation is to make a distinction between the real and the counterfeit and confirm the first original text as well as the hermeneutical text. Intending to bring Islamic thought into 'Quranique' discourse, Arkoun wants to keep all of it open to various readings as well as open for different understandings at the same time.<sup>43</sup>

Islamic thinking in various kinds of literatures as a second text or hermeneutical text enveloping the first text or the first event of the Quran is the major obstacle in Arkoun's project besides getting in the way of understanding the Quran as it is.<sup>44</sup> Arkoun overcame this problem by using Derrida's "deconstruction" process or "uncovering" as well as the archaeological analysis utilized to study 'historical artifacts'. During this 'historical clarification on hermeneutical texts from certain thinking tradition', Arkoun attempted to 'clarify and clean the "dust" of space and time covering them so that the relation between texts from particular historical stages, social contexts, generations and the various thinking movements in the same historical time becomes evident'.<sup>45</sup>

Arkoun showed the inseparable relation between thinking and history, and between thinking and language. Every Islamic thought not only reflected the vibrant efforts of the socio-historical reality, but was also 'formulated, conceptualized and spoken in a certain

<sup>40</sup> [http://journal.ui.ac.id/upload/artikel/04\\_Siti%20Rohmah%20-%20Revisi.pdf](http://journal.ui.ac.id/upload/artikel/04_Siti%20Rohmah%20-%20Revisi.pdf) accessed: 2/14/11.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Young, "Poststructuralism: An Introduction", 13.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Young, "Poststructuralism: An Introduction", 17.

<sup>43</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *Arab Thought*, ed. S.Chand, (New Delhi: OUP, 1988), 25-40.

<sup>44</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *Al-Fikr al-Islamy: Naqdwa al-Ijtihad*. Translation HasyimShali .(London: Dar as-Saqi, 1990), 232.

<sup>45</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *Al-Fikr al-Islamy: Naqdwa al-Ijtihad*, 233-234.

“language”. Arkoun gave an example of “managing” the Quran with the hermeneutic apparatus focusing on three aspects: text, context and contextualization in a continued circle while investigating and at the same time “reproducing” meaning.<sup>46</sup>

He argued that a connection among language, thinking and history must be established and both Islamic and religious societies should be completely alert to this dialectical relation. He maintains that the holy Quran is ‘words, language, cultural and religious phenomena’ arising from its own conditions, and circumstances: therefore, it cannot produce meaning out of its context creating a structuralized awareness.<sup>47</sup>

In 2002, in a discussion program on TV with Mary-Jane Deeb, the Arab world area specialist, and Bernard Lewis, a prominent contemporary Orientalist, Arkoun stated that:

"An anthropological triangle" that includes a disintegration of the Muslim tradition of thought, the use of the Koran as a tool for a liberation struggle and the use of religion by governments as a means of legitimizing their power. Those three elements together have led to today's violence in the Muslim world." Islam must be brought back as a tradition of thinking," a tradition that emerged over a thousand years ago in the "Mediterranean space."<sup>48</sup>

Later prompted by his constant commitment with inter-religious discourses as well as his disappointment at the rueful, or exceedingly courteous and deferential approaches governing such conferences, Arkoun broadened his attention to wide-ranging religious phenomena. Lamenting the lack of a critical theology to employ ‘religious reason’ transparently and rigorously, Arkoun put forward the concept of ‘emerging reason’. The positive characteristic of the use of religion lies in the probability of a constant critical appraisal of the three ‘postures of human thought’, i.e.

- i. the religious stance with its theological, ethical and juridical forms of thinking;
- ii. the scientific-technological styles of thinking directing the current globalization discourse; and
- iii. the rationalist or empiricist philosophical stances still locked in the assumptions of the modernity of the classical age.

This emerging reason can help us find a ‘comparative history of the theologies’ of the three Abrahamic religions, giving the opportunity to the whole field of human, social, and even accurate sciences to theology.<sup>49</sup>

Arkoun maintained that ‘reconstruction’ of a discourse must follow every ‘deconstruction’. Leaving the constraints and the inflexibility of the past, he suggests two ways for reform, i.e., ‘ijtihād’ and Islamic critical reason. According to Arkoun, the acceptance of Islamic philosophical tradition and the Arab-Muslim thought without critical analysis resulted in an inert, rigid, and dogmatic Islamic fundamentalism. He employs approaches and techniques used in social sciences as well as postmodernist concepts.

<sup>46</sup> [http://journal.ui.ac.id/upload/artikel/04\\_Siti%20Rohmah%20-%20Revisi.pdf](http://journal.ui.ac.id/upload/artikel/04_Siti%20Rohmah%20-%20Revisi.pdf) accessed: 2/14/11.

<sup>47</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *Al-Fikr al-Islamy: Naqdwa al-Ijtihad*, 185-186.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Jane Deeb’s discussion program *What Went Wrong ... And Why?* with Bernard Lewis, Emeritus Professor at Princeton University and Mohamed Arkoun, Emeritus Professor at the Sorbonne, Paris, in *Library of Congress Bulletin, Library's African and Middle Eastern Division and Office of Scholarly Programs*, May 2002.

<sup>49</sup> *From Braudel to Derrida: Mohammed Arkoun's Rethinking of Islam and Religion*, in *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 4:1 (2011) 23-43.

“Arkoun’s epistemological and methodological fundamentals borrowed from Descartes’ Rationalism and Kant’s Criticism, Saussure’s Structuralism, Barthes, Hjelmslev, and Greimas’ Semiotics and “the Paris school”, Paul Ricoeur’s myth concept, Michel Foucault’s discourse and episteme and Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction combined the most divine of Islamic thought (Islamic Reason) and the most important in the modern western thinking (modern thought).”<sup>50</sup>

Arkoun modified Foucault’s ideas of episteme, discourse and archeology by splitting up the development of Arab-Islam thought into three historical phases, i.e.,

“classical, scholastic, and modern. Although he did not take over all Foucault’s philosophical views, the term got the specific meaning from him and often used in his writings.”<sup>51</sup>

In his books *Various Readings of the Qurān*, 2nd ed., 1991 and *A Critique of Islamic Reason*, 1998.

“The following issues demonstrate the position:

1. The Qurānic phenomenon and the historical experience of Medina;
2. *jāhiliyah* (ignorance), *ilm* (knowledge), and Islām as anthropological paradigms;
3. the generations of the companions of the Prophet SAW and the succeeding generations (the Saābah and tabiūn) as symbolic figures of mythical memory;
4. living tradition, ethnographic traditions, and traditionalization as an ideological strategy;
5. authority, power, and the search for legitimacy;
6. violence, sacredness, and truth in religious discourses and collective practice;
7. oblivion, elimination, and repression as dimensions of cultural and intellectual history; and
8. orthodoxy as an ideological process”<sup>52</sup>

In another discussion of Islam with Beverly Gray, chief of the Asian and Middle Eastern Division, Mary-Jane Deeb, Arab world area specialist and Charlynn Spencer Pyne, Arkoun informed that “it is important to review first of all the concepts of Islam and the West”. He recommended that “scholars must write a “relative history” of the post-World War II era”. He argued that “Sept. 11 incidents are an element of a sequence of disasters ingrained in the post war history of the Arab world. For instance the war of autonomy in Algeria (1954-1962), created the way Muslims used religion not as a structure of belief and thought, but as an ideology of dissent and conflict”. He upheld that “Algeria still paid the penalty for the politicization of religion”.

Arkoun suggested that “the existing “anthropological triangle” of the three elements that have collectively directed today’s violent behavior in the Muslim world includes dissolution of the Muslim ritual of thought, using the Koran as a contrivance for emancipation efforts and using religion by governments as a way of legalizing their authority”.

“Islam must be brought back as a tradition of thinking, a tradition that emerged over a thousand years ago in the “Mediterranean space.” Islam is a part of the Greco-Roman, Judaeo-Christian traditions that emerged on the shores of the Mediterranean. Muslim scholars revived the works of

<sup>50</sup> Siti Rohmah Soekarba, “The Critique of Arab Thought: Mohammed Arkoun’s Deconstruction Method,” *Makara, SosialHumaniora*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Desember 2006: 79-87, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Indonesia, Depok 16424, Indonesia.

<sup>51</sup> [http://journal.ui.ac.id/upload/artikel/04\\_Siti%20Rohmah%20-%20Revisi.pdf](http://journal.ui.ac.id/upload/artikel/04_Siti%20Rohmah%20-%20Revisi.pdf) accessed: 2/4/11.

<sup>52</sup> [http://ird.yahooapis.com/\\_ylc=X3o](http://ird.yahooapis.com/_ylc=X3o) <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0395> accessed: 5/18/09.

the Greek philosophers by translating and teaching the works of Aristotle and Plato, and thus contributed to the European Renaissance."<sup>53</sup>

Arkoun also argues that, a lot of books on "Islamic fundamentalists" shed no light whatsoever on Islam but lead people to think that violence is inherent in Islam. People who believe that theirs is the only "true religion" often resort to violence against people who hold different beliefs".

During a meeting with members of US Congress on Oct. 11, Professor Arkoun discussed the use of Islam as a political instrument and some of the causes behind the rise of Islamic militant movements in the Middle East and North Africa. Arkoun also met with members of Scholars' Council of the Library, during its first meeting to advise Dr. Billington on future appointments for five senior chair positions at the John W. Kluge Center of the Library. In reply to a question by the Librarian, "What is the one thing you want Americans to know about Islam?" Arkoun responded that "Islam is a part of the monotheistic tradition of the divine. And the knowledge that all three monotheistic traditions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) were born in the Near East should prevent us from conceptually separating Islam from the Western tradition of thought".

Bronislaw Geremek a member of the Scholars' Council, an ex- foreign minister of Poland and a scholar of medieval European history at the College de France, asked: "If there is no contempt for human life in the Koran, then why do Muslims seem to value life so little?" Professor Arkoun replied that,

"In all religions and civilizations there is a separation between those who belong to the orthodox tradition and those who are outside it. Although the Spanish Inquisitors valued the lives of Catholics as a whole, they did not value the lives of either those Catholics they deemed heretics or of those who belonged to other religious groups. Even Aristotle, who upheld the principles of democracy in ancient Greece, accepted the concept of slavery for a conquered people".<sup>54</sup>

Professor Arkoun in a shared presentation with Mary-Jane Deeb on "The Use and Misuse of Religious Concepts: War and Jihad in Islam" discussed the way

"the corpus of religious tradition" "we have today was transformed over time. The divine logos (the word of God) was transmitted to the Prophet Muhammad SAW and collected into a volume known as the Koran, only after his death. The Koran was not arranged in any chronological order and lacked the basic vowels and diacritical marks that were added later. The hadith, or the Prophet's SAW sayings, which is part of the body of religious materials that make up the Muslim tradition, also were collected and selected after Muhammad's SAW death. Thus, the basic texts in Islam were affected by the people who worked to put them together. In other words, an interpretation of sacred texts took place from the very start of Islam and continued for several centuries".<sup>55</sup>

Afterwards Arkoun argued,

"the realm of interpretation (or ijthad) was closed. Official bodies such as states decided that those texts would no longer be interpreted. Yet, those interpretations continued because, Islam is theologically Protestant and politically Catholic, meaning that while Islam can be interpreted by

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<sup>53</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, Critique of The Islamic Reason, 133.

<sup>54</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, "The Use and Misuse of Religious Concepts: War and Jihad in Islam", a discussion with Bronislaw Geremek. Vol. 60 No. 11, Library of Congress Information Bulletin, November, 2001.

<sup>55</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, a shared presentation with Mary-Jane Deeb on "The Use and Misuse of Religious Concepts: War and Jihad in Islam", October 12, 2001. Library of Congress Information Bulletin.

every person who reads the Koran, the state has put a stop to such interpretations and allowed only one version to be taught and disseminated".<sup>56</sup>

### A Critique of Mohammed Arkoun

For most part of his life Europe and the West was Arkoun's permanent residence as well as a place of education and work and French was his second language after his Berber mother tongue and Arabic the first one. Thus his thinking, feelings and mind were profoundly influenced by Western thought and culture. In an attempt to win acceptance and authenticity, he seems to side with both the Orient and Orientalism. On the one hand, he becomes a voice of Muslim protestations against the prejudices of Western thought and research. While on the other, he accuses the Orient of similar unfairness. He charges both of having an unjust attachment to the so called universal truths and neglecting history. The so called 'Islamic' dimension of Arkoun's thought appears self-consciously cautious, obscured and subjugated by the supremacy of the Western discourse. Besides, his epistemological expertise seems to humiliate the traditional and the established work of the Islamic scholars without much reason and rhyme.

Despite being a Muslim scholar, Arkoun seeks the help of non-Muslims and non-historians to reassess 'the relationship of Islamic thought to text, language, groups, power, time, and place to discover "positivities" that could emphasize an "objective" understanding of the "totality" of the Islamic tradition.' His project of thinking 'the unthinkable and the unthought' aims to abolish all the 'positivities' of traditional thought, necessitating a deconstruction unto nothingness.

Arkoun also uses this allegiance to 'scientific scholarship and empirical investigation' as a platform to censure the Islamic tradition. For him, understanding Islam requires to analyse the way the 'Qur'anic fact' was transcendentalized, or acknowledged as a basis for Divine Law and declared a universal truth. He questions the reason behind the final acceptance of these interpretations of the Revelation and discarding of all the alternative understandings. Arkoun concludes that the state/government has always done its best to reduce the Quranic interpretations to a single set of symbols not only to legitimize its political power but also to enforce the unity and uniformity of Islam.

Arkoun's stance on the history of Islam is to unearth the unthought from the logosphere and investigate the 'border situations' of the ethnically mixed surroundings of the Mediterranean, Arkoun also shares Hanafi's aspiration of applying these discoveries to the inquiry of the 'religious phenomenon' in general and thus add to anthropology of religion.

Guided by history and methodology, instead of faith, Arkoun's radical research wants to get rid of all the Islamic tradition as well as inherited sacred and transcendental structures and to re-cast them in the mould of modern social sciences. More concerned with the questions of methodology and epistemology, Arkoun wants authenticity for new foundations in the 'reconstructed collective memory of the community'. That forces his colleague and translator Robert D. Lee to conclude that;

"There reverberates through Arkoun's work an underlying faith in the truth-producing capacities - if not at this stage, then at the next - of modern social science."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, interview after a presentation with Mary-Jane Deeb on "*The Use and Misuse of Religious Concepts: War and Jihad in Islam*", October 12, 2001. Library of Congress Information Bulletin.

<sup>57</sup>Robert D. Lee, *Overseeing Tradition and Modernity* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1977), 59.

This commitment of Arkoun to a modernist concept of truth weakens his own historicising scholarship that relies greatly on the postmodernist technique of deconstruction. And for this even Arkoun's translator, Hashim Salih also criticizes him in an insightful and harsh way:

"Science has usually meant externality and abstraction, and modern social science has dedicated itself to rendering external - hence, comprehensible at a different time and place - that which is initially internal and time-bound. Arkoun calls upon social science to understand l'iminaire - that sedimentation of consciousness and conviction that governs so much behavior in any society - and to achieve, if possible ... a direct and totalizing reading of the real."<sup>58</sup>

In fact, science, itself erected on transhistoric procedures and axioms, is equally vulnerable to critical examination of the historicist sort. Despite all his methodological sophistication and familiarity with the traditional and modern thought, Arkoun seems to be either naïve of the problem of relativism linked with historicism, or he simply pretends to take a deceitful facade by the following disclaimer: "There is no such thing as an innocent discourse or innocent method."<sup>59</sup>

Working from a particular perspective in history Arkoun's 'method' is also vulnerable to the decaying solvent of historicism. Thus, both Arkoun's 'epistemology' and historicising consciousness of modernity and postmodernity have a deadlock in common between them. After overthrowing the transcendent, Islamic subject, Arkoun's epistemological search simply fails to find any normative thought in the radical historicism. Thus Arkoun seems to be infatuated with his own opinion.<sup>60</sup>

French philosophy's great impact on Arkoun's writings results in particular in his application of Michel Foucault's thinking to study the Islamic legal and philosophical traditions. He believes that the study of Islam should be freed from the monopoly of conservative interpretation of Islam exercised by the state-sponsored clerical establishment. Calling for an "audacious, free, and productive" thinking Arkoun favors multiple interpretations of the tradition and the text, and strongly proposes multiculturalism and secularism, albeit without using the Arabic word '*ilmaniyya*'/unbelief.

In Fall 2003, Arkoun represented Muslims along with the sociologist, Hanifa Cherifi in the twenty-person presidential Stasi Commission appointed by the French president Jacques Chirac to propose steps to protect the non-religious against the growing presence of religious symbols in public schools and buildings. The commission's recommendation of banning wearing any conspicuous religious symbol in public schools and buildings came under attack in Muslim countries, and Arkoun was accused for failing to defend the Islamic stance on the issue.

Methodology seems to be Arkoun's major concern. He not only questions the authenticity of the Quran but also its claim of the truth. Deducing from the discursive models of post modernism, he is determined to discover an interpretative mechanism that would not only sort out the historicity of the Quran but also augment the history of ideas by producing a better understanding of the Quran. Arkoun's critical discourse on the historicity of the Revelation is the most radical among the contemporary Muslim

<sup>58</sup>Hashim Saleh, Annotation and Commentary on Arkoun's *sal Fikr al UsuliwaIshthahat Al Ta Sil: NahwaTarikhinAkhar Li Al Fikr Al Islami*, (Beirut: Markaz al Inma al Qawmi, 1996), 65.

<sup>59</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 77.

<sup>60</sup> Dr. S. Parvez Manzoor, Responding to Professor Arkoun, <http://www.answers.com/topic/mohammed-arkoun#ixzz2M4VoGIGc> accessed: 2/1/ 2013.



thinkers. Putting the Quran at par with other religions' Holy Scriptures as the heritage of the whole humanity, he considers the historical method an integral part of the unthought in Islamic scholarship. He declares that such an exercise already being an ingredient of 'ijtihadic' activities to shake the conventional mode of thinking will not harm the Quran in any way.<sup>61</sup>

Arkoun works on the incident of revelation from a general point of view. The theory of interpretation of the Quran he puts forward poses two key hermeneutical questions. The first is the ontological one asking what makes up the Quran or what needs to be interpreted. And the second one is the methodological one seeking how to go about that task.

Similarly, regarding the prophets of God, Arkoun compares their advent into the world to the "production of great men in history".<sup>62</sup> He considers the psycho-social impulses the prophets used to organize and motivate their nations more important than the spirit and substance of their message. Dissociating the heroism, charisma and holiness from the prophetic eras, he attempts to make God inactive in history so that he could not only evade the obligation of submission to its demand but also retain the autonomy of human reason. That is why he propagates that prophets carried no criterion from heaven to make people practice and repeat infinitely but came only to "propose meanings for existence", which certainly are open to modification and revision within the structure of the promise of reason granted to man. In this context, Arkoun makes the mistake of quoting the example of naskh/abrogation to support his notion of subjectivity of meaning in history.<sup>63</sup>

In his attempt to reduce the effect of the Divine Revelation as well as the role of God's prophets in shaping the destiny of mankind, Arkoun puts their great and awe-inspiring impact down to his concept of 'the debt of meaning' towards God's message, His messengers and the noble, pious people who followed them in all ages and times. Thus all three are converted into major and respected sources of inspiration in addition to the moral recognition of being in debt to their great work of reforming the decaying community.<sup>64</sup> However, contrary to Arkoun's belief that the prophetic model was valid only within an episteme that prefers myth to history, spirituality to positivism and imagination to rationality, Muslims all over the world have persistently considered the occurrence and accomplishments of the Prophet Muhammad SAW in the highest esteem with the conviction that following in his footsteps will result in progress and prosperity while turning away from his traditions will worsen their condition.

Contradicting himself, Arkoun acknowledges at a place while giving a description of the phenomenon of revelation that:

"Revelation is a speech directed towards action and application. It actively and continuously influences human history because it proffers practical solutions to the ultimate concerns of human condition. By 'the ultimate concerns' we mean life, death, justice, love, legitimate authority (or veneration), unjust authority, social relations, transcendence, etc. The Quran fulfils all the needs and fills these functions in the best manner. It has spread amidst different strata and various

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<sup>61</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, "The Heritage: Its Content and Identity- Its Positive And Negative Characteristics", In *Al Turath WaTahaddiyat Al Asr Fi Al Wastan Al Arabi*, 2nd Ed. (Beruit: MarkazDirasat Al Wahdah Al Arabiyyah, 1987), 176.

<sup>62</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *TheUnthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 117.

<sup>63</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *TheUnthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 118.

<sup>64</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, "Present Day Islam between Its Tradition and Globalization", In *Intellectual Tradition in Islam*, Ed. Farhand Daftary (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 192.

communities where it demonstrated the soundness of its solutions and ideal model, its strong argumentation against spurious values, tyrannical authorities and wrong conducts.”<sup>65</sup>

Arkoun opines that the Quran re-establishes opposing ancient symbols with an alternative system, whereas positivist rationalism criticizes all kinds of symbols and myths substituting them with scientific concepts. That is another reason he gives for the impossibility of returning to the prophetic time and model. Consequently, he believes that secularization of the prophetic message is unavoidable.

Arkoun divides Divine Revelation into two levels. According to him, the first level is the Archetype of the Books referred to as *Ummul Kitab* in the Quran<sup>66</sup> while the second level is its ‘worldly editions’ including the Bible, the Quran, etc. On its first level, the eternal and timeless revelation/*Ummul Kitab*/The Heavenly Book holds the ultimate truth albeit beyond human reach, safe in the ‘preserved tablet’ with God alone. Human beings know of it only through its second level which often went through several modifications, revisions and substitutions.

“Then the heavenly Book is accessible to the believers *only* through the *written* version of the books or scriptures.... This second aspect of the Book is then submitted to all the constraints of arbitrary historicity.”<sup>67</sup>

which in turn relativised and molded the truth in the Quran. According to Arkoun, modern historicists hold the responsibility of uncovering the historicity of the sacredness of the Quranic events so as to “historicise what has been systematically dehistoricised.”<sup>68</sup>

The three sets of rules of reading/interpreting the Quran Arkoun suggests are:

1. The Historical Anthropological Interpretation
2. The Linguistic-Semiotic and Literary Interpretation
3. The Theological-Exegetic or Religious Interpretation

By the Historical Anthropological Interpretation, Arkoun means to relate the Quran to its background in the 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabian Peninsula. The well established fact about revelation is that the Quran was first sent down orally and throughout the life time of the Prophet SAW it was not compiled in a book form although it was written down in scratches and the whole of it was recited and memorized by a large majority of Muslims. Arkoun however, has a very different history to tell. He divides the history of the Quran again into two periods; the formative period of revelation when the Quran was disseminated orally in Makkah and Medina and the later period of collection, and fixation expanding from the time of the Prophet’s SAW death to the 4/10<sup>th</sup> century till the complete compilation of the Quran. Arkoun refers to the Quran in its first period as “the Quranic Discourse” and “the Prophetic Discourse” while its second transition is named by him as “the Official Closed Corpus”.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *From Faysal To Fasl Al Maqal: Where Is The Contemporary Islamic Thought?* (Beirut: Dar Al Saqi, 1993), 92-93.

<sup>66</sup> Al Quran 13: 39 and 43: 4.

<sup>67</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam Today*, 241.

<sup>68</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 116.

<sup>69</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 57, 64-65.

Arkoun defines the Quran as “a finished and an open corpus expressed in Arabic, to which we cannot have an access except through the text fixed after the 4<sup>th</sup>/10th century.”<sup>70</sup>

Arkoun declares the Quran as holier, more authentic, and more reliable in its discourse form than when it took a written form of a mere worldly book. He considered it open to all meanings in its oral form. He does not think that the *Mushaf*/the written official Quran deserves the holy status it is given as a divine speech of God.

Nonetheless, in an abrupt shift in the same book he states that his distinction between the oral and written forms of the Quran does not make one form more authentic than the other. It only means that the eyewitnesses of the revelation had the privilege of a comprehensive and easy access to its meaning than the later receivers of its written form. In fact, Arkoun is so befuddled about the whole thing that his finest translator Hashim Salih admits of not being sure what he meant. Hashim Salih, his best interpreter, has to add extensive comments to make Arkoun’s ideas clear. In fact Hashim’s annotation on Arkoun’s *Al Fikr Al Usuli wa Istihalat Al Ta Sil: Nahwa Tarikhin Akhar Li Al Fikr Al Islami* consumes about one third of the whole book.

Arkoun promotes the Linguistic-Semiotic and Literary Interpretation of the Quran to reveal the historicity of both the language of the Quran and its content. He questions the sacred, the spiritual, the transcendent attributed to the Quran because its words are subject to the impact of historicity.<sup>71</sup>

He does not approve of the general practice of Muslims referring to the Quran in their routine lives calling it as “a semiotic manipulation” and “fundamentalism” making Muslims intentionally detach the Quran from its socio-historical and linguistic contexts and force their own relevant contexts to make the Quran pertinent to their particular situation/ incident.

As the Quranic language is also made up of signs and symbols, it too refers to the objects by capricious and conventional judgments within a society with no natural link with the signified.<sup>72</sup> Questioning the authenticity and usefulness of the conventional *qiraats*/variant readings also, Arkoun takes them to be merely the norms of the early Muslim community rather than the true meaning of the Quran. That is why currently in the changed needs and norms of contemporary society, he feels that a new reading and a new interpretation is required.

Time honored scholarly works verify that the authentic *qiraats* are divine as told by the Prophet SAW. The multiple choice just makes it easier to execute or recite instead of being a sign of unlimited options of alternative readings. While many commentaries of the Quran as well as several scholars admit the inevitability of reinterpreting the Quran in the light of the historical changes<sup>73</sup>, Arkoun wants a new decoding of the signs and symbols of the Quran because according to him the earlier Muslims had decoded them through their *qiraat* and commentaries. In this regard, he argues that the Quran is a work

<sup>70</sup>Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam Today*, 237.

<sup>71</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, “The Concept of Authority in Islamic Thought”, In *Islam: State and Society*, Eds. Klaus Ferdinand And Mehdi Mozaffari (London: Curzon Press, 1988), 70.

<sup>72</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, “Religion and Society”, In *Islam in a World of Diverse Faiths*, Ed. Dan Cohn Sherbok (London: Macmillan, 1991), 176.

<sup>73</sup> Abdul Kabir Hussain Solihu, “Understanding the Quran In The Light Of Historical Change,” *Islamic Studies*, 42, No. 3 (2003): 393-413.

of signs and symbols portraying infinite meanings, open to everyone and its text can be interpreted in countless ways.<sup>74</sup>

Thus Arkoun's hermeneutic semiological analysis refers to

"the understanding of a set of signs ordered into a coherent textual complex. Such an understanding will disclose the aspects of a particular text or textualization but always in relation to (or in the context of) alternative texts and textualization."<sup>75</sup>

According to Arkoun, the last kind of reading, the Theological-Exegetic or Religious Interpretation of the Quran must be based exclusively on the findings of the first two types of readings. Because theological problems are bound to come up if one carries on regarding the Quran as a divine text.

A 'rational belief' based on the conflict between the general episteme at a certain point and the problems put forward by a religious text, i.e., between heritage and history is required to undertake this third interpretation of the Quran. As all kinds of belief oriented readings make up a 'dogmatic enclosure', therefore the early epic masterpiece exegesis add to the historical development of 'the living tradition'. Arkoun calls it as a 'ritual reading' and considers the first two suggested readings as more 'academic and more complex'.<sup>76</sup>

Arkoun recommends only his personal favorite 'secular theology' for this religious interpretation. He also does not accept the majority belief that 'islam does not separate the spiritual from the profane'. Instead, he declares that secularism is inbuilt in Islam. Just as Harvey Cox derived justifications for secularization from the Bible,<sup>77</sup> Arkoun too states that "secularism is included in the Quran and Medinan Experience"<sup>78</sup>, not a logical conclusion based on historical facts but a preconceived, biased notion of the author. In his essay 'Islam and Secularism', Arkoun declares his intentions and objectives in this regard very clearly.

"It is necessary for us to deconstruct the closed orthodoxy from within. This cannot be possible until we search for a free history which alone could lead us to the entrance of secularization in Islam."<sup>79</sup>

Dr. Abdul Kabir Solihu of International University Malaysia accuses Arkoun of twisting historical facts to suit his objectives. He observes:

"If Arkoun succeeded in avoiding a belief oriented reading in order to evade the 'dogmas' of Sunnites and Shiites definitely he has fallen prey to a secular theology with its own dogmas."<sup>80</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *The Historicism Of Arab Islamic Thought*, Trans. Hashim Salih, 2nd Ed. (Beirut: Markaz Al Inma'alQawmi, 1996), 145.

<sup>75</sup> Hugh J. Silverman, *Textualities between Hermeneutics and Deconstruction* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 16.

<sup>76</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 61.

<sup>77</sup> Harvey Cox, "The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization", In *Theological Perspective* (New York: Collier Books, 1990), 5-23.

<sup>78</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *The Concept of Authority in Islamic Thought*, 71.

<sup>79</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *Tarikhyyat Al Fikr Al Arabi Al Islami*, 286.

<sup>80</sup> Abdul Kabir Hussain Salihu, *Mohammad Arkoun's Theory Of Quranic Hermeneutics: A Critique, Intellectual Discourse*, Department of General Studies, Kulliyah of Islamic Nd Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islami University Malaysia. 2006. Vol. 14, No. 1, 19-32.

Commenting on Arkoun's deconstruction of Islamic Reason and the unthought, Jon Wansbrough writes; "one unfortunately not yet realized to any practical extent"<sup>81</sup> Ali Harb, remarking about Arkoun's main concern, i.e., his method, states:

"Arkoun's method lacks creativity and coherence, and his readings did not enrich the history of thought of either the Muslims or the Orientalists."<sup>82</sup>

Giving opinion about Arkoun's semiotic readings of the Quran, Ahmad Al Alawi ridicules:

"If all the jinns and human beings made a concerted effort to implement Arkoun's semiotics reading, it would not lead to the Muslims' development."<sup>83</sup>

Even Arkoun himself felt quite disillusioned when he admitted that

"No Orientalist or Islamic studies' scholar shared with him the conception he had long ago invented for the Quran, as the 'Official Closed Corpus' and that his methodological discussion has been largely neglected."<sup>84</sup>

Above all, Muslim scholars and commentators of the Quran unanimously hold the view that no one has the right to interpret the *ayaats* of the Quran according to one's personal view and opinion divergent to the accepted principles and norms of doing so. Several authentic *ahadith*/traditions are narrated on the topic. For example:

According to authentic sources, the Holy Prophet (*SAW*) is believed to have narrated:

1. One who interprets/explains the Quran according to his/her personal opinion (*tafsirbira 'yihi*) shall take his abode/place in the fire (Hell),<sup>85</sup> and
2. One who interprets the Quran according to his view, even though it may be right, commits a sin.

Abu Bakar *RA* is reported to have said; "What earth will bear me and what sky will over shadow me if I say anything by my personal opinion when explaining the Quran."<sup>86</sup>

The great Islamic scholar Imam Al Ghazali explains the prohibition of the explanation of the Qur'an (*tafsir*) by personal opinion (*bir-ra'i*) as forbidden by the Prophet *SAW* himself. He states that

"Two reasons for the prohibition of interpretation of the Quran according to one's opinion are

1. Every man has his own individual opinion with regard to every matter and actually he is inclined to that opinion.
2. Every interpreter explains the Quran according to his wish and desire to serve his own ends."<sup>87</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Jon Wansbrough, *The Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 47, no. 2 (1984), 413.

<sup>82</sup> Ali Harb, *Naqd Al Nass*, (Beirut: Al Markaz Al Thaqafi Al Arabi, 1993), 84-85.

<sup>83</sup> Ahmad Alalawi, *Al Tabbi Ah Wa Al Tumthal: Masail An Al Islam WaAlmarifah* (Rabat: Al SharikahalMaghribiyah Lil Nashirm Al Muttahidin, 1988), 13.

<sup>84</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, 2002, 32, 86; *Present Day Islam Between its Tradition and Globalization*, 214.

<sup>85</sup> At Tirmidhi, Sunan, *KitabuTafsir*, 1.

<sup>86</sup> Imam al-Ghazali Chapter Four: the Etiquettes of Qur'an Recitation (*KitabAdabTilawat al Qur'an*) Book VIII) in *the Ihya' Ulum al-Din (The Revival of Religious Sciences)*. Transl. Muhammad. AbulQuasem, Revised & Ed. Abu Ibrahim al-Hanafi, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaysia Press, Imam al-Ghazali Institute 900th Anniversary & Dar Al—Fiqh, 1979), 44.

<sup>87</sup> Imam al-Ghazali, Chapter Four: the Etiquettes of Qur'an Recitation, (*KitabAdabTilawat al Qur'an*) Book VIII) in *the Ihya' Ulum al-Din (The Revival of Religious Sciences)*. Transl. Muhammad. AbulQuasem, Revised &

### Conclusion

The intellectual legacy of the Islamic world unmistakably points out that this is not at all an unmatched venture. Confronting the new and challenging thoughts originating from the early Greek and other cultures, Muslim researchers have already demonstrated an amazing competence to counter as well as assimilate “those ideas, and to expound a new metaphysical groundwork for a comprehensive perception of man and the world.”<sup>88</sup>

That is why present-day deliberations of post modernity have to be carried out aligned with the historical context of Islamic scholarly practice. First of all, modern knowledge must be situated in its historical context because the meaning of knowledge itself “has been mystified from one historical time to another and its origin has been shaped by each age’s special vision of man and his connection to the world. In addition, post modern Western interpretations and applications of thoughts about knowledge, progress, and development have resulted in”<sup>89</sup> blending the astonishing accomplishments as well as unpardonable and unrelenting catastrophes. Post Modern Western civilization must recommence the dialogue with Islam to revitalize itself and humanity in general. In this backdrop, we should think and reflect on the ways both the Western and the Islamic points of view of the world can intrude upon each other to look for an appropriate stance to make their interaction productive and dynamic.

“Familiarity with traditional diversity of Islamic philosophy as well as with the contemporary philosophical thoughts of the West; modern Muslim philosophers neither entirely reject Western view, nor are they absolutely inundated by the West.”<sup>90</sup>

Muslims are all set to study Western vision with a critical consideration adopting a far-reaching approach to develop a non-western culture and creativity besides getting rid of the West’s superiority complex. Instead of considering Western thought and civilization a source of knowledge, it must be observed, historicized, and studied as an object of knowledge to put it at its proper geographic boundaries. Nevertheless, caution must be heeded that in an attempt to be free from this old yoke of getting beleaguered by Western thought and culture, we may not fall prey to some new trap or yet another yoke.

A new and direct relationship with reality must be established without any intermediary, challenging the Western monopoly over theorization, forcing others to simply interpret their work and to see reality through Western philosophical thought and structure. We need to put forward our own version of the reality; current and practical, and convert it into a new text/discourse to be able to get rid of colonization, captivity, disunity, undeveloped state of human and social capital, alienation, corruption, pollution and mass-destruction of material resources and morals, of values and beliefs.

Muslims resist the postmodernist notion that everything is a social construct because if it were the case then the Quran is not Divine anymore and that all our fundamental concepts constituting our worldview would be rendered meaningless because all of them are but social constructs established by those who were in power at that time in history. Similarly the notion that there is no objective truth out there, and that all religions including Islam are simply social constructs, partially man-made truths supplemented by

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Ed. Abu Ibrahim al-Hanafi, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaysia Press, Imam al-Ghazali Institute 900th Anniversary & Dar Al—Fiqh, 1979), 44.

<sup>88</sup> <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/apr95/7.htm> accessed: 4/20/12.

<sup>89</sup> <http://www.allamaiqbal.com/publications/journals/review/apr95/7.htm> accessed: 4/20/12.

<sup>90</sup> [http://drsorosh.com/English/On\\_DrSorosh/E-CMO-19980000-Islamic\\_Philosophy-Modern.html](http://drsorosh.com/English/On_DrSorosh/E-CMO-19980000-Islamic_Philosophy-Modern.html) accessed: 9/15/10.

other human-created thoughts and ideologies, and that Islam is not the Absolute Truth for all times to come till Dooms Day, also hold no ground.

As far as the post modernists' denial of all Grand Narratives is concerned, we do declare the Oneness of Allah and the Truth of His Religion, His Prophets, and His Revelation. Therefore, apart from the Holy Quran and the authentic compilations of *ahadith* of the Prophet SAW, the two sources whose truth and finality is established and recognized beyond any doubt, much of the rest of the large body of Islamic literature based on human thinking/interpretations can be put to the rigors of deconstruction and/or other textual analysis in a larger philosophical and autobiographical framework using anthropology, psychology, sociology and historicity, etc. Moreover enthusiastic, willing and creative researchers of Islamic studies must continue to critically assess one another's work with a multidisciplinary approach.

The Holy Prophet SAW did ask all those present, including his greatest companions, during his address on the occasion of the last pilgrimage to pass his message on to all those who were not there that day, adding that they might prove better in listening, understanding and implementing his commands. This implies at the possibility of multiple and better interpretations of the Prophet's SAW utterances. The intellectual challenges posed by post modernism in the form of colonialism, evolutionism, rationalism, empiricism, existentialism, agnosticism, individualism, secularism, capitalism, humanism, nihilism, deconstruction'ism', and the like can only be answered intellectually and philosophically.

All the Muslim intellectuals who raise hue and cry about deconstructing Islamic thought and sources of Islamic law are graduates and/or professors of the Sorbonne University, Paris France, which had also been the alma mater of Heidegger and Derrida. Thus, it is basically a case of the mentors and the guides directly and deeply influencing the thinking and working of their protégés.

In conclusion, the major findings about contemporary Muslims' getting influenced by Western thought with special reference to Arkoun's work and thought as a well known representative icon can be summarized as following:

- Being a student of and teacher at Sorbonne University, Paris with a permanent residence in France, Arkoun's thought and work is neither open nor neutral.
- Arkoun adopted the Western point of view estranging himself from his origins.
- His prolific French work is mostly unknown or untranslated.
- His thought is uninhibited and secular.
- His objective remains unclear whether he wants to focus on the Quranic studies or methodological studies.
- He studies the Quran only for the sake of methodology.
- He is willing to apply to Islamic heritage the deficient and immature methods/theories developed in the West.
- He wants and expects the Quran to give concrete shape to his preconceived notions.
- He gives an entirely new account of the history of the Quran.
- He has no qualms about twisting history wherever it suits his ends.

- He dares question the authenticity of the Quran, Quran's own account of itself and its truthfulness.
- He acknowledges the truth of the *Umm ul Kitab*/Revelation but only at a level beyond human reach.
- He recognizes the veracity and credibility of the oral Quran only which is lost forever beyond recovery.
- In his hermeneutics, there is a sense of profound 'ontological uncertainty' which confuses the reader too.
- Most of his work is reader-unfriendly due to the excessive use of difficult language, vague expression, many foreign words/terms and other unfamiliar/technical terminologies, repetitions, contradictions and ambiguities.
- Readers unfamiliar with semiotics/deconstruction consider his writings a mathematical work instead of a textual analysis.
- Generally a negative impression of his work prevails as novices and experts in the field all are disenchanted with his work.
- He himself eventually began to feel that intellectuals and scholars either ignored or dismissed his thought and work as worthless.

A Danish philosopher, Soren Aabye Kierkegaard said

"People demand freedom of speech to make up for the freedom of thought which they avoid."<sup>91</sup>

So basically it's more about the freedom of thought than anything else that is needed to break free from the conventional way of thinking and interpreting things in addition to acquiring the ability to think the unthinkable and the previously unthought as well as to get rid of being too overwhelmed by whatever gets 'current' in the largely impulsive Western thought.

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<sup>91</sup> Evan Esar, 20000 Quips & Quotes (USA: Barnes & Noble Publishing, 1995), 327.



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