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Interdisciplinary Passage Through the Human Sciences: The Methodological Philosophy of Mohammed Arkoun

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Abstract

This scholarly paper aims to shed light on the plurality of approaches in the thought of Mohammed Arkoun, ranging from linguistics to historical anthropology. Through these methodologies, Arkoun sought to deconstruct the intellectual rigidity deeply rooted in Islamic heritage and to understand it as a complex phenomenon shaped by political and social interactions. The study focuses on the extent to which Arkoun succeeded in transcending traditional dichotomies—such as heritage versus modernity—without falling into epistemological contradictions. It also highlights his attempt to reconcile scientific criticism of sacred texts with the respect for their sanctity within religious discourse. Furthermore, the paper underscores the contribution of his project, "Applied Islamology," in breaking the isolation experienced by Islamic thought and in opening horizons for global civilizational dialogue, making his work a pioneering effort in renewing Islamic studies within modern intellectual frameworks.

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Introduction

The diversity of Islamic intellectual currents and proselytizing methodologies in the contemporary era is one of the most prominent features characterizing the cultural landscape of the Islamic world, especially amid the profound transformations taking place within Muslim societies. This diversity is manifested in the emergence of critical intellectual projects that seek to offer comprehensive reformist visions encompassing various aspects of life, including highly sensitive areas such as religious texts—namely, the Holy Qur'an and the Prophetic Hadith. These projects often originate from historical and philosophical contexts foreign to the Islamic intellectual tradition, relying on modes of thought derived from frameworks outside the Islamic discursive system.

This study aims to analyze the critical dimensions directed by these intellectual currents toward Islamic heritage in general and the divine revelation texts in particular, following specific methodological frameworks. It is evident that this intellectual phenomenon has imposed its influential presence within Arab and Islamic culture, causing profound transformations on multiple levels—especially at the intellectual level, which has affected the reading of religious texts through attempts to liberate them from sacred traditional interpretations.

These readings are characterized by their adoption of a rationalist methodology that excludes metaphysical and doctrinal dimensions, treating religious texts—as they see it—like any human text open to critical analysis according to modern reading theories. The academic reality highlights the necessity of examining these intellectual projects critically to assess the extent to which their methodologies align with Islamic principles on one hand, and the credibility of their controversial analytical tools on the other. The approaches of these currents vary: some view Islam as inherently modern and partially aligned with Western modernity, while others emphasize the superiority of Islam and its transcendence over the tenets of modernity and postmodernity, advocating openness to scientific and technological development without compromising religious identity or the cultural particularities of Muslim societies. Thus, this intellectual dilemma remains a subject of serious inquiry, requiring a distinction between the need to renew religious discourse to suit contemporary realities and the necessity of preserving the religious constants that form the core of Islamic identity.

This approach also distinguishes between intellectual modernity and scientific-technological modernity, based on the definition of modernity as a way of life shaped by Western societies. From this perspective, any attempt to modernize Islam is seen as an effort to replicate Western civilizational models. Within this context emerges an approach calling for a radical epistemological rupture with Islamic heritage through its deconstruction and critical analysis in order to

transcend it. This is the context in which Mohammed Arkoun's intellectual project operates. His project is based on destabilizing the doctrinal foundations associated with Islam's foundational texts (the Qur'an and Hadith), which constitute the basis of Islamic civilization. This is pursued by applying Western methodologies to the reading of religious texts, seen as a historical necessity imposed by contemporary civilization. Moreover, the Western intellect is adopted as the ultimate reference for reshaping conceptions of revelation texts, both theoretically and practically. According to Arkoun, deconstructing these assumptions shifts the act of reading from a domain of unquestioned certainties to a space of critical thought. This reveals what has been marginalized in religious texts and what lies hidden in the collective Islamic consciousness, calling for a comprehensive critique of the foundations of Islam itself—even if that entails casting doubt on certainties, questioning sacred texts, transcending them intellectually, or stripping them of their spiritual and legislative meanings under the banner of modern methodologies. Accordingly, the research problem is defined by the question of the intellectual foundations that govern the methodologies adopted by Mohammed Arkoun in his reading of religious texts, particularly concerning the historical and civilizational contexts that produced those methodologies and the ways in which they were applied to the study of the Qur'an and Prophetic Hadith.

1. The Diversity of Research Methodologies in Mohammed Arkoun's Thought

In terms of methodology and tools of research and analysis, Mohammed Arkoun adopts an approach that integrates various modern Western human sciences—such as linguistics, sociology, anthropology, and comparative religion—within the framework of his intellectual project aimed at modernizing Islamic thought and liberating it from monolithic traditional interpretations. Arkoun clarifies this methodological integration by explaining that he studied the Sunnah through a historical and anthropological lens, attempting to blend multiple methodologies (Messaoud, 2024, p. 49). Arkoun's central concern lies in deconstructing the traditional view of religious texts by proposing a new interpretive method based on a tripartite analytical framework: semiotics for examining symbolic meanings, historicism for tracing temporal contexts, and anthropology for linking texts to cultural structures.

He believes that this methodological synthesis can reshape Islamic theology by opening up new horizons for renewed interpretations of sacred texts—interpretations that transcend rigid dichotomies between the sacred and the profane. In this context, Arkoun seeks to apply the Western model of religious text criticism, which treats the Bible as a historical product subject to critical scrutiny without institutional oversight. He affirms this position by stating his

intent to provoke within Islamic thought the kinds of questions that have long been familiar to Christian theology—seeking to subject the Qur'an to the processes of meaning production, expansion, transformation, and deconstruction (Arkoun, 2010, p. 20).

However, this deconstructive approach has not been free from criticism, particularly regarding its attempt to impose the Western experience—with its distinct historical contexts—onto the Qur'anic text. As noted by some commentators, such as Hashim Salih (Arkoun's translator and interpreter), the use of semiotic and linguistic methodologies aims to liberate the Muslim reader, even momentarily, from the dominance of sacred texts (Arkoun, 2010, p. 28). Nevertheless, this approach remains fraught with issues, especially concerning the fundamental differences between the nature of the Qur'anic text and that of biblical texts in the Islamic collective consciousness.

Thus, Arkoun's project remains one of the boldest attempts to reread the religious heritage using contemporary epistemological tools, despite the ongoing debate over the appropriateness of applying Western methodologies to the study of the Islamic phenomenon. Amid the dominance of modern Western culture as the prevailing civilizational framework, its analytical methodologies offer advanced tools for delving into the layers of religious texts and deconstructing central concepts such as revelation, the sacred, Sharia, and the Sunnah. In this context, Mohammed Arkoun presents an alternative intellectual model by subjecting the discourse of revelation to a contemporary critical reading.

This approach seeks to reassess the essence of revelation by deconstructing the traditional discourses that confined it within rigid assumptions. As a leading figure of modernist discourse, Arkoun argues that these concepts are treated in the Islamic consciousness as fixed certainties beyond questioning, whereas, in reality, they are assumptions that have not undergone critical scrutiny—thus, in his critique, forming the basis of a faith lacking rational foundation (Oliver, 2008, p. 51). To realize this project, Arkoun employs a complex methodology inspired by Derrida's strategies of deconstruction, Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, along with semiotics, modern linguistics, and the history of religions. However, this methodological synthesis results in a conceptual lexicon that suffers from semantic ambiguities. Terms such as "mental space," "Islam's symbolic capital," and "the unthought" are used with a vagueness that clouds even their original contexts in Western thought. Moreover, the use of terms like "orthodoxy" and "dogmatism" generates confusion due to their historical connotations in Christianity. At the same time, traditional Islamic concepts are replaced by terms like "city model" instead of Islam, or "deliberation" in place of tradition—reflecting an attempt to sever ties with inherited meanings.

Methodological confusion becomes evident in Arkoun's approach through his lack of a clear distinction between the divine absolute and the temporal human interaction with the text (Kihal, 2011, p. 97), despite his theoretical acknowledgment of such a separation. He maintains that activating modernity within Islamic studies requires the reestablishment of new religious sciences such as a "Theology of Revelation" and a "Theology of History," supported by modern linguistic methodologies and interpretive and semiotic theories that have yet to be fully developed in the Arab intellectual environment. This ambitious project, as he presents it, aims to radically rethink Islam by deconstructing its symbolic structure using Western intellectual tools—even if this results in conceptual confusion and a departure from the traditional Islamic discursive framework.

Thus, Arkoun's methodology represents an ambitious attempt to read Islamic heritage through a cross-cultural lens. However, it remains fraught with methodological and linguistic challenges—particularly in its treatment of the sacred text as an open-ended text with unlimited meanings. This raises important questions about the compatibility of such a reading with the established interpretive principles of Islamic thought.

2-Deconstruction in Arkoun's Reading of Religious Texts

Mohammed Arkoun is described as a pioneer of deconstructive readings of religious texts, aiming to uncover what is silenced and the "unthought" within these texts. His approach stems from the belief that confronting intellectual crises requires dissecting and deconstructing tradition. To do this, he relies on the methodology of the "archaeology of thought," which is based on epistemological excavation—uncovering the accumulated layers of tradition, viewing it as a historically intertwined formation akin to geological or archaeological strata. Just as one cannot access the deep layers of the earth without penetrating the surface, the foundational layers of religious thought cannot be understood without temporally tracing backward and dismantling the subsequent accumulations that have obscured them (Arkoun, 1991, p. 74).

3-The Semiotic Approach and Discourse Analysis

Arkoun also adopts the method of semantic semiotic reading, considering the revealed texts as linguistic, historical, social, and cultural material linked to a unique spatiotemporal context—that of the Prophetic era. He argues that modern semiotic analysis liberates the reader from the symbolic reverence imposed by religious texts, which hinders the possibility of objective criticism as soon as one begins reading them (Arkoun, 1996, p. 100). By deconstructing the linguistic structure of the text, this approach contributes to

establishing a critical distance between the reader and the text, analyzing it as a material linguistic entity stripped of its symbolic sanctity.

4-The Problematic Focus on Deconstruction

According to Arkoun, excessive focus on the deconstructive method traps the reader within a purely linguistic framework, which hinders access to the deeper meanings of religious texts and neglects the historical and spiritual contexts that form their essence. Thus, although this methodology contributes to breaking the dominance of the text, it simultaneously becomes a constraint that obscures essential dimensions in the processes of understanding and interpretation. Through his historical approach, Arkoun calls for a radical reassessment of Islamic discourse by dismantling closed dogmatic barriers (Arkoun, 1996, p. 87), applying the method of historical criticism to sacred revelation texts. He explains that his primary aim is to raise critical questions within Islamic thought similar to those that have been posed in Christian thought for centuries, considering such critique a necessary step from a scientific research perspective—despite its delayed application due to the cognitive and social obstacles it faces and the challenges it creates within the Islamic intellectual framework.

Arkoun points out that historical criticism—previously applied to pre-Islamic poetry and the institution of the Caliphate—faced violent rejection when applied to the Qur'an, Hadith, and Islamic jurisprudence, due to the Islamic community's sense that its doctrinal absolutes and core values were under threat. To deconstruct these absolutes and question the constants, Arkoun criticizes Arab Enlightenment thinkers for their lack of courage in adopting critical studies of religion similar to what Max Weber or Ernst Troeltsch did for Christianity, or engaging in intellectual struggle with religious authority as Voltaire did, or deconstructing rigid ideas as Montaigne proposed. He also reproaches them for their failure to reveal the historical and worldly origins of Sharia and for not producing an Islamic theology that aligns with the contemporary scientific spirit.

Mohammed Arkoun is considered one of the most prominent theorists who adopted the methodology of critical analysis of sacred texts, influenced by the Western critical school in the study of the Bible, and seeks to generalize this methodology to Islamic texts. Arkoun believes that Western scientific progress was contingent upon the separation between the sacred and the metaphysical by subjecting religious texts to historical criticism. From this standpoint, he calls for applying the same mechanism to the Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah (Arkoun, 2010, p. 72). Considering that freeing the Muslim mind from the "sanctity of the text" is an essential condition for the advancement of the nation. Arkoun bases his project on a clear orientalist heritage represented by figures such as Richard Simon, Wilhelm de Wette, Jacques Échard,

Carl David Ilgen, Hermann Hupfeld, Theodor Nöldeke, and Julius Wellhausen, the founder of the modern school of biblical criticism. However, according to his critics, this methodology involves a fundamental problem: it relies on the human sources theory that treats the religious text as a historical product subject to deconstruction. This may apply to texts like the Torah and the Gospel, which Islamic sources attest have been altered, but its application to the Qur'an—which is preserved by God, as stated in His words: "Indeed, We have sent down the Reminder, and indeed, We will be its guardian" (Al-Hijr: 9)—constitutes a methodological fallacy that contradicts the firmly established Islamic doctrine of the sanctity of the text and its immunity to alteration.

The danger of historicism as presented by Arkoun, according to critics' analysis, lies in reducing the legal texts to their temporal and material dimension, excluding any metaphysical or doctrinal significance, and turning them into mere linguistic phenomena subject to historical context. Practically, this entails emptying the texts of their legislative meanings and blurring the distinctions between the divine absolute and the human relative (Boulamdoul, 2021, p. 139), which opens the door to uncontrolled interpretations that deny the legal constants and treat the text as a cultural product subject to reshaping according to modernist logic. Additionally, historicism rejects any interpretation that deals with the transcendent aspect of the text, considering it an obstacle to uncovering historical truths, which, according to Islamic references, threatens the epistemological structure of Islam and causes the texts to lose their sanctity and legislative authority.

The analytical methodologies adopted by Muhammad Arkoun in his approach to the foundational Islamic texts—the Qur'an and Hadith—are based on an epistemological reference rooted in modern Western thought, which stems from a philosophical vision seeking to reinterpret the sacred within purely human frameworks (Arkoun, 1993, p. 97). This approach reflects an extension of the secularist tendency that emerged with the European Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, which revolted against ecclesiastical dominance and sought to dismantle traditional religious authorities by rereading heritage within historical and relative contexts.

5-The Epistemological Purpose of Employing Linguistic Methodologies

Arkoun's fundamental goal in applying the methodologies of the humanities and Western linguistics to religious texts is to liberate them from the dominance of static reading and transform them into dynamic entities open to continuous reinterpretation. This endeavor is inseparable from his intellectual project aimed at desacralizing traditional interpretations by deconstructing their claims to absolute truth and

subjecting them to analytical approaches that lead to the relativity of meanings according to dominant cultural contexts and ideologies. Thus, Arkoun reshapes the religious text as a human product subject to the interactions of history and power, which results in removing its fixed legal authority and attributing to it changing meanings compatible with modernist perspectives.

6-Methodological Justifications in Arkoun's Thought:

Arkoun justifies his use of modern linguistic tools by claiming that they enable an "objective" reading of the text, free from theological assumptions or inherited interpretative traditions. He views Western methodologies—such as semiotics and deconstruction—as mechanisms to overcome the estrangement of the text from its historical context and to reconstruct it as a system open to endless interpretations. However, this approach overlooks the fundamental problem of borrowing methodologies that originated in a different cultural context, where sacred texts are reduced to mere linguistic phenomena subject to dissection outside their metaphysical dimensions. Moreover, his complete exclusion of the Islamic exegetical heritage, with all its currents—on the pretext that it is the product of a particular social environment—deprives the text of its intrinsic vitality and reduces it to a rigid historical snapshot.

7-Epistemological Critique of Arkoun's Project:

This approach can be read as an attempt to modernize religious discourse by adopting a Western epistemological model that reproduces European centrality under the banner of liberation from authoritarianism. It is observed that Arkoun seeks to break the monopoly of the religious institution over the interpretation of the text by replacing the theological perspective with methodologies that consider religion as a social phenomenon subject to anthropological analysis. However, this shift reproduces cultural colonialism by employing the Western conceptual framework as the sole standard for interpretation, leading to hermeneutical distortions that strip the text of its spiritual dimensions and repurpose it to serve post-colonial ideologies. Thus, Arkoun's project remains problematic in its treatment of the religious text as a closed linguistic entity, whose sanctity is reduced to symbolic structures subject to deconstruction according to the premises of Western modernity. Despite claims of objectivity, his methodology contains a fundamental contradiction (Arkoun, 2010, p. 60).

Mohamed Arkoun and Modernity: A Critical Reading of His Intellectual Project: The concept of modernity in Mohamed Arkoun's intellectual project, embodied in his critique of Islamic reason, represents a central issue that stems from observing a disparity in

the Arab and Islamic engagement with the outcomes of modern civilization. According to Arkoun, Arabs and Muslims embraced technological modernity as material and consumer phenomena without comprehending its intellectual and spiritual essence. This was due to a skewed understanding toward a negative interpretation of modernity (Arkoun, 1996, p. 31), linked to a reductive conception of secularism as a confrontational ideology that emerged in the nineteenth century as a reaction against the dominance of the Christian Church in the West. However, he stresses that secularism, in its open and positive meaning, is considered one of the greatest achievements of modernity and a cornerstone in the construction of contemporary civilization, which would not have advanced without it. He carefully distinguishes between modernity as an intellectual and critical stance related to reason's view of the world and knowledge, and modernization as a formal process limited to importing technologies and material inventions without questioning intellectual and cultural structures (Arkoun, 1996, p. 42). Modernization, in his view, remains superficial unless accompanied by a radical transformation in the existential stance of humans toward the universe and in the way they engage with the foundational texts of heritage. Hence, Arkoun calls for the deconstruction of Islamic epistemological systems through the adoption of the tools of intellectual modernity and the embodiment of its critical methodologies in reading religious texts, emphasizing that this approach is the only way to achieve an epistemological rupture with traditional theological conceptions (Kamarudin Z. (2015)).

Arkoun highlights that modernity has introduced a new universal vision that liberates humans from the authority of the transcendent sacred and establishes the independence of reason from religious domination—a transformation that, according to his analysis, the Islamic world has yet to reach, remaining stuck at the initial stages of modernity. He stresses the necessity for Muslims to engage in enlightenment struggles similar to those undertaken by European thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to free reason from the dogmatic framework of medieval theology, while affirming that his project does not reject revelation but seeks to transcend the absolute sanctification of texts and heritage through activating historical-anthropological criticism. In the context of his deconstruction of the problems of religious reason, Arkoun divides reason into three types:

- **The independent reason:** This is the critical reason capable of producing open, sovereign knowledge.
- **The religious reason:** This remains constrained by the authority of the sacred text, relying on ready-made data from the Qur'an or holy books, without questioning the issues involved in the transition from revelation to human interpretations.
- **The philosophical reason:** This embodies the creative interaction with existential questions.

Arkoun directs radical criticism at religious reason for its self-closure and its inability to raise the problem of revelation as a phenomenon subject to anthropological analysis or to critically deconstruct the mechanisms that transform sacred discourse into a closed jurisprudential system. (Arkoun, 1996, p. 63)

The analytical methodologies adopted by Muhammad Arkoun in his approach to the foundational Islamic texts—the Qur'an and the Hadith—are based on an epistemological reference rooted in modern Western thought, which starts from a philosophical vision seeking to reinterpret the sacred within purely human frameworks. This approach reflects a continuation of the secular tendency that emerged during the European Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, which revolted against ecclesiastical dominance and sought to dismantle traditional religious authorities by rereading heritage within historical and relative contexts.

Conclusion

The multiplicity of methodologies in Muhammad Arkoun's thought is a distinctive feature that sets him apart from other critical projects within Islamic thought, as he blends linguistic, anthropological, and historical approaches in dealing with religious heritage. This analysis has reached a set of conclusions and recommendations; foremost among them is that Arkoun's project remains problematic in its treatment of the religious text as a closed linguistic entity, where its sanctity is reduced to symbolic structures that can be deconstructed according to Western modernist categories, raising an epistemological issue about the limits of objectivity. Moreover, his critical framework subjects the texts to an external authority that reproduces cultural dominance in the name of liberation, without taking into account the spiritual and historical specificity of Islam.

On the other hand, Arkoun views open secularism as one of the greatest achievements of modernity and a cornerstone of contemporary civilization, yet he observes that Arab and Islamic societies have adopted only technological modernity while remaining distant from its intellectual and spiritual essence due to negative and reductive interpretations of secularism. He carefully distinguishes between "modernity" as a critical intellectual stance and "modernization" as a formal process, emphasizing that modernization remains superficial unless accompanied by a radical transformation in human outlook on the universe and in dealing with foundational texts. Therefore, he calls for dismantling Islamic epistemic systems and adopting the intellectual tools of modernity in reading the texts, considering this the only path for an epistemological break with traditional theological heritage. He also stresses that the modernization of Islamic reason requires a radical reassessment of the heritage, in line with the principles of secularism and intellectual

modernity. However, the core danger in his project lies in his attempt to deconstruct religious assumptions using Western philosophical tools, which could lead to treating Islam as a cultural product subject to historical interpretation rather than as a fixed, sacred legislative text.

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