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The status of the Quran in the light of the applied Islamology of Mohammed Arkoun: the mu'tazilite thesis of the "created" Quran

BY LEÏLA TAUIL

Introduction

The work of Mohammed Arkoun, the father of applied Islamology, is characterized by a critical and subversive approach to the question of Islam, which he moves "its polemical and dogmatic theological framework to the open space of history and of critical anthropology".¹ M. Arkoun positions himself as, on the one hand, an academic researcher-thinker who takes as his object of study the phenomenon of Islamic thought and, on the other hand, as an actor in a renewal of this same Islamic thought, born in a medieval epistemology, which he seeks to open up to the contributions of human sciences and society from a modern epistemological perspective.² M. Arkoun's intellectual commitment, in particular through his book *Pour une critique de la raison islamique*³ which demonstrates the historical contingency of the "theological reason"

on which fundamentalist thought is based, also defines the originality of his own contribution. In this article, we choose, following a brief definition of applied Islamology, to focus on a recurring theme in M. Arkoun's work, namely the question of the theological status of the Quranic corpus,⁴ through the "created" Quran thesis of the mu'tazilites⁵, the rationalist theologians of Islam who, from the second century AH/eighth century CE to the third century AH/ninth century CE, defended the primacy of reason and the free will of human beings.

Mohammed Arkoun, father of applied Islamology

M. Arkoun (1928-2010) was professor of the history of Islamic thought at the University of Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris III). He initiated and taught applied Islamology in various European, Arab and American universities⁶.

¹ Arkoun M., *Humanisme et Islam. Combats et propositions*, Éd. J. Vrin, Paris, 2005, p. 278.

² Tauil L., "Violence et islam : le triangle anthropologique 'violence, sacré, vérité' de Mohammed Arkoun", *Revue de théologie et de philosophie*, Geneva, 2018.

³ Arkoun M., *Pour une critique de la raison islamique*, Mouton-Routledge & Larose, Paris, 1984.

⁴ Arkoun M., *Lectures du Coran*, (1st ed. Mouton-Routledge & Larose, 1982), Ed. Albin Michel, Paris, 2016.

⁵ Mu'tazilism is a rationalist current of Islamic theology imbued with Greek philosophy.

⁶ Let us already point out the existence of the Mohammed Arkoun Foundation, founded by his wife, Touria Yacoubi Arkoun, which centralizes the writings and oral interventions of the late Mohammed Arkoun. <http://www.fondation-arkoun.org>

Applied Islamology is a new discipline which differs from classical Islamology insofar as it goes beyond a linear restitution of the history of Islamic civilization and a philological critique of its great texts to integrate the human sciences in a reflexive approach to Islam and to Islamic thought, while having recourse to history in reverse (a back and forth between the present and the past of societies affected by Islam).⁷ The objective of applied Islamology is, on the one hand, to compensate “the omissions of Islamic thought which continues to repress any idea of historicity in the genesis and the concrete functions of religious belief”.⁸ This he does by studying, among other things, the conditions in which the Quran, the prophetic tradition and all doctrinal discourses came into being, subjecting them in particular to historical criticism, to a deconstructivist approach, to modern linguistics and to philosophical reflection concerning the production of meaning. On the other hand, applied Islamology, seeking to renew religious thought, attempts in a fundamental way to answer a central question that it formulates, “linked to the passage from a ‘medieval’ episteme to a modern episteme”, viz.: “under what conditions is this passage valid for the effective exercise of Islamic thought today?”.¹⁰

The Mu'tazilite thesis of the “created” Quran: unthinkable for Sunni orthodoxy

During the first two centuries of Islam, lively controversies burst out, inter alia in Rayy and Baghdad between 813 and 848, between the followers of reason-based opinion (*ahl al-ra'y*) – who defended the primacy of autonomous reason over scriptural sources – and the followers of the prophetic tradition (*ahl al-hadith*) – who postulated the primacy of the Quran and the sayings of the prophet (*hadith*), which were then being collected, over reason. The Mu'tazilite rationalist theologians and thinkers, enjoying the success of philosophy (*falsafa*¹¹) and the political support of the Abbasid caliphs Al-Ma'mun (d. 833) and Al-Wathiq (d. 847) fundamentally defended the fruitful postulate of a logic-centred rationality in opposition to a faith-based rationality in the service of knowledge drawn from the scriptural texts.¹²

Concerning precisely the status of the “Divine Word”, debates raged throughout the second century of Islam between these two groups of actors.

Contrary to the traditional posture, which would become the Sunni orthodox theology which affirms that the Quran is the “eternal and direct Word of God”, the Mu'tazilites, from second decade of the eighth century, rejected the existence of eternal attributes which they considered to be a form of polytheism. For the latter, the Quran is “created” by God. Otherwise, they say, there would be two Gods, namely Allah and the Word (or the Book). They defend the created character of the Quran, orally transmitted in Arabic to the prophet and then converted, by his companions, into a written text. The Mu'tazilites, opposed to all forms of anthropomorphism, refer to God as unknowable meaning, absolute and transcendent. For them the Quran is as a creation of God and its content a descriptive attribute of him, the recitation of which can only be created and therefore inscribed in history.

Beyond the five main principles developed by Mu'tazilism¹³, for M. Arkoun the essential thing is to highlight “the humanist scope of theses such as those of the created Quran and of free will (*qadar*)”¹⁴, because by considering the Quranic corpus as a historical message subjectable to linguistic analysis, the Mu'tazilites extract it from the impenetrable register of eternity to place it at the service of human reason. By insisting on the responsibility of Man in this process, they help to render him autonomous.

This Mu'tazilite school, which therefore defends the primacy of reason and human free will, was established as an official doctrine by the Abbasid caliph Al-Ma'mun in the year 827 CE, for about twenty years. However, the school of Imam Ibn Hanbal (d. 855 CE)¹⁵ took the opposite view to that of the Mu'tazilites, condemning their conceptions and their methods which it considered to be harmful and sinful innovations, because believers must, according to the founder of Hanbalism, submit to the eternal Word (Quran) in its literal sense (*zahir*) nourished by a deep faith in the absolute transcendence of God. For Ibn Hanbal, it is necessary to

7 Arkoun M., « Pour une islamologie appliquée », Pour une critique de la raison islamique, Mouton, Paris, 1984, pp. 43-63.

8 Arkoun M., *Op. Cit.*, 2005, p. 278.

9 Arkoun M., *Op. Cit.*, 1984, p. 51.

10 *Ibidem*

11 We invite the reader to read the following work in particular: Benmakhlouf Ali, *Pourquoi lire les philosophes arabes*, Éd. Albin Michel, Paris, 2015. (English translation: Islam: Between Message and History, Edinburgh University Press in association with the Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, Edinburgh, 2009

12 Arkoun M., *Op. Cit.*, 2005, p. 255.

13 The five principles elaborated by Abû I-Hufayl al-'Allâf (d. 842) are as follows: oneness (of God), justice (of God), promise and threat (in the hereafter), the intermediate state (of the sinful believer), the commanding of good and the prohibition of evil (here below). These five principles are sometimes reduced by the Mu'tazilites to the first two. Cf. Arkoun M., *Essais sur la pensée arabe*, Éd. Mouton, Paris, 1977, pp. 26-27.

14 Arkoun M., *Essais sur la pensée arabe*, Éd. Mouton, Paris, 1977, p. 27.

15 Ibn Hanbal (d. 855) founded Hanbalism, which is the most rigorous and the most literalist of the four Sunni legal schools, which forms the reference for Saudi Wahhabism.

follow the sacred texts (Quran and *hadith*) to the letter and very strictly, avoiding any interpretations which deviate from their literal meaning. Caliph Al-Mutawakkil, in 847 CE, raised the latter's doctrinal position into the official religion of the state¹⁶, thereby inaugurating the process of what M. Arkoun calls "dogmatic closure". Throughout the history of predominantly Muslim societies, it was this rigorous doctrine, opposed to any form of speculation, that enjoyed a favourable reception in popular circles.¹⁷ For M. Arkoun, there is a before and after in the history of the dogmatic formation of Sunni orthodoxy. The period preceding the dogmatic closure¹⁸ (third century AH/ninth century CE to fifth century AH/eleventh century CE) is rich in innovative discussions animated, among others, by grammarians, judges, philosophers, Sufis, rationalists (Mu'tazilites), and expressed in a doctrinal pluralism. During this period, this Mediterranean area, though politically and theologically divided, remained intellectually and scientifically open to the circulation of ideas and knowledge. The establishment of the Sunni Orthodox dogmatic closure, the outcome of a fierce theological-legal struggle, gave the upper hand to the traditionalists (*ahl al-hadith*) and supporters of the uncreated Quran. Moreover, with regard to the question of the "created Quran", the caliph Al-Qâdir (d. 1031) had read in the mosques of Baghdad a profession of faith known as *al-'aqida al-qâdiriyya*, which ordered the killing of anyone professing the doctrine of the "created Quran". The age of debate was over, this time there was no longer any opposition, with the dogmatic closure consolidated with the gradual stifling of the dynamic of doctrinal pluralism which preceded it. It should be emphasized that intellectual fertility results essentially from confrontation and fruitful tension between philosophical reason and theological-legal reason. With the coming to power of the Seljuk Turks, in the 1050s, the author adds, the social and political frameworks of knowledge gave the primacy to theological-legal reason. This tendency was gradually accentuated in the direction of the elimination of the philosophical approach from Islamic thought, a situation that remains practically unchanged until today.¹⁹

16 Urvoy D., *Histoire de la pensée arabe et islamique*, Éd. Seuil, Paris, 2006, p. 179 ; Medeb A., *La maladie de l'islam*, Éd. Seuil, 2002, Paris, p. 24.

17 Arkoun M., *Op. Cit.*, 1977, pp. 27-28.

18 The word closure refers here to *iglâq bâb al-ijtihâd* or closing the gates of the interpretation of the Quran when the four main or orthodox Sunni schools of jurisprudence were consolidated. [Translator's note].

19 Arkoun M., *L'Islam, approche critique*, Éd. Grancher, Paris, 1998, p. XI. With respect to the tension between *human reason* and "*that which is given and revealed*", during the medieval period, the traditionalist attitude consists, according to M. Arkoun, in giving epistemological primacy to *Tradition over reason*. There is a distinction between a strict traditionalism (the Sunni Hanbalite school), that of the literalists, and a rationalizing traditionalism (the Sunni Hanafi, Malikite and Shafi'ite schools), that of the Sunni and Shi'ite dogmatic and fundamentalist theologians. The rationalist attitude, unlike the previous one, is characterized by the epistemological primacy of *reason over Tradition*. However this *sovereign reason* takes the form, among the *mu'tazilites*, of a constant concern to be in accord with "*that which is given and revealed*". The philosophers (*falâsifa*), are at the summum of the rationalist attitude in Islamic thought, forcefully

M. Arkoun points out that all schools of religious thought use strategies aimed at cancelling historicity in their doctrinal constructions. With regard to Islamic thought, the most convincing example, which illustrates this attitude, is the concealment by the guardians of orthodoxy of this lively controversy between the supporters of the created Quran and the defenders of the uncreated Quran. However, this debate remains decisive in the treatment of the thorny question of the theological status of the Quranic corpus, because it opposes "the partisans of a Quran created [i.e. with human intervention] in its current form, which permits its insertion in a certain historicity and its resumption today in the broader framework of modernity"²⁰ and "the partisans of the uncreated Quran, co-eternal with God, supra-historic and exempt from any questioning on the how (theory of the *bilâ kayf* 'without how')".²¹ For the author, "since the eleventh century, the evolution of social frameworks of knowledge in Islamic contexts has not permitted the reactivation of such a promising debate, the attempt by Muhammad 'Abdu at the end of the nineteenth century having been aborted with the censorship exercised, even by his so-called disciple Rachîd Rîda²²", despite this thesis of the created Quran remaining very topical.

The imposition of the doctrine of the uncreated Quran largely explains the psycho-cultural resistance that the evocation of a modern historical-critical and philological study of the Quran still provokes.

From a religious perspective, the pre-condition of the passage from the medieval episteme to the modern episteme of Islamic thought, M. Arkoun argues, is the recognition of the historicity of Quranic discourse. However, it must be emphasized, the author continues, that alongside an affirmation of the Sunni dogma of the eternal, a-historical and uncreated Word of God, there is in reality paradoxically a recognized historicity of the Quran, at least as a linear chronological development, through the search for "the circumstances of revelation" (*asbâb an-nuzûl*) by medieval orthodox jurists-theologians. Moreover, the Quran itself, he adds, introduces the notion of historicity of the religious norm through the principle of "abrogating" (*al-nasikh*) and "abrogated" (*mansûkh*) –

affirm the primacy of reason for knowing God. Philosophical thought during the classical period of Islam developed according to three tendencies: an emanationist tendency which integrates Aristotelian-Platonic metaphysics; the neo-Pythagorean tendency (*ikhwân al-Safâ*) and the Aristotelian tendency (with Ibn Ruchd, Averroës (d.1198). See Arkoun M., *Arab Thought*, (1st ed. PUF, Paris, 1975), Ed. PUF, Paris, 2012, pp. 66-75.

20 Arkoun M., *Quand l'islam s'éveilla*, Éd. Albin Michel, Paris, 2018. (English translation: *Islam: Between Message and History*, Edinburgh University Press in association with the Aga Khan University Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, Edinburgh, 2009

21 *Ibidem*

22 *Ibidem*

a principle developed by these same theologians and which consists in replacing verses considered obsolete by others, considered better. These remarks are extremely important and in themselves refute, M. Arkoun adds, "the dogma of the inviolability of legal norms defined by jurists in times and socio-cultural contexts unrelated to our own today".²³

The recognition of the historicization of religious texts, endowed with great capacities of sacralization, constitutes an advance in modern thought which radically changes "the theological status of the so-called revealed Texts".²⁴ Regarding this crucial point, M. Arkoun argues, the gap that exists today between Islamic thought and the advances made by Christian theological thought, Protestant in particular, is immense. This shift relating to the "theological status of so-called revealed Texts"²⁵ is passing through "its most tragic historical expression with terrorism"²⁶ which kills in the name of a *truth that sanctifies destructive violence* in the name of God, in both Muslim and non-Muslim societies.²⁷

Finally, M. Arkoun, who defines himself also as an actor of Islamic thought, undertaking a work of deconstruction – and not destruction – aimed at highlighting the historicity of the postulates of medieval dogmatic thought, is also concerned to propose modern reconstructions for believers. For the author, Muslims, men and women alike, would benefit from integrating, in particular, history, anthropology and modern linguistics. This would enable account to be taken of the richness of the Quranic text and its openness to a multitude of possibilities.²⁸ This recognition of the historical contingency of verses (relating to war, slavery, the status of women, etc.) would in no way prevent the guardians of Islam from developing a theology based on "transcendent" verses, metaphorical and altruistic, inscribed in a humanist, universalisable ethic, and respecting real equality between women and men and between believing and non-believing citizens.

23 Arkoun M., "La condition féminine en contextes islamiques", document communicated to the Dakira association in the context of its seminar on the question of Islam in May 2009.

24 Arkoun M. and Maïlla J., *De Manhattan à Bagdad. Au-delà du Bien et du Mal*, Éd. Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, 2003, p. 197.

25 *Ibidem*

26 *Ibidem*

27 *Ibidem*

28 Arkoun M., *ABC de l'Islam, Pour sortir des clôtures dogmatiques*, Éd. Grancher, Paris, 2007, pp. 74-97.

CRITICAL THINKING WITHIN ISLAM

VUB Crosstalks and Moussem set up a lecture series on critical thinking within Islam. In their ideas about Islamic civilisation both Muslim extremists and Islamophobes go back to an originally 'pure' Islam, which was supposedly born 1400 years ago, but in reality did not really exist. Islam was never one block, one movement. On the contrary, it has always been a very diverse culture, strengthened by acculturation and by coming in contact with the Greek, Persian, Indian, African culture etc. A history that is also full of dissidence, heresy and rebellion. These sects and alternative theological currents are at the root of a fascinating culture of debate. Philosophers from the golden age of Islam such as Al Farabi, Averroës, Avicenna, Abu Al Alaa Al Ma'ari Abu Bakr Al Razi, Omar Khayyam, Abu Hayyan Al Tawhidi... are founders of a culture based on reason and science. In today's complex world, attention to these forgotten thinkers is more than necessary.

In this context, we present a series of online lectures and publish a new text by the speaker that relates to the theme.