

The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought

Mohammad Arkoun

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Mohammad Arkoun's eight essays appearing in *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* are gates leading into a city. In this case, the city is the deeply multifarious metropolis called Islam – a source of identity and pride for its adherents and, equally, a source of concern and curiosity for those outside of its periphery. Throughout his life, Arkoun has placed himself on the ramparts and straddled the walls, leading some to call him an enemy spy and others to think of him as a brave pioneer into the unknown. The past few years have seen an unheralded evaluation of Islam's role in this globalized world. Arkoun's eight essays, reflecting a lifetime in the field of Islamic studies, concern themselves with a host of issues enveloping the world of Islam: Qur'anic studies, revelation, belief, authority, power, law, and civil society.

The idea of *unthought* is a creative encapsulation of those diseases that he believes are plaguing Islam. He defines *unthought* as the power employed by the traditional ulama and ideological Islamic states in order to guarantee that a deeply dogmatic and unapproachable version of Islam is protected from all intellectual and scientific analysis. Arkoun uses *unthought* to refer to "an Islam that is isolated from the most elementary historical reasoning, linguistic analysis or anthropological decoding" (p. 308).

The first essay, "A Critical Introduction to Qur'anic Studies," is a sort of outline of his ideas. It expresses Arkoun's suggestion that "we need to articulate the cognitive, critical strategies used by social sciences of the 'meta-modern' sort to analyze, in thorough fashion, the structure and form of the Qur'an, the 'differentiated corpora of Meccan and Medinan revelation, the 'psychology of knowledge,' the notions of sin, virtue, and interpersonal relations, and finally everything from society, law, culture to warfare, commerce and children" (p. 44). The scope is indeed overwhelmingly broad. Arkoun wants the preferred current mode of analytic evaluation in the social sciences – deconstruction, hermeneutics, and their various poststructuralist relatives – to be applied to Islamic studies. The Qur'an, he argues, has become heavily loaded by "legalistic instrumentalization, and the ideological manipulations of contemporary political movements" (p. 45).

On the one hand, he is concerned about the loss of critical Qur'anic reading; however, he is equally wary of carte-blanche dismissals of Islam

and religion by modern scholarship, which preaches a brand of “atheism that does not acknowledge itself” but, nevertheless, has managed to color all other discourses with its doctrinal brush (p. 46). Arkoun’s dual edged diatribe ought warn the reader that he is attempting to walk a fine line between dogmatism and nihilism, slashing both with the machete of his mind. In fact, those who would shrug Arkoun off as yet another Muslim applying western modes of thought to the Qur’an should note carefully his extended commentary on non-believers who write about faiths but do not concern themselves with the ordinary believers’ needs.

The second essay, “The Cognitive Status and Normative Function of Revelation,” is my favorite, in spite of its being the most technical and difficult to read, simply because Arkoun, using concrete examples and methodology, sets about handling one of the problems that lies at the heart of readdressing Islam: that the idea of revelation has been placed in the realm of the unthinkable in Islamic tradition. He refers to this as the “dogmatic enclosure” (p. 61).

Arkoun provides an example of his method in application and, to his credit, tackles one of the most difficult problems in Qur’anic interpretation: explaining the “sword verse” from *Surat at-Tawbah*. The verse begins by stating: “When the sacred months are over, slay the idolaters wherever you find them.” Neoconservatives and evangelical Christians often cite this verse in an effort to polemicize Islam and to give an example against claims by Muslims that Islam is in conformity with modernity. Arkoun explains that before passing judgment, the reader must understand why violence is sublimated in this particular context. He explains that the option to slay was not construed as a theological command by the warriors of that age, but was, to them, simply an expression of the idea of glory and victory they had internalized during their childhood via pre-Islamic legends and myths. He concludes that violence is not given a theological justification. Although the idea is not original in Islamic thought *per se*, Arkoun is among the first western Muslim scholars to enunciate it through a sociocultural reading of the text.

Arkoun concludes the chapter by making a number of proposals. The first is his wish to see through to publication an *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an* that would serve as a tower around which discussions, additions, revisions, and intellectual inquiry could take place. He also suggests reading the Qur’an by situating it in a comparative approach, “not only within the three monotheistic religions, but also within a historical anthropology of the religious phenomenon” as part of the geocultural ambiance of the

Mediterranean (p. 65). In the end, he suggests that all of those interested in opening the meanings of the Qur'an may look toward the creativity (not necessarily the conclusions) employed by such scholars as Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240).

The remainder of the essays deal with such contentious issues as authority, logocentrism (a structuralist method of analysis, especially of literary works, that focuses upon words and language to the exclusion of non-linguistic matters, such as an author's individuality or historical context), and the construction of the subjects in Islamic contexts. Students studying the relation of religion and politics should especially focus on the seventh and eighth essays, which discuss the Crusades, the Battle of Lepanto (1571), and Muslim civil society. In several sections, Arkoun presents an interreligious-ideological vision of the world, one in which the Abrahamic faiths and the humanist element in secular humanism come to accept each other for the betterment of humanity. Many in today's academia are concerned with arguing for the primacy of their own method of analysis over and above the betterment of humanity. One finds Arkoun's adherence to a humanist reading refreshing and inspiring.

This book is useful to that student of Islam who wishes to hoist upon his or her shoulders the challenges that change brings with it.

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