"Pushing the limits"

Introduction to the ideas and methods of Mohammed Arkoun
with special regard to his interpretation of Revelation

Written as a fulfilment of the requirements of the course:

"Islamic Theology"

Written by: Thomas Schönberger

Teacher: Dr. Jon Hoover

Date: 02.02.2010

Contents

1)   Introduction

The Qur'ān has been, and still is, an inexhaustible source of intellectual and spiritual reflection in Islamic history, past and present. This divine book was not only the study subject of commentators and interpreters, but also so essential a source to so as to represent Islam the ultimate connection between human and God, between the believer and faith, in a relation of interdependence and interpenetration alike. Muslims focus on the Qur'ān as the Word of God – handed down from heaven through the prophet Muhammad, "providing all the believers with clear eternal, indisputable norms, teachings and ideal commandments to enlighten this life and lead to Salvation in the next."[1]

The central position of this written corpus is not only being key-question to the religion(s)[2] of Islam, but rather how the Qur'ān should be read and perceived accordingly. On one hand, some Muslim scholars deal with the issue of exegesis, although orthodox premises mostly restrict them. On another hand, many non-Muslim scholars ask whether Islam – because of the Qur'ān – is reformable. In either way, Islam is pre-conceived and seen in these discussions as a "specific, essential, unchangeable system of thought, beliefs, and non-beliefs, one which is superior or inferior (according to Muslim or non-Muslims) to the West."[3]

Mohammed Arkoun is one scholar who goes beyond these narrow margins of Islamic Studies by incorporating methods analyses that are not usually part of what is considered to be the standard, used methodologies in the classical Islamic Studies. He calls for a critical reading of

---

[1] Arkoun, Mohammed: *Islam: To reform or to subvert?* Saqi Books, London 2006, p. 54.

[2] We have to keep in mind that Islam is not a monolithic entity; similar to Christianity it contains different religious views, movements and according to believers a huge diversity. Mohammed Arkoun mentions this point, he criticised the overall usage of the terms like "Islam", "Muslim" and "Islamic" (cf. Günther, Ursula: *Mohammed Arkoun: Ein moderner Kritiker der islamischen Vernunft*. Ergon Verlag, Würzburg 2004, p. 56-57).

[3] Arkoun, Mohammed: "Rethinking Islam Today." In Charles Kurzman; *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*. Oxford University Press 1998, p. 206.

Islamic reasoning/thought by the help of methodological approaches borrowed from social science,[4] this appears for instances in Arkoun's saying:

> „I [M. Arkoun] insist on a historical, sociological, anthropological approach not to deny the importance of the theological and philosophical, but to enrich them by the inclusion of the concrete historical and social conditions in which Islam always has been practiced."[5]

In doing so, Arkoun wants to re-open the 'bāb of ijtihād', a field/method of reasoning that is nowadays limited to a few, selective people within Islam, for the sake of authority to gain and preserve power. Hence, he proposes deconstructing the image of the one true Islam that is established and defended by orthodoxy during the last centuries. In this sense the deconstruction of the Islamic history, combined with an elaborate re-construction, has certainly a deep impact on the endeavour of developing new approaches to Qur'ān. The ultimate goal of Arkouns project[6] is nothing else than to "develop – through the example set by Islam as a religion and a social-historical space –– a new epistemological strategy for the comparative study of cultures."[7]

The present paper has the aim of elucidating the methodology of Mohammed Arkoun, led by the questions: how does Arkoun apply his above mentioned methodology to his study of the Islamic concept of Revelation and to what extent his methodology is based on an interdisciplinary social sciences. The first chapter will give a short overview of the life of Mohammed Arkoun. To take his reliance on the methods of scientific inquiry in other fields into account is necessary: to show firstly, by whom he was scholarly influenced, and to meet,

---

[4] Cf. Günther, Ursula: "Mohammed Arkoun: towards a radical rethinking of Islamic thought." In Shua Taji-Farouki; *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'ān.* Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies London 2006, pp. 125-169.

[5] Arkoun 1998: 207

[6] Although Arkoun developed the project – called „ The critic of Islamic Reason" – he points out very clear that it is only realizable and successfully if many scholars participate in it.

[7] Arkoun 1998: 206

secondly, post-modernist premise of self-reflection. In the second chapter, epistemological strategies are explained: by drawing different perspectives, which will make the aim of the project, as well as the significance of discourse-analyses more comprehensible. Mohammed Arkoun's central terminology and concepts are presented in the third chapter. It will be done by describing and analysing the terminology, the complex network of thoughts – that even Arkoun himself has not systematised,[8] – might be readily available, in order to find a precise answer to the question mentioned above. More or less, critical remarks on the project of Arkoun will be given in the fourth chapter, primarily on the impact of his method, conception and thinking with regard to the Qur'ānic Studies.

2)   Biographical outline

Mohammed Arkoun was born in 1928 in Taourit in Mimoun, Algeria. He grew up in an extended Berber family with a rather poor, traditional and religious background. At the age of nine, he moved together with his father to a small village, built up by French settlers in the East of Oran.[9] There, Arkoun realized for the first time his minority status and suffered from marginalisation because of his family background and his poor knowledge of French and Arabic. By the help of an uncle, he had the possibility of attending a French school and getting a good education. This uncle – a member of an Islamic brotherhood – was also responsible for Mohammed Arkoun's contact with Sufism and the knowledge of the basics of the Qur'ān. After he got his degree, as one of the few Muslims attending the French School (i.e. a Christian education system), he started to study Arabic literature at the university of Algiers. His personal interests in Islamic philosophy, geography and jurisprudence complemented his academic education. Finally, he left Algeria in November 1954, when the war for independence began, and moved to Paris to register for study at the Sorbonne University.

---

[8] Cf. Günther 2006: 126
[9] Oran is a city in North-Western Algeria.

After he did his examination at the Sorbonne in 1956, he moved to Strasbourg. According to Günther, "It was Claude Cahen, also teaching at Strasbourg University, who made him familiar with the ideas and concepts of the Annales School of Historians and their innovative approach to the history of the Muslim Orient."[10] Furthermore, it was the intellectual 'break-up' in the late 1950's and 1960's that shaped Arkoun's methodology and intellectual orientation in a sustainable way. While conventional methods, perspectives and problems were increasingly criticized, other scientific approaches, like structuralism and historical-critical analyses got more attention. This change within the academic disciplines was shaped by global questions, especially by the ones concerning the so-called "third world" as it is manifested in the work of Frantz Fanon.

Two changes are visible in Arkoun's dissertation about Ibn Miskawayh[11] and Arab humanism in the tenth century, which he started writing in 1968 and finished in 1970. On the one hand, Arkoun could establish himself scientifically because of this work. On the other hand, during his research and work on the Persian philosopher Miskawayh he gained a deep knowledge in the field of medieval studies. From this time onwards he also realised that Islamic studies, as well as the broader field of academic disciplines, which are dealing with Islam or Muslims in general, are mostly reduced to Sunnism and Arabism.

Finally, Mohammed Arkoun served at the Sorbonne from 1963 to 1993; he has been a visiting professor at many universities around the globe. Although, Arkoun is recently Emeritus Professor of the History of Islamic Thought at the Sorbonne, he still lectures and acts as a

---

[10] Günther 2006: 128

[11] „Mishawayh represents a formative impulse in Arkoun's thought: the correlation of socio-cultural and socio-political circumstances, and the success or failure of intellectual currents, all of which corresponds to the reflection on modalities of mental structures at a certain time in a certain place. Therefore the study of Miskawayh, […], provided impetus for undertaking the long-term project of a critique of Islamic reason embedded in the generic context of religious thought. This critique is at the heart of Arkoun's approach and reveals his self-assessment as a scholar" (Günther 2006: 129).

Board member in 'The Institute of Ismaili Studies'. In a retrospective consideration of his life, all the people who inspired him, and all the clashes concerning origin, culture, acceptance, identity, so forth have fostered his intellectual formation and clarified his project. Ever since his early scholarly career he continually traversed the borders between languages, cultures and religious traditions. Even when many times he was in the marginal position, he always searched for an insightful method of research, pursuing a new and far-reaching approach in "departing from orthodox delimitations and dogmatic enclosure"[12] and primarily focusing on the hermeneutic, of the sacred texts, aiming to uncover the meanings and structures beyond religious imaginations.[13]

---

[12] Günther 2006: 131

[13] For the biographical information and facts above I used the dissertation paper „*Mohammed Arkoun: Ein moderner Kritiker der islamischen Vernunft*" (p. 23-35) written by Ursula Günther Ergon Verlag, Würzburg 2004, and her article; "Mohammed Arkoun: towards a radical rethinking of Islamic thought" in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'ān*, edited by Suha Taji-Farouki 2006: pp. 125-169. Oxford University Press in association with 'The Institute of Ismaili Studies' London.

3)   Epistemological perspective

The core of Arkoun's thought laid in the keyword "episteme".[14] In other words, in an "epistemological"[15] critique. For this reason, he raises the question: under what verifiable circumstance does the idea of truth assume a definite form and produce an individual destiny or a collective history?[16] In doing so, he stipulates a comprehensive re-thinking about the conventional methodology of religious studies, or the methods of modern social science, incorporation therein linguistic and semiotic theories from Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes, methods of structural-anthropology from Claude Levi-Strauss and psychology analysis from Jacques Lacan.[17] Through this holistic and historical approach, Arkoun presents a so-called "exhaustive tradition"[18], which embraces all Muslim traditions, even these Islamic currents that were excluded or marginalised by the orthodoxy of the 'official' religious Institutes of Islam. Arkoun speaks about the "critique of Islamic reason"[19] and the look of a proper appraisal within Islam that makes certain cognitive systems gain power and others vanish when he says:

> To control the epistemological validity of any discourse, it is necessary to discover and analyze the implicit postulates. This work has never been done for any discourse in Islamic thought.[20]

To rethink Islam in this sense means that "any kind and level of knowledge produced by man living, acting and thinking in a given social-historical situation"[21] must be taken into account.

---

[14] Arkoun adopt the term "episteme" from Michel Foucault. It concerns the following: a system of meanings and cognitive schemata of values/categories, which build the foundation for knowledge, science and philosophy at a specific time. That means all imaginations, religious doctrines and postulates which have an influence on a system of thought and are channelling the discourse – the way people talked about reality – at a certain epoch. (cf. Günther 2004: 267)

[15] Arkoun 1998: 208

[16] Cf. Günther 2004

[17] Cf. Siti Rohmah Soekarba: „The Critique of Arab thought: Mohammed Arkoun's deconstruction method" In *Makara, sosial Humaniora, Vol. 10, No. 2, December 2006: 79-87.* Online available: journal.ui.ac.id/upload/.../04_Siti%20Rohmah%20-%20Revisi.pdf (02.02.2010)

[18] „The sociology of failure combined with the sociology of success." (Arkoun 2002: 29).

[19] Arkoun cited by Günther 2004: 80

[20] Arkoun 1998: 208

[21] Arkoun 1998: 210

Referring to Islamic history, the project and aim of Mohammed Arkoun become more understandable in his special attention to the communication and development of the Qurʾān received as revelation. Although he bestows importance upon the primary function of the Revelation of Qurʾān, he claims that questions of faith should not be central to the analyses. We have rather to notice the discourse beyond these questions. Thus a meta-level of interpretation is the outcome. Verifying or falsifying the revelatory nature of the texts is no longer crucial matter, but rather extraction of the biological, linguistic, historical and semiotic statements of the texts as ones that are composed by natural beings.

> From this perspective, the Revelation of Islam is only one attempt, among many others, to emancipate human beings from the natural limitations of their biological, historical, and linguistic conditions.[22]

One reason why this approach is still "unthinkable" or "unthought" [23] in the domain of orthodox Islamic thought are the concepts of "reason" and "science" (ʿilm). Arkoun claims that while the European societies have implemented free modern thinking during the last four centuries, Muslim orthodoxy still uses the concepts elaborated in Qurʾānic discourses because the "epistéme introduced by Qurʾān has not been intellectually reconsidered." [24] This narrow and static view on Islamic doctrines and Islamic history – i.e. the generating of the "thinkable" and the ban of the "unthinkable" – appears in the present Islamic revivalism and in the activities of those who are its real or perceived proponents. This means that the so-called 'orthodoxy'[25] has monopolized the discourse on Islam.

---

[22] Arkoun 1998: 210

[23] The terms 'thinkable' and 'unthinkable' are described in chapter four.

[24] Arkoun 1998: 208

[25] Mohammed Arkoun uses the term ‚orthodoxy' as denomination for the official religion, established by the majority, the 'ulamā' in connection with the political state. He, according to Pierre Bourdieu, claims that orthodoxy systems are based on mutual exclusions, manifested for example in the contradictions between orthodoxy and heresy. The phenomenon of orthodoxy is equivalent to an ideological, and therefore a historical, process. (cf. Günther 2004: 60)

Against this orthodoxy, Arkoun highly values the Islamic traditions like 'Mu'tazilits' and the Islamic 'falsafa', placing himself on the line of such historical traditions. He proposes to integrate, as al-Ghazzalī or Ibn Rushd did, "new disciplines, new knowledge, and new historical insights into Islam as a spiritual and historical vision of human existence."[26] All of those philosophers worked on philosophical questions, yet they simultaneously them with integrated their religious thoughts without becoming dogmatically confined.[27] One central method to illuminate a more multifarious picture of Islam than the one that was drawn by orthodoxy and orientalism-literature is the method of deconstruction. Therefore, we have to explain the methods and terminology of Arkoun before we start looking at his approach on the issue of revelation.

4)   Methods and terminology

I mentioned above, according to Arkoun the notion and the thorough analyses of orthodoxy plays a decisive role in the rethinking of the whole Islamic theology. Because social groups usually "perceive and construct history by means of the system of belief and non-belief and imaginations established by orthodoxy,"[28] it is not only one of the most important factors, it is also the key to go beyond dogmatic enclosure.

> For centuries religions have dominated the construction of different, intricate *Weltanschauungen* [world views] through which all realities were perceived, judged, classified, accepted, and rejected without the possibility of looking back at the mental-historical process which led to each *Weltanschauung* [world view]. The strategy of deconstruction is possible only with modern critical epistemology.[29]

---

[26] Arkoun 1998: 207
[27] cf. Günther 2004: 63
[28] Günther 2004: 139
[29] Arkoun 1998: 207

To apply this deconstruction[30], Arkoun implements a complex terminology and claims that any observation of a given society – in the past as well as in the present – should corresponds to the meaning of the term *imaginaire*[31]: the sphere of dominant perceptions in combination with images and imaginations about the reality that is given in a certain common socio-historical context.[32] Arkoun distinguishes between three types of *imaginaire.* 1) The religious *imaginaire*[33], "containing all convictions within faith that are accepted, thought and expressed as being true, and therefore do not allow critical reasons to interfere."[34]. 2) A social *imaginaire*, based on a dynamic combination of ideas and forces within a collective *Habitus*[35] that shapes identity and 3) a third form that is involved with the creating of the social one and is called the individual *imaginaire.* Although the Qu'rān is the basis of the *imaginaire*, it is not a static concept; it is rather a dynamical one that is interdependent with the ethic of Islam.[36] In doing so, Arkoun's anthropological orientation is to unearth the 'myth of origins' and the 'regimes of truth'.[37]

In order to uncover the 'regimes of truth' and deconstruct Islamic history – which concurs with his critique on Islamic reason[38] – he utilizes the terms 'thinkable' and 'unthinkable/unthoughts' arguing that both must be understood as historical concepts. Arkoun shows that before the systematization of the *Sunna* – and the use of it through the 'Uṣūlī' – many aspects of Islamic thought were open to discuss but become later unthinkable. The

---

[30] Arkoun understands „deconstruction" in the way like Jacques Derrida has defined it.

[31] According to Arkoun, there is no accurate English translation for the French term „imaginaire". Best fits „Imagination" or the German term „Vorstellungswelt".

[32] Cf. Günther 2004: 267

[33] Concerning the generating and use of different aspects of Religious Imaginary see also: Arkoun, Mohammed: *The unthought in contemporary Islamic thought*. Saqi Books, London 2002, pp. 274-298.

[34] Günther 2006: 150

[35] In reference to Pierre Bourdieu. (cf. Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press 1977)

[36] Cf. Günther 2004: 267-268

[37] Cf. Arkoun 2002: 50

[38] Islamic reason in that sense is equivalent to ‚orthodoxy', the system, which gives structure to the collective *imaginaire* of Muslims. (cf. Günther 2004: 269)

Mu'tazilites School, for example, had "thinkable issues – such as the issue of God's created speech – declared unthinkable afterwards by the Caliph al-Qādir."[39] While there was, from the thirteenth century onwards, a slowly decline of thinkable issues, the amount of the unthinkable increased steadily up until today.

> What interests us her is the accumulation of unthinkables and unthoughts during the four centuries form the sixteenth century to the present, during which Europe/the West was constructing intellectual, political, legislative and cultural modernity in Western Europe. Not only did Islamic thought play no part at all in this development; it cut itself off from its own classical heritage by eliminating the practice of philosophy and even theology, which so enriched religious thought in the past and has yet to be reinstated.[40]

With regard to the Qu'rānic Studies, Mohammed Arkoun gives one example on how this process narrowed down the extend of reasoning in contemporary Islamic thought. A linguistic analyses of the Qu'rānic discourse is still almost impossible because neither the "the *divine* word expressed in Arabic which is itself elected as a *divine* language"[41] nor the text as an "indivisible part of the *uncreated Qur'ān* collected in the *Muṣḥaf*"[42] is questionable. In rejecting all the methods of modern human sciences, the rich philosophical debates in classical theology as well as the potential of making the unthinkable thinkable are frequently ignored. To the contrary, the aim of orthodoxy is to preserve and support this system of unthoughts.[43]

Another means for breaking through the boundaries of orthodoxy lies in the analytical categories, "Islamic fact/event" and the "Qur'ānic fact/event". These categories "allow a differentiation between a linguistic event and the consolidation of the new religion."[44] Furthermore, these categories takes into account all the social, political and cultural factors,

---

[39] Arkoun 2002: 13
[40] Arkoun 2002: 17
[41] Arkoun 2002: 34
[42] Arkoun 2002: 34
[43] Cf. Arkoun 2002: 33-35
[44] Günther 2006: 143

which affected, supported or used the system of belief in order to legitimize and maintain power. The concepts of "Qur'ānic"- and "Islamic fact" should provide a reliable framework, where in historical, linguistic, hermeneutical and anthropological inquiries can be raised. In doing so, Arkoun's interest does not lie in criticising the truth of one particular religion or faith as such, but in showing how religion and faith are interdependent with other aspects in a given society.[45]

> In the case of ‚Islam', the dialectic of the ‚Qur'ānic fact' and the ‚Islamic fact' remains to be defined. It presupposes the identification of the ‚Qur'ānic fact' as a historical, linguistic, discursive stage different from the subsequent stage called 'Islamic fact' with all the political, theological, juridical, mystical, literary and historiographical expansions, elaborations and doctrinal disputes.[46]

Therefore, 'Qur'ānic fact' can be understood as the historical expression of an oral discourse, in a certain time and in a certain socio-cultural milieu. On the linguistically level, it is clear that the discourse is based on the Arabic language, first a religious consciousness is generated, later on the meaning/message is elevated, especially through a metaphorical speech, in a mythical and symbolical sphere. The semiotic analyses, focused on the relation between God acting as sender and Muhammad, the privilege and passive receiver in connection to the categories of "believer" and "un-believer". The historical level show that the 'Qur'ānic discourse' contains therein the life and the activities of a social actor called Muhammad Ibn 'Abdallāh.[47]

With the death of Muhammad (632 AD), the discourse switched, and a transformation from the 'Qur'ānic fact' to the 'Islamic fact' took place. First, as it is mentioned above, the message transmitted by the prophet was an "oral enunciations, heard and memorized by disciples."[48]

---

[45] Cf. Günther 2004: 83-86
[46] Arkoun 2002: 262
[47] Cf. Günther 2004: 85-90
[48] Arkoun, Mohammed: *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*. Mohammed Arkoun translated and edited by Robert D. Lee. Westview Press 1994, p. 32.

Later on, this oral message was "elevated to the status of a Closed Official Corpus[49] according to procedures developed and supervised by scholars."[50] This transformation turned out because political-powers, amongst others, preferred certain interpretations and were interested in eliminating or prohibiting deviant understandings. Thus an official orthodox Islam – founded on a Corpus, called *Muṣḥaf,* a collection declared as complete, finished and closed – came into existence and is since then determining the 'Islamic fact'. [51]

In conclusion Mohammed Arkoun hopes that on the basis of analyzing categories like 'Islamic fact' and Qur'ānic fact' as well as concepts like 'imaginaire', 'unthought' and 'unthinkable', by the help of discourse-analyses, semiotic and other methods of inquiry borrowed from social science, an anthropology of religion, and in long term, a philosophical theology will originate in Islamic studies. How this project is to put in execution should be scribed in the next chapter. The primary aim here is to illustrate the wide range of Arkoun's approach – drafted on the question of revelation – and his adaptation of methods from other human sciences.

---

[49] Characterized as an entity of faith-doctrines, descriptions, postulates and other subject matters. Through the systematisation of the revelation-theories by means of 'ilm al-uṣūl through the 'ulamā' a dogmatic closed corpus developed.

[50] Arkoun 1994: 33

[51] Cf. Arkoun 1994: 35 and Günther 2004: 88

5)   Interpretation of Revelation by Mohammed Arkoun

In the following pages, I will refer to Arkoun's discussions in his article "Rethinking Islam today"[52], where he proposes essential "heuristic lines of thinking to recapitulate Islamic knowledge and to confront it with contemporary knowledge in the process of elaboration."[53] Arkoun's complex terminology and interdisciplinary approach become compacted in his interpretation of Revelation. His ultimate goal, as drawn in the previous pages and will be shown on the following ones, is summarized here in a condensed manner.

> Modern rationality restores the psychological and cultural functions of myth and develops a global strategy of knowledge in which the rational and the imaginary interact perpetually to produce individual and historical existence. We must abandon the dualist framework of knowledge that pits reason against imagination, history against myth, true against false, good against evil, and reason against faith.[54]

5.1 The matter of 'language'

In the three monotheistic religions, Revelation was received first as an oral message.[55] This means for Arkoun that revelation is transmitted in human language (Aramaic, Arabic, Hebrew) and has linguistic codes. In each society "realities are expressed through languages as [a] system of signs. Signs are the radical issue for a critical, controlled knowledge."[56] Furthermore, there is interdependency of language and the perceptions, expressions, interpretations and of course communication in a given society.[57]

Therefore the postulate of Islamic orthodoxy, which is based on the "privilege of the Arabic

---

[52] Arkoun 1998: 205-222
[53] Arkoun 1998: 210
[54] Arkoun 1994: 37
[55] This distinction between the oral language – according to Arkoun – the earlier language form and more original than the written one, is important. (cf. Arkoun 1998: 205-222)
[56] Arkoun 1998: 210
[57] Cf. Arkoun 1998: 210-211

language elected by God to 'teach Adam all the names'"[58] is no longer unapproachable. "The core of Islamic thought is thus represented as a linguistic and semantic issue."[59] To uncover this core, Mohammed Arkoun uses amongst others the methodology of the theoretical linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. He differentiates between French words, "langue" (language or tongue) as a system and language as a speech (parole).

> *Parole* is an activity or a process and it is diachronic. *Langue* as a structure is a web of internal relationship amongst elements of language and it is synchronic. *Parole* is individual and intentional, as *langue* is collective and anonym.[60]

In using linguistic methods, Arkoun takes not only into account the shift from the oral to the written language, which goes along with the transformation from the prophet discourse to a teaching discourse. He also tries to find hidden meanings in the text. He, in other words, deconstructs the text and reconstructs the context. It fallows from this that Arkoun claims to understand Qur'ānic text, as revelation, "not only as langue, but also as parole for the society"[61] in our time.[62]

5.2 Semiotic issues

The approach of Arkoun and his use of linguistic methods stand in a close correlation with the issue of semiotics as characterised by Saussure, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. The focus lies here in the fact that every invention even all the productions of human kind are bound to our terrestrial and historical existence. This means that there is neither a justified demand of transcendence by theological and metaphysical reason, nor access to the absolute truth. There is only semiotic methodology.[63]

---

[58] Arkoun 1998: 211
[59] Arkoun 1998: 211
[60] Siti Rohmah Soekarba 2006: 80
[61] Siti Rohmah Soekarba 2006: 80
[62] Cf. Siti Rohmah Soekarba 2006
[63] Cf. Arkoun 1998: 207-212

All semiotic productions of a human being in the process of his social and cultural emergency are subject to historical change which I call historicity. As a semiotic articulation of meaning for social and cultural uses, the Qur'ān is subject to historicity.[64]

Including semiotic aspects means carrying out an extended analyses of signs (mentioned in chapter 5.1) in accordance with Roland Barthes and his understanding of how a signifier is related to a signified, the relation between signs and the things to which they refer become obviously. Hence, not only the effects of signs on those people who use them are comprehended, but also the tools, definitions and concepts, which are used to shape the truth are uncovered.[65] "The concept of Revelation should be reworked in the light of semiotic systems subjected to historicity."[66]

5.3   *Imaginaire* and the Question of Myth

In dependency on anthropological knowledge,[67] the human being, as embedded in and connected to the social circumstances, comes into question. The complex category of social *imaginaire*[68] takes into account how an individual as a member of group is influenced through the group and how individual actions shape the group itself. Identity is therefore produced through belonging to an in-group and distinctions to an out-group (the others). Thus a common history, tradition[69] as well as a common identity, based on a selective issues and facts, is represented through the group and strengthened – most of the time subconsciously – through the individual.[70]

---

[64] Arkoun 1998: 211
[65] Cf. Arkoun 1998: 211
[66] Arkoun 1998: 211
[67] In example Pierre Bourdieu and Clifford Geertz.
[68] See Chapter 3: 7
[69] „[...] the concept of tradition as it used in anthropology today – the sum of customs, laws, institutions, beliefs, rituals, and cultural values which constitute the identity of each ethno-linguistic group." Arkoun 1998: 209.
[70] Cf. Arkoun 1998: 211 and Arkoun 2006: 299

The Revelation translated into a sublime, symbolic, and transcendental language the daily public life of the group whose identity and *imaginaire* were separated from the hostile, non-converted groups (called infidels hypocrites, enemies of God, errants, and bedouins). [...] in the Qur'ān the growth of a new collective social-cultural *imaginaire* nourished by new systems of connotation whose semantic substance was not primarily an abstract vision of an idealistic dreaming mind but the historic crystallization of events shared at the time by all members of the group.[71]

Based on these proposals, the concept of myth – adopted from Paul Ricoeur[72] – must be noted. For Arkoun, the stories in the Bible, the Qur'ānic text, the 'legend' of the Golden age and so forth must be under consideration within a process of mythical analysis. Myths do not yet have relevant conceptualizations, neither in the Islamic Studies nor in the Arabic language itself.[73]

5.4 Discourse Analyses

With regard to the linguistic and semiotic methods in chapter 5.1 and 5.2, the analysis of the Islamic discourse has to start with the fact that "Islam is given as revealed in the grammatical structure of Qur'ānic discourse, and it is received as such by the psychological consciousness generated by this discourse and the ritual performances prescribed by it."[74] According to Jacques Derrida and Michael Foucault, every discourse is characterized by how people talk about reality. Thus a critical discourse analysis is always a method of deconstruction, as mentioned above. Discourse in this sense is an "ideological articulation of realities as they are perceived and used by different competing groups occurs prior to the faith."[75]

---

[71] Arkoun 1998: 219

[72] „Ricoeur defined myth as a secondary symbol that talk about human being. That is why myth is something that should not be left to modernize human thought. What should be left is the misuse of the myth. Arkoun takes over this theory" Siti Rohmah Soekarba 2006: 80.

[73] „Myth is translated as ustura [plural: asatir], which is totally misleading because the Qur'ān uses the word for the false tales [...]" Arkoun 1998: 208.

[74] Arkoun 1998: 214

[75] Arkoun 1998: 211

Concerning revelation, the aim must be to discover an "exhaustive tradition"[76] and in doing so, to show, that faith itself is embedded in, and is influenced by, various other circumstances, like political and scientific discourses. Faith was, therefore, first shaped by discourses at the time of Muhammad. Later on, this faith imposes its own direction and paved the way for subsequent discourses and individual and collective behaviours.

> Faith is the crystallization of images, representations, and ideas commonly shared by each group engaged in the same historical experience. It is more that the personal relation to religious beliefs; but it claims a spiritual or a metaphysical dimension to give a transcendental significance to the political, social, ethical and aesthetic values to which refers each individual inside each unified social group or community.[77]

5.5 Epistemology

I have already explained the centrality of epistemology (see chapter 3). Arkoun proposes a new ranking of rational methods, thus the conventional system of legitimization which was developed, imposed and represented by theologians (Usul al-din) and jurists (Usul al-fiqh), has to be detached by modern scientific knowledge.[78] In doing so, the divine law that is derived from Revelation would become a historical-shaped subject. As a result, the mythical belief that it is a totally rationalized law that cannot be transformed by any human legislation would fall apart.[79]

> [...] the Qur'ān, presented as the revelation and received as such by the individual and the collective memory, is continuously reproduced, rewritten, reread, and re-expressed in a changing social-historical space.[80]

Scientific knowledge in this sense, adopted from contemporary social sciences, does not aim to demonstrate if one belief is based on an incorrect assumption, but to illustrate that there is a

---

[76] See chapter 3: p. 5
[77] Arkoun 1998: 211
[78] Cf. Arkoun 2006: 55-56
[79] Cf. Arkoun 1998: 216
[80] Arkoun 1998: 220

distinction between modern reason and the linguistic shaping logic of the Qur'ān, because this logic is the production of the epistemological environment of Muhammad.[81] Hence, it raises the question how a group monopolizes the legitimacy of power[82], an issue that leads us to the next chapter.

5.6 The ultimate meaning and the 'Societies of the Book'

In searching for the ultimate meaning, we have to come back to Arkoun's *Leitmotiv* that lies in the question about under which identifiable circumstances the idea of 'truth' assumes a definitive form in order to create an individual destiny or a collective history. "We have no right to reject the possibility of its existence. What is questionable is how to base all our thoughts on the postulate of its existence."[83] In doing so, we have to take up again the "communication of the Qur'ān received as revelation and the historical process through which a social group [...] emerged and dominated other groups.[84]

Here, the Qur'ānic/Islamic context is put in the broader context of the Near East religious history. Arkoun makes at this point the distinction between two different meanings of the Book, first the "Heavenly Book preserved by God and containing the entire word of God"[85] and "its terrestrial manifestations through religious *imaginaire*."[86] In uncovering the second meaning of the book, the circuit – concerning the approach of Arkoun – is complete. These analyses, carried out as an exhaustive discovering of all traditions, an inquiry "thinkable" and "unthinkable" issues. It opens the field to explore the dialectic between "the official culture produced and used under the ideological supervision of the state, that is, the orthodox religion

---

[81] Cf. Rippin, Andrew: *Muslims: their religious beliefs and practices*, third edition. London: Routledge, 2005: 254
[82] Cf. Arkoun 1998: 212
[83] Arkoun 1998: 212
[84] Arkoun 1998: 207
[85] Arkoun 1998: 215
[86] Arkoun 1998: 216

defined and enforced"[87] by jurists and theologians, on the one hand, and the "non integrated, resisting groups using oral, non-official culture and keeping alive non-orthodoxy beliefs,"[88] on the other hand. In this sense, Revelation is one essential instrument to "maintain the possibility of giving a 'transcendent' legitimization to the social order and the historical process accepted by the group."[89]

6)   Conclusion

Indeed, there is a need to ask critical questions concerning Islam today, and of course there is a need to reinforce Qur'ānic exegesis. But in doing so, we cannot use a methodology, which is either based on orientalistic literature or theological dogmas, for all are loaded with symbolical, historical and cultural connotations. We have to expand the approach, in order to grasp the whole complexity, even the un-thought conceivability. The success of the long-term project will depend on the participation of interdisciplinary scholars and how Arkoun's recommendations will be adopted in the field of Islamic studies. Especially, many Muslim scholars have to recognize that the aim of Mohammed Arkoun is not to deny religion as such, but to show that it is a psycho-linguistic, social and historical construct represented through the orthodoxy as unique and true religion.[90] We can conclude then by this quotation from Arkoun himself:

> The acts of building a mosque on the site of an ancient temple, of designating Friday as a day for collective prayer, of facing Mecca rather than Jerusalem, of fasting for an entire month as opposed to a few days, of changing the mythical figures of Isaac, Ishmael, Abraham, Moses and Jesus, of discussion Gods existence, of redefining the revelation are all forms of encoding – ritual, cultural, ethical, judicial, and political levels of human existence to transform each religion into the unique ‚true religion'.[91]

---

[87] Arkoun 1998: 217
[88] Arkoun 1998: 217
[89] Arkoun 1998: 220
[90] Arkoun 2002: 41
[91] http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0395#e0395-s0002 (02.02.2010)

7)   Bibliography

ARKOUN, Mohamed: "Rethinking Islam Today". In Charles Kurzman; *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook.* Oxford University Press 1998 pp. 205-222.

ARKOUN, Mohammed: *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers.* Mohammed Arkoun translated and edited by Robert D. Lee, Westview Press 1994

ARKOUN, Mohammed: *The unthought in contemporary Islamic thought.* London: Saqi Books, 2002.

ARKOUN, Mohammed: *Islam: To reform or to subvert?* London: Saqi Books, 2006 (Originally published as *Unthought in contemporary Islamic thought*: London: Saqi Books, 2002).

GÜNTHER, Ursula: "Mohammed Arkoun: towards a radical rethinking of Islamic thought." In: Shua Taji-Farouki; *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'ān.* Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies London 2006 pp 125-169.

GÜNTHER, Ursula: *Mohammed Arkoun: Ein moderner Kritiker der islamischen Vernunft.* Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2004.

RIPPIN, Andrew: *Muslims: their religious beliefs and practices*, third edition. London: Routledge, 2005.

SOERKARBA, Siti Rohmah: „The Critique of Arab thought: Mohammed Arkoun's deconstruction method." In: *Makara, Sosial Humaniora, Vol. 10, No. 2, December 2006: 79-87.* Online available: journal.ui.ac.id/upload/.../04_Siti%20Rohmah%20-%20Revisi.pdf (Retrieved on 02.02.2010)

http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0395#e0395-s0002 (Retrieved on 02.02.2010)