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Mohammed Arkoun

## A Modern Critic of Islamic Reason

**Initially considered to be either an Islamist thinker or an all-too-liberal critic of Muslim traditions, Mohammad Arkoun is now gaining a reputation as one of the Islamic world's most important modern thinkers, writes Burhan Schawi**



Islam has suffered from the abolishment of a culture of criticism, says Mohammed Arkoun

Though one of the Islamic world's most important modern thinkers, Mohammed Arkoun has largely been ignored – and not only by Germany's Middle Eastern and Islamic scholars. Even the Arab world has paid little attention to this outstanding theorist of contemporary Islamic culture.

Were it not for the tireless efforts and translations of the scholar

Hashem Saleh, Mohammed Arkoun would still be unknown to the non-French-speaking cultural elites in the Arab world. Yet his provocative thoughts are meeting with resistance.

The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World describes Arkoun as one of the most important modern Islamic thinkers.

### A critique of Islamic reason

The German Islamic scholar Ursula Günther has written a dissertation about Arkoun, published by the German publisher Ergon under the title: Mohammed Arkoun – Ein moderner Kritiker der islamischen Vernunft (Mohammed Arkoun – a Modern Critic of Islamic Reason).

For Ursula Günther, Arkoun's importance lies in the fact that he uses the findings and methods of modern social sciences and humanities in his analysis of Islam, harnessing structuralism, semiotics, structural anthropology, discourse analysis and post-structuralism to develop his own theory of Islam and Islamic reason.

Another crucial factor, according to Günther, is that Arkoun is a long-time resident of France, thus bridging the gap between Orient and Occident. Due to his familiarity with the West's Middle Eastern and Islamic studies on the one hand and Islamic research and the Islamic view of the West (for example, that of Hassan Hanafi) on the other, he is capable of taking a critical view of both sides and resisting the one-sided perspectives which often dominate Western and Islamic research and literature.

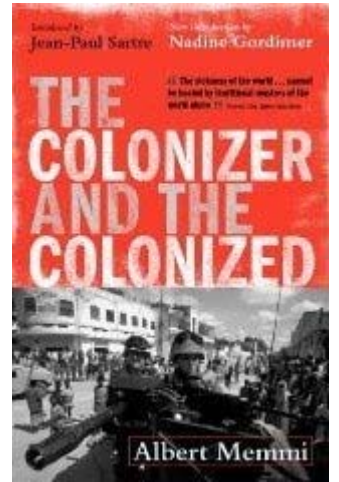
Thus, "critique" can be regarded as the crux of Arkoun's

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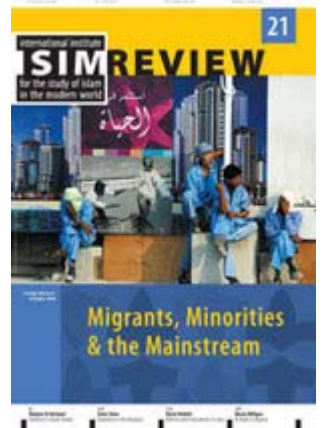
### Albert Memmi



First published in English in 1965, Albert Memmi's classic explores the psychological effects of colonialism on colonized and colonizers alike.

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### Islam in Europe



The **International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World** has released its new edition of the ISIM Review, focusing on migrants, minorities, and the mainstream. [Click here](#)

thinking. His central concern – the critique of Islamic reason – surfaces in all his publications and interviews, especially in his book *Pour une critique de la raison islamique*.

### **Christian compassion and the Islam of the common people**

Mohammed Arkoun was born in 1928 in Taourit Mimoun in the Larger Kabylia of Algeria, the son of a Berber family. At the age of nine he moved with his father to a prosperous village near Oran inhabited by French settlers. This change of scenery came as a shock for Arkoun. He realized that, as a Berber, he belonged to a minority and lacked the status and rights of the Arabs. Moreover, he now had to learn Arabic and French in order to communicate.

Arkoun was much influenced by his uncle, an ardent adherent of mystical Islam who provided him with a good education. This explains Arkoun's understanding of the influence which religion has on people, as well as his knowledge about and experiences with Sufism and the Islam of the common people. His uncle acquainted him with the basics of Islam and the Koran, while also accompanying him and his father to the religious gatherings which were part of everyday life in the village.

However, the family's financial situation made it impossible for Arkoun to continue his education in the capital. From 1941 to 1945 he attended a school in a neighboring town that was run by monks. Arkoun describes this time as one in which he discovered Latin culture and literature, coming to know the Church Fathers, Augustine, Cyprian, and Tertullian, and Christian values, particularly that of compassion.

From 1950 to 1954 he studied Arabic literature in Algiers, also exploring law, philosophy, geography and especially Arabic philosophy, in the hopes of being able to study in Paris.

### **Frantz Fanon and the "Third Way"**

In the mid-fifties Arkoun enrolled at the Sorbonne. In this time of upheaval he was preoccupied, like many others of his generation, with the interests of the Third World, the search for a "third way" and the development of political consciousness in these countries, influenced by the writings of Frantz Fanon. However, Algeria's liberation and Boumédiène's government put an abrupt end to the hopes held by Arkoun and his generation.

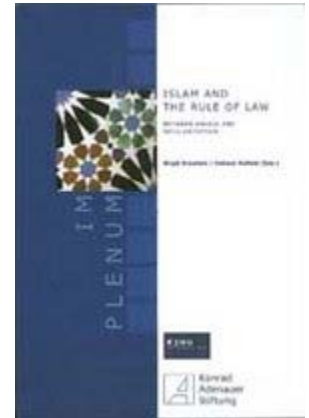
The following years in France were also difficult ones for Arkoun. Like other Muslim intellectuals who had adopted European methods of scholarship, he was unwelcome in Europe, regarded as someone who rejected European modernity and was hostile to Europe.

He was unwelcome in his homeland as well, where he was seen as a representative of the imperialist west and its European culture and methods, its liberal and hostile publications.

In 1971 Arkoun became a professor for "Islamic intellectual history" at the Sorbonne; from 1993 onwards he has been a visiting professor at many universities and research institutes,

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### **Sharia and Secularization**



"Islam and the Rule of Law" is the title of a new monograph published by **Centre for Modern Oriental Studies**, Berlin, and the **Konrad Adenauer Foundation**. [Click here](#), to down the the PDF file...

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in particular at the "Institute of Ismaili Studies" in London. In 1999 he finally founded the "Institut d'Études des Sociétés Musulmanes" in Paris, a project to which he had been committed since 1970.

### **Arkoun's critique of rigid thinking**

According to Arkoun, the development of Islamic thought since the 13th Century has led to an inflation in the number of things it is impossible to think about. The result today is rigid thinking and intransigent convictions which call for criticism.

In his central work, *Pour une critique de la raison islamique*, Arkoun attempts to bring a new perspective to Islam's legitimation by reinterpreting the sources himself. In so doing he goes back to the roots of the religion and Islamic law, whose stipulations regarding analysis, interpretation, research and deduction have been regarded as infallible and inviolable to this day, despite the changed historical and social circumstances.

Arkoun does not negate these laws, but rather aspires toward a modern interpretation, which he regards as urgently necessary for two reasons: on the one hand, to compensate for the vacuum in leadership and legitimacy in the nations founded after independence; on the other, to combat the population growth which, according to Arkoun, goes along with political romanticism and laws fostering unemployment, frustration, poverty and the emergence of marginalized social groups.

### **Intellectual impotence, stereotyped thinking**

According to Arkoun, in this situation people fall back upon their cultural heritage, their religion and tradition, encouraged by Muslim scholars who never weary of invoking the "Golden Age" of Islam but avoid confronting the time of "decline" which preceded the modern era.

In actual fact, Arkoun argues, for centuries Islamic reason has been dominated by intellectual impotence, stereotyped thinking and laziness, finally leading to the abolishment of any scope for criticism.

With his critique of Islamic reason, Arkoun pursues the goal of bravely and uncompromisingly confronting Islam with all its flawed understandings, legends, slogans and visions, yet without being condescending. This analysis could create a synthesis enabling an alternative thinking that would stand in contrast to the previous current of Islamic thought.

*Burhan Schawi*

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*Translation from German: Isabel Cole*

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Erasmus Prize 2004

**Important Figures from the Islamic World Awarded**

This year's Erasmus Prize, which is endowed with € 150,000, goes to Sadik Al-Azm, Fatema Mernissi and

Abdulkarim Soroush. Martina Sabra spoke to laureate Al-Azm, who currently teaches in Antwerp, Belgium

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