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The Historical Development of Muhammad Arkoun's Thought on the Sacred and the Profane in Islamic Thought

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Abstract

This study examines Muhammad Arkoun's thought on the sacred and the profane in Islamic thought and analyzes how these categories shape the historical development of Islamic intellectual traditions. The study is motivated by the persistent epistemological problem in Muslim societies, particularly the tendency to conflate divine revelation with human interpretations, which has contributed to the sacralization of intellectual products, the formation of orthodoxy, and the narrowing of critical inquiry. While previous studies on Arkoun have largely focused on his critique of Islamic reason and hermeneutics, limited attention has been given to the sacred-profane dialectic as a historical structure in Islamic thought. This study employs qualitative library research using historical-intellectual and philosophical approaches. Primary data were obtained from Muhammad Arkoun's major works, while secondary data consisted of books, journal articles, and other relevant scholarly sources. Data were analyzed using content analysis through thematic, historical, and philosophical interpretation. The findings reveal that Arkoun firmly distinguishes between the sacred, which originates from divine revelation and prophetic experience, and the profane, which consists of human interpretations and socio-historical constructions. The study also shows that the transition from the Qur'anic fact to the Islamic fact marked a crucial transformation in Islamic intellectual history, contributing to the emergence of orthodoxy, sacralization, and epistemological rigidity. Furthermore, social actors such as religious scholars, political authorities, and reformist movements played significant roles in shaping the dynamics of Islamic thought. This study concludes that Arkoun's Applied Islamology offers an important framework for reconstructing contemporary Islamic thought through a more critical, historical, and contextual approach.

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Introduction

In contemporary religious discourse, it is argued that religion does not only consist of sacred teachings, but also contains profane elements that emerge from its interaction with socio-cultural issues surrounding human life. At this level, there is active human involvement, both in practicing religious teachings and in articulating those teachings, which were initially considered sacred, as a result of historical contingencies. Consequently, these teachings become worldly, humanistic, and dynamic in nature (Abdullah, 2003, pp. 167–168).

The contextualization of religious teachings in this form requires deep intellectual engagement, as it must continuously be reconstructed in accordance with the spirit of the times (Madjid, 1992, p. 75). In Islam, this flexibility can only be achieved through openness to change originating both from within the Muslim community and from external cultural and civilizational influences (Wahid, 2007, p. 2). Historically, it has been demonstrated that the Prophet, through his interpretive engagement with the Qur'an, was able to provide solutions to the problems faced by his society. This was possible because the Prophet was open to various socio-cultural "readings" of his environment, including pre-Islamic Arabian culture, as long as they did not contradict the fundamental principles of the Qur'an (Brahimi & Ben Lazreg, 2021).

In line with the Prophet's experience, Muslims also encountered new cultures and customs during the period of Islamic expansion. This condition inevitably required Islamic authorities to formulate new legal and social regulations as a form of accommodation to local cultures (Qomar, 2012, p. 162). Over time, these policies generated new socio-cultural dynamics that eventually gave rise to legal principles, religious institutions, theological schools, and various ritual practices (Fakhruddin, 2025). Furthermore, openness to external cultures, particularly Greek thought, stimulated intellectual development in Islamic civilization across theology, law, engineering, medicine, and philosophy. This transformation was accelerated by the rapid translation movement of ancient Greek scientific works during the early Abbasid period. The result was the emergence of Islamic cosmopolitanism, a phase in which Muslims achieved a balance between normative religious tendencies and intellectual freedom (Wahid, 2007, p. 9).

Intellectual dynamism was made possible because Muslims maximized the role of reason in understanding knowledge, as emphasized in many Qur'anic verses. The Prophet even associated intellect with one's level of religiosity. However, intellectual freedom and civilizational advancement in the Islamic world began to stagnate during the later Abbasid period. This was due to the strengthening of theological standardization and rigid intellectual frameworks within Muslim societies. Over time, through social, cultural, and political mechanisms, religion—once open to multiple interpretations—was transformed into a doctrine regarded as sacred and fixed (Arkoun, 1996, pp. 133–134).

This strong doctrinalization imposed a heavy intellectual burden on Muslims, leading to severe stagnation and even regression at a time when other parts of the world were rapidly advancing (Masykuroh, 2025). This condition was further exacerbated by the rise of progressive Islamic movements that sought to restore the early Islamic experience of the Prophet and his companions through rigid normative arguments. Instead of resolving the issue, this approach further alienated Muslims from contemporary realities.

One of the Islamic thinkers who is highly concerned with this issue is Muhammad Arkoun. According to him, the strength and weakness of Muslims depend on how they position religious teachings and thought in relation to change. In practice, however, these two dimensions often overlap: sacred, fixed religious teachings become intertwined with human thought, which is profane and inherently dynamic.

Arkoun argues that this phenomenon arises due to a historical rupture and the neglect of external cultural developments. Therefore, he proposes an intellectual program for Muslims that encourages the study of religious texts using selected contemporary Western disciplines such as semiotics, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy. Through these approaches, it is expected that a clearer distinction can be made between divine teachings, which are sacred, and interpretations shaped by the mental and historical conditions of their time (Islam et al., 2025).

In formulating his historical-critical methodology, Arkoun draws on Michel Foucault's concept of the archaeology of knowledge. Foucault explains that in each historical period, humans understand reality through specific systems of thought called episteme, and express it through discourse (Anam et al., 2025). Thus, the archaeology of knowledge seeks to uncover the underlying systems of thought in each era. To a certain extent, political, social, economic, and cultural interests are embedded within Islamic intellectual products. Historically, episteme and discourse are often shaped to serve the interests of particular groups across different socio-cultural generations.

The axiological phase proposed by Arkoun is Applied Islamology, which replaces classical Islamology. In the modern era, as a form of transformation, there is a need for a new paradigm in articulating religion through a multidisciplinary scientific approach. This requires new methods, analytical tools, and a critical attitude that situates rationality within contemporary contexts (Saidah et al., 2025). Through this approach, Muslims are expected to produce new interpretations of religion that are technically applicable and responsive to socio-cultural and historical realities.

Previous studies on Muhammad Arkoun have largely focused on his critique of Islamic reason, hermeneutics, deconstruction of Islamic orthodoxy, and broader reformist ideas in contemporary Islamic discourse. However, limited studies specifically examine how Arkoun conceptualizes the dialectical relationship between the sacred and the profane as a historical structure shaping the development of Islamic thought. In particular, studies that analyze this issue through the interconnected frameworks of sacred-profane distinction, Qur'anic fact and Islamic fact, and the role of social actors remain relatively limited.

This study aims to analyze Muhammad Arkoun's thought on the sacred and the profane and to explain how these categories shape the historical development of Islamic thought. The novelty of this study lies in its integrative analysis of Arkoun's epistemological framework through three major analytical dimensions: the distinction between the sacred and the profane, the transition from the Qur'anic fact to the Islamic fact, and the role of social actors in constructing Islamic intellectual traditions. Through this framework, this study seeks to contribute to contemporary discussions on the reconstruction of Islamic thought by offering a more critical, historical, and contextual understanding of Islamic intellectual heritage.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design based on library research with historical-intellectual and philosophical approaches. This design was selected because the object of the study is not empirical field data but intellectual discourse, particularly Muhammad Arkoun's conceptual framework concerning the sacred and the profane in Islamic thought. Library research is considered appropriate for examining the development of ideas, tracing epistemological shifts, and critically analyzing conceptual structures within Islamic intellectual traditions.

The primary sources of this research consisted of Muhammad Arkoun's major works that discuss the critique of Islamic reason, the sacred and the profane, and the reconstruction of Islamic thought, including *Tārīkhiyyat al-Fikr al-'Arabi al-Islāmī* (1986), *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers* (1994, 1996), and *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (2022). These works were selected because they represent Arkoun's central intellectual contributions to the discourse on Islamic epistemology, historical criticism, and Applied Islamology.

Secondary sources included books, peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, and scholarly publications relevant to Muhammad Arkoun's thought, Islamic intellectual history, hermeneutics, Islamic reform discourse, and the dialectics of sacred and profane dimensions in religion. The inclusion criteria for secondary sources were based on three considerations: (1) relevance to Arkoun's intellectual framework; (2) scholarly credibility and academic contribution; and (3) significance in supporting historical and philosophical interpretation of Islamic thought.

Data collection was conducted using documentation techniques through systematic identification, selection, and classification of relevant literature. The collected data were organized into thematic categories according to the main analytical dimensions of the study, namely: (1) the concept of the sacred; (2) the concept of the profane; (3) the distinction between the Qur'anic fact and the Islamic fact; and (4) Applied Islamology as Arkoun's epistemological project.

Data analysis employed qualitative content analysis through five analytical stages. First, data reduction was carried out by selecting relevant textual materials directly related to the research focus. Second, data categorization was conducted to classify the data into major themes based on Arkoun's conceptual framework. Third, thematic coding was applied to identify patterns, arguments, and conceptual relations within the texts. Fourth, historical interpretation was used to examine the socio-political and intellectual contexts that shaped the development of Islamic thought in different periods. Fifth, philosophical interpretation was employed to critically analyze Arkoun's arguments and to explore the epistemological implications of his distinction between the sacred and the profane.

The historical approach in this study was used to trace the transformation of Islamic thought from the prophetic period to contemporary Muslim societies, particularly concerning the shift from the Qur'anic fact to the Islamic fact. Meanwhile, the philosophical approach was applied to critically examine the structure of Arkoun's arguments, his critique of orthodoxy, and his proposal of Applied Islamology as an alternative framework for reconstructing Islamic thought in response to modern challenges.

Results

The findings of this study reveal that Muhammad Arkoun's thought on the sacred and the profane in Islamic thought is rooted in a historical-critical reading of Islamic intellectual traditions. Arkoun emphasizes that the development of Islamic thought cannot be separated from the interaction between revelation, interpretation, socio-political power, and historical dynamics. Based on the analysis, the findings are presented in three major themes: the distinction between the sacred and the profane, the transition from the Qur'anic fact to the Islamic fact, and the role of social actors in shaping the dynamics of Islamic thought.

Sacred and Profane in Islamic Thought

The issue of the sacred and the profane is significant for Arkoun because it is closely related to the dynamics of Islamic thought from the classical period to the contemporary era. Contemporary Islamic thinkers generally agree that Islam has two dimensions: Islam as a religion and Islam as a tradition of thought. The former is regarded as sacred, therefore constant and stable, while the latter is considered profane, thus continuously changing in accordance with the historical dynamics of human thought.

In the context of the sacred and the profane, Ali Ahmad Said—an Arab cultural figure more widely known as Adonis—in his dissertation *al-Thābit wa al-Mutaḥawwil: Baḥṡ fī al-lbdā' wa al-ltibā' 'inda al-'Arab* sought to situate this issue within Arab-Islamic ways of viewing two key oppositions: past and present, belief and reality, revelation and reason, and inherited tradition versus external influence. These are reflected in cultural and civilizational expressions such as politics, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), theology (*kalām*), Sufism, linguistics, and literature (Asdawi, 2007, p. 52).

According to Adonis, the sacred and the profane—or “the fixed” and “the changing”—do not lie within Islamic teachings themselves, but within Arab cultural space. The “fixed” (*al-thābit*) is defined as thought grounded in textual authority, which uses its stability as the basis of legitimacy in both understanding and evaluation. It presents itself as the only true meaning of the text and becomes an epistemological authority. Meanwhile, the “changing” (*al-mutaḥawwil*) is divided into two meanings: first, thought based on the text but interpreted in a way that allows it to adapt to reality and change; second, thought that does not grant authority to the text and is instead based on reason rather than transmitted tradition (*naql*) (Asdawi, 2007, pp. 57–60).

Adonis explains that the root of the problem lies in the Arab epistemological tendency to elevate textual permanence to a religious level. This tendency emerged because literature, poetry, and intellectual production were often equated with religion. Historically, Arab culture has functioned as a representation of power structures. Thus, in Adonis's view, the “fixed” and the “changing” represent a struggle between permanence and change. He further notes that the dominant side of this struggle is reinforced by theological and political support, which ultimately produces stability and its various manifestations. According to Adonis, this dominance leads to a satisfaction with the past, which is considered complete and no longer in need of development. In contrast, the opposing tendency sees the past as unfinished and therefore requiring further development. However, such changes are often regarded as minor disturbances that can be suppressed or eliminated (Asdawi, 2007, p. 71).

In contrast to Adonis, Abdul Karim Soroush, in *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, sees the “fixed” and “changing” as occurring within the domain of religion itself. However, unlike Adonis, he does not place them in opposition but rather in parallel. According to Soroush, religion is divided into two forms: religion itself and religious knowledge. Religious knowledge arises from human understanding of religion, while religion itself is its fixed and sacred source (Brahimi & Ben Lazreg, 2021).

Religious knowledge, like other forms of knowledge, continuously evolves and requires ongoing refinement. It is connected to human culture and thought, which are dynamic and collective in nature, as it is produced through collaboration among scholars. If these two dimensions are not distinguished, people will find it difficult to escape intellectual rigidity and stagnation.

For Soroush, revivalists or reformers are interpreters of religion (*shāriḥ*), not creators of religion (*shāri‘*). They contribute to religious knowledge, which is inherently imperfect, and their role is to understand the Qur’an and Sunnah in ways that continuously renew religious understanding. However, they do not produce sacred knowledge. Prophet Muhammad is the final prophet, and the religion he brought is the final religion; however, religious understanding is not final. The sacred dimension belongs to religion itself, while the profane dimension belongs to religious understanding or tradition. In this way, “the fixed” and “the changing” can be reconciled (Brahimi & Ben Lazreg, 2021).

In contrast, Arkoun differs from both Adonis and Soroush. He emphasizes a clear separation between the sacred and the profane in order to distinguish what is truly sacred from what is human intellectual production in Islamic thought, which has often been mixed together and treated as equally sacred. This tendency is still widely found in Muslim societies today, especially when reinforced by orthodoxy and group interests (Budi, 2022).

This condition eventually became a tradition passed down through generations in Islamic history through the sacralization of texts, both primary and secondary, including their derivative interpretations. Over time, what should have remained historically adaptable became fixed religious rules that must be followed in daily life.

To clarify this distinction, Arkoun divides tradition (*turāth*) into two forms. First is the “ideal tradition,” representing the Qur’anic mission during the twenty years of revelation in Mecca and Medina. This form is transcendent and cannot be altered by human intervention. Second are the traditions that emerged afterward as human interpretations, imitation, or repetition of the ideal tradition, expressed through textual formulations (Arkoun, 1986, p. 134).

It is within this second category that the process of *taqdīs al-afkār al-dīniyya* (sacralization and ideologization of Islamic thought) occurs. This is followed by traditionalist orientations and sectarian divisions, which later produced orthodoxy after two major historical turning points in Islamic history: the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols under Hulagu Khan in 1258 CE and the fall of Muslim rule in Spain followed by the Reconquista in 1492 CE (Gardet, 1997, p. 91).

At this stage, Muslims experienced severe socio-political decline, leading to the emergence of an orthodox Islam that was dogmatic and rigid, yet ideologically effective as a unifying force.

Furthermore, historically evolving turāth shifted into myth, which explains, constructs, and maintains collective consciousness while simultaneously preserving, reproducing, standardizing, and even sacralizing it. Myth emerges when used by dominant groups in struggles over discourse and power, serving to legitimize and maintain established social hierarchies. In this context, myth is no longer a collective creation shaped by all members of society, but rather a set of images and values controlled by dominant discourse holders (Arkoun, 1996, p. 251).

This process can be seen during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, when the Qur'an was transformed into a closed textual corpus and used as a normative reference for political and legal systems. A similar pattern continues today when political leaders invoke Qur'anic texts to justify political and economic practices.

As Arkoun states:

“The Qur'an has never before been so widely used by millions of believers to legitimize behavior, support wars, sustain aspirations, preserve hopes, reinforce beliefs...” (Budi, 2022).

A key factor in the sacralization of turāth is the collective and individual imaginaire. This imaginaire is formed through what Arkoun calls a “debt of meaning,” originating from the Prophet Muhammad's efforts in building a new community in Mecca and Medina over twenty years, expressed through narrative forms. This narrative unconsciously produces a sense of “debt of meaning” in collective consciousness, resulting in obedience to authority.

Similarly, symbolic figures and paradigms derived from historical events become collective representations that structure social imagination, producing shared perceptions of religion and power. The biographies (sīra) of Muhammad and 'Ali in Sunni and Shi'a traditions are typical products of this shared social imagination shaped by mythic visions elaborated through Qur'anic discourse.

Thus, according to Arkoun, any reform in the contemporary context must begin with textual analysis (deconstruction). He refers to this as epistemological analysis in works such as *Pour une critique de la raison islamique*, *Lecture du Coran*, and *Ouvertures sur l'islam* (Fakhruddin, 2025).

Arkoun further argues that epistemological analysis must be applied to all texts—sacred or profane, historical or philosophical, theological or legal, sociological or anthropological—regardless of their cognitive status within a tradition of belief or thought. Islam, in this sense, is only one example among many. Attributes such as authenticity, originality, sacredness, and transcendence belong to fundamentalist, holistic, and mythological thinking aimed at ideological empowerment rather than improving human cognitive understanding across cultures.

From Qur'anic Fact to Islamic Fact

The dynamics of the sacred and the profane in Islamic thought, in Arkoun's view, can be identified through the characteristics that shape Islamic intellectual production. These characteristics include basic elements of representation and belief, perceptual and evaluative schemata, frameworks, channels, and procedures of expression, tensions within

education, as well as mechanisms of selection and exclusion. Through the identification of these features, we can better recognize the various functions, levels of emergence, and the interaction between rationality and imagination across different domains of Islamic intellectual activity.

According to Arkoun, these domains are determined by what he calls the “Qur’anic fact” and the “Islamic fact.” The Qur’anic fact refers to the divine appeal delivered through Qur’anic revelation to humanity. It is an event that is simultaneously linguistic, cultural, and religious in nature. The Islamic fact, on the other hand, refers to the concrete ways in which this divine message is historically realized within human society (Masykuroh, 2025). The shift from the Qur’anic fact to the Islamic fact can be traced through the development of reason in various forms within societies shaped by the Islamic fact since the first century of Hijrah (622 CE), through the study of figures, works, and foundational moments that reveal its intellectual evolution.

Arkoun begins by examining the generation of the Companions (*ṣaḥābah*), who occupy a key position in transmitting foundational Islamic texts and traditions. The political turmoil following the Prophet’s death, linked to competing group interests, significantly affected the authenticity of transmission. However, the majority of Muslims idealized the Companions as witnesses of revelation, particularly rulers and leaders, who are constantly invoked as role models, thereby eliminating historical perspectives (Arkoun, 2022, pp. 23–24). It is rarely acknowledged that the first three caliphs were assassinated. This idealization is reinforced by biographical literature of transmitters (*kutub al-rijāl*). Arkoun cites Ibn Taymiyyah as describing the Companions as possessing extraordinary memory, deep intellectual insight, and exceptional hermeneutical ability, which enabled them to extract wisdom from sacred texts and establish a singular interpretive authority.

The group that succeeded the Companions is referred to as the founding generation, or what Arkoun calls the period of the formation of Islamic identity, spanning the first three centuries of Hijrah (Arkoun, 1994, pp. 46–48). This generation played a decisive role in defining orthodoxy, determining legitimate religious behavior, and establishing acceptable socio-political structures. By relying on the Qur’an and Prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*) as interpreted by the Companions and transmitted by later generations, an uninterrupted chain of reliable narrators was constructed, which came to define “authentic Islam” as an unquestionable reference against heresy and deviation (Arkoun, 1994, p. 60).

Arkoun further argues that struggles over authority had a profound impact on Islamic intellectual heritage, particularly in the conflict between the legitimacy of the Caliphate (Sunni) and the Imamate (Shi’a). By the end of the 9th century CE, Sunni and Shi’a theories of authority had fully developed and were used as ideological tools in socio-political struggles following the Prophet’s death in 632 CE (Brahimi & Ben Lazreg, 2021). Shi’ism developed a maximalist view in which only the Prophet’s descendants possess legitimate spiritual authority through the infallible Imam (*imām ma’ṣūm*). Sunnism, in contrast, accepted existing political authority after the Umayyad victory in 661 CE and prioritized order over chaos.

Ultimately, for both Sunni and Shi’a traditions, political leadership (caliph or imam) became sacralized as a manifestation of both power and religious authority. This sacralization was reinforced by legal theology based on *uṣūl al-fiqh*, which developed extensively from the time of al-Shafi’i onward (Madjid, 1992, p. 48). According to Arkoun,

this theoretical conflict pushed Islamic thought into what he calls the “unthinkable,” as each side constructed rigid doctrinal corpora.

The dissemination of Islamic thought was accelerated by the invention of paper and the transition from oral to written tradition. Arkoun emphasizes that the written tradition of ḥadīth not only facilitated access to religious knowledge but also functioned as a tool of ideological standardization and political domination by ruling dynasties over populations unfamiliar with literacy. Religious scholars, meanwhile, often acted only to provide theological validation for inherited texts.

Arkoun notes that Islamic knowledge eventually became dominated by scholastic thought from approximately the 6th–11th centuries AH (16th–18th centuries CE), characterized by repetition, simplification, and rigid dogmatism. Institutions such as al-Azhar in Cairo, Zaytuna in Tunisia, and al-Qarawiyyin in Fez played key roles in preserving Sunni legal schools (Arkoun, 1996, p. 94). During this period, rational sciences such as logic, mathematics, astronomy, and medicine developed outside religious institutions, while religious scholars increasingly retreated into mosque-centered learning.

At the same time, popular Islam expanded through Sufi networks, *zawiyas*, and local religious leaders (*murābitūn*), who integrated Islamic teachings with local cultures—though Arkoun notes that this process was largely unexamined. He observes that as orthodox reason weakened and fragmented, empirical religious practices expanded, giving rise to Sufi brotherhoods (*ṭuruq*). Reformist movements later reinterpreted these developments as superstition, while simultaneously attempting to restore a purified orthodoxy.

These socio-ideological developments continued until the 19th century, when reform movements (*Nahda*) emerged in response to colonial pressure. However, Arkoun criticizes the *Nahda* for misunderstanding its own intellectual heritage and for producing imitative rather than critical thought (Asdawi, 2007, p. 92). Thinkers such as Rifa‘ah al-Tahtawi and later reformers, as well as figures like Taha Hussein and Ali Abd al-Raziq, are seen as engaging with European ideas without fully adopting critical historical methodologies.

Instead of producing a rigorous scientific critique, reformist and Islamist movements often produced romanticized and mythologized versions of Islamic history, claiming that modern scientific and political ideas were already present in the early Islamic period. Political ideologies in the 20th century further reinforced this tendency by mobilizing Islamic symbols for nationalist and ideological purposes.

Thus, what is often called the “Islamic revival” (*tsawrah*) is characterized by an expansion of Islamic symbols in public life, while simultaneously experiencing a decline in genuine scientific and intellectual production. This reflects, in Arkoun’s view, an ongoing tension between traditionalist reproduction and the demands of modernity.

Social Actors and the Dynamics of Islamic Thought

From a structural analysis perspective, Arkoun sees a dynamic between the sacred and the profane in Islamic thought, which is actually controlled by social actors. They function as creators of values and transform them into norms (a systematic and coercive juridical-ethical code). Based on this analysis, Arkoun divides it into three decisive periods to facilitate a careful examination of the distinction between proclaimed values, imposed norms, and real values within a society, so that one can properly understand the role of religion in these three periods. Islam offers a clear picture of these differences in very

different socio-historical contexts. The three periods referred to by Arkoun are: the context of the emergence of the Qur'anic fact, or the prophetic period; the context of the emergence of the Islamic fact, or the kingdom period; and the explosion of modernity.

First, the Prophetic Period. Who introduced the values and who expressed them during the 20 years of Muhammad's preaching and action in Mecca and Medina? To understand this, Arkoun invites us to trace historically all the paths drawn, marked, and imposed by tradition: starting from the Word of God, moving to the Qur'anic Discourse, then to the Corpus of Sacred Texts that is official and closed, and then to the corpora of tafsir (exegesis). The results of interpretive activity by the community can be illustrated in the following scheme:

KL → WQ → KRT → KT → sd → KA

Up = mukallifūn = believers

The meeting point is in the KRT area, because at this position there is an effort or movement that strongly implies the creation and expression of values. According to Arkoun, KRT must be seen as a moment of a specific intersection between the socio-historical experience of a "community of believers," a model of thought, and a mode of expression. This is one illustration of the relationship between language, thought, and history.

For Arkoun, the actors involved in the creation and expression of values are the "scriptural communities" (ahl al-kitāb: Qur'an, Gospel, Bible), in the sense that only those who have internalized a cultural linguistic system and retold foundational narratives—emotionally charged experiences that truly shape new collective destinies under the leadership of prophets—are involved in such expression. Examples of symbolic values include the persecution of Moses' people, the suffering of Christ, and the Hijrah of Muhammad. These founding events, taken together, constitute real values, a way of thinking that engages transcendence, and a mythic mode of expression. The historicity of these constructed and adopted values, the axiological activity of thought that builds them as thought is itself built by values, and the metaphorical structure of expression open to multiple virtual meanings—these are what Arkoun calls the three vectors that institutionalize the prophetic moment and distinguish it from all subsequent moments to varying degrees.

Furthermore, these symbolic values are not intended to be merely contemplated, read, or appreciated aesthetically like literary narratives; rather, they are a precise and deeply penetrating expression of socio-cultural transformations truly introduced by Muhammad into Arabian Hijaz society. The force of penetration, suggestion, and sublimation of the Qur'anic expression is such that these symbolic values are continuously reactivated in the memory of those who recall them, generating a powerful and truly mythical desire to revive their entire content.

Second, the Kingdom Period. The term "kingdom" highlights the rapid political and economic growth of the Caliphate state from the Umayyad dynasty onward: this historical condition produced a transformation in the relationship between religion and society, symbolic creation, and the supervision of individuals and groups by the state. From the space where new perspectives on the human condition emerged, religion turned into a set of regulatory norms and social roles defined by jurists within a ritual framework that constrained everyone. Norms and ritual practices recognized and protected by dominant

power became “true religion” or orthodoxy; correspondingly, groups resisting the official expression of religion were marginalized and discredited as exclusivists, heretics, ignorant, unruly, and so on.

At this stage, the central point is the Sharia, regarded as timeless, transcultural, and universal. In this position, Sharia becomes a technical system of religious practice used by all Muslims in worship. However, the content and form of “Sharia” were determined and regulated by jurists supported by the caliph, who concealed themselves behind a universalized Sharia that represented a uniform image of Islam across all civilizations, societies, and ethno-cultural groups. Arkoun refers, for example, to Ibn al-Muqaffa’s work *Risālah fī al-Ṣaḥābah* (140/758), in which the author clearly formulates the concept of a unified Islamic law adapted to the vision of the new progressive Abbasid caliphate.

This model influenced works by the intellectual elite (jurists, theologians, philosophers, *udabā*, scribes, historians) within the ruling circle. Eventually, the universal use of Sharia led to the formation of classical Islam, meaning a model of personal life and historical action oriented toward God, encompassing law, speculative theology, culture, and civilization. Such Islam is later reified by collective imagination into a powerful political instrument for certain regimes; the more Islam is reduced to an ideological channel, the more critical, sociological, and anthropological historical readings of “classical Islam” are hindered.

Another decisive moment in this aspect is the Abbasid Revolution, which reproduced a social hierarchy similar to that produced by the first Islamic revolution in Medina: the *sābiqah* as the Abbasid aristocracy and the *ansār al-dawlah* or *ahl al-da’wah* as supporters and mobilizers. This has two meanings: sociologically, the rise of new power always requires the emergence of narrow, hierarchical solidarities; ideologically, every new power surpasses its rivals through imitation, devaluing opponents by presenting itself as the true successor of the paradigm of authority that serves as reference for all competing social forces within a cultural sphere.

Under the Abbasid Revolution, imitation became even more evident, as they sought to accommodate Shi’a opposition by honoring the *ahl al-bayt* while also satisfying Sunnis who upheld the primacy of the Qur’an, Hadith, and a Sharia structured according to the strict rules established by al-Shafi’i (absolute adherence to the Arab linguistic experience of the Muslim community; necessity of reading sacred texts in Arabic for proper understanding). This imitative behavior not only expressed pious intention or political legitimation, but behind the paradigm initiated by revelation, as in al-Shafi’i’s formulation, one must read an anthropological reality repeated across all dynastic formations (Berber dynasties in the Maghreb, Wahhabi dynasty in Saudi Arabia, Safavid dynasty in Iran; and today, hierarchies in nationalist movements and their governments; ideological imitation by contemporary Islamic movements using the same cultural paradigm as in the classical era).

Third, the Explosion of Modernity. By “explosion,” Arkoun emphasizes its original meaning of violence, a military intervention, and confrontation between colonial sectors and traditional sectors within conquered societies. In other cases, nationalist discourse often opposes, distorts, or exaggerates the “colonial scientific discourse.” It is acknowledged that in the current development of Islamic values, facing Western

imperialism and neo-colonialism—liberal, socialist, or communist—it is difficult to take a purely scientific approach.

According to Arkoun (in Saidah et al., 2025), the neglected peripheral history of Islam must be studied, because at the same time these actors served as socio-political stabilizers for ruling powers (Caliphate, Sultanate, Emirate, Protectorate, Mandate, Governor-General), among which are maraboutism and the 'ulama'. Maraboutism played an undeniable role in ethno-historical analysis, reflecting socio-political anthropology. This group was negatively judged by official 'ulama' and historians, and even by nationalists, who considered them traitors for mediating with colonial powers. Yet marabouts, in their own way, functioned like 'ulama': they could read and write, but also integrated oral cultural traditions and local beliefs (often labeled superstition by urban 'ulama'), while engaging in seasonal and animistic rituals that were partially Islamized (as the Prophet himself did in relation to pilgrimage rituals).

The cultural and class conflict between reformist 'ulama' and local saints or marabouts became especially visible in the 19th century during colonial invasions. Muhammad al-Sanusi (1791–1895) and his son Ahmad al-Sharif (1873–1933) in Libya, Muhammad al-Mahdi (1844–1885) in Sudan, 'Abd al-Qadir (1808–1859) in Algeria, 'Izz al-Din al-Qassam (1882–1935) in Palestine, and Ahmad 'Urabi (1841–1911) in Egypt (Nofrianti et al., n.d.) were among those who attempted various forms of popular resistance against colonial enemies.

The slogan of jihad became a powerful theme expressing messianic longing and demands for justice; however, despite their efforts, the imbalance of power and their return to scholastic Islam for justification contributed to the partial failure of these movements. In 'Urabi's case, popular mobilization through Islamic language also expressed a collective pride explicitly framed as national (*watani*). Official 'ulama' were content with declaring jihad against unbelievers but did not accept the Islam practiced by Sufi orders.

After recognizing the importance of popular religion in Muslim societies since the 19th century, it becomes possible to properly situate the modern current as a continuation of Western rationalist, secular, and liberal tradition. Studies of the Arab Nahda focused on figures such as al-Tahtawi, the first newspapers, Muhammad 'Ali's reforms, and reformist thinkers like al-Afghani and Muhammad 'Abduh. Yet the closer one gets to 1930–1940, the more evident it becomes that Westernized intellectuals were detached from the broader population.

From the Nahda to the Revolution (Sawrah), there was greater literary creativity and intellectual renewal, but also stronger ideological control that reached all sectors of society, making bold intellectual breakthroughs increasingly ineffective.

Sociologically, the number of individuals exposed to Western culture remained limited, while educational infrastructure was insufficient. Access to modern knowledge was constrained by language policies and ideological restrictions, and many social sciences were considered dangerous.

Another phenomenon was the migration of scholars to the West or to other countries suffering from intellectual shortages. Egypt, Syria, Iran, and Pakistan lost many intellectuals due to political or material reasons. This left a social space dominated by lower administrative elites with limited intellectual horizons but strong receptivity to traditional

religious literature oriented toward ideological mobilization rather than critical historical inquiry or spiritual renewal.

Ideologically, modern movements maintained naïve awareness of ideological domination. Arkoun notes that even when thinkers like ‘Abd al-Raziq and Taha Hussein used Western philological and historical methods, they did so without fully understanding their critical implications. Similarly, rejection of Western colonial culture today does not always extend to internal power relations within Muslim societies.

Philosophically, modernists in the Islamic world have left a vast amount of “unthought,” accumulated due to cultural discontinuities since at least the 11th century. This requires not only scholarly research but also epistemological engagement. Arkoun emphasizes the need to rethink fundamental oppositions such as sacred/profane, pure/impure, and loyal/disloyal, which have long been used dogmatically, so that they can be understood historically and critically.

Discussion

Sacred and Profane as Foundational Categories in Arkoun’s Epistemology

The findings of this study indicate that the distinction between the sacred and the profane constitutes one of the central epistemological foundations in Muhammad Arkoun’s intellectual project. This distinction is not merely conceptual but serves as a critical analytical framework for understanding the historical development of Islamic thought. Arkoun argues that one of the most fundamental problems in Islamic intellectual history is the persistent failure to distinguish between divine revelation, which is sacred and transcendent, and human interpretations of religion, which are historical, contingent, and therefore profane.

This study shows that Arkoun’s position differs significantly from both Adonis and Abdolkarim Soroush. While Adonis frames the issue through the dialectic of permanence and transformation within Arab culture, and Soroush distinguishes religion from religious knowledge, Arkoun places greater emphasis on the historical overlap between revelation and interpretation in Islamic intellectual traditions. This overlap has gradually blurred the boundary between divine truth and human understanding, leading to the sacralization of intellectual products that should remain open to criticism and reinterpretation.

The findings further reveal that Arkoun conceptualizes this distinction through the categories of ideal tradition and historical tradition. Ideal tradition refers to the prophetic experience and Qur’anic revelation during the Meccan and Medinan periods, representing the sacred dimension that remains transcendent and immutable. Historical tradition, by contrast, consists of interpretations, doctrines, institutions, and intellectual constructions produced by Muslims throughout history. These products emerged through engagement with specific socio-political, cultural, and historical contexts.

The inability to distinguish between these two dimensions has produced a major epistemological crisis in Islamic thought. Human interpretations that originally emerged as contextual responses to historical challenges gradually became treated as sacred truths. As a result, Islamic thought experienced a shift from intellectual dynamism toward epistemological rigidity. This confirms that Arkoun’s distinction between the sacred and the profane is essentially an effort to restore the critical boundary between revelation and interpretation, allowing Islamic thought to recover its intellectual openness.

Thus, the findings suggest that the sacred-profane distinction in Arkoun's epistemology is not intended to desacralize religion, but rather to protect the sacred from historical distortions while simultaneously reopening the profane domain for critical intellectual engagement.

Sacralization, Myth, and the Formation of Islamic Orthodoxy

The findings also reveal that the development of Islamic thought cannot be separated from the processes of sacralization, mythologization, and ideologization. These processes played decisive roles in shaping orthodoxy and constructing dominant structures of religious authority throughout Islamic history. According to Arkoun, this process explains why many intellectual products in Islam eventually became treated as sacred and unquestionable.

This study shows that the process of sacralization occurred through the transformation of historical interpretations into religious norms. Interpretations produced by scholars, jurists, theologians, and political authorities gradually became institutionalized through legal systems, educational institutions, and religious traditions. Over time, these interpretations ceased to function as historical products and instead became perceived as absolute religious truths.

The role of myth in this process is highly significant. Arkoun's analysis demonstrates that myth functions not merely as narrative or symbolic memory but as a mechanism of power. Myth preserves collective consciousness, legitimizes authority, and reproduces dominant ideological structures. Through myth, certain interpretations gain symbolic power and become deeply embedded within social imagination.

The findings particularly highlight Arkoun's concept of *imaginaire* as a key element in understanding this phenomenon. Collective imagination shapes how Muslim societies perceive authority, legitimacy, and truth. Symbolic figures, historical events, and foundational narratives become powerful tools in constructing religious consciousness. The biographies of the Prophet, the Companions, and central figures in Sunni and Shi'a traditions often function not only as historical accounts but also as symbolic structures that shape communal perception of religion and authority.

This explains why orthodoxy in Islamic history became more than a theological system; it evolved into an epistemological regime that determined what could be thought, taught, and accepted as legitimate knowledge. Consequently, the formation of orthodoxy cannot be understood purely in theological terms but must also be analyzed through historical, sociological, and political perspectives.

The findings therefore affirm Arkoun's argument that Islamic orthodoxy was not formed solely through religious necessity, but also through historical processes involving power, ideology, and collective imagination.

From Qur'anic Fact to Islamic Fact: The Historical Shift of Islamic Reason

One of the most important findings of this study is the identification of the transition from the Qur'anic fact to the Islamic fact as a major turning point in the historical development of Islamic thought. This transition explains how divine revelation gradually became transformed into structured religious, legal, and political systems.

Arkoun's distinction between the Qur'anic fact and the Islamic fact provides an important framework for understanding the historical trajectory of Islamic reason. The Qur'anic fact refers to revelation as a living event characterized by direct interaction between divine message, prophetic authority, and socio-historical transformation. During this period, revelation functioned dynamically within the context of social change in Arabian society.

However, the findings indicate that after the Prophet's death, Islamic thought entered a new historical phase. Revelation was no longer experienced as a living discourse but became increasingly mediated through transmission, interpretation, codification, and institutionalization. This marked the beginning of the Islamic fact, in which revelation became embedded within historical structures shaped by political authority, theological debates, legal developments, and institutional power.

This transformation became particularly visible during the periods of the Companions, the founding generation, and the rise of major Islamic dynasties. The construction of orthodoxy intensified as legal schools, theological doctrines, and institutionalized educational systems developed. Political struggles between Sunni and Shi'a groups further accelerated this process, producing rigid doctrinal structures that shaped Islamic intellectual history for centuries.

The findings also show that this historical transformation contributed to what Arkoun describes as the emergence of the unthought and the unthinkable. Certain questions, perspectives, and intellectual possibilities were gradually excluded from mainstream discourse because they challenged established orthodoxy. As a result, Islamic reason became increasingly constrained by inherited epistemological boundaries.

This condition contributed to intellectual stagnation, particularly when scholastic traditions became dominant and critical inquiry weakened. Therefore, the transition from the Qur'anic fact to the Islamic fact represents not only a historical shift but also a profound transformation in the structure of Islamic reason itself.

Applied Islamology and the Reconstruction of Contemporary Islamic Thought

The findings of this study suggest that Arkoun's concept of Applied Islamology represents his most significant intellectual contribution to the reconstruction of contemporary Islamic thought. Applied Islamology emerges as Arkoun's response to the epistemological crisis that has shaped Islamic intellectual history.

Arkoun argues that classical Islamology and traditional Islamic scholarship both suffer from important limitations. Classical Islamology often focuses excessively on texts while neglecting the socio-historical realities that shape interpretation. Traditional Islamic scholarship, meanwhile, frequently treats inherited intellectual products as sacred and therefore resistant to critical examination. Both approaches, according to Arkoun, limit the possibility of intellectual renewal.

The findings demonstrate that Applied Islamology seeks to overcome these limitations through multidisciplinary inquiry. Arkoun proposes the integration of modern disciplines such as history, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, semiotics, and philosophy to critically examine Islamic intellectual heritage. This approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of how religious knowledge is constructed, institutionalized, and reproduced.

More importantly, Applied Islamology aims to reopen intellectual spaces that have been closed by orthodoxy. Through this approach, Muslims are encouraged to critically examine inherited doctrines, challenge rigid epistemological structures, and distinguish more clearly between sacred revelation and historical interpretation.

The relevance of this framework remains highly significant in contemporary Islamic discourse. The findings indicate that many Muslim societies continue to struggle with problems identified by Arkoun, including rigid orthodoxy, ideological polarization, historical romanticism, and resistance to critical inquiry. These challenges often hinder the development of Islamic thought capable of responding constructively to modern realities.

In this context, Arkoun's intellectual project offers an important framework for rebuilding Islamic thought as a dynamic, critical, and historically conscious tradition. His distinction between the sacred and the profane, his critique of orthodoxy, and his proposal of Applied Islamology collectively provide a strong theoretical foundation for intellectual renewal in the contemporary Muslim world.

Ultimately, this study confirms that Arkoun's thought remains highly relevant not only as a critique of Islamic intellectual history but also as a constructive framework for developing a more open, critical, and transformative Islamic discourse in the modern era.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Muhammad Arkoun's thought on the sacred and the profane offers a critical epistemological framework for understanding the historical development of Islamic thought. Arkoun firmly distinguishes between the sacred as divine revelation and prophetic experience, and the profane as human interpretations, intellectual constructions, and socio-historical products. This distinction demonstrates that not all elements within Islamic intellectual tradition possess equal sacred status, as many religious doctrines and interpretations are historically conditioned and therefore open to critical examination.

The findings reveal that the dynamics of Islamic thought are shaped by continuous interactions between revelation, interpretation, power, culture, and historical context. The transition from the Qur'anic fact to the Islamic fact marks a major turning point in which revelation gradually became institutionalized through theological, legal, and political structures. This process contributed to the emergence of orthodoxy, the sacralization of intellectual products, and the narrowing of critical inquiry within Muslim societies. As a result, Islamic thought increasingly experienced epistemological rigidity, producing what Arkoun identifies as the domains of the unthought and the unthinkable.

This study also confirms that Arkoun's concept of Applied Islamology provides an important framework for reconstructing contemporary Islamic thought. By integrating modern disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, and philosophy, Applied Islamology enables a more critical and contextual understanding of Islamic intellectual heritage. Theoretically, this study contributes to strengthening the discourse on Islamic intellectual criticism by positioning Arkoun's thought as a relevant framework for reexamining the relationship between sacred teachings and historical interpretations. Practically, Arkoun's ideas remain highly relevant for encouraging a more open, critical, and transformative Islamic discourse capable of responding to contemporary challenges.

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