"Arkoun's Islam is tolerant, liberal and modern ... [His] vision embodies profound possibilities."

—NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

RETHINKING ISLAM

Common Questions, Uncommon Answers

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Westview Press

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Imagining Islam

Can one speak of a scientific understanding of Islam in the West or must one rather talk about the Western way of imagining Islam?

In a small book designed for a broad Western audience, it is useful and even necessary to start with this question. We can, in fact, wonder whether the Western understanding of Islam is valid and objective. Ever since the 1950s, when national liberation movements emerged, there have been continual debates on this issue, many of them sharp and passionate. If I evoke the war for Algerian independence (1954–1962), for example, every French person who was alive then remembers the accompanying polemics and deadly confrontations about the Arab world and Arab culture generally seen in the context of Nasserism, the emergence of the Third World at the Bandung Conference of 1955, and the Zionist struggle for the establishment of the state of Israel. The links of these polemics to religious and political quarrels dating from the Middle Ages augmented their propensity to provoke violence.

The Algerian war ended, but the polemics continued as a result of other events, such as the revolution in Iran. The Ayatollah Khomeini's rise to power produced a fresh outpouring of emotions around the world, most notably in the United States, which exerts an influence in the Middle East that is widely recognized. The Iranian revolution touched vital Western interests in the Middle East, and the reactions that event provoked and continues to provoke have revived and enriched the Western way of "imagining" Islam. The Gulf War constituted yet another climax in the confrontation between two collective imaginaries: the Arab-Islamic and the Western.

The notion of "imagining" evoked in the question is new; the nonspecialist is not likely to grasp it, for even the experts have not succeeded in mastering the shape, function, and operation of this faculty we call imagination. To be brief, I will say that the "imaginary" of an individual, a social group, or a nation is the collection of images carried by that culture about itself or another culture—once a product of epics, poetry, and religious discourse, today a product primarily of the media and secondarily of the schools.[1] In this sense, of course, individuals and societies have their own imaginaries tied to their own common languages. There are thus French, English, and German ways of imagining Islam—imaginaries, as they have come to be called—just as there are Algerian, Egyptian, Iranian, and Indian imaginaries of the West. Since the 1950s the powerful, omnipresent media, drawn daily to report on the violent happenings of the moment—national liberation movements, protests, and

revolts in the numerous and diverse countries inhabited by Muslims—have fed the Western imaginary of Islam.

The misperceptions inherent in this imaginary go beyond current events. Although the problems of Muslim societies have indeed become knottier and more numerous since the emergence of national states in the 1950s and 1960s, another serious confusion—one that has contributed directly to the shaping of the Western imaginary of Islam—has also emerged in this short time. That is, all the political, social, economic, and cultural shortcomings of Muslim societies are hitched together and to Islam with a capital "I." Islam then becomes the source and the prime mover of all contemporary history in a world that extends from the Philippines to Morocco and from Scandinavia, if we take account of Muslim minorities in Europe, to South Africa.

It is true that the sort of Islamic discourse common to fundamentalist movements, especially those engaged in the most decisive political battles, proposes the powerful image of a single, eternal Islam, the ideal model for historic action to liberate the world from the Western, imperialist, materialist model. The media in the West seize upon this monolithic, fundamentalist view of Islam that dominates the contemporary Muslim imaginary and transpose it into a discourse suitable to the social imaginary of Western countries without any intermediate critique from the social sciences. The field of perception is open to the confrontation of two imaginaries overheated by accumulated confusions about each other.

This everyday labor of stimulating and amplifying the two imaginaries is complicated by a much older and more serious issue, one that reaches to the most sacred origins of the three monotheistic religions. Ever since the emergence of Islam between 610 and 632, there has been continuous rivalry among three religious communities—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim—all striving to establish a monopoly on the management of symbolic capital linked to what the three traditions call "revelation." The issue is enormous and primordial, yet it has nonetheless been buried by secularized, ideological discourse: the ideologies of nation building, scientific progress, and universal humanism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe. Then, beginning with the Nazi catastrophe and the wars of colonial liberation, the question of revelation was buried under the no less deceptive rhetoric of decolonization, of development and underdevelopment (in the 1960s), and of nation building in Third World countries that had just recovered their political sovereignty.

To this day, *no one* has studied revelation in its Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arab manifestations and as a function of the historical and anthropological conditions for the emergence of these three traditions. That constitutes a failure of the comparative history of religions, of social science, and of the human sciences, which have left the task of "managing the goods of salvation" to the theologians of each community. That is to say that they have perpetuated theological discourse in its function of legitimating the drive for power of each community. This fact condemns discourse to the confines of a cultural system that excludes all those others who have the sacrilegious pretension to draw upon the same symbolic capital.

It may seem excessive to claim that revelation has not been studied *anywhere* in its three historical manifestations, while an immense literature on the subject clutters the shelves of our libraries. I want to emphasize, however, the following evidence: In constructing a Judeo-Christian vision of the story of salvation, Christianity, on both the Catholic and the Protestant sides, annexed the Old Testament to the New in such a way that Jews protested the dissolving of their Talmudic and prophetic tradition; as for Muslims, they remained excluded from this theological structure by the fact that Islam follows Christianity chronologically and because the structure portrays Jesus Christ as the final expression of the Word of God. Already in Medina between 622 and 633 A.D., Jews and Christians refused to recognize Muhammad as a prophet in the same spiritual line as Moses and Jesus in salvation history.[2]

To this historical evidence must be added the abdication of the social and human sciences, loath to take on all the disputes bequeathed by theological structures as problems of religious and anthropological history. I can testify that these problems have not yet been approached in a comparative perspective combining history and cultural-religious anthropology. Islam is always considered apart from other religions and from European culture and thought. It is often excluded from departments of religion and taught instead as a part of Oriental studies.

Another aggravating factor in the old quarrel between Islam and the West is that Islam, as a force in the historical rise of societies, took control of the Mediterranean area from the seventh to the twelfth centuries and again, with the direction of the Ottoman Turks, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. The cultures of the Mediterranean region share a single historical destiny that the scientific study of history, independent of the ideologies that divide the northern and southern or the eastern and western coasts of the Mediterranean, is far from confronting. The Mediterranean region I refer to is more cultural than geographic and strategic; it encompasses all those cultures that have been influenced historically by Iranian religions and the great ancient cultures of the Near East, including the Mesopotamian, the Chaldean, the Syriac, the Aramaic, the Hebraic, and the Arabic—all before the intervention of Greece, Rome, Byzantium, and "Islam."

I should note in passing the influence of the vocabulary used to evoke the plurality of cultures in the Near East. In speaking of the Aramaic, the Syriac, and the Byzantine, I am including Christianity. In speaking of the Hebraic, I am referring to the Jewish religion. But Islam, linked of course to Arabic, designates both the religion begun by Muhammad and the vast empire quickly built by the new power center in Damascus, which shifted to Baghdad and Cordoba. For this reason I have put quotation marks around the word "Islam."

The confusion between Islam as religion and Islam as historical framework for the elaboration of a culture and a civilization has been perpetuated and has grown ever more complex to this day. Nonetheless, Islamic societies must be examined in and for themselves, as French, German, Belgian, U.S., or Polish societies are. It is certainly legitimate for research to identify common factors that generate a single Islamic discourse in very different societies, but then it must also come back to the history of

each of these societies and to its own culture. It is important to identify the ideological obstacles that retard the study of the Mediterranean area as a whole and obscure its pertinence to a modern revival of the history of religions, philosophy, and cultures.

The lesson provided by Fernand Braudel in his great book, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*,[3] has not carried so far as to modify history curricula in high schools and universities. The southern and eastern coasts of the Mediterranean continue to be the domain of specialists in Arabic and Turkish studies—that is to say, of that nebulous "science" we call Orientalism. What is taught about the Arab or Muslim Mediterranean is highly conditioned by the European perspective on the Mediterranean world.

The European perspective has itself been relegated to the background ever since the U.S. Seventh Fleet established strategic control of the whole of the Mediterranean area extending to Iran. Meanwhile, Europe has dedicated all its resources and energies to the construction of a community in which Germany, a country utterly foreign to Mediterranean culture, occupies a central position. Will the presence in the European Community of Greece, Spain, and Portugal eventually reestablish a long-lasting and effective interest in the Mediterranean dimension of the Community by including Arab and Islamic contributions in the powerful, dynamic history of European construction? These are crucial political and cultural issues for the coming decade. It is clear that definitive peace between Israel and the Palestinians would generate hope of almost apocalyptic dimensions for all peoples in the Mediterranean sphere of influence.

I aim here only to reestablish proper historical perspective on the political, economic, and strategic stakes of the unending wars around the Mediterranean. More fundamentally, the task of historians of religions, cultures, and philosophy is to show how ethnocultural groups of varying size and dynamism have dipped into the common stock of signs and symbols to produce systems of belief and nonbelief that, all the while assigning ultimate meaning to human existence, have served to legitimate power drives, hegemonic empires, and deadly wars. All "believers," whether they adhere to revealed religions or contemporary secular regions, would thus be *equally* constrained to envisage the question of meaning not from the angle of unchanging transcendence—that is, of an ontology sheltered from all historicity—but in the light of historical forces that transmute the most sacred values, those regarded as most divine by virtue of their symbolic capital and as inseparable from necessarily mythical accounts of the founding, and from which each ethnocultural group extracts and recognizes what it calls identity or personality.

It is in this new field of intelligibility, beyond the dogmatic definitions that continue to safeguard the mobilizing, ideological force of revealed religions, that the phenomenon of revelation must be reexamined. Only when this perspective holds sway will multidisciplinary and crossdisciplinary analysis of a phenomenon with many faces and functions penetrate to the *radical imaginary*[4] common to the societies of the *Book/books*.

First, though, we need to revise history textbooks in France, Germany, Belgium, the United States, and elsewhere. We must acknowledge the intellectual and cultural poverty of the brief chapters devoted to Islam in high school courses. As for the universities, rare are those even now with history departments willing to tolerate the intrusion of a historian of Islam.[5] The teaching of the history of "Islamic cultures"[6] is all too often left to the department of so-called Oriental languages, where one exists. This observation, which holds for most universities in the West, demonstrates the extent to which an ideological vision of the history of the Mediterranean area has been translated administratively and institutionally into the universities themselves. And the field is open for essayists and journalists to construct imagery of Islam and Muslims based on current events and locked into a short-term perspective dominated by Nasserism, Khomeinism, Israel, and the Palestinians.

To be fair in this description of mutual perceptions of "Islam" (I repeat: This global designation of multiple and different realities is very dangerous; hence I use quotation marks) and of "the West" (another, no less dangerous global designation[7]), I must speak briefly of the situation from the Muslim side. First I must distinguish the perceptual framework of classical Islam from that of contemporary Islam. For classical Islam, the inhabited world was theologically and juridically divided between the home of Islam (*dār al-islām*), where the Divine Law applied, and the land of war (*dār al-ḥarb*), where "infidels" always threatened to substitute "pagan" laws for the True Law, as they did in Mecca and Medina in the time of the Prophet. (A similar division existed for Christianity before Vatican II in 1965.) The Divine Law, revealed in the Qur'an,[8] was rendered explicit and applied by the Prophet and the so-called "orthodox caliphs" in Medina from 622 to 661, and for the Shi'a by the line of designated Imams. From this division of the world into two parts came a special status for "protected peoples" (*dhimmī*), Jews and Christians recognized as peoples of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*) but as theologically beyond the "community promised salvation" (*al firqa al-nājiya*). Today's Jews and Christians are wrong to use this status as a theme of polemics against today's Muslims; they should rather deal with this problem as historians would, avoiding the anachronism of projecting the philosophy of human rights and religious liberty—conquered late in the West (French Revolution) on a theoretical level and still incompletely and randomly applied on a practical level—onto a theological mentality *common* to the three revealed religions.

The theological vision similarly divides time into *before* and *after* the founding moment of the new salvation history. Jews, Christians, and Muslims thus have their respective eras, and all face this question about the theological position of human beings who lived before the "final" revelation was manifest.

Understanding that space and time are for all human beings the coordinates of every perception of an object of knowledge, one can measure the impact of theological systems on all modes of intelligibility in the societies of the Book, where the revealed, Holy Book has engendered all other books containing the knowledge constitutive of each cultural "tradition." Scholars have not yet abandoned these frameworks of perception, and my observation about textbooks and departments of history shows how

the conditions for intelligibility in a desacralized, secularized time and space carry forward in ideological form the prevailing distinctions established by religions.

Inside theological space and time, Muslim geographers of the classical epoch wrote and taught "profane" perceptions of peoples and cultures outside the Muslim domain.[9] What is interesting about this vast geographical literature is its demonstration that the miraculous—hence, the imaginary—intervenes in the perception and the definition of the *other*. To describe the construction of an image of the other as a psychocultural process tied to typical histories and frameworks of intelligibility is an intriguing *new* practice of scientific history.

What can be said now about the perception of the "West" by contemporary "Islam"?

One of the first breaks with classical frameworks goes back to an Egyptian traveler in France in the nineteenth century, Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, who left a moving account of his "discoveries" in a France freshly emerged from revolutionary battles and Napoleonic wars. His view is positive, admiring, and uneasy. The contrast between a free, dynamic society open to change and a Muslim society that was repetitive, conformist, and conservative touched off a desire for progress, reform, and revision. Despite brutal colonial conquests, notably in Algeria, Western civilization stunned him, provoking admiration and envy. It elicited an irrepressible desire for change and movement in Muslim society. Political, literary, artistic, and university figures opened themselves to the lessons of Enlightenment philosophy. They believed they could lead Muslim societies along the same historical course the West had followed toward a civilization perceived as superior, effective, and liberating.

In the years between 1920 and 1940, a secular nationalist movement supported by a reformist Islamic current began to oppose the liberals, who favored imitation of the Western cultural model. The reformist movement, tracing itself back to Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad 'Abdu in the nineteenth century, continued and grew with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and with the Association of Reformist Ulema in Algeria. The rivalry between the liberal and reformist-nationalist positions took a decisive turn with the end of World War II, the creation of the state of Israel, and the coming to power of the Free Officers and Nasserism in Egypt in July 1952. During the Algerian war, which began in November 1954, a nationalist, anticolonial, anti-imperialist, and anti-Zionist perspective gradually took the place of the liberal view held by small "Westernized" groups with their naïve, depoliticized conception of cultural transformation in Muslim societies.

To complete this picture, I would have to recount the stories of Nasserism's confrontations with the demands of the Muslim Brothers, of the confrontation between Atatürk's secularism and a Europe looking for political hegemony and economic domination, of Bourguibism in its struggle for Westernization in the framework of Tunisia's reacquired political sovereignty, of the populist revolution eager to take shortcuts to industrialize, Arabize, and Islamicize Algerian society in a single historic movement, and of Ba'athist socialism in Syria and Iraq, which aimed to build the Arab nation by combining bits and pieces of Enlightenment philosophy with a ro-

mantic version of Islam and a projection of Arab culture back onto the legacy (*turāth*) of the classical age, also called the Golden Age, of Arab-Islamic civilization.

All these movements enjoyed fleeting success owing to the availability of peoples still sensitive to Messianic promises and eschatological expectations. The leaders who benefited from this availability did not perceive the corrosive action and devastating effects of their *ideological* discourse, which substituted unrealizable political programs for the millenary, transhistorical hopes nourished by the *mythical* discourse of traditional religion.[10]

The emergence of Khomeini and the eruption of "Islamic" revolution in Iran in 1979 brought a new illustration of the distinction, not only for the case of Islam but also for other historical trajectories. When Khomeini used "Islamic" discourse to regenerate the ethos of Shi'ite consciousness and to eliminate the "Pharaonic" regime of the shah, he benefited from the disappointed hopes of Arab and Muslim peoples, who had been mobilized ever since the 1950s by socialist-inspired ideologies such as Ba'athism. The confusion between mythical religious discourse and mobilizing, desanctifying ideological discourse reached maximum mobilizational efficacy and destructive effect on the semantic ordering of the community. It produced a particularly dangerous inversion of values, because the most engagés of social actors understood this regeneration of Shi'ite consciousness as social promotion. What was presented as restoration of "Islamic" legitimacy for power, law, and ethical values proved to be only a tragic parody of the formal practices of "democracy" cut off from Islamic principles of authority and foundational philosophy for the rights of man.

With the dissipation of the mythical force of the Arab nation and the Arab Socialist revolution as models for the liberation of other peoples of the Third World, all of a sudden religious consciousness has been demythologized not by historicizing religious knowledge[11] but through ideological manipulation of popular belief and of the richest parts of the tradition. In a great historic drama, Muslim peoples were brutally confronted with material civilization and intellectual modernity. Neither the "Socialist revolution" (in its Nasserist and Algerian phase) nor the "Islamic revolution" (in its Iranian phase) reflected a powerful movement of philosophical and scientific criticism of the religious tradition, of political practice in the inherited culture, or of the problem of knowledge in general; there was nothing to compare in these regards with the eighteenth-century movement that prepared the way for the French Revolution. When in the 1950s and 1960s Nasser sent the Muslim Brothers to prison and even had them hung, he was not thereby encouraging a modernization of Islamic consciousness; likewise, Boumediene in Algeria after 1965 simultaneously fostered slogans of Socialist revolution and spectacular, official operations to traditionalize society with a "return" to ritual, fragmentary expressions of Islam. With the "Islamic revolution," the restoration of the law and ritual practice is more systematic, but the crucial problems inherited from what I call the exhaustive Islamic tradition[12] are further than ever removed from scientific and philosophical examination.

The *unthought* and the *unthinkable* in Islamic thought have been accumulating ever since ideologies of struggle for political liberation took over the whole of the social arena. Forced to forswear colonial domination, the West has since the 1960s launched a search for new expressions of modernity, while the Muslim world has, quite to the contrary, turned away from these opportunities and proposed instead an "Islamic" model, which is beyond all scientific investigation. This notion constitutes the triumph of a social imaginary that is termed "Islamic" but that in fact sacralizes an irreversible operation of political, economic, social, and cultural secularization. Analysts have barely noticed this new role of Islam used at the collective level as an instrument of disguising behaviors, institutions, and cultural and scientific activities inspired by the very Western model that has been ideologically rejected.

We must try, as we go along, to *rethink* the historical situation created by the evolution of Muslim societies during the past thirty years. We must linger over those problems rendered *unthinkable* by the ideology of struggle in the hope of opening a new historic phase in this process of evolution, a phase where critical thought—anchored in modernity but criticizing modernity itself and contributing to its enrichment through recourse to the Islamic example—should accompany, or even for once precede, political action, economic decisions, and great social movements.

Notes

1. For an extensive discussion of the "imaginary," see Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, translated by Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge: Polity, 1987). Castoriadis offers this initial effort at definition, p. 127: "Recall the common meaning of the term 'imaginary', which is sufficient for the moment: we speak of the 'imaginary' when we want to talk about something 'invented'—whether this refers to a 'sheer' invention ('a story entirely dreamed up'), or a slippage, a shift of meaning in which available symbols are invested with other significations than their 'normal' or canonical significations. ('What are you imagining now?' says the woman to the man who is chiding her for a smile she exchanged with someone else.) In both cases, it is assumed that the imaginary is separate from the real, whether it claims to take the latter's place (a lie) or makes no such claim (a novel)."

2. "Salvation history" is a translation of the term *Heilsgeschicte*, first used by J. C. von Hofman (1810–1877) "to refer to those events which the Bible narrates as manifesting God's deeds for the salvation of the world." That history would include creation, exodus, covenant, ancient Israel, the prophets, and the advent of the New Testament, among other events. Thomas P. McCreesh, "Salvation History," *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988). Other possible translations of the German term would be "history of salvation," "redemptive history," and "holy history." The term in French is *histoire du salut*.—TRANS.

3. Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II* (London: Collins, 1972).

4. Castoriadis says: "To the extent that the imaginary ultimately stems from the originary faculty of positing or presenting oneself with things and relations that do not exist, in the form of representation (things and relations that are not or have never been given in perception), we shall speak of a final or radical imaginary as the common root of the actual imaginary and of the symbolic. This is finally the elementary and irreducible capacity of evoking images" (*The Imaginary Institution of Society*, p. 127).—TRANS.

too secular and thus too far removed from Islamic legitimacy, which is always linked in the common imaginary to the Medina model.

The abolition of the sultanate by Atatürk did not abolish this imaginary. However, the functions of the caliph or the Imam have undergone sharp deterioration since at least the tenth century. Emirs lacking any tie to the family of the Prophet took power in Baghdad as early as 945 (the Buyids). They left the caliphate in place purely for reasons of legitimation. Various dynasties ruling in various Muslim countries since the tenth century have turned to the ulema in search of legitimation. That is what the Ottoman sultans did from the seventeenth century onward.[3]

Legitimate authority remains a requirement of the common Muslim imaginary, but in historical reality the seizure and exercise of power (*sulṭān*) has usually followed from acts of violence. This is why all regimes established in Muslim countries since the 1950s, with the exception of the Moroccan monarchy, suffer from a deficit of legitimacy. In Arabia the Sa'ud family entered into alliance with the Wahhabi religious movement to insure Islamic legitimacy. The ulema still maintain an eminent position in the functioning of monarchical power there.

There has never in the history of Muslim countries been a break in continuity comparable to the French Revolution of 1789–1792, that is, the imposition of a secular and republican imaginary over and against a religious imaginary that had until then held sway in the realm of authority. The overlapping of the religious and the political, of legitimating authority and state power, had been comparable in Christianity to that which emerged in Islam. The new climate created by the French Revolution is now spreading to the Muslim domain, but by indirect means and always hidden by Islamic references destined to reassure the religious imaginary. Demographic growth has considerably loosened the social boundaries of the imaginary in all Muslim societies—a fact that explains why the debate over authority and power is currently so heated and also why it is completely distorted and obstructed by the ideological connivance of states in search of legitimacy and of broad social strata kept away from the corridors of power.[4]

Notes

1. These are examples of religious vocabulary covering, in fact, very precise social groups in Arabia at that time.

2. The word *imām* (imam), which means "guide" or "prayer leader," will be capitalized when referring to the designated successors to the Prophet in the Shi'a tradition.—TRANS.

3. Note the legal difference indicated by terminology: While the "caliph" is a vicar, an Imam is a charismatic guide, spiritual heir of the Prophet, and a sultan is a holder of power without the procedures and conditions required for a caliph or an Imam.

4. On this question, see my studies in *Pour une critique de la raison islamique* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1984) and *Islam: State and Society*, edited by Klaus Ferdinand and Mehdi Mozaffari (London: Curzon, 1988), pp. 53–74.

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Judaism, Christianity, and Paganism

What did Islam retain from the previously revealed religions, Judaism and Christianity? And what in addition did it retain from the religions and customs of pre-Islamic Arabia?

Posed in this way, these questions are only conceivable within a framework of knowledge characteristic of history as it is written by modern historians. They imply a horizontal window on the time line marking the "evolution" of societies and cultures. This view contrasts with that visible through the vertical window introduced in the Qur'an, and, more generally, in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, which reveal that all beings and all events of terrestrial history are dependent on the creative *fiat* of God. The framework for perception of time and space in the Qur'an is mythical; ancient peoples who disobeyed God are evoked from the perspective of salvation history, that is, a perspective that takes account of an eschatological future that goes beyond the chronology of terrestrial events. In this fashion, the pre-Islamic Arab past is categorically dismissed in the Qur'an as an age of darkness and ignorance (*ẓulumāt al-jāhiliyya*), subsequently abolished by the light of Islam (*nūr al-islām*). The pasts of those societies where Islam spread are similarly rejected and condemned to oblivion for their links with paganism.

The Qur'anic position with regard to Judaism and Christianity is obviously different from the Qur'anic view of paganism: Jews and Christians are considered peoples of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*). Revelation reached them through recognized and venerated prophets such as Abraham and Moses. Jesus, son of Mary, enjoys a special status; he is the Word of God (*kalimatu-llah*) but not the son of God, and he was not crucified. To understand the Qur'anic definition of Jesus the person we must come back to the theological disputes dividing eastern Christians in the fifth and sixth centuries. It took time for the Christian dogma of the Trinity to assert itself in the now familiar standard Catholic form. Current debates between Muslims and Christians do not take account of the historic dimension of the problem. Beliefs elaborated rather late are projected backwards by both sides.

The Qur'an, appearing after the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, integrates these two other moments of revelation and introduces itself as the final act in the exhibition of the heavenly Book (*al-kitāb*) among human beings. Inversely, the Jews

and Christians of Medina refused to recognize Muhammad as a prophet, a fact that explains the split between the communities at the end of the Medina period. There are several conciliatory verses in the Qur'an about the "Sons of Israel" and the Christians, but in Sura 9, revealed in 630 after the taking of Mecca by the believers, the following verses appear. They have served as the basic definition of the legal status of Jews and Christians, who became *dhimmī*, protected peoples:

> Fight those who do not believe in God, even on the Final Day, and who do not proclaim illicit that which God and His Messenger have declared illicit; those who among the people of the Book do not profess the religion of Truth, fight them until they personally pay the *jizya* [tax on non-Muslims], acknowledging their inferiority.
>
> The Jews said: "Othair is the son of God," and the Christians said: "Oint is the Son of God." That is what they say with their own mouths! They repeat what the infidels said before them. May God humiliate them! How they are wrong![1]

These verses, like the rest of Sura 9, warrant a long historical and theological commentary. They have fed an interminable polemic from which there is no escape because it is conducted at the dogmatic level. I cite them here not to touch off new controversies but to attract attention to the urgent need for a modern rereading of these sacred texts that takes account of historical context and doctrinal struggles aggravated by the appearance of the Qur'an at the beginning of the seventh century.

More generally, the comparative history of religions of the Book is still little studied; everyone wants to avoid falling back into medieval polemics. Anything that emphasizes the historicity of sacred texts touches off indignant protest among believers. Only a calm, objective, open brand of history can illuminate declarations such as those quoted above.

History teaches, too, that Islam has retained many of the rites and beliefs characteristic of earlier Arab religion: the rites of pilgrimage to Mecca, the belief in jinn, the mythological representations of ancient peoples, and many edifying tales with clear references to preceding cultures. But the Qur'an recuperated these "ruins of an ancient social discourse" for the construction of a new "ideological palace," as attested by Sura 18, for example.[2] In this sense the Qur'an as a discourse has a mythical structure. Myth refers here to that which the Qur'an calls *al-qaṣaṣ*, a narrative, tale, or story, and not to *usṭūra*, a legend or fable lacking in truth value. By translating myth as *usṭūra* even though the Qur'an furnishes a more useful equivalent, the Arabs have forbidden themselves from thinking about myth and its irreplaceable functions in the construction of the religious imaginary. I emphasize this fact because several readers of my work have falsely interpreted "myth" to mean "fable" or "insubstantial legend"—a definition that destroys the mythical richness of Qur'anic stories.

The utilization in the Qur'an of notions, rites, beliefs, and stories already familiar to previous cultures does not justify a search for "influences" in the style of historicist philologists, who hold a theory of literary or doctrinal creativity that practically rules out any work of synthesis based on widely known materials drawn from ancient traditions. Modern linguistics and semiotics, in contrast, permit us to rediscover the dynamic characteristic of each text, seen from these new viewpoints, as recombining and revitalizing elements borrowed out of context. For every story in the Qur'an, one could show how narrative discourse introduces a new experience of divine thought by pulling names, themes, episodes, and even terms out of previous texts. There are those who have tried to minimize the contribution of the Qur'an by insisting on its "borrowings" from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. By doing so they have used the historicist, philological method in the service of a Christian or Jewish apologetic objective. We now know that such an approach is scientifically erroneous.

I would underscore the arbitrary aspect of any historical knowledge based on deliberate refusal to recognize the conditions and contributions characteristic of mythical knowledge. So many misunderstandings between believers, who operate in the mythical framework, and "rationalists," who limit themselves to quantifiable and verifiable space and time, stem from such a refusal. The famous thesis of Taha Hussein on pre-Islamic poetry is an excellent illustration of the divorce between the two types of knowledge. Even today violent clashes and passionate disputes between "Islamists" and historians come out of divergent perceptions of social and cultural reality. I fear that these antagonisms will become more serious as schools spread mythological and highly ideologized images of the past among ever larger populations. Demography has a multiplier effect on the mythologization of religion and the use of history for ideological purposes.

Ideology actually proceeds on the basis of an amalgamation of concepts, notions, historical periods, and levels of meaning, all the while claiming to be highly scientific. Myth, in contrast, always provides food for thought by recapitulating the historic experience of a social group through symbolic expressions, parables, and narrative structures. In the contemporary Muslim context, we can observe a degradation of myth into mythology and ideology, a dilapidation of the symbolic capital bequeathed by Islam, and a reduction of sign into signal. In the languages of the Islamic world, discourse in the sciences of man and society is still too weak and too inadequate to prevent the spread of semantic disorder.

Notes

1. Sura 9, verses 29 and 30.

2. See my *Lectures du Coran* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1982). The references are to Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966).

sustain demand for knowledge and culture; beginning in the eleventh century, when mounting risks threatened the life of the cities already rendered fragile by poorly controlled nomadic and peasant settings, scientific research gave way little by little to the mobilizing discourse of wartime ideology. Against the Reconquista in Spain, the Crusades in Palestine, and the Turkish and Mongol hordes in Iran and Iraq, Muslims needed an orthodox, dogmatic, and rigid but ideologically effective Islam to rally around.

This was the period in which scholastic teaching spread through the *zawāyā*, small mosque schools often run by the religious brotherhoods, and popular religion penetrated the countryside under the guidance of marabouts or local saints. These social and ideological developments radically modified the prospects for scientific and intellectual activity. Narrowing horizons and scholastic hardening accelerated without interruption until the nineteenth century, when a reformist movement appeared in response to colonial pressure. But by then, in about 1830, the historic break with the scientific and cultural legacy of the productive period had been fully consummated. That is why the *salafi* reformists of the late nineteenth century developed a mythological vision of primitive Islam and of the classical civilization it inspired. Mythology, romanticism, and nostalgia for long lost glory left little room for a scientific, critical, constructive approach. The nationalist ideology that emerged to guide the wars of liberation in the twentieth century would only accentuate the semantic break, all the while maintaining the claim to a glorious past, especially on the scientific level. During what is called the liberal age (1850–1940) of the *nahḍa*, the Arab revival movement, Orientalism, and a few Muslim scholars trained in the philological and historical disciplines spurred scientific research and the publication of some ancient texts, but the work remained insufficient. Thus, the history of science remains less well explored than other topics in Islamic history.

Notes

1. See Paul Kraus, *Jābir Ibn Hayyan: Essai sur l'histoire des idées scientifiques dans l'Islam*, 2 vols. (Paris: 1935, 1942); and E. J. Holmyad, *Alchemy* (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1957).

2. See Zakariya Ibn Muhammad, *'Ajā'ib al-makhlūqāt wa Gharā'ib al-Mawjudat* (Beirut: Dar al-Afaq al Jadida, 1978).

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Sufism

What is the place of Sufism as a doctrinal movement and a style of religious life within Islam? Does Sufism come out of the school of hidden meaning (al-bātiniyya) or the literalist perspective (al-zāhiriyya), a distinction we have already invoked?

Any discussion of Islam that did not devote special attention to its mystical strain called Sufism would be insufficient. This stream of thought is equipped with its own technical lexicon, discourse, and theories. Its style of religious life depends upon rites and ceremonies, individual and collective, that enable both body and soul to participate in the process of incarnating spiritual truths.

The mystical experience develops in every religion; it is not unique to Islam. Historically, it has enjoyed a remarkable continuity, while other modes of religious expression—theology, law, exegesis, architecture, and institutions—have undergone more rapid change.

The ultimate purpose of mysticism is, first and foremost, a lived experience of an internal, unifying encounter between believer and his or her personal God (the sense of the infinite and the absolute linked to the divine as taught by all religions). This experience is analyzed as it is formalized through examination of consciousness, through the mystic's turning in on the self. Once reflected upon in this way and put into writing, the experience serves to nourish aspiring disciples (*murīdūn*), who set themselves upon a mystical course (*sulūk*) under the guidance of a master (*shaykh*).

Mystical contemplation is an individual exercise, independent of the worship practiced by the community; it is lived as a gratuitous gift of God, which is reciprocated by the loving gift of the mystic. Islam encourages communication with God without the mediation of priests. In the view of legal-theological orthodoxy, however, mystics go too far in their ritual detachment from the community, especially when they reach the stage of ecstatic unity (*al-waḥda*) with God. When the great mystic al-Hallaj, who was tortured in 922, uttered the famous theopathic phrase, "*anā-l-ḥaqq*," "I am God-Truth," he met with incomprehension from literalists and ritualists, who would not admit that the human "I" could be unified to the same extent as the divine, transcendent "I." "We are two minds poured into a single body," said al-Hallaj. This assertion earned him the accusation of incarnation, *ḥulūl*. Louis Massignon, the great authority on al-Hallaj and practitioner of dialectics and ecstatics, wrote: "Hallaj

tried to reconcile dogma and Greek philosophy with the rules of mystical experimentation. He was a precursor of al-Ghazali in that respect."[1]

Massignon's assessment of al-Hallaj underscores the richness and originality of mysticism from the seventh to the ninth centuries in a society where several cultural traditions and currents of thought originating in ethnocultural groups (*mawālī*) converged. Philosophy was capable of unraveling a mystical or ascetic experience, just as mysticism could open itself to philosophy. The theologian and the jurist could be drawn to both philosophy and Sufism. Such interchanges of ideas and exchanges of experience could occur in cosmopolitan cities such as Baghdad, Basra, Rayy, Mecca (as a result of the pilgrimage), and Cairo.

Mystics of the formative period succeeded in remaining solidly rooted in the intellectual terrain of their time, all the while suspending their consciousness of time and the world of objects and edging toward an existential monism (*waḥdat al-wujūd,* in the words of the great mystic Ibn 'Arabi, d. 1240). They described their experience with a style and an acuity of analysis that even now attract the attention of all students of religious psychology as well as practitioners of the mystical way. I will mention the names of Hasan al-Basri (d. 772), Muhasibi (d. 857), Bistami (d. 874), and Junayd (d. 910).[2]

One cannot neglect the social and political aspects of the mystical movement if one is to understand the tensions generated by great innovators such as al-Hallaj. The ready-made clientele for mystics is clearly an impoverished urban milieu consisting of the members of marginal social categories and those who cannot rise into the privilege of the leisured classes of merchants, landowners, and "intellectuals" associated with the exercise of power or protected by patrons. Mysticism's relationship with the working classes evolved after the eleventh century toward an association with the society's more dangerous, contentious classes (*futūwa, 'ayyārūn*). Then, in a later stage, from the thirteenth through the nineteenth centuries, local saints (marabouts) were associated with the rural and mountain populations whom central authorities could not control, as in the Maghrib toward the end of the Merinid dynasty. In that period mysticism became a highly diverse movement of religious brotherhoods, expressing and crystallizing tribal and clan rivalries in rituals and ceremonies unique to each brotherhood. Throughout the Muslim world, brotherhoods worked to gain prestige, followers, and political ground by sending trained marabout missionaries into teaching centers. Each such center, or *zāwiya,* was linked to a founding saint. Everywhere the holy emanations (*baraka*) of the saints worked miracles to win the confidence of populations, whose illiteracy and foreignness to Arabic, as in the case of the Berbers in the Maghrib and of Africans south of the Sahara, rendered them all the more credulous.

This is the Islam of the marabouts, dominated by the work of saints and the constant diffusion of holiness, that a conquering, positivistic West discovered in all the Muslim countries in the nineteenth century. Interpretations and misunderstandings emanating from this situation continue to feed the Western imaginary of Islam even now.

In the current context of Muslim societies, it is difficult to assess precisely the significance of what wrongly continues to be called Sufism. Like Islam as a whole, the shape of Sufism depends upon the cultural system and the political regime where it manifests itself. The powerful movement toward ideologization already mentioned with regard to Islam clearly affects Sufism, too, especially since nation-states are wary of any resurgence of saint cultures and careful to keep watch over the places and milieus hospitable to brotherhoods. In certain cases, as in Senegal, brotherhoods become pillars of support and transmission belts for the power of the state, which accords them privileges in exchange. For these reasons, sociological surveys aiming to identify links or conflicts between militant Islam and the Islam of the brotherhoods are difficult if not impossible to carry out. The Sufi milieu does not lend itself to surveys; theirs is a silent, discrete Islam. One would love to know more about its spirituality and about its ties to the intellectual concerns of classical Sufism. Political analysts err in concentrating all their attention on the burning, militant Islam in plain sight; other manifestations of Islam deserve to be more closely examined and better known to the public at large.

Many Westerners convert to Islam these days by means of what is introduced to them as Sufism. The psychocultural complex at work in such conversions deserves to be studied in relation to the outcasts produced by a Western society deemed cold, rationalist, materialist, and without ideals. There are many illusions, mistakes, hasty judgments, and misunderstandings on one side and the other, just as there are for infatuations with the religions of India and, more generally, with the multiplication of Christian sects in the West. These phenomena show the extent to which contemporary scientific thought as well as political authorities fail to take account of religious movements, channel them, and assure them adequate room for expression. Society is content to marginalize the sects and stigmatize religious and cultural deviance without seriously reexamining the spiritual dimension of human existence through the multiple experiences recorded in the history of religions.

Currently Islam cannot claim superiority in that regard. Where there are manifestations of the "spiritual" in Muslim societies, it is more a result of the survival of social structures and subsistence economics conducive to the manifestation of traditional religion than of a more effective resistance on the part of Islam to the disruptions generated by the modern economy and industrial civilization. The output of theological or mystical goods does not compare with that which once energized and enriched classical Islam. That is why people are reusing ancient works in contemporary contexts.

The fact that mystical experiences as described and taught by the ancients elicit disciples in our societies, deeply troubled at every level of their existence, only demonstrates the capacity of these societies to produce cultural and psychological marginality. Of course, the ancient testimony contains aspirations toward the transcendence of social and cultural context. Still, the experience of the divine can no longer seek support in symbolic capital, a sense of miracle, a mythical universe, and a capacity for bewitchment. All such assets have been neatly destroyed not only by our sur-

roundings of concrete, factories, and public housing but by a replacement myth of secular and republican origin characteristic of our current societies.

The so-called Islamist movements combat this myth, which came out of the English, American, and especially the French revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But political regimes, state structures, systems of production and exchange, generalized corruption, technological culture, destruction of the semiological environment, dilapidation of traditional symbolic capital, loss of bewitchment, and sacredness of time and place all give a priori shape to modern sensitivities and the framework of modern perceptions. They derive from a myth of secular, "republican" origin. (Republics, understood as democratic regimes, exist in only a formal sense in most Muslim countries, but authority there, whether monarchical or formally republican, is oriented toward the general secularization of society.)

I have already suggested that the line of demarcation between intrinsic and extrinsic cannot be drawn between internal and external, between that which is *hidden* and can be known only via initiation and that which is *apparent* or *manifest*, which is immediately accessible to sight or reason. Traditional Islamic thought psychologized, in the framework of a gnostic culture, a psycholinguistic reality that we describe today in terms of deep and superficial structures, implicit and explicit discourse in language. Ancient practitioners of exegesis encountered this distinction in trying to decipher Qur'anic discourse. The notions of *taqdīr* and *taḍmīn* (implied, implicit) and of explicit, but either clear or ambiguous, verses requiring more analysis or greater interpretative effort (*muḥkamāt, mutashābihāt*) put them on the path toward distinguishing between what is said and unsaid and understanding what is said by way of the unsaid. All the same, their theory of language and the relations between language and thought lacked an adequate approach to metaphor and metonymy, any recognition of myth as the key to a mode of knowledge, and any conception of symbol and sign as fundamental elements of signification in all semiological systems and especially in this sort of religious discourse from which so many other systems of signification are derived.

The ancients were of course familiar with metaphor, metonymy, parable, edifying story, and sign-symbols. (The word for verse in the Qur'an is *āya*, a "sign" or "mark.") They commonly used all the tools of expression in all the semiological systems they produced. (Mystical discourse is one; there were others for dress, furniture, architecture, urbanism, legal codes, and so on.) But they could not take full account of the role played by each of these rhetorical, linguistic, and semiological tools in organizing all signification. Scholars are only beginning to glimpse, for example, the capacity of metaphor, symbol, and myth to establish meaning with regard to the construction of the imaginary and the historical avatars of meaning. Meaning is no longer stable, forever rooted in transcendence, but is rather exposed to the continual genesis of destruction. Meaning is generated by semantic creativity, the inventiveness of the subject under the pressure of new existential demands that necessitate destroying, transforming, or surpassing previous meanings. The process entails the existence

of live, dead, and revived metaphors or the degradation of symbols into simple signs or even into signals that are merely descriptive.

Mystical discourse amplifies, develops, and utilizes the symbolic and mythical part of founding religious discourse (the Qur'an for Sufism, the New Testament for Christians, the apocalyptic texts for Jewish cabala) to construct an initiating knowledge, a gnosticism that sustains the mystic journey and finds itself enriched in return by the data of every experience carried to its conclusion. Scholars thus dispose of particularly rich bodies of work for the study of semantic and symbolic eruptions in language under the pressure of intense, internal spiritual experience and, inversely, of the capacity generated in the course of mystical experiences for renewal and revival of articulated discourse. Louis Massignon perceived this decisive importance of language very well in studying the "technical lexicon of Muslim mysticism" and in translating the *Diwān* of al-Hallaj.

To complete this inquiry I would have to show how the spiritual contents of mystical discourse are translated and incorporated into the flow of normal religious exercises through rites, prayers, recitations, performances, and corporal disciplines. The genesis and functions of what we call "faith" are surely linked to these linguistic and psychophysiological mechanisms. We now know that language training takes place through the reception of sounds corresponding to phonological structures. Deaf mutes use skin and bones for the reception of these sounds. Units of sound are imprinted in the neuronic system as if on tape; their faithful reproduction is thus assured. This does not, of course, eliminate the creativity of the subject, which resides in variable abilities to formulate new combinations at the moment of semantic and symbolic eruption. The highest degree of such creativity is to be found in prophets and great artists.

Notes

1. Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, 4 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University, 1982).

2. See A. J. Arberry, *Sufism: An Account of the Mystics of Islam* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969); Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1975).