



MOHAMMED ARKOUN AND THE QUESTION OF ETHICS IN CONTEMPORARY ARAB THOUGHT

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The question of ethics has never aroused much interest in contemporary Arab thought, mainly because many people regard it as being “traditional”, “old hat” and ideologically irrelevant.

However, this does not mean that the subject is irrelevant where Arabs in general are concerned. On the contrary, ethics and morality are – and always have been – almost inseparable from behaviour; however, as they are also separate from thought, books on the topic are invariably “traditional” in character in that they promote established values without considering the philosophical foundations upon which those values are based. In this connection, a work like al Ghazali’s *Ihya’ ‘Ulum al Din (The Revival of Religious Sciences)* is still among the most famous books on the subject today.

Nevertheless, Arab thinkers in the modern age are familiar with world philosophy and aware of present-day

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ethics-related questions. Major books on the subject have been translated into Arabic such as Spinoza's *Ethics*¹ and Kant's *Kritik der Praktischen Vernunft (Critique of Practical Reason)*, as well as other relevant reference material. Several books have also been written by Arabs, including Zakaria Ibrahim's *Mushkilat al Akhlaq (The Problem of Ethics)*, which is a popular textbook in Arab academic institutions, while since the early 20th century philosophy departments in Arab universities have been producing theses on ethics from a range of angles – some traditional, others modern. Ahmed Amin published his *Akhlaq (Ethics)* in 1920 and in 1924 Zaki Mubarak published *Al Akhlaq 'inda'l Ghazali (Al Ghazali's Ethics)*, which aroused quite a storm because of its critical approach and led to its author being accused of scepticism about traditional values and having atheistic tendencies. Yousuf Musa published *Tarikh al Akhlaq (A History of Ethics)* in 1940 and Muhammad 'Abdullah Draz submitted his brilliant dissertation *Dastour al Akhlaq fi'l Qur'an (The Ethical Code in the Qur'an)* at the Sorbonne in 1947. (It was subsequently published in Arabic.) Other works include Majid Fakhri's *Al Fikr al Akhlaqi al 'Arabi (Arab Ethical Thought)*, published in 1978.

All these studies aimed to reconcile the Arab/Islamic ethical system with some aspects of modern ethical thinking. The result, though, was modest considering the importance of the subject and ethics continued to be basically associated with behavioural concepts that were traditional, educational and admonitory.

Let us now consider some of the attempts that have been made in recent years to revisit the question of ethics and its relation to the Arab/Islamic tradition as well as modern philosophical trends. In this connection, Dr. Taha Abdulrahman's *Su'al al Akhlaq: Musahamah fi'l Naqd al Akhlaqi li'l Hadathah al Gharbiyyah (The Question of Ethics: a Contribution to Moral Criticism of Western Modernism)* – published by the Arab Cultural Centre in 2000 – calls for “an ethical approach that looks below the surface of modernism and probes into the deepest aspects of

1 A translation by Jalal al Din Sa'id of the writings of leading specialists on Spinoza's thought was published in 2009 by the Arab Organisation for Translation.

humanity and human life; nothing is deeper than life that extends from the 'immediate to the deferred' [i.e. from this world to the next], and nothing is deeper than a human being whose exterior is connected to his inner being."¹

In Part 4 of his book *Mashru' Naqd al 'Aql al 'Arabi (Critique of the Arab Mind* – published by the Arab Cultural Centre in 2001) – entitled "*The Arab Ethical Mind: A Critical Analytical Study of the Value Systems in Arab Culture*" – Dr. Mohammed 'Abed al Jaberi writes that his aim is to "begin an examination of Arab ethical thought and the value systems in the Arab/Islamic culture which gave birth to it"². He notes that one of its most significant results was an appeal for an end to the link between ethics and philosophy, "because in our culture philosophy has never been the 'mother of disciplines', as was the case in Greece and Renaissance Europe. Rather, philosophy – along with other associated branches of learning – was just one discipline out of many, so that consequently there were other lines of ethical discourse outside the realm of philosophy."³

Mohammed Arkoun may have been the first to examine the relationship between ethics, tradition and modernity. He began his academic career with a thesis on Miskawaih, the author of the monumental work *Tahdhib al Akhlaq (The Refinement of Morals)*, and returned to the subject of ethics in a later book published after his death⁴ under the title *Al Mas'alah al Akhlaqiyyah wa'l Tashri'iyiyah fi'l Fikr al Islami (The Ethical and Legal Issue in Islamic Thought)*. Originally published in French as *La Question Ethique Et Juridique Dans La Pensee Islamique*, it was described by the publisher – Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin – as "as introduction commissioned from Arkoun by the Librairie Philosophique as an introduction to the reissued version of Miskawaih's *Tahdhib al Akhlaq*, which Arkoun translated into French in 1961 and published in 1969. When

1 Taha Abdulrahman: *Su'al al Akhlaq: Musahamah fi'l Naqdi'l Akhlaqi li'l Hadathah al Gharbiyyah*, Arab Cultural Centre, Beirut, 2000, p. 26.

2 Mohammed 'Abed al Jaberi: *Al 'Aql al Akhlaqi al 'Arabi: Dirasah Tahliliyyah Naqdiyyah li Nudhumi'l Qiyam fi'l Thaqqafah al 'Arabiyyah*, Arab Cultural Centre, Beirut, 2001, p. 18.

3 Ibid. p. 621.

4 Mohammed Arkoun: *La Question Ethique et Juridique dans la Pensee Islamique*, Vrin, 2010.

the idea of a new edition was suggested, Arkoun set about writing an introduction to it. However, it eventually turned out to be so long that it became a book in its own right and the publisher decided to publish it separately under the above title.”

In his “introduction, which later became a book” Arkoun aimed to present “an overview of the shifts in ethical attitudes in Islamic thought” based on examples cited in earlier publications. He showed how religious thought and theology in former times were preoccupied with the principle of mutual exclusivity and quoted some paragraphs from Ibn Khaldun’s *Muqaddimah (Prolegomenon)* to show how even a person regarded as one of the most critical of historians was prone to this tendency. He also cited numerous examples from early Christian thought which demonstrate how this same tendency was a feature of Christianity both before and after Islam and explain how Saint Augustine combined the two dangerous and far-reaching concepts of a “just war” and “the True Religion”; that is to say, he regarded Christianity as the only true faith and every other creed as invalid, thereby providing justification for resorting to violence and coercion.

Arkoun refutes the thesis that the idea of Holy War was adopted by Christendom in reaction to the spread of Islam;¹ after all, if the idea came from Saint Augustine, who lived in the 5th century CE (he died in 430 CE), this would mean that it predated Christianity’s encounter with Islam – indeed, it would have predated Islam itself. Therefore it was not a question of the Religion of Peace (Christianity) coming up against the Religion of War (Islam); rather, it was a product of the religious mindset in the Middle Ages and its preoccupation with the principle of mutual exclusivity.

What we need to do today is “dismantle” those religious and theological illusions, which are still exerting a strong influence on people’s ideas and national decisions, and replace them with an ethical system which transcends the old theological structures – though without falling prey to the hazards of modern ideologies. Arkoun called for the

¹ For example, Jean Flori: *Holy War, Jihad, Crusade: Violence and Religion in Christianity and Islam (Guerre Sainte, Jihad, Croisade: Violence et Religion dans le Christianisme et l’Islam)*.

breaking of the “closed dogmatic fence” imposed upon the human mind by earlier eras; this was within the context of a dual critique of theology and modernism in which he also coined the unique expression “the human mind’s fence of modernism”. In his view “emerging reason” (*raison emergente*) needed to free itself from the theology of the past as well as the ideologies of the present day – i.e. from the “exclusivist” morality of the past and modern ideologies that marginalise issues such as religion and ethics.

In both Christianity and Islam the “dismantling” of the old ethical system entails an investigation of their two main sources – the religious heritage and Greek philosophy. Arkoun notes that “ethics committees” (*comites d’ethique*) have been set up in several states including some Islamic countries and he suggests that a close look should be taken at the people who compose these committees so that a comparison can be made with the old, traditional view of ethics.

In the old days ethics was derived from religion or philosophy, or from a combination of religion and Platonist philosophy (a combination found in both Christianity and Islam). Today’s ethics committees generally include representatives of the different faiths, in addition to scientists/scholars in the modern sense (particularly doctors of medicine) and leading thinkers, which of course means that present-day ethics is cut off from its Greek legacy and that it is no longer the sole preserve of the religious establishment.

At the same time, if we compare the situation of Christian societies – in which the “religious representatives” speak of “religious ethics” – with that of Islamic societies, whose “religious representatives” sometimes speak of “religious ethics” and at other times of the “Shariah”, we will find that the two are not identical, because the “Shariah” (in the way it is presented) really falls into the category of law rather than ethics or morality. The difference between Christian and Islamic societies on this issue is really due to historical factors rather than the essential characters of the Christian and Muslim religions. Both religions share the same background – i.e. the principle of the True Faith – and have developed along similar

lines in that they combine religion with Platonist philosophy. In Islam this is mainly due to the influence of eminent thinkers such as Miskawaih (d. 1030 CE) and Abu'l Hayyan al Tawhidi (d. 1023); subsequently, while the philosophical element of ethics began to lose its significance in the Islamic tradition until it almost vanished altogether from the 13th century CE, in the Christian world it grew in significance at the expense of the religious element, which became nearly extinct with the arrival of the Age of Enlightenment and the scientific and technological revolutions. In Arkoun's view, these were both negative developments and both were bound to retreat under pressure from the dual critique (see above) and the rise of the "emerging reason" which he advocated in his later writings.

Arkoun summarises the question of ethics in Islamic thought as follows: It reached its high point with Miskawaih's generation and the emergence of humanist (*humaniste*) ideas, and Miskawaih's *Tahdhib* was its finest expression. Subsequently Islamic ethical thought took a wrong turn and became sectarian-religious; this was exemplified by the Sunni Abu Hamid al Ghazali (d. 1111 CE) in his book *Mizan al A'mal (The Scale of Deeds)* and the Shi'ite Nasir al Din al Tusi (d. 1274 CE) in *Akhlaq-i Nasiri (Nasirean Ethics)*, and this situation continued until modern times. If Muhammad Abduh read Miskawaih's *Tahdhib al Akhlaq*, there is no indication in his writings that he was in any way influenced by him.

(This clearly suggests that Arkoun found Muhammad Abduh's view of ethics unconvincing – a point that we touch on in our thesis on Abduh, which was written under Arkoun's supervision. We shall return to this subject later and explain how we differ with Arkoun on this important issue.)

After al Ghazali and al Tusi Islamic thought found itself at an impasse, where it remains to this day. With the rise of modern philosophy in the 1960s and 1970s some people concluded that the question of ethics was no longer relevant and that Arab societies should focus on material growth and development; anything else (in their view) was pointless and meaningless. Modern ideologies overran and occupied the field of thought and cut its "communication cord" with traditional ethical thinking. This

was followed by a fundamental shift from faith and reason to a pragmatic neo-liberalism which rejected the notion of values. Meanwhile Miskawaih's *Tahdhib al Akhlaq* was jettisoned in favour of Islamic fundamentalism, raising the question: "Where are values headed for in these societies?"

Citing the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights as an example of the contradictions in modern Islamic ethical thought (the Declaration that was drawn up by the Islamic Council and officially endorsed by UNESCO on 19th September 1981), Arkoun wondered how the eminent persons who prepared its text and saw it as an "ethical point of reference" could claim it as "universal" – i.e. for the whole of humanity – while at the same time it was described as "Islamic," with every one of its 23 sections citing supporting evidence from the Qur'an and the Sunnah.

In Arkoun's view this is but one instance of the predicament in which Islamic thought finds itself when trying to develop new ideas on the question of ethics. While he believed that there was no chance of a serious revival without a stringent critical review of the entire cultural legacy, he also recognized the difficulty of such a task – not only in the Islamic world, but also in the West. The West is firmly ensconced behind its "fence of modernism", while the Islamic world remains marooned behind a fence which brought an end to an era of intense intellectual activity by "cutting off the lifelines" of Islamic thought. Islamic critical thought is still enfeebled, cramped and unable to counter attempts to transform traditional myths into modern ideologies. This is due mainly to the fact that the "faith legacy" has not only unravelled and lost touch with its roots; it has also opted to isolate itself from the present-day trends in modern critical thinking.

Arkoun wrote frankly about his own career as a teacher and writer, describing himself as a "seeker and thinker" who tried to combine a strict academic approach with an open-minded attitude towards the preoccupations of human societies; however, he had found his way blocked by religious, and secular, intransigence. Consequently, neither the faith camp nor the secular camp was prepared to listen to him. He concluded that the "return to religion" we see today is actually a return to

“naive populist religiosity” rather than a revitalised interactive discourse with human and social progress and advances in the various fields of knowledge. Moreover, he asserted, while this might be particularly true of the Islamic world, it also applied – to one extent or another – to all the monotheistic faiths.

In Arkoun’s view, while traditional myth may have been replaced by modern ideology, there is a degree of obfuscation about the latter’s approach (i.e. the “ideological” approach); in particular, he rejected the kind of root-and-branch type of criticism espoused by the German historian Bultmann, which he described as “historicist” and “positivist”, while failing to take into account the functional aspects of myth, etc. In his view the humanities and social sciences had made this type of criticism redundant since the 1950s when they began to propose more appropriate classificatory categories such as “social visualisation”, “collective memories”, “contingent ignorance”, “social construction of reality”, “social field production”, “social contingency of the intellect” etc.

It is true that these categories can be a useful means of softening the impact of criticism by approaching it through the medium of anthropological terminology, thereby minimising its destructive effect and steering it away from atheism. However, it might be appropriate here to wonder whether the concepts which appeared during the second half of the 20th century would have seen the light of day were it not for the root-and-branch type of criticism that characterised much of the 19th and early 20th centuries. We might also ask whether the new concepts referred to by Arkoun actually helped in any fundamental way to revitalise religious or ethical thought – apart from in the Christian world, which “produced” those concepts and was therefore better equipped to adopt them and use them for its own interests.

Finally, is Islam today still a geographically and creedally “central” member of the three monotheistic faiths which fought each other for the centre ground in the Middle Ages, or does it belong more to Asia – to the territories from the Gulf countries to Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia and Malaysia? Those territories are “historically alien” to the notion of

reconciling religious ethics with Greek philosophy and have no interest in the modern philosophies that have provided the basis for the humanities and social sciences, since they are only interested in those sciences from a practical point of view.

It is not only the Islamic world that has lost its “historical connection”. This is also true of Buddhist and Hindu societies such as Japan or India. They are democratic societies that enjoy a large degree of religious freedom, but for them ethics is linked to custom and tradition rather than religious philosophy and they regard it as a practical issue that does not entail a thorough critical review of their entire history and heritage.

The above observations raise the question: When societies are dealing with the issues that concern them, do they consider them from a strictly intellectual standpoint, in the same way as a writer or university professor; or do they see them as an expression of social and political needs, and regard criticism as unnecessary because it does not serve those needs in the way they perceive them?

The growing importance of religion is something we see in every society. Referring to the French Foreign Ministry’s decision to appoint a Counsellor for Religious Affairs, Arkoun notes that it is not only a symptom of laicism’s dilemma in its purely French manifestation. On the contrary, Western societies in general are turning away from the notion that “God is dead” and towards a “revival of religious faith”. This means that they are having to tackle the question of ethics head on, and on a sound basis.

According to Arkoun, both Islamic and Western societies are trying to avoid dealing with the issue of ethics by kindling the flames of mutual conflict and promoting exclusivist values. The West has replaced its old enemy – i.e. Communism – with Islam, which it sees as the Axis of Evil and the enemy of decent values, and it justifies wars and violence as a means of protecting those values. The origins of its moral classifications can be seen in the works of the Early Church Fathers such as Tertullian and Augustine.

For their part, Muslims have gone back to the old religious discourse, which they see as the right and proper source for their present-day ethical values, while investing violence with the force of law in the name of jihad.

To counter this potentially catastrophic situation, Arkoun suggests a new critical approach to ethics as an alternative to the principle of “mutual exclusivity” (which is an unfortunate characteristic of both the old days and the modern era) and independent of the Western media’s much-promoted image of Islamic fundamentalism.

On the situation in the Islamic world in particular, Arkoun believes that present-day assumptions about faith and belief should be subjected to scientific analysis, just as the assumptions of Christian and Jewish beliefs were in the past. In particular, he cites the “historical aspect of revelation” – a subject that he is prepared to tackle in his previous books, especially *Lectures du Coran (Reading the Qur’an)*. This is in contrast to his Western rivals, who maintain that he helped cast doubt on philological studies influenced by Regis Blachere’s methodology.

I personally believe that what these Western rivals say is closer to the truth and that in recent years Arkoun has lost out on two fronts. The “Islamic front” objected to his “historical take” on the Holy Scriptures, which belittled the sacred nature of Revelation, while the “Western front” saw him as having cast doubt on French philological criticism for thirty years before he finally recognized its value. In my view the present confrontational relationship between the Muslims and the West does not allow this issue to be discussed in the way that it may have been in the past, since the discipline that is described today as philological studies is overtly hostile to Islam, while Muslim studies are self-absorbed in their own faith-based issues, with the result that they are unable to fulfil a universal role or qualify as knowledge in any methodological sense. Consequently, it would appear that attempts to view ethics through the “historical prism” of the established scriptural texts are doomed to fail, particularly since those involved in the attempts can only succeed if the Muslims themselves adopt such an approach – rather than having it foisted upon them by institutions and people whom they regard, rightly or wrongly, as being parties to the anti-Muslim crusade.

By applying a set of historical-social and philosophical criteria, Arkoun tried to compare the “legalistic mindsets” of the West and the Islamic world by examining the European Charter of Fundamental Rights alongside the preambles to the Islamic constitutions.

He observed that Europe’s scientific revolution in the 16th and 17th centuries – i.e. from Copernicus to Newton – opened a new page for the human intellect; however, the Islamic world remained untouched by the new advances and when it first encountered them it opposed them on the grounds that it was resisting imperialism and foreign expansionism. Subsequently the Islamic world regressed in two ways: firstly, in relation to its own rich heritage and secondly, in comparison with the West’s progress after the latter’s succession of scientific revolutions.

Commenting on the European Charter of Fundamental Rights proclaimed in 2000, Arkoun noted that it includes a paragraph on Europe’s “cultural, human and religious heritage”, as well as references to the universal principles of human dignity, freedom, justice, democratic solidarity and the state of law. However, France objected to the word “religious” since it was a secular state and its constitution did not allow religious references. In Arkoun’s view, the French position amounts to a denial of history, since it is a historical fact that religion is part of the European heritage. French *laicite* (secularity) is thus an “ahistorical attitude” in the same class as the attitudes of the Islamic movements. Arkoun maintained that religion – any religion, regardless of which it might be – must be recognized as an element of human history and that secularism should not be given the status of a sacred cow that is superior to history.

From the Islamic side, Arkoun examines the situations in Egypt, Turkey and Iran. His Egyptian model is inspired by Baudouin Dupret’s study, published in French under the title “*Au Nom de Quel Droit?*” (“*By What Right?*”).

Egypt’s first experience of modern positive law was in the 1930s, thanks to two leading legal specialists – Abdel Razzaq al Sanhoury and Shafiq Shehatah. However, Chapter Two of that country’s present

constitution stipulates that Islam is the state religion, Arabic is the official language and the Shariah is the main source of legislation. This chapter can be interpreted in two ways. It could be understood to mean that all Egyptian laws should be derived from the Shariah, or – alternatively – that the legislative body is not bound by this provision and that all it is required to do is refrain from promulgating laws that are in open conflict with the Shariah. Although lawyers in Egypt are constantly locked in procedural battles over which interpretation should be adopted, they are not prepared to look at the issue from a holistic theoretical point of view, or follow the traditional system of classifying textual injunctions as either categorical or subject to *ijtihad* (interpretative judgement).

In Iran the Shi'ite tradition has been the basis of legislation since the foundation of the Safavid state in 1507 – a situation that was reinforced after the 1979 revolution. Although the Persian and Sunni traditions are different (the Persian heritage is Illuminist and centred round the Imamate), Arkoun says that they both have similar legislative systems. While the Safavids made Shi'ism the official sect and the Ottoman state was officially Sunni, the rulers of both empires surrounded themselves with armies of official *fuqaha'* (scholars of jurisprudence). However, the Safavids introduced a unique system that combined Illuminist philosophy (which posits that scriptural texts should not be understood at face value) with scripture-based *fiqh* (jurisprudence) legislation.

In Turkey, Ataturk replaced Shariah Law in 1934 with Swiss Law and imposed secularity on the French *laicite* model, despite the fact that Turkey had never experienced the kind of scientific and intellectual revolutions that had taken place in Europe. Moreover, Ataturk's endeavours to tie Turkey to Europe were not accompanied (from either the Turkish or the European side) by a critical historical analysis of the Ottoman Empire's relationship with its European neighbours. The uneasy nature of that relationship can still be seen today in Europe's reluctance to accept Turkey as a member of the European Union, despite the efforts of Turkey's Islamic-oriented government to join.

In view of the above challenges, how can the question of ethics be put back on the agenda?

According to Arkoun, the answer is a broader critical analysis of belief, extended to include all types of belief – not only the different schools, sects, confessions and denominations of religious belief, but also the new manifestations of belief that have appeared during the modern age.

In effect, his position represents an extreme example of what al Khatibi calls “dual critique”. As we have seen, in many of his books he uses the expression “dogmatic fence” to describe the stagnation in which Islamic thought has been mired for centuries – in contrast to the rich intellectual diversity that had previously characterised that thought – which has prevented any true revival or regeneration from within. He also uses the expression “the human mind’s fence of modernism” to describe the intellectual stagnation that has afflicted human thought after three centuries of European progress and also poses an obstacle to new critical thinking.

Arkoun sees modernism as a “work in progress”, not a “completed task”. Consequently, in the wake of its marginalisation by “traditional modernism”, ethics today is a project that needs to be tackled intellectually in order to ensure that it does not revert to the old position on ethics and morality that existed before the modern age; that is to say, to the principle of one truth, one faith, and one judgement in every circumstance – unlike modernism, which attaches supreme importance to difference and diversity.

The modernism of today seeks to break down these two “fences” which pen in the intellect, so that it can be free to roam, explore and discover. Arkoun says: “If modernism were to offer the chance for new systems of reality to appear, it would sometimes be seen as the sublimest system of reality and truth...as a system that is superior to all those that have gone before it – indeed, as the guiding system that dictates human values, knowledge, politics, the law and ethics; a universal system in fact.”¹

In a nutshell, what Arkoun concludes from all this is that the predicament in which thinking on ethics finds itself is essentially the

¹ Mohammed Arkoun: *Al Mas’alah al Akhlaqiyyah wa’l Tashri’iyyah fi’l Fikr al Islami*, p. 170 (French edition).

predicament of the modern age. This is due to three factors: firstly, the distinctive feature of the Islamic mindset that takes an uncritical view of the Sunni and Shi'ite traditions; secondly, political systems that have made religion and the law subject to the will of the dictators; and thirdly, the fact that an arrogant West treats the rest of the world as the tool of its whims and interests. It is therefore impossible to establish a true vision of reality, and without a critical re-examination of truth and reality it is impossible to develop new thinking on ethics and the law. Hence it is an "absolute predicament".

Although Arkoun wrote this before the Arab revolutions, he would probably not have changed his position, even if he had lived to see them. It is true that the revolutions demolished one of the three elements in some countries, but the result appears to have served the interests of the remaining two, not the *raison emergente* in which Arkoun had placed his hopes. We can either accept this predicament as it is – and as Arkoun described it – by adopting an intelligent, courageous and thoroughly analytical approach, and look forward hopefully to the future, or – alternatively – we can opt for a new and more realistic re-evaluation of the whole question.

We may differ from Arkoun over his interpretation of the history of traditional ethical thought. He assumes that it reached its zenith at the time of Miskawaih and al Tawhidi, and that that generation marked the shift from narrow tribal to broader human ethics. We accept this. However, we should note that in former times Islamic ethics comprised three discordant trends: 1) a *fiqh* trend which converted ethics into five classes of "legal" rulings: *wujub* (obligation), *nadab* (recommendation), *karaha* (disapproval), *man'* (prohibition) and *ibaha* (permissibility), 2) a philosophical trend which reconciled religious values with Platonic moral philosophy; it was largely due to this factor that the Islamic Faith changed from being an Arab religion to a universal ethical philosophy capable of accommodating the demands of the expanding Islamic Empire with its vast number of different ethnicities and cultures, and 3) a spiritual trend which transformed ethics into what is known as *tasawwuf* (Sufism). Ethics in the Sufi context took on various different forms, including "*al tahdhib al akhlaqi al 'ilmi*"

(“scientific ethical refinement”) as described in traditional Sunni Sufi writings; or the “hierarchical principle” of “public” and “private” ethics exemplified by al Ghazali’s books including *Mizan al ‘Amal (Criterion of Action)* – on “public” ethics – and *Al Madhmun bihi ‘ala Ghairi Ahlihi (The Book to Be Held from Those for Whom It is not Written)* on “private” ethics; or Illuminist-philosophical in both the Sunni (Ibn ‘Arabi) and Shi‘ite (al Tusi) versions. In our view the philosophical-human ethical trend – as represented by Miskawaih in *Tahdhib al Akhlaq* – went into relative decline in comparison with the *fiqh* and Sufi ethical trends.

This continued to be the case right up to modern times, when the state intervened actively against Sufism, which was held responsible for the backwardness of Arab and Islamic societies, and modern legal theories were introduced which drew a distinction between morality and the law. Religious ethics came to be dominated by the *fiqh* trend, the notion of “implementing the Shariah” – i.e. applying *fiqh* rulings – gained popularity and conflict arose between those who championed the Shariah and those who favoured the modern legal system. Consequently, the use and application of religious terminology became the sole preserve of the former (i.e. the Shariah).

However, today we find that Sufism is making a strong comeback, alongside the rising and highly significant “*maqasid*” (“objectives of the Shariah”) trend. In the wake of the current Arab revolutions we shall see a realignment of the balance of power between, on the one side, the religious and modern legal systems and, on the other, the rival religious trends competing with the religious establishment (traditional institutions, Sufism, *maqasid* supporters etc.). In our view the most important question is whether Arab societies will accept or reject the notion of a distinction between morality and the law. Unless such a distinction is made, it will be impossible to establish democratic societies and the issue of ethics will not be able to recover its vitality as an element of Islamic thought. Instead, it will merely become a vehicle for justifying conservative or reactionary political projects that exploit religion in order to mobilise their followers.

The modern principle is that morality should only be a legal issue when it is established that a particular violation of the moral code causes direct harm to other people. The law is concerned with the public sphere, not private behaviour, and public morality is subject to change and evolution, depending on the times and recognized lifestyles.

I mentioned my second area of disagreement with Arkoun before my first reference to “emergent reason” – or *raison emergente* – which I felt was an obscure and rather quixotic expression. Today I see events in the Arab world as offering its peoples their first ever opportunity to enjoy freedom, including free elections. However, as I look at the Western world with its selfishness and materialism, I cannot for the life of me see any sign of that *raison emergente* which Arkoun foretold.

Nevertheless, I think I understood the positive aspect of *raison emergente* when I read his last book, in which he stated that he saw it as the antithesis of the expression “post-modernism” – a term which reflects the West’s self-centred view that modernism is synonymous with its own experience; this would explain why the West has declared the arrival of a “post-modernist age”, while there are still other societies that are trying to modernise themselves – i.e. enter the age of modernism. Even if the two concepts are not identical, the term *raison emergente* is consistent with an important idea put forward by Arkoun in the 1980s which has also influenced my thinking; that is, that modernism is not the West or a specific, limited historical period, but an intellectual and mental attitude. On this basis, Miskawaih is more modern than many people who are alive today in the “modern age”. Our problem today is that we are not living in the Age of Reason – neither the classical version nor the *emergente* one; rather, we have reverted to the age of the emotions and tradition-based collective attitudes as our way of confronting a globalism that is taking mankind along a road into the Unknown – a globalism dominated by money and consumerism which is destroying all ties between human beings, including those “modern” ones like citizenship and democracy, with the result that human relationships are now governed by the caprices of the financial markets.

Here I should like to quote an observation from Arkoun's book *Qadhaya fi Naqd al 'Aql al Dini (Critique of Religious Reason)* (Beirut 1998): "Man lives not by reason alone, but also by the fertility, creative whimsicality and breadth of the imagination."¹

This would suggest that regenerated Islamic ethical thought should not be based solely on a fundamental analytical critique; it will also require a degree of creative intuition. Although we frequently discussed the subject together – from the time I began working on my dissertation under his supervision, in fact – Arkoun remained unconvinced by the model for a new approach to Islamic ethical thought espoused by Muhammad Abduh. He continued to insist that Abduh's discourse was superficial, while I for my part was also ready to concede that Abduh was superficial in comparison with someone like Miskawaih or a contemporary philosopher. However, Abduh was essentially a man of intuition; that is to say, his pronouncements were initially inspired by intuition, even if they were later refined and developed within a rational Islamic context so as to arrive at an acceptable position on the question of ethics.

So when we try to revive the question of ethics in Islamic thought, let us begin with Abduh and his intuition, since that intuition is the starting point for rational thought, not its final embodiment. In my opinion Arkoun is going round and round in a circle – i.e. a revival of ethical thought requires a fundamental critique/ the present situation does not allow a fundamental critique/ the present situation cannot be changed without a revival of ethical thought.

I shall leave the last word to Mohammed Arkoun so that he can sum up his position in this graphic paragraph, which shows the depth of his critical thought and the gloomy picture he paints of the future prospects for a truly critical approach. He says:

"On the political front the prevailing Islamic discourse ignores the greater degree of freedom that modernity is able to offer, and in doing so it

¹ Mohammed Arkoun: *Qadhaya fi Naqdi'l 'Aqli'l Dini* Dar al Tali'ah, Beirut, 1998, p. 200. See our introduction and critique of this book in *Majallat al Dirasat al 'Arabiyyah*, Beirut, July/August 1998.

cuts itself off from the wealth of critical material, ideas and knowledge that could make it a positive and active contributor in the age of globalisation. Ethical, legislative and spiritual activity has collapsed because it continues to reject the rich sources that are conducive to the spread of critical reason: theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, politics, exegesis, history, linguistics, sociology and the humanities. Sham democracies led by undemocratic leaders are obstructing the chance (which I have proposed in this book) to engage in extensive philosophical discussion of a work [he meant Miskawaih's *Tahdhib al Akhlaq*] which to this day continues to advance the cause of free and wide-ranging debate.”¹

The present gloomy climate reminds us somewhat of Galileo and the Court of Inquisition when – after the departure of the members of the Court– he said: “*Eppur si muove*” (“And yet it moves” – i.e. the earth is still going round the sun).

¹ From the last page of the book.