CRITICAL ISLAM: MUSLIMS AND THEIR RELIGION IN A POST-ISLAMIST WORLD

by Carool Kersten

The term ‘critical Islam’ can mean a host of things and therefore needs to be qualified. Here it will be used to describe a strand of contemporary Muslim thinking arising and developing both in parallel with—and in contrast to—what scholars of Islam from different academic disciplines refer to as the ‘Islamic Resurgence’ beginning in 1970s.¹ The exponents of this other current are called turāthiyūn, or ‘heritage thinkers’, because they do not take Islam as a narrowly defined

¹ There are earlier instances in the twentieth century where the reverse is also true. This belies Armando Salvatore’s suggestion of a temporal asymmetry between the Islamists’ conflation of din wa dawla and its challenge by their opponents, claiming that there had been an effective absence of the former during the latter’s dominance over the political domain in the Muslim world between the 1920s and 1970s, cf. Armando Salvatore, Islam and the Political Discourse of Modernity, Reading, Ithaca Press, 1997. Salvatore’s contention can be challenged by pointing at the dissonant emergence of the Muslim Brotherhood during the 1920s and the rise of Sayyid Qutb in the 1940s and 1950s. Meanwhile, during the supposed heyday of ‘deconflationist’ (secular) thinking in the 1930s and 1940s, Calvert and Shepard have also noted a shift towards Islamic themes in the writings of intellectual icons such as Taha Husayn and ‘Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad: cf. John Calvert, “The World is an Undutiful Boy!” Sayyid Qutb’s American Experience’, Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations 11(1), 2000, pp 90; William Shepard, Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism: A Translation and Critical Analysis of Social Justice in Islam, Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1996, p. xiii.
and fixed set of doctrines and tenets, nor do they regard it as offering a set and concrete political model that works as a panacea against all the ills affecting Muslims and Muslim societies.\(^2\) Instead, they regard Islam as a civilizational concept with a rich legacy of religious, philosophical, and cultural expressions. This is not to imply that the advocates of political Islam, or Islamists, can’t be critical too. In fact, a case could be made that their views of the role of religion in human life refers to another meaning of ‘critical’; in the sense of considering it crucial or critically important to human felicity. However, rather than projecting Islam as an ideal, the heritage thinkers—depending on their disciplinary backgrounds—take religion as an idea or a social fact.

**Critical Islam, heritage thinking, and post-Islamism**

This paper is intended as a meditation on the contributions of Islamic heritage thinking to the critical examination of religion as part of the intellectual history of the Muslim world. The interlocutors in this discourse work as academic scholars of Islam and act as public intellectuals—often at the same time. The significance of this stream of Muslim intellectualism is evinced by three important meetings held in the same time frame during which the reactive (and often reactionary) forms of political Islam began to be noticed: The 1971 Cairo Conference on Authenticity and Renewal in Contemporary Arab Culture; the forum which took place three years later in Kuwait on the Crisis of Civilizational Development in the Arab Homeland; and another conference held in Cairo, in 1984, convened under the title ‘Heritage and the Challenges of the Modern Age in the Arab Nation: Authenticity and Modernity’.

In assessing the significance of these meetings, Issa Boullata, a veteran observer of the intellectual history of the Arab world, distinguished three main trends of what he called a ‘painful introspection’ into the state of affairs of Muslim thinking about the role of their religion and wider intellectual legacy.\(^3\) The variety of perspectives is relatively broad. On the one end of the spectrum are the proponents of a radical cultural revolution in which the religious outlook is jettisoned in favour of a secular one. On the other end is a very vocal cabal wishing to eliminate all ‘external’ intellectual and cultural influences from Arab society. In between these opposing

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\(^2\) Conveniently captured in the Islamist slogan ‘*al-Islām huwa al-ḥall*’ (‘Islam is the solution’).

camps is a group advocating a renewal and intellectual-cultural adaptation of the Islamic heritage rather than its transformation, because they believe that contemporary Arab-Islamic civilization is capable of dealing with modernity. Although raising more questions than providing answers, Boullata considered the Kuwait forum to be ‘one of the most important cultural events to occur in the Arab world’ during the early 1970s. Over the next decade it gave rise to what Leonard Binder, another long-time student of the modern Muslim world has called a rich, varied, and growing turâth literature.

‘Despite the still wide range of definitions of turâth’, the Italian sociologist of Islam Armando Salvatore considers the conference of 1984 as the high point in ‘the collective Arab intellectual endeavour to invest the conceptual couple "heritage/authenticity” in a conscious project of reconstruction’ based on ‘a broadly accepted, communicatively effective term of political-intellectual discourse’. Adding to Salvatore’s observation, I want to suggest that the 1984 conference also heralded a changing of the guard. While the meetings of 1971 and 1974 were still dominated by thinkers such as Zaki Naguib Mahmud (1905-1993), Mahmud Amin al-‘Alim (1922-2009), and Anouar Abdel Malek (1924-2012), by 1984 they were being replaced by scholars born in the 1930s. This generation was less timid in terms of pushing renewal in the direction of a transformation of existing Islamic epistemes.

Although I have only mentioned three gatherings of intellectuals from the Arabic-speaking part of the Muslim world, it is important to stress that the development of this form of critical Islam is not restricted to the Middle East and North Africa. In fact, in Indonesia—located on the south-eastern periphery of the historical Dâr al-Islâm, but at the same time the world’s largest Muslim nation state—there is not only a voracious appetite for the writings of the turâthiyyîn, but also a thriving local Muslim discourse in Indonesian. Its origins go back to the 1960s and 1970s, when student leader Nurcholish Madjid (1939-2005) and a number of like-minded budding intellectuals started the ‘Movement for the Renewal of Islamic Thinking’ (Gerakan Pembaruan Pemikiran Islam). With this initiative and their own subsequent appreciation for the ‘intellectual treasures of Islam’, they prepared the ground for the often

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4 Boullata, Trends and Issues, p. 25
controversial ideas expounded by the heritage thinkers from the Middle East, ideas that are often met with a more welcoming reception in Indonesia than in their originators’ home countries.\(^7\)

Despite varying academic backgrounds, different points of entry and concentration areas when dealing with the civilizational heritage of Islam, what I also want to note is that the approaches chosen by this type of Muslim intellectual prefigure what is now becoming known as ‘Post-Islamism’. While, in the 1990s, Olivier Roy and Asef Bayat were the first to put the term on the map as a historical and analytical category respectively, I believe that its intellectual beginnings can be traced to the work of the Arab turāthiyūn and Indonesian renewal thinkers of the early 1970s.\(^8\) To back up this claim, I draw on those parts of my earlier and current research into the intellectual history of the contemporary Muslim world where I focus primarily on a quartet of Arab thinkers who have been particularly influential among young Muslim thinkers in Indonesia. For the framing of this discursive exchange I draw heuristically on recent writings about cosmopolitanism and cultural hybridity, the circulation of ideas in the intellectual histories written by South Asianists, and Edward Said’s notion of ‘travelling theory’, which was originally intended for literary criticism but which has also been fruitfully applied in the study of global Islam in the context of international relations.\(^9\)

Notwithstanding considerable differences in how they engage the Arab-Islamic heritage, Mohammed Arkoun (1928-2010), Hasan Hanafi (b. 1935), Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabiri\(^10\) (1936-2010) and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943-2010) share an intellectual profile characterized by intimate familiarity with the Islamic tradition and an equally solid acquaintance with the achievements of Western academe in the humanities and social sciences. While intellectuals from the Maghreb countries tend to incline towards historical approaches, Egyptians, such as the literary and Qur’anic studies expert Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the philosopher Hasan Hanafi,\(^7\)

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\(^10\) Sometimes also spelled as ‘al-Jabri’.
lean towards a more conceptual focus. Although al-Jabiri too was trained as an academic philosopher in both his native Morocco and in Damascus, there is an affinity between his work and that of his fellow Moroccan Abdallah Laroui (b. 1933). Meanwhile, Algerian-born historian of Islam Mohammed Arkoun sees great merit in drawing on the social sciences for the study of the Islamic past, sharing an interest with, for example, his Tunisian colleague Hichem Djaït (b. 1935) in the historical transformations of the notion of ‘basic personality structure’ developed by the American sociologist Avram Kardiner and introduced to a Francophone readership by the philosopher Mikel Dufrenne.11

Both Binder and Boullata regard Laroui’s *The Crisis of the Arab intellectual: Traditionalism and Historicism* (1974) as a key contribution to the turāth literature.12 According to Laroui, Arab intellectuals are eclectics who must be disciplined into a historically more responsible way of thinking. However, Binder contends that Laroui himself is also eclectic, calling him a ‘superb dialectician, whose rhetoric includes both phenomenal and pragmatic tropes’, which turn him into a ‘cultural and philosophical hybrid, capable of interpreting Europe to the Muslim world and the Muslim world to Europe’.13 Thus Laroui was able to engage critically with historiographies that are unsympathetic towards Islam, such as those written by the Austrian-American Islamicist G.E. von Grünebaum.14 However, he thought it unlikely that a meaningful dialogue with the texts of the turāth by Arab intellectuals could occur because of the disjunction between existing Arab-Islamic historiography and contemporary Muslim worldviews. These frustrations over the lack of appreciation for historicism among Arab


12 The French original appeared in 1974, and an English translation two years later.


intellectuals remains detectable in Laraoui’s later work as well, including The Concept of Reason (1997) and Sunnah and Reform (2008). However, notwithstanding his disappointment at the progress of Arab critical-historical thinking, Boullata thinks Laroui’s propositions have exercised an influence through which a more comprehensive view of the Arab-Islamic past is becoming ‘an imperative for many Arab intellectuals’.15

Phenomenological investigations, text criticism and discourse analysis: Critical Muslim intellectuals in Egypt

Just before the outbreak of the Suez War in 1956, Hasan Hanafi was one of the last Egyptians to reach France for postgraduate studies at the Sorbonne. He went there with the ambition of developing an ‘Islamic method of philosophical investigation’.16 For this he turned to the traditional field of Islamic learning that dealt with jurisprudence or fiqh. The reason for this was that law holds centre stage in Muslim intellectual activity and the particular domain with the most sophisticated methodological apparatus and greatest potential for providing the necessary academic rigour was a subfield of traditional Islamic legal studies known as usūl al-fiqh or the ‘foundations of Islamic jurisprudence’. In order to extract its most fundamental principles and transpose these into a contemporary idiom, Hanafi decided to subject this particular scholarly specialism to a critical examination along the lines of Husserl’s philosophical phenomenology in order to transform a specialist field within legal studies into a philosophical method that could be universally applied to any domain of Islamic thinking.17 Although he was a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan Hanafi’s enthusiasm for thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb was tempered by the trauma caused by the Brotherhood’s persecution under Nasser. While retaining the Qutbian perspective of seeing Islam as a comprehensive method or minhaj, the impact of events in the 1950s and 1960s cured Hanafi from following the trajectory of radical Islamism. Instead he abandoned his fellow Egyptian for the spiritual father of Pakistan, Muhammad Iqbal. Rather than drawing on Milestones, he turned to Iqbal’s Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam with its focus on subjectivity and creativity, using this as the template

16 Kersten, Cosmopolitans and Heretics, p.111.
17 Hasan Hanafi was introduced to Husserl through his teacher Paul Ricoeur.
for an anthropocentric reconstruction or liberation of man as ‘the central proposition which regulates the structure of Islam’. Hasan Hanafi considered Iqbal’s writings as the third phase of Islamic reformism after the awakening of the Muslim spirit by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh’s institutional reforms. The first project in which Hanafi developed what he called his minhaj fiqhī or ‘juristic method’ for transforming a legal jargon into a general philosophical idiom was later published under the title Method of Exegesis.

After his return to Egypt in 1966, Hanafi was soon side-tracked by events in the Arab world, especially after the disastrous outcome of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Throughout the 1970s, his writings became increasingly political, even including a brief infatuation with the transformative potential of the Iranian revolution of 1979. He published some of the writings of Ayatollah Khomeini in Arabic translation, while in 1981 he also launched a manifesto for an ‘Islamic Left’ (al-Yasār al-Islāmī). Although this initiative did not really take off, the ideas behind it drew the attention of the Indonesian Muslim leader (and future president) Abdurrahman Wahid (1940-2009), who introduced them to his followers among the country’s young Muslim intelligentsia after he became the head of the largest traditionalist Islamic mass organization Nahdatul Ulama (NU) in 1984. By then, Hanafi had returned to his philosophical studies, embarking on a very ambitious undertaking that would occupy him for the remainder of his scholarly life. Expanding the scope of his research to other fields of Islamic learning, he named this comprehensive project after the programmatic blueprint he published under the title al-Turāth wa’l-Tajdīd–‘heritage and renewal’. On the back of translations of the ‘Islamic Left’ manifesto and Kazuo Shimogaki’s critical study of that document, Indonesia’s progressive Muslim intellectuals also came to develop an interest in Hasan Hanafi’s philosophical writings.

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18 Kersten, Cosmopolitans and Heretics, p. 127.
Since the 1990s he has become a regular visitor to the country where his lectures draw large audiences.

The trajectory of Hasan Hanafi’s intellectual journey also provides a good example that Islamism/Post-Islamism must not be thought of in terms of a sequential temporal order. Even though he eventually traded Sayyid Qutb’s writings for the philosophical ideas of Muhammad Iqbal, Hanafi retained part of the vocabulary of the Muslim Brotherhood ideologue. The search for a method of Islamic thinking with general applicability and validity still carries echoes of Sayyid Qutb’s all-encompassing and comprehensive abstraction of Islam as a universal concept, method, and system.\(^\text{23}\) Although Hanafi interprets religious traditions from an anthropocentric perspective instead of Sayyid Qutb’s theocentric orientation grounded in the notion of divine sovereignty (ḥākimiyya), the latter’s fiqh al-wāqī or ‘new realist science’ continues to resonate in Hanafi’s ‘fiqhi method’ as the best way of analysing Muslims’ attitudes towards their present-day reality.\(^\text{24}\) While it may be true that the impact of Islamist ideology devised by Sayyid Qutb did not become really apparent until the late 1970s, my discussion makes clear that his writings of the 1950s and 1960s definitely affected younger contemporary Muslim intellectuals such as Hanafi. In fact, his generation was probably more acutely aware of the multifaceted dimensions of Sayyid Qutb’s legacy than either their reactionary Salafi or progressive-minded intellectual successors. Hanafi’s example shows the porosity of discursive formations: theories travel and ideas circulate not just among like-minded individuals, or from one part of the Muslim world to another, but also between Islamist thinking and the counter-currents that give rise to alternative discourses which attach greater weight to a critical reflection on Islam’s heritage.

As a one-time student of Hasan Hanafi, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd relates in his autobiography, how his philosophy teacher convinced him to move from the study of Arabic to a hermeneutical analysis of Islam’s own ‘Q’ document—the Qur’ān.\(^\text{25}\) As a scholar of language,
Abu Zayd retained an interest in linguistics and literary criticism, resolving to apply the methods developed in these fields to the study of Islam’s sacred scripture. With this, he continued a scholarly approach that had emerged in Egypt around the Second World War, beginning with Amin al-Khuli (1895-1966) and Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah (1916-1997), but also featuring in the early writings of Sayyid Qutb. In *Les nouveaux penseurs de l’islam*, Rachid Benzine presents this duo as the ‘two precursors of modern literary analysis of the Qur’ān’. Before becoming a professor at Cairo University, al-Khuli had received both a religious and secular education, and spent time in Rome and Berlin (1923-27), learning Italian and German, and studying the works of Western orientalists. In 1948, his career was seriously compromised when the doctoral thesis of his student Khalafallah on narrativism in the Qur’ān was rejected, because offense was taken at the suggestion to treat stories in the Qurān as myths and legends rather than as accurate accounts of historical events. Fifty years later, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd found himself in similar hot water when his application for a full professorship was denied because of the controversial eclectic methodological framework he had adopted in his research, that combined the philosophical hermeneutics of Heidegger and Ricoeur, the contextual study of the Qur’ān by Fazlur Rahman and Toshihiko Izutsu, with text criticism and discourse analysis drawing on the work of Eastern European semioticians such as Yuri Lotman and Algirdas Greimas.

Eventually, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd’s case became a *cause célèbre*, when a group of Islamist activists initiated legal proceedings arguing that since Abu Zayd’s treatment of the Qur’ān amounted to apostasy, and that therefore he could no longer be legally married to his wife, a Muslim. When the court ruled in favour of the plaintiffs, Nasr Abu Zayd and his wife did not await the implications of this for their lives and opting instead to go into voluntary exile. Initially moving to Germany and then to the Netherlands, Abu Zayd took up a position at Leiden University, where he worked until his untimely death in 2010, during a very low-key visit to his

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29 Eventually the study was published anyway in 1951 as a book under the title *al-Fann al-Qasasî fî al-Qur’ân al-Karîm* (‘The Art of Narrative in the Holy Qur’ān’). Ten years later al-Khuli published his own literary analysis of the Qur’ān: *Manâhij Tajdid fî al-Nahw wa l-Balâgha wa l-Tafsîr wa l-Adab* (‘New Methods in Grammar, Rhetoric, Interpretation and Literature’).
homeland. Whereas Abu Zayd’s publications on the study of the Qur’an text remained anathema in Egypt, not unlike the writings of Hasan Hanafi and others, they drew positive attention in Indonesia so that Abu Zayd also became a regular visitor to the country and a key collaborator at the International Institute for Quranic Studies (IIQS) established in Jakarta in 2008 under the patronage of the late Abdurrahman Wahid.

Maghrebi Historicism

In the mid-1950s, Mohammed Arkoun, a Berber from Kabylia educated in French and Arabic institutions in Oran and Algiers, moved to France for postgraduate studies at the University of Strasbourg and later in Paris. Arkoun arrived during a time of political and intellectual turbulence. The beginning and end of his studies coincide not only with two major milestones of the Cold War Era, the Soviet invasion of Hungary and the ill-fated Prague Spring: the same time period also saw the eruption of Algeria’s war of independence and the student uprisings of 1968. Prefiguring these latter events was the rise of thinkers and engaged intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, as well as more staid academic developments in the fields of structural linguistics and anthropology, quickly followed by poststructuralist challenges in the form of discourse analysis and deconstructive text criticism.

Although Arkoun’s inquisitive mind took many of these new strands of thinking on board, he fell initially under the influence of Claude Cahen, a medievalist and proponent of a new way of writing history known as the Annales School. By the time Arkoun arrived, the school had already progressed from a minor heresy into the main church of French historiography in the mid-twentieth century. The propositions of its founders, Marc Bloch’s ‘histories of mentalities’ and Lucien Febvre’s notion of ‘unthinkability’, would find their way into Mohammed Arkoun’s writings, often via a detour or under the guise of postmodernist concepts developed by Michel Foucault and especially Jacques Derrida. For his doctorate, Arkoun decided to engage what

was largely a text-historical project on the court culture of the tenth-century Buyid viziers of the Abbasid Caliphate. Instead of concentrating on the deeds of great men, he focussed on the intellectual milieu, incorporating the distinctions made by the leading figure of the second generation of the *Annales* school, Fernand Braudel, between historical events, mid-term conjunctures, and the *longue durée* of civilizational and environmental influences. The final product, a case study of the philosopher and man of letters Miskawayh, presented as an analysis of Arab humanism, also betrayed the influence of Louis Massignon’s encouragement to invest scholarly writings with a ‘personal intonation’.32 Tied up with what Arkoun called his own existential experiences on both sides of the Mediterranean, this humanist orientation and a perception of the Middle East and North Africa as an integral part of the Mediterranean as a single geopolitical formation and shared space, have become constant aspects in Arkoun’s academic work.

Disappointed by the lack of response from fellow (Muslim and non-Muslim) historians of the Muslim world and other scholars of Islam, Arkoun resolved that the suggested methodological innovations would need to be articulated even more explicitly. After another ‘detour through a vast field of interdisciplinary investigations’, he came up with an alternative research programme for Islamicists which he presented under the heading ‘Applied Islamology’.33 Even though he had already coined the term in 1973, it would take him another ten years to compile a comprehensive agenda which was first presented in his most influential essay collection, *Critique of Islamic Reason*.34 Arkoun proposed a survey of the Islamic heritage as an ‘exhaustive tradition’, quarrying the intellectual legacy of the Muslim world and excavating what had been ignored, rejected or not critically interrogated.35 Betraying both the influence of Febvre and Derrida he called this neglected part of *turāth* ‘the unthought’ and ‘the unthinkable’. Leap-frogging through recognizable ‘cognitive fields and moments’, his fourteen-point agenda of ‘Applied Islamology’ included examinations of the inception of the Qur’ān, the

33 In the introduction to the second edition of *L’humanisme Arabe*, p. 13.
‘Medina experience’ of the embryonic Muslim community, the institutions of the Sunni Caliphate and the Shi’i Imamate, and the emergence of the various disciplines of Islamic learning. It continues with the transformation of this body of scholastic knowledge into the positivist rationalism that dominated during the early Muslim experiences with modernity known as the Nahda, and the new social imaginaires of the postcolonial revolutionary period. Critical of the obsession of contemporary Middle East watchers with short-term events, Arkoun contrasts their ‘pragmatic Islamology’ with the demanding horizon of the plurality of meanings opened up by his own alternative ‘Applied Islamology’, whereby epistemological questioning is pushed to its limits.36

The initial inspiration for ‘Applied Islamology’ came from an unlikely direction: Roger Bastide’s Applied Anthropology, which had grown out of the latter’s field work experiences in Brazil, but the book was conceived as a social theory for dealing with the phenomenon of acculturation.37 Although Bastide had been influence by Emile Durkheim’s view of religion being embedded in social structures, his own interest was far more geared towards transformation and change than the constancy of structures. Bastide’s theory also leaned heavily on the writings of the Brazilian social scientist Giberto de Mello Freyre about Lusotropicology or Lusotropicalism, which privileged experiential knowledge as promoted by the American pragmatist John Dewey and which was also regarded as the indirect outcome of the interactions between Muslims, Christians and Jews of the Iberian Peninsula before the Age of Discoveries.38 I suggest that this last point, together with the fact that Bastide considered ‘cultural marginal as leaders in the gambit of the acculturative gambit’, resonated strongly with Mohammed Arkoun’s biography as a cultural and intellectual border crosser.39

39 Bastide, Applied Anthropology, p. 94: For Arkoun as a border crosser, cf. Kersten, Cosmopolitans and Heretics, pp. 177-192
Aside from the influence of Bastide’s *Applied Anthropology*, Arkoun’s research agenda was also informed by the *ethnohistoire* or historical anthropology developed by third-generation *Annales* historians Jacques Le Goff and Georges Duby, and their successors Roger Chartier, Pierre Nora and Jacques Revel. They argue that cultural relations are not simply determined by economic and social factors; in fact, the latter are ‘fields of cultural practice and cultural production themselves’. Finally, as in the cases of Hanafi and Abu Zayd, there is the catholicity of Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics which has also shaped Arkoun’s ambition for a comprehensive research agenda encompassing the full range of Islamic *turāth*. Reading Arkoun’s observation that ‘accurate description must precede interpretation, but interpretation cannot be attempted today without a rigorous analysis using linguistics, semiotic, historical, and anthropological tools’, is not simply an appropriation of Ricoeur’s slogan that ‘to explain more is to understand better’, it is also an attempt to emulate the latter’s generous or charitable interpretations through which Ricoeur tried to reconcile conflicting philosophical positions on knowledge and understanding. It is this omnivorous quality of Mohammed Arkoun’s scholarship that appeals to innovative-minded Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia who have comparable voracious appetites, absorbing ideas from a wide range of strands of Muslim and non-Muslim thinking, which are then fashioned into a heuristic apparatus for the critical study of Islam.

By the mid-1990s, Hasan Hanafi and Mohammed Arkoun had been overtaken by Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabiri as the key ‘person of interest’ for Muslim intellectuals in Indonesia. Instrumental in the introduction of al-Jabiri’s ideas were prominent scholars and religious leaders such as M. Amin ‘Abdullah (b. 1953), who went on to serve as the rector of the State Islamic University in Yogyakarta, and the current head of the NU, Said Aqil Siradj (b. 1953). At the turn of the century, al-Jabiri’s ideas began to gain wider circulation when a selection of his essays was translated and published for the first time in Indonesian under the title *Islamic Post-Traditionalism*. A year later, in 2001, this name was also used to designate an alternative

42 Muhammad Abed Al Jabiri, *Post Traditionalism Islam*. Translated and edited by Ahmad Baso, Yogyakarta, LKiS, 2000. Only a few of al-Jabiri’s writings have been translated into English: Mohammed ’Abed al-Jabri [sic], *Arab-Islamic Philosophy: A Contemporary Critique*. Translated
Islamic discourse formulated and introduced by a number of young NU cadres in a special issue of what would become their flagship periodical: Tashwirul Afkar.  

Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabiri’s intellectual trajectory certainly betrays the eclecticism that his fellow Moroccan Abdallah Laroui had identified as a hallmark of contemporary Arab intellectualism. His early interest in Marxism and the sociological approach to world history of Ibn Khaldun have coloured his elaborations of turāth. In his introduction to the Indonesian translation of al-Jabiri’s essays, Ahmad Baso relates how al-Jabiri’s discovery of Yves Lacoste’s comparative study of Ibn Khaldun and Marx made him realize that the Muslim world has its own version of a socially determinist and historical-materialist analysis predating the work of Marx by several centuries.  

al-Jabiri also used his newly developed awareness of the Muslim world’s former intellectual prowess to challenge the Orientalist tradition in the study of Islam, even criticizing sympathetic scholars such as Louis Massinon and Henry Corbin for their ‘egocentric’ interests in controversial Sufis such as al-Hallaj and Suhrawardi. This foreshadowed a realization al-Jabiri shared with Arkoun, that many classical Orientalists accepted and adopted the same uncritical glorification of the Islamic past propagated by Muslim writers of the classical era, while others fell into the same reductionist trap as nineteenth and early twentieth-century Muslim reformists and revivalists by dismissing the classical Islamic tradition as stultified or decadent. Baso goes on to explain how al-Jabiri insisted that the Islamic heritage must be

from the French by Aziz Abbassi, Austin, the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, the University of Texas at Austin, 1999; Democracy, Human Rights and Law in Islamic Thought. London: I.B. Tauris, 2009; For a review of this last publication cf. Carool Kersten, ‘Reconfiguring Politics, Law and Human Rights in the Contemporary Muslim World’ American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences 28:2, 2011, pp. 106-119


understood as a broad concept, in which religion is seen ‘not just as truth, facts, words, concepts, language and thought, but also myth, legends, ways of behavior, and methods of thinking’—words reminiscent of Arkoun’s critique of Islamic reason.\textsuperscript{45} Also al-Jabiri found the methodological cues for this alternative reading of turāḥ in the work of linguists, anthropologists, psychologists and philosophers like Ferdinand Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Jean Piaget, as well as their poststructuralist successors Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault. From them he learned that reason can no longer be conceived in Cartesian terms as a coherent, conscious and transcendent process. Instead, the achievements of structural linguistics and psychoanalysis teach that reason is more accurately described as a collective understanding shaped by culture and by what Piaget called the ‘cognitive unconscious’.\textsuperscript{46}

al-Jabiri applied this heuristic apparatus in his magnus opus written during the 1980s and published as a trilogy dedicated to what he calls a ‘Critique of Arab Reason’. Dissecting the intellectual history of the Arab world through critical-historical and structural analyses combined with an ideological critique of its dominant political discourse, the oeuvre presents a comprehensive deconstructionist reading of Islam as a historicized and objectified civilizational heritage that needs to be set free from \textit{a priori} assumptions and the authoritative dominance of a supposedly fixed tradition which shackles the autonomy of Muslims as freethinking human beings.\textsuperscript{47} Al-Jabiri’s Indonesian translator appears to disagree with Laroui’s characterization of heritage thinkers as eclectic thinkers, because according to Ahmad Baso, al-Jabiri’s return to the tradition is not a matter of picking and choosing, but a holistic appropriation for the purpose of analyzing Arab-Islamic thought in its theological, linguistic, juridical as well as philosophical and mystical aspects.

In contrast to the textual criticism of Arkoun and Abu Zayd, the Moroccan thinker al-Jabiri has opted for the historical-philosophical approach of the academic philosopher. To articulate the link between modernity and tradition, he rejects the view that this implies a break with tradition. Indicative of al-Jabiri’s awareness of the relativity and historicity of each and every tradition is his insistence that modernity must be developed organically from within Arab-Muslim culture instead of just copying from European modernist methods.

\textsuperscript{45} Baso ‘Posmodernisme sebagai Kritik Islam’, p. xxiii.
In analyzing defects in the ways in which Muslims have studied their history, al-Jabiri distinguished three different readings of tradition: The fundamentalist reading employed by Islamists presents the past as a means of reconstituting an imaginary that confirms a ‘pure’ Islamic identity. Taking the form of a retreat into a defensive stand, it projects ‘a “radiant” future fabricated by ideology—upon the past’.  

Then there is a liberal reading of the tradition. This interpretation is clearly derived from European thinking and endeavors to read one tradition through the lens of another. However, with a nod to Pierre Bourdieu, al-Jabiri cautions that adopting such an ‘orientalist habitus’ harbours the risk of a ‘dangerous identity alienation’. The third–Marxist–reading is qualified as a ready-made dialectical method that must be considered as scientifically unsound because it posits an outcome before engaging in the analysis. al-Jabiri points out that all three readings suffer from two major weaknesses: one methodological, as a result of a lack of objectivity flowing forth from a flawed epistemology; the other visionary, evincing a lack of historical awareness and a skewed perspective in which the past is projected as transcendental and sacral, thus rendering it a-historical.

To escape from this deadlock requires an epistemological break along the lines of Louis Althusser and other post-structuralists. al-Jabiri stresses that this does not constitute a break from tradition itself at the level of knowledge, emphasizing that it takes place in the form of a mental act: ‘This break must transform us from beings “taken by tradition” to beings who have embraced their tradition’. The systematics of al-Jabiri’s philosophy continue to draw on post-structuralist thinking, suggesting a ‘disjunctive-“rejunctive” reading’. By this he means the disruption of the subject-object relation in order to get rid of a biased understanding of tradition based on that tradition itself. This type of discourse analysis requires a meticulous three-tiered dissection of texts, consisting of a structuralist approach which searches for the constants in a text tradition; a historical approach linking the author's thinking to its historical context; and an ideological approach synthesizing the structuralist and historical readings of the text. So far modern students of Islamic philosophy have failed to make such a distinction between the cognitive and ideological perspectives of this reading, rendering Islamic thinking an ‘immobile

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48 al-Jabri, Arab-Islamic Philosophy, p. 9.
51 al-Jabri, Arab-Islamic Philosophy, p. 22.
void of progress and of dynamics’. This three-phased analysis of the discursive formations which together constitute the Arab-Islamic intellectual heritage is elaborated in a trilogy that forms the core of al-Jabiri’s *Naqd al-‘Aql al-‘Arabī* or ‘Critique of Arab Reason’. The first volume on the ‘formation of Arab Reason offers a historical analysis of the start of the ‘era of recording’ (‘asr tadwīn) in the eighth century, during which the data for constructing both pre-Islamic and early Islamic history were collected. This rich storehouse of orally transmitted knowledge was put into writing and then gradually structured into the discrete disciplines of Islamic learning such as *tafsīr* (Qur’an exegesis), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and *kalām* (discursive theology). When analyzing this period of data collection and codification, al-Jabiri stresses that it is as important to pay attention to what is said as to what is not said if one wants to understand how knowledge receives its epistemological and ideological validity and authority. In *The Structure of Arab Reason*, al-Jabiri distinguishes three epistemes: *bayānī* (discursive); *‘irfānī* (intuitive or illuminationist), and *burhānī* (demonstrative) reason. He argues that from the *tadwin* period onwards, discursive reason has held centre stage in Arab-Islamic thinking. Texts become authoritative through epistemological protocols and practices that rely predominantly on emulation and reasoning by analogy (*qiyās*)–an epistemological method developed to its greatest level of sophistication in the field of legal studies. As discussed above, this was the reason for Hasan Hanafi’s concentrating on the transformation of the ‘foundations of jurisprudence’ into a generally applicable method of philosophical thinking.

In order to shake Arab-Islamic thinking free of its atrophy and restore its dynamism, al-Jabiri had his hopes pinned on demonstrative reason. In effect this meant a rejection of much of the intellectual legacy of the eastern parts of the Muslim world. He dismissed figures such as al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, because, in al-Jabiri’s mind, *‘irfān* is not illuminationist, but amounts to obscurantism. Also the discursive theology of al-Ghazali is condemned on grounds of the latter’s instrumentalization of Aristotelian logic. Instead, al-Jabiri proposes a reintegrated epistemology resting on a systemic understanding of the Hellenic heritage. An essay entitled 'The Andalusian Resurgence' provides an apt illustration of al-Jabiri’s revisionist view of Islamic philosophy as an

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52 Al-Jabri, *Arab-Islamic Philosophy*, p. 42
intellectually militant discourse. Sketching the specific pluralist setting of medieval Muslim Spain, he shows that the thinkers there were uniquely well positioned and prepared to tackle complicated philosophical questions. Far removed from the ideological and political controversies raging in the central and eastern parts of the Islamic world, the philosophers in Iberia and the Maghreb could almost at their leisure internalize foundational scientific disciplines, such as mathematics, physics, and logic before engaging with metaphysics.

The critiques of Ibn Hazm and al-Shatibi, but especially the rationalism developed by Ibn Rushd (Averroes), form the basis of al-Jabiri’s panacea for both the bayānī tendency to ground authority in texts and for the speculative irrationalism of the ‘irfānī tradition. Speaking as an academic philosopher, al-Jabiri claims the Islamic tradition reached the height of its sophistication when it was suffused with the ruḥ rushdiya, or ‘spirit of Averroism’, because it advocated a proper use of Aristotelianism in the way it embraced the methods of both induction and deduction, and interpreted the concepts of universal validity and historicity. This leads al-Jabiri to end the brief outline in his Arab-Islamic Philosophy with the provocative conclusion that ‘the future can only be Averroist’.

The Indonesian Islamic post-traditionalist Ahmad Baso notes that al-Jabiri’s approach hinges on the somewhat chauvinist privileging of ‘rationalist’ thinking in the Maghreb over the ‘irrational’ tendencies of the Muslim world East. Whereas Mohammed Arkoun felt the same affinity with the Maghreb as an integral part of the Mediterranean World until its northern and southern shores each went their separate ways, his ‘Critique of Islamic Reason’ retained broader scope than al-Jabiri’s ‘Critique of Arab Reason’ As yet another instance of the circulation of ideas, past and present, the suggested epistemological break between the Eastern and Western Arab world was further explored by al-Jabiri in a two-volume study he co-authored with Hasan Hanafi, aptly entitled ‘East-West Dialogue’ (Hiwār al-Mashriq w’al-Maghrib).

54 Al-Jabri, Arab-Islamic Philosophy, pp. 63-119.
55 This is also the interest al-Jabiri holds for Indonesian intellectuals such as Baso (Pos Traditionalisme sebagai Kritik Islam, p. xxv) and M. Amin Abdullah (see his Islamic Studies di Perguruan Tinggi, Pendekatan Integratif-Interkonektif, Yogyakarta, Pustaka Pelajar, 2010.
56 Al-Jabri, Arab-Islamic Philosophy, p. 120.
Critical Islam: From historicized heritage thinking to concerns for a post-Islamist future

This discussion has shown that the critical discourses of the heritage thinkers emerged in the same time frame in which proponents of overtly Islamic political agendas came to the fore as well. Even though the proper domains of these new Muslim scholars of Islam are situated in academic fields such as epistemology, intellectual history, and the sociology of knowledge, as public intellectuals their ideas have political implications too. Meanwhile, in many Muslim countries, political and intellectual conditions remain constrictive to the point of suffocating any chance or opportunity for thinking freely. This is why Muslim intellectuals operating outside the historical geography of the Muslim world remain central to the further advancement of critical Islamic thinking initiated by the heritage thinkers of the 1960s and 1970s. These include not only exiled intellectuals (both involuntary and voluntary), but also nomadic expatriate academics based in metropoles in Europe, North America, and Australia, as well as scholars and activists descending from erstwhile migrants from different—formerly colonized—parts of the Muslim world. To my mind, they have an increasingly prominent role to play in the critical reworking of *turāth*.

I have tried to demonstrate that the alternative readings of the Islamic past by the heritage thinkers and their innovative interpretations of the significance of *turāth* for Muslims in the present, first developed in the late 1960s and coming to fuller intellectual fruition from the 1980s onwards, prefigure the understandings of today’s younger critical intellectuals presented under the heading of ‘post-Islamism’. Its development in parallel with Islamist thinking with varying signatures shows that post-Islamism is best understood as an analytical rather than a historical category. Instead of a chronology heralding post-Islamism as a new phase that follows on from the alleged demise of Islamism, as posited by French observers of the contemporary Muslim world such as Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel, it seems more accurate to opt for the conceptual understanding of post-Islamism found in the eponymous publication edited by Asef Bayat. Just as postmodern and postcolonial thinking do not signify the end of modernity or the persistence of colonial conditions, so also the concept of post-Islamism allows for the possibility of multiple strands of thought and a diversity of ideas to co-exist and influence Muslim minds at the same time. However, given the temptation to assume a sequential order of Islamism and Post-Islamism, perhaps it is better to forfeit the introduction of another ‘post’ and settle for the
alternative term ‘critical Islam’. Reflecting on the actual political and intellectual realities in the Muslim world, the conclusion from such critical analyses should be that what we are dealing with is not an abstract called ‘Islam’, ‘Islamism’, and now supposedly ‘Post-Islamism’, but real people: Muslims capable of critical engagement with their religion.

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