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SPECIAL FOCUS

PLURALISM IN EMERGENC(I)ES IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Politics and the Limits of Pluralism in Mohamed Arkoun and Abdenour Bidar

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One of the striking features of the literary culture of the modern Maghreb is the profusion of works that undertake to identify the essential features of the region – exercises in definition that almost always emphasize plurality.[1] Philosophers, social scientists, and literary writers have highlighted the Maghreb's multilingualism – the coexistence of different forms of Arabic, Tamazight, French, and Spanish – the varied and hybrid cultural legacies of conquest and colonialism, and the effects of the region's geographical proximity to other parts of Africa, Europe, and the Middle East. It would be hard to find a more ubiquitous theme of francophone Maghrebi literature than cultural diversity, and the subject is by no means absent from Arabic-language literature. This preoccupation with plurality can be seen as a response to a history of colonization and decolonization with particular ideological features. In their efforts to build "l'Algérie française," the French colonial authorities suppressed Arabic as a language of culture and government.[2] In response, anticolonial nationalists called for the replacement of French with Arabic. "Islam is my religion, Arabic is my language, Algeria is my nation" – the

[1] Examples include Abdelkébir Khatibi, *Amour bilingue* (Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1983), *Maghreb Pluriel* (Paris: Denoël, 1983), and *Penser le Maghreb* (Rabat: Société Marocaine des Editeurs Réunis, 1993); Abdelfattah Kilito, *Je parle toutes les langues mais en arabe* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2013); Moha Ennaji, *Multilingualism, Cultural Identity, and Education in Morocco* (New York: Springer, 2005), and from an external perspective, René Galissot, *Le Maghreb de traverse* (Paris: Bouchene, 2000).

[2] In 1848, Algeria was declared to be a part of France rather than a colony. For the ensuing 120 years, France sought to make this statement a reality through the recruitment of French and other European settlers, among other policies. During the War of Independence (1954–62), the slogan "L'Algérie française" served as shorthand for the position that Algeria was and must remain French.

catchphrase of Abdelhamid Ben Badis's *Jam'iyat al-'Ulama* [Association of Muslim Ulema], an Islamic reform movement of the 1930s and 1940s – later became a slogan of the nationalist movement, the Front de libération nationale (FLN) [National Liberation Front]. Since the 1980s, a similar call to restore Arabic and eliminate French has been issued by the Islamist opposition to the corrupt and undemocratic FLN government and at times by officials in that same government seeking to restore their legitimacy.[3] In emphasizing linguistic and cultural diversity, writers and scholars have tried to tender an alternative to these recurrent efforts to delimit the region's identity.

Plural-ism, which I take to mean the prescription to affirm the existence of a diversity of cultural and religious perspectives as a positive good, appears most often in contexts such as the Maghreb, where traditions, faiths, and languages coexist in a relationship of historical tension. Proponents of pluralism generally portray it as the salutary overcoming of positions that are intolerant and divisive. I would argue, however, that pluralism should be approached, not as the transcendence of identitarianism, but rather as a mode of immanent critique.[4] By this I mean that it grows in the same soil as the positions that it rejects, and its history is interwoven with theirs. To explain why this nuance matters, it is helpful to consider an often-unexamined tension within pluralism: the fact that the injunction to recognize and accommodate different practices and values effectively contradicts its own premise. In other words, the call to embrace plurality excludes and can even be directed against those who do not agree with it. In addition, there is no automatic consensus about what constitutes plurality. In the case of North Africa, for example, some identity-labels are seen to be inherently pluralistic whereas others are not.[5] To describe the

[3] In 2019, in the midst of a national revolutionary movement seeking to topple the regime, the Minister of Education, Tayeb Bouzid, called for the complete replacement of French instruction with English, a transparent effort to curry favor with a presumed Islamic constituency that has historically preferred English to French, and to sow divisions among the protesters. On this announcement see: Lamine Ghanmi, "Algeria seeks to replace French with English at university, sparks 'language war,'" *The Arab Weekly*, March 8, 2019, https://thearabweekly.com/algeria-seeks-replace-french-english-university-sparks-language-war.

[4] I use the concept of "immanent critique" in a somewhat different way than do Marxist thinkers such as Fredric Jameson and David Harvey, for whom it denotes a deliberate decision to work within existing or local traditions of thought rather than striving for a Kantian transcendence. I see pluralism in its more programmatic forms as being embedded in existing worldviews and debates, but less intentionally. This said, there are examples of pluralism that align more closely with the strategies described by Jameson and Harvey among others. See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981) and David Harvey, "Critical Theory," *Sociological Perspectives* 33.1 (1990): 5.

[5] I refer to "identity labels" rather than "identities" to signal the fact that identities are often naturalized in ways that overlook their construction and instrumentalization for political purposes. On this tendency in the context of the Maghreb, see Walid Benkhaled and Natalya Vince, "Performing

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Maghreb as "Mediterranean" is tantamount to proclaiming its cultural diversity, whereas describing it as "Arab" is more likely to be seen as an essentializing and identitarian gesture. These conditioned responses overlook not only the plurality of referents encompassed by the term "Arab," but also the fact that identification with the Mediterranean has all too often signaled the rejection of other coordinates.[6]

In this essay, I explore some of the paradoxes of pluralism in the Maghreb as reflected in the work and biography of a leading intellectual who is often described as a pluralist: the Algerian specialist of Islam, Mohamed Arkoun (1928–2010). This prolific scholar, whose life and body of work in many ways distilled the claims made for the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Maghreb, argued throughout his career for what I will call a "pluralist Islamology," i.e. a comparative, interdisciplinary study of Islam, and against definitive interpretations, which he considered to be surrogates for political authoritarianism. Arkoun presented these arguments against the backdrop of major political and social transitions: decolonization in the 1950s and 60s; the "Islamic Revival" of the 1980s, and the Algerian "Black Decade" (sometimes called the "Civil War") of the 1990s.[7] In line with this volume's focus on pluralism in emergency, I attend in particular to how Arkoun's vision of pluralism was tested at a complex political moment.

In the latter part of his career, Arkoun's pluralism appeared increasingly out of touch with currents of Islam gaining ascendance in and beyond the Maghreb. Drawing an increasing number of attacks from other Muslim scholars, he began to feel misunderstood, and came to see himself as a victim of the Maghreb's linguistic and sociological fractures. Was Arkoun in fact misunderstood, or did his pluralism fail to attract followers for other reasons? This question is raised in a recent return to Arkoun's work by the prominent French Muslim scholar, Abdennour Bidar, to which I turn at the end of this essay. Sympathetic to Arkoun's project but also

Algerianness: the National and Transnational Construction of Algeria's 'Culture Wars'" in *Algeria, Nation, Culture and Transnationalism, 1988–2015*, ed. Patrick Crowley (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), 243–69.

[6] On "Mediterraneanism" and dogmatic pluralism see Madeleine Dobie, "For and against the Mediterranean: Francophone Perspectives," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34.2 (2014): 389–404.

[7] From 1991 to 2000, Algeria was caught in the throes of a violent conflict between state security forces and Islamist militias that claimed up to 200,000 lives. Though widely used, the label "Civil War" suggests a misleading division between two segments of the population. Though the competing label "The Black Decade" is problematic in its own right, it is preferable to the extent that it does not imply a deep political and ideological rift.

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dubious about its ultimate goals, Bidar raises the question of the relationship between pluralism and faith. I end with a short consideration of Bidar's own run-ins with critics who view him as a spokesman for a French state that has preached pluralism while singling Muslims out for criticism and surveillance. I suggest that these two cases echo each other in ways that reflect the inevitable entanglement of pluralism and politics. This entanglement is reflected in the methodology of this essay. My analysis is grounded in intellectual history to the extent that I focus on Arkoun's contributions to Islamic science, but it also gestures to wider pluralist currents circulating in literature and the social sciences, and to some of the social and political movements and events that both framed and were framed by identity claims and the arguments leveled against them.

The Pluralist Islamology of Mohammed Arkoun

Born in colonial Algeria in the Tamazight-speaking region of Kabylia, Arkoun belonged to the first generation of colonized subjects to be educated in French colonial schools.[8] This French education paved the way for some of his close contemporaries, for example the novelist and diarist Mouloud Feraoun and the writer/anthropologist/linguist Mouloud Mammeri, who both came from the same small village as Arkoun, to explore the effects of colonialism on Amazigh culture and society. Arkoun, by contrast, developed an interest in Arabic literature and eventually became a leading scholar of Islam. After Independence in 1962, he left Algeria to teach in France, where he served as Professor of the History of Islamic Thought at the Université Sorbonne nouvelle-Paris III. He also held appointments beyond French academia, at American Universities such as UCLA and Princeton, UNESCO, as well as the Library of Congress, and the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. Like many other Algerian intellectuals of his generation, Arkoun criticized the increasingly authoritarian, military-backed FLN regime from a position of virtual exile. Yet in the 1980s, he came into conflict with another group of critics – Islamists who also called for democratic reforms. In the 1990s, as Algeria traversed a period of violent conflict between the state and Islamist militias, Arkoun grew closer to Morocco, the country of his second wife. He was ultimately buried in Casablanca with full honors of the Moroccan state. Though some Algerians lamented this decision, his burial in Algeria would have been controversial in other quarters.

[8] Tamazight and other Amazigh ("Berber") languages are the mother tongues of at least 25 percent of Algerians and 40 percent of Moroccans.

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One of the unifying threads of Arkoun's extensive body of writing is the defense of plurality in its many forms. He admired the spirit of the early centuries of Islam, which he viewed as a time of productive cultural exchange and synthesis.[9] By contrast, he was a severe critic of what he saw as a progressive narrowing of Islam's doctrinal scope and a growing tendency to endow the past with unshakeable authority. He also challenged the institutional framing and intellectual methods of Islamic scholarship, rejecting what he considered to be uncritical orthodoxy on the part of Muslim scholars as well as the neocolonial prejudices of Western orientalists. He called for the replacement of the dominant methods of scholarship with a new field of "applied Islamology" [islamologie appliquée] – an idea inspired by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard's principle of "applied rationalism" [rationalisme appliqué] – i.e. empirically engaged reasoning.[10] In essence, this entailed approaching Islamic doctrine and worship in its varied historical, political, and social contexts.

As the Kantian-sounding title of Arkoun's best-known work, *Pour une critique de la raison islamique* [Towards a Critique of Islamic Reason] (1984) conveys, he advocated a rigorously self-reflexive approach to the epistemology of religion.[11] He called for "a sociological, anthropological and philosophical examination of all cultural productions" [une mise en perspective sociologique, anthropologique et philosophique de toutes les productions culturelles], claiming that interdisciplinarity was necessary to the openness of "critique," i.e. the continuous reevaluation of the legitimacy of modes of knowledge.[12] On the same principle, in his own work he drew eclectically from political and cultural theory, borrowing ideas from Marxism and structuralism and acknowledging affinities with deconstruction, with which he shared a reticence toward definitive analyses and interpretative closure. He speaks in this vein of "The plural strategy that I advocate for all readings of the *Qurʾan*, which resists both formalist methods, the constraining rules of a rigid structuralism, and the univocal and dogmatic interpretations of orthodox reason" [La stratégie

[9] On classical Islam as a polyvalent cultural space see also Thomas Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: eine andere Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011).

[10] Gaston Bachelard, *Le rationalisme appliqué* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1949). A nuanced account of Arkoun's intellectual biography is offered by Mohamed Amine Brahimi in "Elective Affinity as an Intellectual Connection: a Review of Mohammed Arkoun's Relation to the Institute of Ismaïli Studies," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society* 13 (2018): 131–43.

[11] Mohammed Arkoun, *Pour une critique de la raison islamique* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1984).

[12] Ibid., 9. Translations are mine unless otherwise attributed.

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plurale que je préconise pour toute lecture du Coran : celui-ci refute aussi bien les procédures formelles, les règles contraignantes d'un structuralisme rigide que les interpretations univoques et dogmatiques de la raison orthodoxe].[13] Taken together, these different but interrelated methodological principles constitute what I am calling Arkoun's "pluralist Islamology."

One of Arkoun's chief concerns was the treatment of Islamic law (*shariʿa*) as a fixed and immutable code. The statutes to which the status of *shariʿa* is ascribed, he argued, were elaborated in specific contexts, a historical contingency that was being obscured to create or preserve monopolies on legal authority:

> Thus, a body of largely positive law continues, to this day, to be presented and applied under the name of Shariʿa, as though it were Divine Law. The restoration or extension of the domain of Shariʿa in several Muslim societies underscores how much the historicity of the reasoning that established these *Usûl* [foundations] remains an unthought of Islamic thought.
>
> [Ainsi un droit largement positif continue jusqu'à nos jours, à être présenté et appliqué, sous le nom de Shariʿa, comme une Loi divine. La restauration ou l'extension du domaine de la Shariʿa dans plusieurs sociétés muslmanes souligne à quel point l'historicité de la raison qui a élaboré les Usul [foundations] demeure un impensé de la pensée islamique].[14]

As this passage illustrates, Arkoun felt that the domain of *shariʿa* was expanding and that lack of attention to its historical foundations was enabling this growth.

But his calls for historicism were not limited to the domain of law. Arkoun also, and more controversially, insisted that the most sacred texts of Islam, the *Qurʾan* and *Hadith,* were compiled over time, their coalescence as fixed and authoritative sources being interwoven with the consolidation of the power of the Abbasid Caliphs. Echoing Claude Lévi-Strauss, he argued that the very transition from oral communication to written transmission of God's word was a vector for the establishment of political power. He thus writes in *La pensée arabe* (1996) that:

[13] Ibid., 37.
[14] Ibid., 17.

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> It was in relation to the administrative and ideological needs of the Abbasid state that this *writing of the Qurʾan* took place – this passage to the written text that would give rise to the Qurʾan-object that Mohammed never held in his hands! What we call the Qurʾan is thus the act of an "official will."
>
> [C'est en relation avec les besoins administratifs et idéologiques de l'État abbâside que s'est faite cette *écriture du Coran* – ce passage au texte écrit qui va donner naissance à l'objet Coran que Mohammed n'a donc jamais tenu entre ses mains ! Ce que nous nommons Coran serait bien ainsi le fait d'une "volonté officielle"].[15]

The final chapter of *Pour une critique de la raison islamique* turns to the political dimensions of the sacred in the specific context of the Maghreb. Arkoun charges official nationalism with the deliberate mythologization of the past and the cultivation of an Islamic identity divorced from scientific knowledge: "Official nationalist discourse tends to enclose society in an imaginary perception of its past and its identity with little concern for the norms and established principles of scientific knowledge" [le discours nationaliste officiel tend à enfermer la société dans une perception imaginaire de son passé et de son identité au mépris des normes et des données les mieux établies de la connaissance scientifique].[16] His critique strikingly parallels Frantz Fanon's rejection of early anticolonial movements' immersion in the precolonial past, though whereas for Fanon, nationalism was the antidote to nostalgia, for Arkoun it had become the problem. Moreover, whereas Fanon considered the emphasis that the previous generation of anti-colonialists had placed on African heritage to be well meaning but misguided, Arkoun decried nationalists' embrace of religious tradition as a cynical political strategy.[17]

He posited that just as the French colonial authorities had undertaken to engineer a separation between "Maghreb space" and "Islamic space" [espace maghrébin and espace islamique], so nationalist discourses in Algeria and Morocco had found it expedient to conflate them. Their sponsorship of a uniform, international form of Islam, he contended, had occurred at the expense of local and regional varieties of faith and practice, a homogenization that had contributed to the centralization of power by

[15] Mohammed Arkoun, *La pensée arabe* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1996), 13. See also Claude Lévi-Strauss, "La Leçon d'écriture," *Tristes tropiques* (Paris: Plon, 1955), 338–53.

[16] Ibid., 355.

[17] See Frantz Fanon, "Sur la culture nationale," *Les damnés de la terre* (1961) (Paris: La découverte, 2002), 202.

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distracting attention from political authoritarianism and growing class inequality. Turning from the motives of rulers to those of the ruled, Arkoun proposed that popular receptiveness to archaic forms of Islam could be partially understood in light of frustrated social and economic aspirations to enjoy the conveniences of modern consumer culture.

This kind of socioeconomic explanation for the "Islamic revival" has been prevalent in the work of European and American political scientists and sociologists as well as some Maghrebi scholars.[18] Such an analysis was less expected and less easily accepted from a leading scholar of Islam immersed in its theological and textual traditions.[19] Arkoun was increasingly faced with a critical reception that associated his work with a sociological and, by extension, western perspective. Rejecting this characterization, he lamented that intellectuals who sought to speak critically about the strategic refashioning of Islam were automatically branded as "sociological Muslims" [musulmans sociologiques] and dismissed as "servile imitators of Western models" [imitateurs serviles de modèles occidentaux].[20]

[18] Sociological explanations of the Islamic revival and of Islamist and jihadist movements are numerous and diverse. Some reduce these phenomena to expressions of political alienation and economic deprivation, others describe looser correlations between the rise of Islamist movements and parties and social and political stresses. Influential examples include Gilles Kepel, *Les Banlieues de l'islam. Naissance d'une religion en France* (Seuil, Paris, 1987), Gilles Kepel, *La Revanche de Dieu. Chrétiens, juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde* (Seuil, Paris, 1991), and Martin Kramer's polemical essay collection, *Arab Awakening and Islamic Revival* Kramer (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1996). Works by Maghrebi scholars include Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy, Fear of the Modern World* (London: Virago 1993). The Algerian political scientist, Yahia Zoubir has edited several collections of essays on politics and society in the Maghreb in which this form of analysis is well represented, for example, *North Africa in Transition: State, Society, and Economic Transformation in the 1990s* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1999).

[19] After Arkoun's death in 2010, the francophone newspaper *El-Watan*, a liberal forum for critical perspectives on government and society, hosted a public discussion of his legacy. In a summary of the event published under the title "L'oeuvre novatrice de Mohamed Arkoun," *El Watan*, December 20, 2010, it is explained that Arkoun had declined an invitation to speak in Algiers in 2006 due to security concerns. The (unnamed) author asks "Pourquoi la pensée «arkounienne» rencontre-t-elle une farouche opposition en Algérie et dans la majorité des pays arabes ? Pourquoi ses ouvrages ne sont pas disponibles en Algérie?" [Why does "arkounian" thought encounter such vehement opposition in Algeria and the majority of Arab countries? Why are his works not available in Algeria?] One of the speakers invited by *El Watan* was Yadh Ben Achour, the celebrated Tunisian jurist who would soon become a leader of his country's transition to democracy. In his speech, also published in *El Watan*, Ben Achour noted that Arkoun's pluralist, anti-dogmatic opinions "ont valu à Mohammed Arkoun, souvent sur la base de la simple commune renommée, des attaques frontales et virulentes, précisément de la part de ceux qui partagent la théorie de 'l'évidence coranique'. Ces attaques sont allées jusqu'aux déclarations d'apostasie." [often, on the mere basis of reputation, led to frontal and virulent attacks on Mohammed Arkoun by those who believe in "Koranic truth." These attacks went as far as accusations of apostasy]. "Mohammed Arkoun, défenseur de l'Islam (1re partie)," *El Watan*, December 26, 2010.

[20] Arkoun, *Pour une critique*, 364.

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Such criticism was unfair to the extent that Arkoun was in fact withering on the subject of Western approaches to Islam, not least the French model of secularism. His approach to *laïcité* was in many ways parallel to his approach to Islam; that is to say, he regarded it as an idea that had had been disconnected from its historical and political roots and that had come to be treated as abstract and universal. Anticipating the arguments of many recent critics of *laïcité*, he suggested that far from defending the plurality of opinion and belief, French secularism had become a mechanism for condemning Islam and its rich traditions of thought:

> In its most advanced institutional context – the French Republic – secular thought is still at the stage of refusing, rejecting and condemning a great tradition of thought and civilization. Instead of recognizing the intellectual fecundity of the debate that Islam, thanks, if I may say this, to its historical delay, is reintroducing into a society which has not thoroughly exhausted the confrontation between religious and secular modes of producing meaning, we see a growing number of negative campaigns against the "darkness of the Middle Ages."
>
> [La pensée laïque dans son cadre institutionnel le plus avancé – la République française – en est encore au stade du refus, du rejet, de la condamnation à l'égard d'une grande tradition de pensée et de civilisation. Au lieu de reconnaitre la fécondité intellectuelle du débat que l'Islam, grâce, si je puis dire, à son décalage historique, réintroduit dans une société qui n'a pas épuisé la confrontation des modes religieux et laïque de production du sens, on voit se multiplier des campagnes de dénigrement contre le retour des "ténèbres du Moyen Âge"].[21]

He also forcefully rejected the idea that Muslim societies should imitate the development of the West, criticizing not only Western attitudes to Islam, but also the "aggressive certainties of ideological discourses, the 'confident' march of scientific thought" [les certitudes aggressives du discours idéologique, la marche "assurée" de la pensée scientifique].[22]

In the Maghreb, criticisms of intellectuals for adopting Western perspectives have been leveled most consistently at those who, like Arkoun, write primarily in French. The question of language was one to

[21] Mohammed Arkoun, *Ouvertures sur l'Islam* (Paris: J. Grancher, 1989), 199–200.
[22] Ibid., 50.

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which he was sensitive, though he viewed it less as a matter of intellectual and political perspective than as a problem of readership. He expressed regret that his work had failed to reach a large public since "most Muslims don't read French" and "those who do are engaged in political, economic and technical activities that are too remote from Islamic thought" [la majorité des musulmans ne lisent pas le français; ceux qui le lisent sont engagés dans des activités politiques, économiques, technologiques trop éloignées de la pensée islamique].[23] This framing of the multilingualism of the Maghreb and the distribution of readers, is, however, far from neutral. It posits a major cultural divide, with Arabic-reading readers, presumed to include the majority of believers, on one side and a more secular (and middle-class) French-reading public on the other. As a socio-linguistic map, this account fails to acknowledge either the functional bilingualism of many Maghrebis or the wide range of oral and written discourses circulating in both Arabic and French. It is certainly not grounded in the kind of rigorous scientific study that Arkoun championed, betraying rather the limits of his pluralism. This said, the perception of a linguistic dichotomy in which French is secular and Arabic religious is by no means limited to Arkoun. As scholars including Karim Akouche and Hafid Gafaiti have explained, claims about bifurcated linguistic practice have gained traction in the Maghreb because they are conduits for powerful ideological and political forces.[24] As a native Tamazight-speaker who wrote in French about Islamic texts and traditions, Arkoun's own practice clearly challenged this dichotomy. Yet it also placed him in the midst of the conflicts that Akouche and Gafaiti describe, in which languages become surrogates for presumed social, political, and religious viewpoints.

Pluralism in Crisis

Arkoun's life spanned a cascading series of social and political transitions and crises occurring in and beyond Algeria. The segregated colonial society of his childhood was replaced, after the long and bloody War of Independence, by the authoritarian rule of the prevailing faction of the FLN. The 1970s and 80s witnessed a widespread transnational (though also thoroughly heterogenous) renewal of Islamic faith allied with calls for

[23] Arkoun, *Pour une critique*, 17–18.

[24] On the enduring *repoussoir* of a francophone and indeed pro-French secular elite in Algeria, the so-called *hizb França*, see, for example, Karim Akouche, "L'Algérie arabe est une imposture," *Jeune Afrique*, April 18, 2017. On the prismatic nature of linguistic politics in Algeria see Hafid Gafaiti, "Language and De/Construction of National Identity in Postcolonial Algeria," in *Algeria in Others' Languages*, ed. Anne-Emmanuelle Berger (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), 19–43.

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Islam to occupy a more central place in politics and society. Like other scholars of Islam, Arkoun owed some of his prominence to this dynamic global context, but it also thrust him into a number of high-profile controversies.[25]

Since Independence in 1962, the Algerian government had supported and cultivated Islamic causes and institutions as a strategy for pacifying its critics. But in the 1980s, it encountered mounting opposition from Islamists. In October 1988, pro-democracy protests led to the scheduling of the country's first free elections, but in the face of the likely victory of the newly created Islamist party, the FIS (Front islamique du salut), the government canceled the elections with the backing of the army and considerable international support. Following the banning of the FIS and the imprisonment of its leaders, the political crisis descended into a brutal and opaque armed conflict that continued on and off for almost a decade. Many Algerians and external observers believe that the regime at times deliberately provoked Islamist violence in order to legitimize its hold on power.[26]

The uneasy relationship between the FLN government and Islamist constituencies that would soon directly challenge it was the backdrop for a notorious incident in which pluralism collided with brewing political tensions. The state-sponsored Séminaire de la pensée islamique (Seminar on Islamic Thought) had been held annually in different Algerian cities since 1966. It was an occasion to highlight the nation's religious culture – a source of insecurity in the wake of the long French colonial occupation – and the role of the state in promoting Islamic education. Specialists, including foreign clerics and academics, addressed large audiences of students and teachers and responded to their questions. At the 1985 meeting, held in Bejaïa and attended by dignitaries including Yasser Arafat, Arkoun was one of the invited speakers. He delivered a lecture touching on a wide range of topics, including the importance of a philological approach to the *Qur'an*. After he had finished speaking, another scholar, the Egyptian Mohamed Al-Ghazali al-Saqqa, took the microphone and opined that Arkoun had questioned the sacred character

[25] See for example, Arkoun's commentary on the Salman Rushdie affair in *Le Monde*, March 15, 1989: https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1989/03/15/un-entretien-avec-m-mohamed-arkoun-professeur-a-la-sorbonne-la-conception-occidentale-des-droits-de-l-homme-renforce-le-malentendu-avec-l-islam_4107357_1819218.html.

[26] See for example, Luis Martinez, *The Algerian Civil War, 1990–1998* (London: Hurst, 2000) and Jean-Pierre Filiu, *From Deep State to Islamic State: the Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

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of the *Qur'an*, which amounted to blasphemy. Rejecting a "critical" approach to sacred texts, he was of course essentially affirming the position that Arkoun was contesting, i.e., that Islamic scholarship must accept the premise of these texts' authority.

There are different accounts of what happened next. According to Arkoun's daughter Sylvie, cries of *Allah' akbar* resounded in the amphitheater and Arkoun had to be ushered out.[27] Others recall the incident differently, claiming that a vigorous back-and-forth continued for several hours and ended when Arkoun stated, to the approbation of the audience, that a Muslim could not call for the excommunication of another Muslim, or when he humbly begged God's pardon for his earlier words.[28] Despite (and indeed given) the differences among these accounts, what is clear is that the seminar became the scene of a symptomatic confrontation between different visions of Islamic science interwoven with an array of local and global political forces.

Arkoun's interlocutor, Cheikh Mohamed Al-Ghazali, was a prominent Al-Azhar cleric with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Widely recognized as a leading figure in the "Islamic revival" in Egypt, he served in the 1980s as Rector of the new Islamic Emir Abd-el-Qader University in the Algerian city of Constantine, and he was a frequent presence on Algerian national television. His harsh response to Arkoun as a result registered, not as an intervention by a foreign cleric, but as the expression of a perspective shared by some Algerians.[29] A few years later, Al-Ghazali was one of several Al-Azhar scholars who issued a judgment condemning the Egyptian intellectual Farag Foda for supporting the separation of state and religion and the preeminence of secular law. After Foda was assassinated

[27] See Sylvie Arkoun's memoir/biography of her father, *Les vies de Mohamed Arkoun* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2014), 187–206.

[28] See, for example, the testimony of Arkoun's second wife, Touria Yacoubi Arkoun, published in *El-Watan* in February, 2014: https://www.elwatan.com/edition/contributions/madame-arkoun-nous-ecrit-04-03-2014. See also a short piece, published in 2019 on the media site *Reporters,* containing the recollections of Abderrazak Guessoum, President of the Association of Algerian 'Ulema: https://www.reporters.dz/eclairage-mohammed-arkoun-a-t-il-ete-exclu-du-seminaire-sur-la-pensee-islamique-en-1985/.

[29] On the Emir Abd-el-Qader Islamic university and Al-Ghazali's role in its early years, see Ahmed Boudraâ, "Université Islamique Émir Abdelkader de Constantine**:** un sanctuaire du savoir anéanti par les luttes idéologiques," *Algeria Watch*, December 13, 2009, updated June 1, 2018: https://algeria-watch.org/?p=6471. The architecturally splendid Islamic university, opened in 1984, was an attempt to highlight the Islamic credentials of the FLN government and Algerian nationalism more broadly. Yet as Boudraâ explains, it rapidly became a site of conflicts between a more moderate administration and a young student body attracted to the Salafist currents circulating in Islamist movements in Algeria and abroad. Al-Ghazali's prestige allowed him to mediate between these constituencies but he departed in 1988 when Algeria erupted into anti-government protests at which point the university became the site of a prolonged strike.

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in 1990 by members of Gamaa al-islamiyya (The Islamic Group), an organization committed to the overthrow of the Egyptian government and its replacement with an Islamic state. Al-Ghazali testified at the trial that death was a just punishment for an apostate.

Sylvie Arkoun reports that in the wake of the Bejaïa incident, her father felt increasingly uncomfortable in Algeria. While this claim is hard to evaluate (he visited Algeria several times after 1985, though never after the outbreak of violence in 1992), he must have understood that his vision of Islam contrasted sharply with that of a significant number of his compatriots, and that some of them saw him as a blasphemer. If Arkoun had ventured to Algeria in the 1990s, it seems likely that he would have met a similar fate to Foda.[30] In making this observation, my point is not to portray Arkoun as a heroic defender of pluralism under threat from fanaticism. Rather, I want to situate him as a committed and eloquent spokesperson for a perspective that was tightly interwoven with that of his opponents. A striking aspect of the various accounts of the Bejaïa episode is that they speak mostly about Ghazali's attack, the reaction of the auditorium, and how Arkoun handled the situation.[31] They say little about his intentions or expectations in delivering his lecture. It seems fair to assume, however, that he was not completely blindsided by Al-Ghazali's reaction, but rather went to the seminar knowing that his ideas contested the very grounds of many participants' vision of Islamic learning and were likely to provoke a hostile response.

Arkoun's lecture and wider body of writing was just one of many instances of Algerian intellectuals in the 1980s and 90s speaking out against what they saw as a monolingualist and monotheistic assault on the diversity of Maghrebi culture. These critiques were understandable and legitimate. They were also enmeshed in social and political conflicts that had been playing out since Independence and given this, less likely to attenuate divisions than to reinforce them. To, again, be clear, I make this observation not in order to criticize Arkoun or other Algerian public intellectuals. I feel considerable personal admiration for Arkoun and little if any for Al-Ghazali. Rather, I want to suggest the importance of locating pluralism within its discursive context rather than treating it as an abstract principle with the power to transcend divisive "identarianism."

[30] Despite its premise, orthodoxy can, of course, always be challenged. After the Foda trial, Al-Ghazali was viewed in the Europe and the United States as a fatwa-issuing fanatic, yet in other quarters he was considered to be too close to the Egyptian presidency and too critical of its Islamist opponents.

[31] See above, notes 21 and 22.

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Pluralism and Transcendence from Arkoun to Bidar

One of Arkoun's most attentive recent readers has been the French philosopher of Islam, Abdenour Bidar, best known for his memoir, *Self Islam* (2006) and for his contributions to the radio programs *France Islam* and *Cultures d'Islam*.[32] Bidar's public persona is built around his atypical trajectory. Raised in a working-class neighborhood of Clermont Ferrand by a French mother who was a convert to Islam, Bidar cites his early exposure to Islamic spirituality as the source of his attraction to philosophy and the driving force behind his career as a public intellectual. In *Self Islam,* he recounts his childhood experience of the walls separating Muslim life and worship from the wider dynamics of French culture and his own subsequent efforts to integrate western and Islamic philosophy.

Bidar begins his reflection on Arkoun by stating "I'm not an 'Arkounian.' Moreover, I don't know where the 'Arkounians' are today and I worry that there don't seem to be many of them" [Je ne suis pas un « arkounien ». Je ne sais pas d'ailleurs où sont aujourd'hui les « arkouniens » et je m'inquiète qu'il ne semble pas y en avoir beaucoup. . . .[33]]. His point is that Arkoun ought to have touched a bigger audience but failed to do so. He goes on to attribute this failure to reach people to a fundamental absence in his work. Although, as Bidar rehearses, Arkoun's analyses are far-reaching and devastating, it is not clear whether his deconstruction of Islamic theology and science ever envisaged a process of reconstruction:

> He methodically deconstructed the founding myths of Islam, he vigorously inventoried then denounced their consequences and harmful effects, and finally, he rigorously identified the scientific means required for their deconstruction; but these ideas are not accompanied by "positive" proposals that explain how he would have wished to reconstruct Islam. What Islam did Arkoun envisage for tomorrow? Did he in fact imagine that some part of Islam would survive its critical deconstruction? Did he see his work as a contribution to the re-formation of the religious and renewal of the spiritual? Or as a prelude to an atheistic post-religion?
>
> [Il a méthodiquement déconstruit les mythes fondateurs de l'Islam, il en a vigoureusement répertorié puis dénoncé les conséquences et les

[32] Abdennour Bidar, *Self Islam: Histoire d'un islam personnel* (Paris: Seuil, 2006).

[33] Abdennour Bidar, "Mohammed Arkoun et la question des fondements de l'islam," *Esprit*, February 2011, https://esprit.presse.fr/article/abdennour-bidar/mohammed-arkoun-et-la-question-des-fondements-de-l-islam-35953.

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> méfaits et, enfin, il a rigoureusement indiqué les réquisits scientifiques de leur déconstruction ; mais ces propositions critiques ne se sont pas accompagnées de propositions « positives » précisant dans quel sens il aurait souhaité reconstruire l'islam. Quel islam Arkoun envisageait-il pour demain ? Envisageait-il même que quelque chose de l'islam survive à sa déconstruction critique ? Situait-il son travail dans la perspective d'une refondation du religieux, et d'un renouveau spirituel ? Ou bien dans celle d'un postreligieux athée?].

Though Bidar does not explicitly charge Arkoun with being "secular," or still less a "secularist," he raises the question of whether his rigorously critical approach in the end leaves him outside of or post-Islam.

A fundamental issue for Bidar is Arkoun's failure to say whether, for him, the phenomenon of religion amounts to more than the sum of its historical, sociological, and political parts, i.e., whether he shared the believer's experience of some form of transcendence:

> He never stated his position on the "religious phenomenon" itself, i.e on the objectivity of the illusion by which man comes to believe himself called by a transcendent destiny. The question without an answer that his work poses is what, for him, remains of the religious or of the spiritual life when the dogmatic and mythological apparatus has been stripped away.
>
> [Il n'est pas parvenu à thématiser sa position sur le fait « religieux lui-même », sur l'objectivité ou l'illusion qu'il y a pour l'homme à se considérer comme appelé par un destin transcendant. La question sans réponse que pose son œuvre est de savoir ce qui pour lui reste ou non du religieux, et pour la vie spirituelle, quand on en a soustrait l'appareil dogmatique et mythique].

Bidar observes that while Arkoun speaks in anthropological terms of a human need for spirituality, he does not try to show how, outside the framework of organized religion and its prescriptions of doctrinal orthodoxy, this might be fulfilled. He suggests, drawing on his own experience, that it is the desire for transcendence and not the frustrated aspiration for better social and economic conditions or thwarted opposition to political authoritarianism that constitutes the core of religious experience. He proposes that contemporary Islamic practices that are often taken to be purely reactive, such as the wearing of the *burqa* or

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even participation in armed jihadism, can be seen as signs of this positive demand. Correspondingly, he suggests that Arkoun's failure to recognize the place of transcendence in affirmations of religious orthodoxy explains his difficulty in reaching his intended audience.

Did Arkoun's rigorous epistemological pluralism make it impossible for him to acknowledge the experience of transcendence? This is obviously a question with which intellectuals of many religious and political traditions have grappled, and one that is raised with particular urgency in situations of conflict and incipient violence. To do justice to it in the particular case of Arkoun would require a much longer textual and biographical study. I would, however, like to highlight a striking passage of *Pour une critique* in which Arkoun expresses frustration with the difficulty of communicating to "believers" the complexity of his ideas. He asks:

> How can one conduct a comprehensive, demythologizing, demystifying and thus necessarily desacralizing and demobilizing argument whose results are nonetheless communicable to the naïve collective consciousness of believers?
>
> Comment conduire une analyse compréhensive, démythologisante et démystifiante, donc nécessairement désacralisante et démobilisatrice, dont les résultats soient cependant communicables à la conscience indivise et naïve des croyants?[34]

I am struck by Arkoun's characterization of the public he would like to reach as naïve and "indivise" – a French term that suggests not just a collective or shared perspective but also a lemming-like incapacity for plurality. Arkoun seems to fall here into the kind of paternalism for which he reproaches religious authorities. The fact that he held this condescending attitude does not prove that contemplating Islam from a broad range of perspectives is incompatible with belief in spiritual experience. It does, however, illustrate the blind spot that we have observed in pluralist arguments, that is, their tendency to exclude, and indeed to construct themselves upon the exclusion of positions seen to be monolithic and unyielding.

Since publishing his essay on Arkoun, Bidar has had his own confrontations with critics who regard him not as a believer, but as a representative of French efforts to coopt and control Islam. Since 2013, he has been a member of France's official secularism watchdog, the

[34] Arkoun, *Pour une critique*, 111.

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Observatoire de la laïcité, which some critics view as an instrument of religious and racial profiling. In 2014, he published an "Open Letter" calling on the "Muslim World" to recognize that it had given birth to a monster, the Islamic State (IS), and to cease blaming "The West" for its problems.[35] The letter calls for a rigorous reform of Islamic education so that it instills universal principles such as democracy, freedom of thought and "*tolerance and right of citizenship . . . for all the diversity of visions from all over the world and all beliefs*" (my italics). Perhaps inevitably, this injunction, issued by a prominent French Muslim intellectual, was widely applauded in the aftermath of IS-sponsored attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in January 2015. For some French Muslims, however, it seemed to reproduce a longstanding perspective that essentializes Islam and subjects Muslims to more exacting standards than members of other faiths. One takeaway from this incident is that Bidar, much like Arkoun, has struggled to articulate a vision of Islamic pluralism that is persuasive beyond the circles of those who already identify with this worldview.

Though the parallel between Arkoun and Bidar is at best loose, I believe that a couple of points can be drawn from the comparison. The first is that when pluralism becomes systematic or institutional, it tends to undermine its own goals by targeting rather than incorporating other points of view. The role of the Observatoire de la laïcité as a "watchdog" that polices religious intolerance is a prime example of this tendency, but it can also be detected in Arkoun's systematic rejection of claims of authority and doctrinal truth. The second is that pluralism never simply transcends its social and political context. Rather, it is rooted and enmeshed in the ideological conflicts that it tries to rise above. This is not just because pluralism involves a kind of logical fallacy – people must agree to disagree – but also because it arises as a response (and most often as a rebuttal) of other doctrines, yet as the -ism ending indicates, is a doctrine in its own right.

[35] Abdennour Bidar, *Lettre ouverte au monde musulman* (Paris: Liens qui libèrent, 2015). A first version of this text was published in *The Huffington Post*, January 9, 2015: https://quebec.huffingtonpost.ca/abdennour-bidar/lettre-au-monde-musulman_b_5991640.html. An English version, the author's own translation, was published in *ResetDOCS*, January 14, 2015: https://www.resetdoc.org/story/open-letter-to-the-muslim-world/.

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