
Interview: Prof. Mohammed Arkoun

The West must act now to avert catastrophe in the Islamic world

Mohammed Arkoun is an Algerian professor of the history of Islamic thought, teaching at the Sorbonne in Paris. EIR's Dean Andromidas interviewed him at the Global Panel Conference earlier this year in The Hague, where the professor delivered a lecture on the current situation in the Islamic world.

EIR: One can read the term "Islamic fundamentalism" almost every day in the western press. Most of the time it's in a bad light, conveying anything from religious fanaticism to terrorism. Can you give a better definition of this much-abused term?

Arkoun: When we observe what has been happening in the many Muslim societies in the last 20 years, especially since the Iranian revolution, we find what has given rise to this fundamentalist discourse in the Muslim world. It is correct to use the term fundamentalism, because Muslims are basing all their claims, and their view of their own future, on *fundamentals*. This means on basic sources which are presented as specifically Islamic sources. The Koran, in this sense, is a fundamental source. They go back to take from it instructions for their political projects and political achievements.

So this is true, but in the sense that fundamentalism is the search for fundamentals. This search for fundamentals by contemporary Muslims can be explained by the fact that they are opposed to what they call the western model—not because it is western, but because they have discovered the western model through the historical process of colonialism. This point is not seen correctly by the West, when they see Muslims today protesting against the western model. These Muslims perceive this model as they actually experienced it during the time of colonialism. Then, when national states emerged after independence, the state insisted that western colonialism was responsible for destroying the Islamic personality of Muslim societies.

So you see that fundamentalism is built on a very special history, in ignorance of the historical development of western thought, western culture. It is not known as it is in the West. What is known is an ideological, abstract presentation of

the West, as a culture which did not respect the cultural personality of Muslim society during the time of colonialism, and even after independence. It is currently said by these fundamentalists that the West continued to destroy the Islamic personality by its economic policy and by its political solidarity with the new nation-states, causing these states in turn to quickly lose their legitimacy. So there is a rupture between civil society and the state, and western states are still cooperating with these nation-states, without regard to what is happening between the civil societies and the nation-states.

This is the real basis of the process of development of what we call the "fundamentalist discourse" in Islamic societies, but it is not presented like this by the media in the West. It is presented only as something which comes from inside Islam, as if Islam were a world by itself and can generate this by itself. This, of course, is totally unacceptable, because Islam is a religion generated through a historical, sociological, and anthropological process.

The correct approach is the sociological one. Through a historical process and sociological and anthropological mechanisms, there is a continuous interaction among religion, state, and society. Put it in its religious context, as I said earlier: fundamentals. Now you can find fundamentalism in Christianity, in Judaism. It's the same. They all go back to fundamentals, so it is a general, universal attitude. It is not necessarily a negative attitude to go back to fundamentals.

You can go back to economic fundamentals. This is also part of this fundamentalist attitude. When all this is carefully analyzed, then we see that what we call fundamentalism is very complex phenomenon; a historical phenomenon to be analyzed in relationship to the history of western society, because there is a continuous, dialectical tension between the policies of western societies in these countries before and after their independence, and the reactions generated by this policy and aggravated by the policy accepted by the nation-states after their independence. This general model can be found in almost every society. There are some differences

when you have a monarchy, such as in Jordan or Morocco, or when you have a state which emerged from scratch like Algeria.

EIR: What is your view of the Islamic Salvation Front?

Arkoun: It is a product of what I call populism. In the concept of populism, it is very important to make a distinction between what we used to present as popular culture, and what has happened to this popular culture through—besides the historical process since independence—heavy industry, the agrarian revolution. All the traditional structures, all the traditional systems of values on which the society has been based for centuries, have been destroyed. The population moved from the land to these huge cities, where they became totally uprooted, they totally broke their ties to the past.

The population is sociologically characterized as populist, and generates a populist language, a populist discourse which is characterized by the disintegration of all references—either traditional references, very ancient ones going back before Islam, or Islamic references based on Islamic culture, on Islamic values. All this has been disrupted, uprooted, fragmented. And this young generation (which, don't forget, is 70% of the population) is the sociological basis of the discourse of the Salvation Front.

So, this Salvation Front is a *bricolage*, as we say in French. They use fragments of references; they don't build anything coherent and positive and valuable, or which leads society toward a new step in its history. It's just a product of the history of the last 30 years. That's why it cannot work the way it is; it has to be reworked, intellectually, culturally, to integrate the positive conquests of modernity and the solid aspects of Islamic thought and culture.

EIR: In what direction will the situation in Algeria develop? Is civil war a possibility?

Arkoun: This depends on the policy which will be adopted by the countries of Europe. But you have seen that in all the papers presented at this conference today, there was not even a mention of the attitude of Europe over the next decade to the societies of the so-called Third World. Not even those that belong to the Mediterranean area. These countries are put totally aside from the European perspective as it is being discussed, especially after the Maastricht Treaty. All the discussions which are taking place now are purely national or even nationalist. We have not even had a statement concerning the integration of Mediterranean problems within the policy of this new Europe.

This is frightening, because there is no possibility for these countries to move in any direction without solidarity on the economic level, as well as the cultural and political level. The cultural level is not being considered at all, on any level, by either side. This has been totally neglected. The cultural issues are sometimes perhaps more important than

the economic issues themselves. This is a serious deficiency in the political culture and thinking of the decision-makers on the political or the economic level.

This is the most frightening situation, when you look to the future, to the next 10 years. We are witnessing a lack of attention, a lack of interest in the Third World in general, and in this part of the Third World in particular, which in reality is a part of Europe. I insist on this idea, but as you see, it is extremely hard to insert in the discussion. This is for me the most important thing, because the current catastrophic economic situation in these societies is not merely the responsibility of their own elites. We have to share the responsibility, because all this has been made possible through political and economic policy of the European nations; and now we have to move to another way of dealing with this situation.

EIR: There is a tendency among western countries to say that the Third World is competing with eastern Europe for economic aid.

Arkoun: The problem is not the same. Western Europe is more responsible for the Arab countries than for eastern Europe. Eastern Europe had its own history, with its communism. It is a part of Europe, but it had its own history, and western Europe was not responsible for the establishment of communist regimes. Communism itself is a product of European industrialization and thought. They cannot come to France or England or Germany and say, "You are responsible for what has happened."

After the Second World War, there was a division of the world, but they had their own history. They had to deal with Stalin, but the Mediterranean countries, in North Africa, for example, since the 19th century had not had the sovereignty to decide their own history. Other people decided on their history even after independence. The situations are totally different.

Of course, eastern Europe also needs money, and in this respect, they are the same. But historically, I reject the comparison of the two cases. Because historically, the political sovereignty of England, of France, of Belgium, and, in a certain way, Germany, has been engaged here since the 19th century.

We cannot forget the colonial page of history and put it aside. It has in fact generated the ideology of liberation and now the fundamentalist movements. It has imposed an interaction between Europe and these countries, leading to their colonization or turning them into satellite states of western Europe. Social and political discourse in Arab societies reflects European pressures on the economic, financial, political, and cultural levels.

EIR: Your approach to these questions is historical and cultural. At this conference, you spoke of the importance of understanding the period of history after the 13th century.

Arkoun: We have to go back at least to the 13th century to understand the historical process of disintegration of Muslim societies, especially in the Middle East and North Africa. One has to point out the urban character of classical Islamic civilization. The cities have been threatened by internal and external forces. The invasion from the East and West, the rise of European hegemony since the 13th century, have been converging pressures on Islamic cities and civilization. In the 13th century, there was the invasion of Baghdad by the Mongols, which destroyed the institution of the caliphate. Another point was the western reconquest of Spain, as well as the Crusades, which increased the pressure of western Europe on the region.

In the Middle East, where Islamic culture had previously developed, this generated developments in Muslim societies which have not been adequately studied by intellectuals and researchers in the region. This is because it is considered to be the period of decline or decadence.

This process of decay is a historical problem which historians have to elaborate on, to understand what the forces were which operated in the Mediterranean region, in order to explain why, in the 19th century, these Arabic societies had become too weak to resist colonization by western Europe. It was the colonial period which generated the current situation, with all the problems in which these societies are engaged.

The new universities in Arabic societies were founded only recently, in the '50s and '60s, so they could not have had the time to initiate all the historical studies necessary to explain all that has happened in this long historical process since the 13th century. This historical research, in my view, is extremely important, in order to stop intellectuals from putting the sole responsibility for the present situation in Arabic society on what we call colonialism or imperialism. This is an ideological view which was used during the '50s, during the wars of liberation, for example, in Algeria, but also in Egypt. But this historically is not correct; it is misleading, if we want to explain the evolution in Mediterranean history.

That is why I insist on the necessity of going back historically and studying the processes which have been engaged in the Mediterranean area, between Europe and the Middle East, which was at that time Islamic or Arabic or Turkish after the 16th century, and of course, the Ottoman Empire, which controlled this region. I mean to study at the same time the rise of Europe since the 16th century and the 19th century, the rise of European hegemony, and correlate that to the study of the fall of Arabic society, which hasn't stopped to this day. Europeans would have a different view of Islam today if they understood these processes and this historical approach to the present situation.

EIR: How does this compare with the interpretation of history by many of the Islamic fundamentalist scholars?

Arkoun: My approach is strictly historical. I don't want to use it in an apologetic way to show that Islam, for example, is greater than it is, or greater than Judeo-Christian Europe. This is ideology, not history. I don't want to use this to, for example, justify the grandeur of Islam, as many Muslim apologists do.

I insist, for example, on the history of Europe. I want to show a growth of European hegemony on an economic and political level. At the same time, I want to show that it is in Europe, and only in Europe after the 16th century, that the intellectual events took place which did not take place in Islamic thought. This is extremely important for Muslims to understand, but also for Europeans to see—the intellectual revolutions which took place in Europe in the 17th century and especially the 18th century, the Enlightenment philosophy, which is the basis of European thinking, which is used as a reference to oppose Islam.

This point is not correctly analyzed either by Muslims or by Europeans; on one side, we have to recognize that the philosophy of the Enlightenment had a positive advantage for human thinking, a universal aspect; but on the other side, there are many political consequences of this intellectual hegemony which emerged in Europe in the 18th century, because this was used in the 19th century by European societies to legitimize their colonial policy. This contradiction is hidden in European history; in France, the republican ideology does not yet accept the opposition between revolutionary ideals and colonial domination based on the division of citizens in Algeria between "first" and "second" class (*Code de l'indigénat*), which is totally in opposition to the Declaration of Human Rights. [The *Code de l'indigénat* was the French colonial civil code for Algeria—ed.]

It is not fair to jump over the 19th century and to compare Islam to the 18th century, without looking at what happened during the 19th century and the first half of this century. That's why, you see, I insist again on the historical approach, because I consider that this way of studying history makes us understand the present conflicts, which are based in my view on misunderstanding and also on mutual ignorance, because Europeans ignore the consequences of 19th-century history, and Muslims ignore the intellectual importance of the 18th century as a major turning point in the history of thinking, in philosophical questions as well as political philosophy, and all that we call democracy and human rights.

EIR: Algeria is experiencing tremendous economic problems. These problems have both an internal and external cause. Could you explain your view?

Arkoun: The problem is more general. After independence, Algeria wanted to be free from the French model, so the rulers in Algeria had the option of the so-called socialist model, taken from the Soviet Union at the time of the Cold War. So it was part of the big international game, and Algeria

went on that line, under the influence of the Soviet Union, and the industrial policy that Algeria chose was influenced by this ideological position. So we have to put this in the historical context of the '60s and '70s.

The model taken by Algeria had two major points. One was the agricultural policy, which was shown to have been catastrophic. We see the results of this even now. The second one was industrial policy. The agricultural policy was an abstract policy based on the so-called self-management (Yugoslavian) model. It didn't reflect the special rural history of Algerian society. It didn't seek to respect the peasants in their tradition of cultivating the land, with the many centuries of Mediterranean traditions. Instead of respecting these traditions, they introduced the model from the so-called popular democracies of eastern Europe, according to Soviet ideology. This is the point I emphasize—abstract, when you compare it to realities in Algeria.

The industrial policy was also abstract. "Industrializing industry" for its own sake was the formula used by the experts at that time. This, of course, was totally disconnected from the economic and industrial realities of the '60s and '70s, because when Algeria produced steel, to whom could they sell? To France? To Germany? Then they had the idea of selling it to Africa, which also failed. So it was absolutely abstract. It was not based on the realities of industry in the European societies in the '60s and '70s. Now it is commonly recognized in Algeria, even by the rulers, that it had been a big mistake. They are trying to repair it.

EIR: Based on this Soviet model, was agricultural policy collectivized, and did it suffer under this policy?

Arkoun: Yes, they collectivized all the land and distributed it to new so-called peasants, who had no relationship to the land. Now land is more and more owned privately. Now they have come back to the situation as it existed prior to the agricultural revolution, which was initiated in the beginning of the '70s under Boumediene.

When the French colonists left Algeria, they left much of the richest land, which the government distributed to Algerians. But they gave it to Algerians who had no knowledge of how to cultivate the earth. They collectivized according to the Yugoslav model of "self-management," and it did not work at all. This is one of the major failures of the economic policy in Algeria in the '60s and '70s.

Now they have gone back to the situation as before, because now they realize their policy was made according to an abstract ideology they wanted to apply by force. Algeria was not the originator of all these ideas. We always had independent owners. There has also been the colonial effect on the land because the French colonists took the land, and many Algerians had been marginalized in agricultural life during the French period. But the government made it worse. So the rural history of Algeria in the 19th century is also a

very important point to study, to show the effect of the colonial period and of the agrarian revolution during the '60s and '70s, to explain what the difficulty is today.

EIR: What is the alternative?

Arkoun: There is an urgent need to rethink the necessary conditions for a new economic policy, taking into account the triumph of the liberal market economy dominated by the seven big industrialized powers. I do not see any way for equal exchange between the seven big industrialized powers and the Third World countries; there is a tragic political crisis everywhere; no legitimacy and no possibility to engage in a democratic process. [French Prime Minister Michel] Rocard said that France cannot help the misery of the whole world; one can ask only if there is a place for political responsibility on behalf of the big seven.

There is no way to establish an Arab Common Market, or a Maghreb Common Market; everything depends on the solidarity of Europe with the Third World. But Europe is not

LaRouche addresses the nations of Africa

This open letter from Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr. was released on Sept. 1:

I am aware, in a general and I believe efficient way, of the nature of the suffering which all of sub-Saharan Africa suffers today in one degree or another, but with all parts of sub-Saharan Africa facing the same ultimate fate unless something is done to reverse the present situation.

The situation in Africa is not an accident. It is not like some mysterious disease which came upon us without human foreknowledge, of which we must discover a cure. The crisis of Africa, especially sub-Saharan Africa, is the product of a *willfully malicious determination* to destroy and depopulate that continent along the lines specified by not only John Ruskin's Cecil Rhodes, with his plan for making Africa a safe place for the *bwana makuts*, or the "big hunters," but the policy of the late evil Bertrand Russell, a man often thought to be a friend of the poor and weak, but actually their deadliest enemy, by his own declaration in his commitment to use disease and other means to more efficiently depopulate the world of those populations whose skin colors were darker than pleased Mr. Russell and his friends.

willing to consider this solidarity for the moment.

EIR: They appear to be thinking of it only in negative terms.

Arkoun: Yes, with the crisis of legitimacy, the big economic failure, the economic crisis in the big seven, problems of migrants, closing frontiers—all these facts converge to impose a negative image and a pessimistic view of the future. I come back to European humanism. What does it mean today? How can one conceive its actualization in Europe and outside? No place for moral considerations, not even for an economic, financial order. Europe does not speak this language. I think we are going to undergo tragic events, unless Europe is successful and overcomes its present crisis.

We have to correct this. Because it's not all negative. It can be shown that there are also positive aspects, for example, the younger generation, which is ready to engage itself in the economic reconceptualization of the development of

Europe. They may contribute to this, as the Turks did in Germany, as well as the North Africans in France, in the 1960s and '70s. They called them to come and to work on their farms and in their industry. But now they say they don't need this. It can be a way of cooperation. Why not open it? It is possible.

Europeans have to understand that in the Mediterranean area, there are forces operating and these forces are totally unequal, unbalanced. These forces are creating huge political and economic problems, and they have to be considered seriously for the next 10 years, because it is a situation once again of domination, not of cooperation. In an extremely important area like the Mediterranean, I think this is very bad. The Mediterranean region is a European problem, it is not an Arabic problem, or a Middle Eastern problem, or a problem of Islam. I don't know any European who would reject the importance of Mediterranean culture as a basis of European culture; I don't know anyone who would deny this. . . .

As an economist, I know what could be done for Africa. With relatively modest means, a gigantic improvement could have been effected any time we wished over the past 20 years. That I know, from studies I have done. I know that Africa could more than feed itself, if the development were supplied. Simple basic economic infrastructure in water development, in transportation, in energy production, in health care—that is, particularly in control of disease and treatment—and in education, combined with a relatively modest amount of direct assistance to farmers to improve their technology, their production, and their land, and to essential industries, would start the process of development rolling, under which Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa in particular, could be relieved from a brutalization from the outside which I know as an historian to have been going on since at least the 700-800 A.D. period of the present Christian era. That could be done. And it *must* be done.

We have a similar situation, not as grievous, in Central and South America, where similar policies are being applied to people who speak Spanish or Portuguese, by and large. Similar plans are projected by the same evil forces for Asia. They think Asia is overpopulated, and they intend to use war, famine, and epidemic as a means of bringing those populations down.

We must recognize, that the failure of nations to band together to provide justice for Africa, is bringing chaos upon the planet as a whole. Because negligence, denial of the human rights of one part of the human race, opens the door to denial of those same rights for all men of the

human race.

In Africa, we must do what we can with the means available to both Africans and others of good will from outside of Africa for this purpose. But we must recognize, that we must band together on this issue, and we must draw in from Central and South America, from Asia, and from Europe and elsewhere, those who must recognize, as we do, that the fate of Africa today may be the fate of the entire planet tomorrow.

Only with that kind of conscience do I believe that we will reverse the kinds of policies which Robert McNamara in particular brought into the World Bank, which was the beginning of the new version of the present holocaust in Africa. And only if we reverse that general opinion, that sympathy for McNamara's World Bank policy—*eliminate that* from the institutions of Europe, Asia, and Central and South America, as well as Europe and North America—only in that case is there going to be the kind of long-term solution for African peoples and African nations which is a just one.

So we must act now to do what we can, with the means available. We must unify ourselves, those who are committed to this, to achieve what is achievable. We must at the same time realize that there is no durable solution for this problem, but only short-term amelioration, unless we can draw in the concern of the peoples of Europe, of North America, of Central and South America, and Asia, and draw them in if on no higher moral purpose, than the realization that what happens to Africa today, can happen to them tomorrow.