



<https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2302-2026-30-2-415-429>

EDN: ESWXOX

Research Article / Научная статья

Between Authenticity and Modernity: Rationalist and Historicist Currents in Maghrebi Islamic Thought

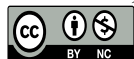
Mehmet Vural  

Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Ankara, Türkiye

 mvural@aybu.edu.tr

Abstract. The study examines the intellectual landscape of contemporary Islamic thought, with a particular focus on the North African (Maghreb) region and the influential precursors of modern reformism. The inquiry begins by addressing the historical encounters between the Islamic world and Western modernity, analyzing the shift from classical metaphysics to contemporary discourses centered on hermeneutics, civilizational analysis, and the “Islamization of Knowledge.” Central to this foundational discourse is the figure of Jamal al-Din al-Afghānī, whose political activism and critique of naturalism (materialism) laid the groundwork for modern Islamic revivalism by diagnosing the root causes of civilizational inertia. The core of the research evaluates the distinct methodological inquiries of Maghrebi thinkers who seek to transcend the stagnation of the post-classical era. It analyzes the “Realist Personalism” and “Tomorrowism” of Aziz Lahbābī, alongside Malek Bennabī’s seminal theory of “colonisability,” which identifies internal social conditions as the primary catalyst for external subjugation. The study further explores the massive deconstruction of the “Arab / Islamic Reason” spearheaded by Mohammed Abed al-Jabrī through his epistemological triad — Beyan, Irfan, and Burhan — and Mohammed Arkoun’s “Applied Islamology,” which utilizes structuralist tools to dismantle the “mythical closure” of the tradition. Furthermore, the research delves into the radical “Islamic Left” of Hassan Hanafī, which proposes an anthropological turn in theology, and the linguistic hermeneutics of Nasr Hamid Abū Zayd, who defines revelation as a “cultural product.” These historicist and rationalist projects are contrasted with the ethical-traditionalist counter-critique of Tāhā Abderrahmane, who rejects Western-centric methodologies in favor of an indigenous modernity rooted in “Supported Reason.” A critical theme of the study is the analysis of the methodological crisis surrounding the “Period of Codification” (*al-Tedwin*). It explores how contemporary thinkers attempt to bypass centuries of traditional accumulation to establish a direct, rational link with the founding texts. By analyzing the dynamic dialectic between Asala (Authenticity / Tradition) and Mu’asara (Modernity), this paper identifies the pivotal role of historicist and rationalist methodologies in diagnosing civilizational decline. Ultimately, it proposes that a modern Islamic renaissance depends on the successful synthesis of ethical authenticity and critical rationalism, transitioning the Islamic world from an “object” of Western modernization to a “subject” of its own historical development.

© Vural M., 2026



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/legalcode>

Keywords: Epistemological Triad, Applied Islamology, Colonisability, Islamic Left, Supported Reason

Conflict of interest. The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Statement about data availability. All the data obtained during the study is included in the published article.

Article history:

The article was submitted on 21.01.2026

The article was accepted on 16.04.2026

For citation: Vural M. Between Authenticity and Modernity: Rationalist and Historicist Currents in Maghrebi Islamic Thought. *RUDN Journal of Philosophy*. 2026;30(2):415–429. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2302-2026-30-2-415-429> EDN ESWXOX

Между самобытностью и современностью: рационалистическое и историцистское течения в исламской мысли Магриба

М. Вурал  

Университет Анкара Йылдырым Баязит, Анкара, Турция

 mvural@aybu.edu.tr

Аннотация. Исследование посвящено анализу интеллектуального ландшафта современной исламской мысли с особым акцентом на регионе Северной Африки (Магриба) и ключевых предшественниках модернистского реформизма. Исследование начинается с рассмотрения исторических встреч исламского мира с западной современностью, анализируя переход от классической метафизики к современным дискурсам, сосредоточенным на герменевтике, цивилизационном анализе и «исламизации знания». Центральной фигурой этого основополагающего дискурса является Джамаль ад-Дин аль-Афгани, чья политическая активность и критика натурализма (материализма) заложили фундамент для современного исламского возрождения через диагностику коренных причин цивилизационной инерции. Основная часть исследования оценивает самобытные методологические изыскания магрибинских мыслителей, стремящихся преодолеть стагнацию постклассической эпохи. Анализируются концепции «реалистического персонализма» и «завтраизма» (футуризма) Азиза Лахбаби, а также основополагающая теория «колонируемости» Малека Беннаби, определяющая внутренние социальные условия как основной катализатор внешнего порабощения. Далее в работе исследуется масштабная деконструкция «арабо-исламского разума», предпринятая Мухаммедом Абедом аль-Джабри через его эпистемологическую триаду — *Баян, Ирфан и Бурхан*, — и «прикладная исламология» Мухаммеда Аркуна, использующая структурно-исторический инструментарий для демонтажа «мифической замкнутости» традиции. Кроме того, исследование углубляется в радикальный проект «исламского левого движения» Хасана Ханафи, предлагающий антропологический поворот в теологии, и лингвистическую герменевтику Насра Хамида Абу Зайда, определяющего откровение как «культурный продукт». Эти историцистские и рационалистические проекты противопоставляются этико-традиционалистской контркритике Тахи Абдурахмана, который отвергает

вестерноцентричные методологии в пользу автохтонной современности, основанной на «подкрепленном разуме» (*al-Aql al-Mu'ayyad*). Критически важной темой исследования является анализ методологического кризиса, связанного с «периодом кодификации» (*at-Tedwin*). Изучается то, как современные мыслители пытаются обойти века традиционных наслоений, чтобы установить прямую рациональную связь с основополагающими текстами. Анализируя динамическую диалектику между Асаля (Аутентичность / Традиция) и Муасара (Современность), данная работа выявляет ключевую роль историцистских и рационалистических методологий в диагностике цивилизационного упадка. В конечном итоге делается вывод о том, что современный исламский ренессанс зависит от успешного синтеза этической аутентичности и критического рационализма, переводящего исламский мир из статуса «объекта» западной модернизации в статус «субъекта» собственного исторического развития.

Ключевые слова: эпистемологическая триада, прикладная исламология, колонизируемость, исламское левое движение, подкрепленный разум

Конфликт интересов. Автор заявляет об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Заявление о доступности данных. Все данные, полученные в ходе этого исследования, включены в опубликованную статью.

История статьи:

Статья поступила: 21.01.2026

Статья принята к публикации 16.04.2026

Для цитирования: Vural M. Between Authenticity and Modernity: Rationalist and Historicist Currents in Maghrebi Islamic Thought // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Философия. 2026. Т. 30. № 2. С. 415–429. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-2302-2026-30-2-415-429> EDN ESWXOX

Introduction

Classical Islamic philosophy is traditionally viewed as a trajectory beginning with al-Kindī in the 9th century, peaking with Avicenna, and concluding with Averroes in the 12th century. This perspective, frequently championed by Orientalists, often dismisses classical inquiries — such as the proofs for God’s existence (*isbāt al-wajib*), emanation theory (*sudūr*), and the *Tahāfut* tradition — as archaic relics of the Middle Ages. However, treating these theories as a mere accumulation of pseudo-propositions overlooks their potential for modern discourse. On the contrary, contemporary Islamic philosophy is a vital necessity, providing the intellectual orientations required to address modern crises [1].

Historically, the Islamic world has faced two significant Western encounters. The first, occurring in the 9th century, was shaped by the influx of Greek philosophy and later the Crusades. While Islamic civilization initially demonstrated a robust capacity for synthesis and resilience, it began to stagnate after the 13th century, turning inward and adopting a more rigid structure. The second encounter emerged in the 19th century through Western colonial expansion. As Edward Said argued, Orientalism served as an ideological “scouting party” for imperialism, establishing a “us vs. them” bifurcation that ultimately led to an intellectual and humanitarian collapse.

Today, the primary challenge for Muslim thinkers is diagnosing the causes of civilizational inertia while the West advanced rapidly in science and technology. A significant modern response has been to re-emphasize the rational elements of Islamic philosophy and *Kalām* (theology) to forge a resistance against Western ideological pressures. Contemporary Islamic thought must now engage with a multitude of challenges: democracy, human rights, the ecological crisis, and the ontological questions raised by artificial intelligence and post-humanism.

Furthermore, the influence of postmodernism has led to a decline in institutionalized religion, fostering tendencies toward deism, agnosticism, and nihilism among younger generations. Crises specific to the Islamic world, such as the Sunni-Shia divide and the erosion of coexistence, also demand critical attention. Consequently, classical metaphysics has been superseded by contemporary studies on the “Islamization of Knowledge,” hermeneutics, and social justice. This intellectual awakening, which gained momentum through 19th-century anti-imperialist movements, continues to strive for a new synthesis that reconciles Islamic heritage with the demands of modern rationality.

Contemporary Maghrebi thought: new methodological inquiries

Contemporary North African (Maghreb) thinkers exhibit a distinct originality in their methodological approaches to resolving modern crises. This intellectual tradition is represented by prominent figures such as Aziz Lahbābī, Mohammed Arkoun, Hassan Hanafī, Mohammed Abed al-Jabrī, Nasr Hamid Abū Zayd, and Tāhā Abderrahmane. The core of their discourse revolves around hermeneutics, the synthesis of secularism with Islam, and the dynamic tension between tradition (*al-asala*) and modernity (*al-mu'asira*).

Among these, Malek Bennabī stands out for his civilizational analysis. He shifted the ideological focus from “colonialism” to the internal social condition of “colonisability,” asserting that civilization emerges only when man, soil, and time are synthesized within a catalyst of faith. Parallel to this, Mohammed Abed al-Jabrī subjected the Islamic intellectual tradition to a massive critique through his “epistemological triad.”

Al-Jabrī categorized Islamic thought into three systems:

- Beyan: Linguistics and jurisprudence.
- Irfan: Gnosticism and mysticism.
- Burhan: Logic and demonstrative reason.

He argued that the salvation of the Islamic world lies in reclaiming “demonstrative reason” (*Burhan*), which he identified as a historical strength of the Maghreb and Andalusia. Furthermore, Mohammed Arkoun introduced the concept of “Applied Islamology” (*L'Islamologie Appliquée*), utilizing historicist and structuralist analyses to decipher the “unthought” and “unthinkable” realms within the Quranic tradition. Collectively, these methodologies aim to deconstruct traditional stagnation and propose a rationalist framework for the modern age.

Islamic personalism and tomorrowism: the philosophical synthesis of Aziz Lahbābī

Mohammed Aziz Lahbābī (1922–1993), a Sorbonne-educated philosopher, stands as a pivotal figure in bridging Islamic and Western intellectual traditions. Returning to Morocco in 1959, he held significant academic and administrative roles, publishing extensively in both Arabic and French. His philosophical trajectory evolved from “realist personalism” (*al-shakhsaniyya*) in his early years toward a systematic framework he termed “Tomorrowism” (*al-Ghadriyya*) by the 1970s.

Personalism is the cornerstone of Lahbābī’s thought. He argues that the transformation from mere existence into a “person” — the attainment of a unique identity — results from the process of “personalization.” This process is a multidimensional act involving intellectual, conscientious, physical, and social engagements within the dynamic dialectic between the self and the world [2].

Lahbābī positioned this philosophy as a strategic response to the challenges of Westernization. By fostering an inherently forward-looking (“tomorrowist”), developmental, and critical outlook, he sought to generate indigenous solutions for the Muslim world within the context of the Third World [3].

Furthermore, Lahbābī was a vocal critic of internal religious stagnation. He directed severe critiques toward Sufism, contending that its emphasis on *tawakkul* (fatalistic reliance on God), dependency, and asceticism had corrupted the authentic, active spirit of Islam. He maintained that mysticism’s roots were non-Islamic and viewed Sufi practices as irrational movements of ambiguous origin that failed to produce a consistent modern discourse. Similarly, he dismissed the Salafi movement as an inadequate response to the rigorous demands of the modern age [4].

The critique of Islamic reason: the methodology of Mohammed Arkoun

Mohammed Arkoun (1928–2010), an Algerian-born philosopher and longtime professor at the Sorbonne, is a towering figure in contemporary Islamic thought. His academic journey, spanning from Algiers to Paris and Princeton, culminated in his role as a pioneer of “Applied Islamology.” Arkoun emphasized that the fundamental method of philosophy is critical thinking, yet he advocated for approaching Islamic phenomena through a “historian’s lens.” He argued that only a historical perspective can truly grasp the classification and change within founding texts, whereas immediate philosophical interpretation (*ta’wil*) often triggers sectarian and ideological divides.

For Arkoun, the Qur’an is a historical material that must be read within its 7th-century context through a critical, social, and factual lens. He posited that the revelation, which originally possessed a vibrant spiritual dimension, underwent a “mythical closure” during the period of codification (*tedwin*). This process transformed the fluid oral tradition into a fixed, written *mushaf*, which was then

utilized by political and religious authorities as a tool for legitimacy, effectively confining the text within “iron cages” of orthodoxy [5].

Arkoun staunchly opposed the idea that sacred texts contain infinite, immutable meanings. He maintained that what societies accept as “absolute truth” is often a historical construct. Even verses concerning legal rulings (*ahkam*), which are inherently variable and related to human affairs, have been erroneously treated as eternal principles. By integrating historicism into Islamic thought, Arkoun believed the Qur’an could be liberated from its medieval interpretations to generate solutions for the modern day.

A central pillar of his methodology was the strict separation between “primary texts” (the Qur’an) and “secondary texts” (Sunnah and *tafsir*). Arkoun held Imam al-Shafi’i responsible for the disproportionate elevation of these secondary interpretations to a status equal to revelation. He criticized traditional culture for conflating these layers, citing examples like al-Tabari’s commentary, where human interpretation is often framed as divine decree.

Regarding external critiques, Arkoun was equally severe toward Orientalists, accusing them of ideological bias and a lack of objectivity. Instead of subversive deconstruction, he proposed “analytical decomposition” a process involving the rigorous verification (*tahkik*) and systematic analysis (*tahlil*) of texts. He argued that all data produced after the codification period, including theology (*kalām*), requires a thorough revision to address modern social and cultural disparities.

Arkoun viewed modernity as an unfinished project in the Islamic world. He asserted that without adopting modernity and secularism (*laïcité*), it is impossible to establish an authentic link with historical heritage (*turath*). For him, the failure to distinguish between “historical” and “mythological” heritage prevents the Islamic world from functioning within a modern framework. He believed that the peaceful coexistence of major faiths is only achievable when they operate for the common good under a secular umbrella [6].

Ultimately, Arkoun’s stance was one of critical engagement; he valued Western intellectual advancements while staunchly opposing colonial attitudes and the hegemony of globalization. Though criticized by some as an exemplar of Marxist or Orientalist critique, his effort to deconstruct the “unthought” and “unthinkable” realms of Islamic reason remains a unique contribution to contemporary philosophy.

The project of reconstruction: Hassan Hanafi’s ‘Islamic Left’ and the turn to anthropology

Hassan Hanafi, a Sorbonne-educated philosopher at Cairo University, remains a preeminent figure in contemporary Islamic thought due to his ambitious “Heritage and Renewal” (*al-Turath wa al-Tajdid*) project. His intellectual universe centers on the revitalization of the Islamic world, using the metaphor of the *Ashab al-Kahf* (People of the Cave) to describe the “civilizational slumber” that began in the

13th century¹. Hanafî argued that contemporary Muslim crises stem from a dual existence: the body lives in the modern age, while the mind remains anchored in a past era. To close this gap, he proposed a “New *Ilm al-Kalām*” (theology) grounded in *maslahah* (public interest) rather than abstract metaphysics² [7].

Hanafî identified a profound historical decline starting from the 13th century, during which rational sciences — such as philosophy and Mu’tazilite theology — were superseded by “irrational” disciplines like fatalistic Sufism and monolithic Ash’arism. This shift led to an intellectual culture dominated by repetitive commentaries (*sharh*) that consolidated the authority of the “ancestors” (*salaf*) over the “descendants” (*halaf*). To reverse this, Hanafî advocated for a historicist interpretation of revelation, viewing it not as a static, sacred object, but as a dynamic dialogue between the celestial and the terrestrial, deeply nourished by social reality.

A cornerstone of Hanafî’s thought is the “anthropological turn” in theology. He argued that since revelation addresses man directly, theology should essentially be transformed into anthropology. In this framework, religion is treated within the scope of human sciences and evolved into an ideology of action (*praxis*). For Hanafî, the classical focus on understanding God’s essence must be replaced by understanding man’s potential to actualize divine values on earth. He famously encapsulated this immanent view with the statement: “God is everything we need. If it is bread, then bread; if it is land, then land; if it is freedom, then freedom” [8].

Within this anthropocentric framework, Hanafî reinterpreted fundamental theological subjects like prophecy and the afterlife (*ma’ad*). He viewed the afterlife not as a physical destination for eternal residence, but as a phenomenological expression of the “best possible world.” For Hanafî, the afterlife symbolizes victory over defeat and justice over injustice, representing a human experience of hope that brings continuity to the history of civilization. This moves away from literal eschatology toward a future-oriented human experience remains one of his most controversial yet distinctive contributions³ [9].

As the founder of the “Islamic Left” (*Yasar al-Islam*), Hanafî sought to synthesize Marxist social analysis with Islamic theology. He distinguished between “Right Theology,” which he characterized as conservative, reactionary, and

¹ In the Holy Qur’an, besides the story of *Ashab al-Kahf* (Surah al-Kahf, 18:9–26), the story of a man who stayed asleep for 100 years after visiting a deserted town is also narrated (Surah al-Baqarah, 2:259). Similar narratives are found in different faiths and mythologies, such as the Sleepers of Sardinia, Epimenides, Abimelech, and the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus.

² According to Ömer Nasuhi Bilmen (1883–1971), who provided a distinct definition of *maslahah*: “*Maslahah* is the procurement or provision of benefit, or the repulsion and elimination of harm, namely *mafsadah*.” In this sense, *maslahah* is the element that necessitates and causes the righteousness and auspiciousness of an affair. The opposite of *maslahah* is *mafsadah*, which denotes corruption and mischief.

³ According to Hanafî, debates aimed at proving the resurrection after death were developed in response to the concept of *tanasukh* (reincarnation) originating from Indian culture. Similarly, the doctrine of the *Imamate* emerged as a reaction to the political understandings of the Persian, Byzantine, and Roman Empires. Today, these debates have been replaced by modern ideologies.

centered on a transcendent, oppressive God, and “Left Theology,” which is predicated on an immanent, revolutionary understanding of the Divine. His methodology aimed for a classless society based on absolute equality, effectively turning religion into a tool for socio-political liberation and progress.

Furthermore, Hanafi’s rationalist stance led to a trenchant critique of Sufism. He contended that Sufi ethics — emphasizing asceticism (*zuhd*), poverty, and fatalism — encourage a passive lifestyle that contradicts the revolutionary spirit required by the modern age. He argued that substituting reason with subjective intuition undermines the intellect’s inherent value. Although criticized for reinterpreting Islam through Marxist and modern Western lenses, Hanafi’s work represents a radical, systemic attempt to transform traditional heritage into a functional social ideology for the “child of this century” [10].

Mohammed Abed al-Jabrī: a synthesis of the critique of Arab reason

Mohammed Abed al-Jabrī (1936–2010), a Moroccan philosopher and professor at Mohammed V University, stands as a seminal figure in contemporary Islamic thought for his rigorous “Critique of Arab Reason.” He defined Arab/Islamic reason as the cognitive framework — the sum of concepts and mental activities— that dictates how Muslims perceive reality and produce knowledge. Al-Jabrī argued that the stagnation of Muslim societies is rooted in a “traditional reason” that remains detached from universal logic and modern scientific methodology.

Al-Jabrī centered his analysis on the “period of codification” (*tedwin*), the era when Islamic sciences were first systematized. He argued that this period established a stagnant epistemological paradigm that replaced the dynamic, independent *ijtihad* of early Islam. He categorized the resulting Arab reason into three fundamental systems: *Beyan* (discursive / linguistic), *Irfan* (gnostic/mystical), and *Burhan* (demonstrative/logical). In his view, the dominance of *Irfan* and *Beyan* over *Burhan* led to the decline of rationalism [11].

In a provocative reversal of common historical narratives, al-Jabrī identified Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), rather than al-Ghazālī, as the primary agent of rational decline. He argued that Ibn Sīnā’s synthesis “imprisoned” reason within the irrational confines of Hermeticism (*Irfan*), undermining the rationalist trajectory of the tradition. Al-Jabrī viewed al-Ghazālī and al-Suhrawardī as mere disseminators of this “intellectual darkness” [12]. Consequently, he advocated for a return to the *Burhani* (demonstrative) tradition of Averroes and the sociology of Ibn Khaldūn.

While *Burhani* epistemology advocated for the introduction of philosophy and logic into the Islamic world, the leading scholars of *Beyani* epistemology preferred the use of language — specifically grammar — over logic. In this context, the ‘Baghdad Debate’ between al-Sirafī, who defended language, and Matta b. Yūnus, who defended logic, stands as one of the most famous examples [13]. Although al-Sirafī emerged as the victor in this debate, *Irfani* epistemology eventually gained

dominance over *Beyani* epistemology as the Islamic geography expanded through conquests and the inclusion of newly converted peoples (*mawali*)⁴.

Al-Jabrī's project extends into the practical realms of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and politics. He proposed a paradigm shift from a literalist, imitative (*taqlīd*) understanding of law to a *maslahah*-centered (public interest) approach. By drawing on al-Shatībī's philosophy of *maqāsid* (objectives), he argued that Sharia rulings are instruments of general welfare and must be re-evaluated within their specific historical and social contexts.

In the political sphere, al-Jabrī advocated for the recognition of modern rights — such as freedom of expression and democracy — as “complementary elements” (*tahsiniyyat*) of the Sharia. He utilized a phenomenological “suspension” (*epoche*) of historical heritage to return to the essence of sacred texts and their application in actual life. He believed that Islam must evolve into a secular and human-centered system once revelation is understood within the dimensions of time and space [14].

Regarding modernization as a necessity, al-Jabrī maintained that a renaissance in the Islamic world requires transcending sectarian struggles (like the Sunni-Shia divide) to establish a contemporary political philosophy. He adopted modernization as a teleological goal while emphasizing the preservation of national values against the homogenizing force of globalization. He proposed a “counter-modernity” that remains rational, democratic, and within the boundaries of modernism, rooted in the Andalusian-Maghrebi experience.

Despite criticisms of his “hyper-modernist” stance and his tendency to focus predominantly on Arab cultural history, al-Jabrī's work remains a unique contribution. By addressing the static nature of the post-codification era from a fresh, critical perspective, he attempted to restore the dynamic intellectual spirit of Islam's early history, seeking a path that synthesizes ethical authenticity with critical rationalism [15].

Nasr Hamid Abū Zayd: the literary and historical reconstruction of the qur'an

Nasr Hamid Abū Zayd (1943–2010) was a prominent Egyptian academic whose work focused on the linguistic and historical analysis of Islamic tradition. After beginning his career as a civil servant, he transitioned into academia, becoming a professor at Cairo University. His scholarly journey was marked by a shift from the ideas of Sayyid Qutb to the critical methodologies of Hassan Hanafi. However, his life took a dramatic turn in 1995 when his critical views led to a

⁴ Matta b. Yūnus (870–940) and al-Sirafī (894–979) held an influential debate on logic and grammar in Baghdad. A similar disputation occurred in Andalusia during al-Batalyawṣī's visit from Valencia to Saragossa, known as the ‘Saragossa Debate’ between him and Ibn Bājja. In the debate, al-Batalyawṣī defended the originality and superiority of Arabic grammar, while Ibn Bājja supported Aristotelian logic. Details of this debate are found in al-Batalyawṣī's *Kitab al-Masā'il* (The Book of Issues).

declaration of apostasy, forcing him to emigrate to the Netherlands, where he taught at Leiden University until his death.

Abū Zayd posited that the Qur'an must be understood as a book shaped within the specific cultural and historical context of the 7th century. He argued that meanings are not static, but change in different contexts, and therefore a historical and humanistic reading of the text is an absolute necessity. For him, the traditional approach that considers revelation entirely sacrosanct must be supported by rational, scientific, and unbiased criteria.

A central tenet of Abū Zayd's thought is the distinction between the original, unknowable truth of God's word and its Arabic expression. While he accepted the Qur'an as the "Word of God", he emphasized that as a text, it is essentially a cultural and linguistic product. He described the Qur'an (*nass*) as being shaped by reality and culture during its formation, while simultaneously shaping society through its transformation. This dialectic relationship implies that the Qur'an possesses no pre-existing metaphysical essence (*khalq al-Qur'an*), but rather arrived as a message from the heavens to the earth in a form that the existing society could comprehend.

Abū Zayd used the belief in *jinn* as an example: Arab society already accepted metaphysical beings who "taught poetry," which made the concept of revelation intelligible to them. Consequently, he differentiated between "Religion" (the universal building) and "Sharia" (the historical elements of that building). He maintained that because Sharia is historical, its rulings — including many punishments inherited from pre-Islamic traditions — must change with time and space.

Characterizing the Qur'an as a "linguistic text" (*nass lugawī*), Abū Zayd prioritized the intended meaning (*magza*) over the literal phrasing (*lafz*). He proposed a "contextualist reading" through the methodology of literary analysis to achieve a deeper understanding of the text. This approach necessitates a continuous process of *ijtihad* and *tajdīd* (renewal) based on *maslahah* (public interest) and the universal objectives of Sharia: reason, freedom, and justice [16].

Similar to other Maghrebi thinkers, Abū Zayd was a fierce critic of Imam al-Shafi'i, whom he blamed for sacralizing the Sunnah and cementing literalist interpretation. He also challenged the historical narrative that blamed non-Arab powers like the Ottomans for the decline of Islamic thought. While acknowledging their role in political unity, he argued that their indifference to cultural matters contributed to a climate where independent thought could not flourish, leading to long-term intellectual stagnation.

Tāhā Abderrahmane: the ethical architect of "supported reason"

Tāhā Abderrahmane (b. 1944) is a contemporary Moroccan philosopher who represents a significant internal critique of the Maghrebi School. Unlike his contemporaries who often seek to adapt Western hermeneutics, Abderrahmane aims to construct an original philosophy rooted in Islamic principles (*usul*). He

argues that thinkers like Arkoun and al-Jabrī are “conceptually confounded” because they attempt to transpose tools developed for Western Christianity onto the Islamic tradition. According to him, this leads to reductive tendencies that prioritize secular and Orientalist discourses over the spiritual essence of faith.

Abderrahmane identifies three primary flaws in the methodologies of his peers:

- Historicization (*al-arkhana*): Confining sacred texts strictly to their past context, thereby stripping them of their contemporary vitality.
- Rationalization (*al-aqlana*): Dismissing any element that transcends the narrow limits of modern human reason.
- Humanization (*al-ansana*): Reducing the divine and the metaphysical to a purely human, rational, and historical plane.

To provide a more holistic alternative, Abderrahmane categorizes reason into a tripartite hierarchy:

- Abstract Reason (*al-Aql al-Mujarrad*): Predominant in classical philosophy and theology (*kalām*), but ultimately limited in its spiritual reach.
- Guided Reason (*al-Aql al-Musaddad*): Operative within jurisprudence (*fiqh*), providing practical direction but remaining within legalistic bounds.
- Supported Reason (*al-Aql al-Muayyad*): The highest form of reason, effectively utilized in Sufism and ethical practice, which integrates the intellect with spiritual support.

Analyzing these types, he critiques the first two as insufficient, regarding the third as the only truly authentic and profound mode of thought. He asserts that an original philosophy requires the development of “The Jurisprudence of Philosophy” (*Fiqh al-Falsafa*) an endeavor aimed at critically explaining the essence and methodology of philosophy through an indigenous lens.

Furthermore, Abderrahmane challenges the traditional methodology of hadith, which he believes was too narrowly shaped by Imam al-Shafī’ī’s focus on the *isnad* (chain of transmission). He advocates for a transition toward a Qur’an-centered approach and a modern re-reading of Scripture. In legal theory (*usul al-fiqh*), he proposes a *maqāsid*-centered methodology that favors ethical objectives over rigid literalism (*lafz*) and analogy (*qiyas*). By centering ethics and spiritual support, Abderrahmane seeks to build a “Moral Modernity” that remains authentically Islamic while engaging with the modern world⁵ [17].

⁵ A striking example within the context of the historicist approach is Mahmoud Mohamed Tāhā (1909–1985) of Sudan. In his work *The Second Message of Islam (al-Risāla al-Thaniya min al-Islām)*, Tāhā categorized Qur’anic verses into two groups: he regarded the Meccan verses, which contain principles of faith and ethics, as the essential (*asli*) message; conversely, he viewed the Medinan verses, which contain legal rulings (*sharia*), as subsidiary (*furu’*) or secondary messages. He argued that the fundamental message of Islam belongs historically to the Meccan period, rather than the Medinan, and that these primary principles should be the basis for modern life.

Conclusion

Contemporary Maghrebi Islamic thinkers, like other modernist Muslim intellectuals, seek to analyze the causes underlying the stagnation of the Islamic world and to formulate solutions to bridge the gap with the West. In doing so, they put forward both original and provocative ideas in the domains of theology and politics.

The Contemporary Maghrebi School, drawing particularly upon modern hermeneutical studies, prioritizes the question of how the Holy Qur'an can be better understood and how it can address contemporary challenges. These thinkers generally advocate for a *maqāsid*-centered, historicist reading over literalist, language-centered interpretations. In this methodology, cultural and local elements, along with customs and variables, are moved to the background, while the religious, universal essence — consisting of acts of worship (*ibadāt*) and constants (*thawabit*) — is placed at the center.

Within this framework, the divinity versus the historicity of revelation remains one of the most debated issues. According to these thinkers, while revelation possesses a transcendent (*muta'al*) character, it entered a horizontal plane and acquired a historical form upon being revealed to Prophet Mohammed. Consequently, they argue that a historicist reading enables the Qur'an to function as a meaningful and problem-solving text for today's world. However, the historicism invoked here differs from that associated with Christianity, which often questioned the authenticity and sanctity of sacred texts or the authority of the Church. Rather, this approach primarily aims to consider the historical conditions of the text's formation to achieve a deeper understanding [18]. Nevertheless, the claim that historical conditions such as time and space can shape truth — and the assertion that the text (*nass*) constitutes a cultural product — carries the potential to pave the way for relativism and secularism within Islamic thought. In this context, many contemporary Maghrebi thinkers argue for the adoption of various Western institutions, thought systems, and modes of governance, such as secularism (*laïcité*) and democracy.

Another notable aspect is their shared Enlightenment-oriented, modernist, and progressivist perspective, viewing the historical stages Europe underwent as an inevitable path for the Islamic world. The most significant alternative they offer is the revival of the historical Andalusian / Maghrebi experience. Accordingly, their primary references are thinkers of Maghrebi and Andalusian origin, such as Ibn Hazm, Ibn Bājja, Averroes (Ibn Rushd), Najm al-Din al-Tufī, al-Shatibī, and Ibn Khaldūn.

Adopting a rigorously rationalist methodology, the Maghrebi School subjects esoteric sources of knowledge — such as intuition (*shuhud*), discovery (*kashf*), and inspiration (*ilham*) — to intense critique. They evaluate gnostic movements and disciplines like Sufism, which rely on these sources, as anti-rationalist, subjective, and intellectual structures that have lost their relevance in the modern era. However,

this approach carries the risk of disregarding the rich and deeply rooted heritage of Islamic thought.

Despite certain internal divergences, Maghrebi thinkers are notable for their predominantly Marxist backgrounds and their tendency to approach issues through an ideological framework. This influence is particularly palpable in Hassan Hanafi, the founder of the ‘Islamic Left’ (*Yasar al-Islam*) movement, and Mohammed Abed al-Jabrī, who possessed socialist roots. These thinkers interpret the relationship between the East and the West not through the lens of religion or civilization, but within the framework of binary oppositions such as colonizer versus colonized and rich versus poor.

Simultaneously, there is no singular consensus in the solutions they propose for theology and politics. For instance, while Arkoun adopts a structuralist method for understanding texts, al-Jabrī advocates for a collective intellectual breakthrough to initiate a new era of codification (*tedwin*). Hanafi, on the other hand, proposes the construction of a new *kalām* (theology) based on *maslahah* (public interest). According to them, a pre-determined, ‘ready-made’ Islamic system encompassing all areas of life does not exist. Consequently, exercising *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) in social, political, and economic matters — outside of fundamental ethical principles — is a necessity.

The contemporary Maghrebi School faces severe criticism both from within their own geography, such as from Tāhā Abderrahmane, and from other parts of the Islamic world. These critiques assert that these thinkers merely borrow methods and tools developed in the West — specifically hermeneutics shaped by the Christian context — and attempt to transpose them onto Islam. Furthermore, the significant overlap between these methodologies and Orientalist discourses, as well as their heavy reliance on Marxist thought, remain primary subjects of contention.

The epistemological and rationalist projects of the Maghrebi School have been extended into gender studies by thinkers such as Fatima Mernissi (1940–2015). Utilizing the hermeneutical methods pioneered by Arkoun and Abū Zayd, Mernissi subjects the corpus of *hadith* and exegesis — often perceived as misogynistic — to rigorous historical scrutiny. She argues that the ‘women’s question’ does not stem from the essence of Islam, but rather from the instrumentalization of sacred texts by patriarchal politics to consolidate its own authority. For Mernissi, the liberation of Muslim women depends upon reclaiming the egalitarian spirit of the original revelation from its historical, male-centered distortions [19].

A central paradox within Maghrebi thought lies in the fact that many thinkers who opposed colonialism (such as Arkoun and Lahbābī) composed their primary works in the language of the colonizer (French). This creates a tension between ‘thinking in Arabic’ and ‘expressing in French.’ While French provides a rational and philosophical apparatus, Arabic represents the emotional and ontological bond with tradition and religious identity. This linguistic duality has resulted in a hybrid identity, where thinkers attempt to deconstruct the Islamic tradition using the

epistemological tools of Western modernity, often leading to debates regarding the ‘authenticity’ (*asala*) of their discourse.

The ‘Rationalist-Historicist’ character of the Maghrebi School is clarified when compared with other regional movements. Unlike the Iranian School (e.g., Seyyed Hossein Nasr), which advocates for Sophia Perennis and ‘Gnosis’ (*irfan*) as a response to modernity, Maghrebi thinkers largely dismiss *irfan* as ‘irrational.’ Conversely, the Maghrebi approach shares significant methodological ground with the Indian Subcontinent scholars like Fazlur Rahman. Both emphasize a ‘double-movement’ hermeneutics, distinguishing between the historical context of the revelation and its universal ethical objective (*maqāsid*).

The ultimate tension in Maghrebi thought resides between Authenticity (*Asala*) and Modernity (*Mu’asara*). Contrary to al-Jabrī, who views Western modernity as a ‘universal necessity,’ Tāhā Abderrahmane perceives it as a specific ‘Western spirit’ and advocates for Muslims to construct their own ‘Ethical Modernity.’ This debate addresses whether the Islamic world should mimic Western paradigms or invent its own indigenous modernity. It represents a transition from being an ‘object’ of Western modernization to becoming a ‘subject’ of its own historical development.

In conclusion, contemporary Islamic thinkers identify the causes of decline and stagnation in the Muslim world as follows: the failure of Muslims to fulfill the universal mission of Islam, the neglect of the true spirit of *jihad*, the historical transformation of the Caliphate into a hereditary sultanate, the marginalization of the principle of *shura* (consultation), the spread of a fatalistic mindset through mysticism, the dominance of superstitions over the essence of faith, and the ‘closing of the gates of *ijtihad*.’

References

- [1] Said EW. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books; 2003.
- [2] al-Misbāhī M. Habābī. In: *TDV Islamic Encyclopedia*. Vol 14. Istanbul: TDV Publications; 1996. P. 338–340. (In Turkish).
- [3] al-Lahbābī MA. *From the Closed to the Open: Twenty Essays on National Cultures and Human Civilization*. Yediyıldız B, transl. Ankara: TDV Publications; 1996. (In Turkish).
- [4] al-Lahbābī MA. *Islamic Personalism*. Akin İH, transl. Istanbul: Yağmur Publications; 1972. (In Turkish).
- [5] Arkoun M. *Lectures du Coran*. Ünal AZ, transl. Istanbul: İnsan Publications; 1995. (In Turkish).
- [6] Nasr SH, Leaman O, eds. *History of Islamic Philosophy*. Özalp Ş, transl. Istanbul: İnsan Publications; 2001. (In Turkish).
- [7] Bilmen ÖN. *The Encyclopedia of Islamic Law and Juridical Terms*. Vol. 1. Istanbul: Istanbul University Faculty of Law Publications; 1949. (In Turkish).
- [8] Hanafī H. Theology or Anthropology? Yazıcıoğlu MS, transl. *Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*. 1978;(23):505–531. (In Turkish).
- [9] Hanafī H. The Historicity of the Science of Kalām. Aslan İ, transl. *Kelām Araştırmaları*. 2003;1(2):155–175. (In Turkish).
- [10] Hanafī H. *Les Méthodes d’Exégèse*. Cairo: Le Caire; 1966.

- [11] Hourani A. *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1983. DOI: 10.1017/CBO9780511801990
- [12] al-Jabrī MA. *The Formation of Arab Reason*. İbrahim Akbaba, transl. Istanbul: Kitabevi; 2000. (In Turkish).
- [13] Bilen O. A Debate on Logic and Grammar Between Abū Bishr Matta and Abū Said al-Sirafī. *İslāmiyat*. 2004;7(2):155–172. (In Turkish).
- [14] al-Jabrī MA. *Our Philosophical Heritage and Us*. Köroğlu B, transl. Istanbul: Kitabevi; 2000. (In Turkish).
- [15] al-Jabrī MA. *The Structure of Arab-Islamic Reason*. Köroğlu B, Hacak H, transl. Istanbul: Kitabevi; 2001. (In Turkish).
- [16] Abū Zayd NH. *Maḥmū al-Nass: Dirasa fī ‘Ulum al-Qur’an*. Maşalı ME, transl. Ankara: Kitabiyat; 2001. (In Turkish).
- [17] Tāhā MM. *The Second Message of Islam*. An-Na’im AA, transl. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press; 1987.
- [18] Abderrahmane T. *Fiqh al-Falsafa*. Casablanca: Al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-Arabi; 1995.
- [19] Mernissi F. *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam*. Reading: Addison–Wesley; 1991.

About the author:

Vural Mehmet — Professor at the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University, Esenboga Campus, Esenboga, 06770, Ankara, Türkiye. ORCID: 0000-0002-5165-1837. E-mail: mvural@aybu.edu.tr

Сведения об авторе:

Вурал Мехмет — профессор кафедры философии, факультет гуманитарных и социальных наук, Анкарский университет Йылдырыма Беязыта, кампус Эсенбога, Турция, 06770, Анкара, Эсенбога. ORCID: 0000-0002-5165-1837. E-mail: mvural@aybu.edu.tr