

## Thinking the Unthinkable and the Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought

*Nous vivons une époque étrange, dominée par une idéologie douce et une pensée molle: aux uns le savoir dur et la science, aux autres les apparentes évidences du social et du culturel; à chacun, enfin, les mystères du 'vécu' et les interrogations sans réponse. Il faudra bien jeter un pont entre ces trois continents à la dérive, sous peine de les voir livrés à leurs formes respectives et peut être complices de totalitarisme.*

Marc Augé, *Le Monde*, 3/9/1999.

*All human knowledge, insofar as a man is a 'member' of a society in general, is not empirical, but 'a priori' knowledge. The genesis of such knowledge shows that it precedes levels of self-consciousness and consciousness of one's self value. There is no 'I' without a 'we'. The 'we' is filled with contents prior to the 'I'.*

Max Scheler, *Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge*, 1980, p. 67.

What this book proposes is a way of thinking, rather than essays in traditional scholarship based on primary sources. Not that I do not use such sources extensively, but my interpretation of them is informed by a strategy which differs from that usually employed for the purpose of providing a descriptive, narrative, factual and cumulative presentation of what they contain. My intention is to combine a critical review of modern studies devoted to early and contemporary periods of what is generally called 'Islam', with the systematic deconstruction of the original texts used in these studies as sources of genuine information. Primary and secondary texts are not read in order to

discuss the facts themselves, but to **problematize**<sup>1</sup> the epistemic and epistemological framework underlying the articulation of each discourse. This cognitive strategy has never been used before in interpreting the types of discourse produced by Muslims to express their Islam, or in approaching them as a subject of study, alongside the Western literature on Islam and Muslim societies. From this perspective, **historical epistemology** has a priority over the purely descriptive, narrative presentation of what 'Islam' teaches, or what Muslims say, do or achieve as social and historical protagonists. To what extent are these protagonists aware of the ideological dimensions of their discourse and historical actions? Which cognitive structures do they use for the purpose of interpreting their religion, applying it to their actual life or reshaping it on the basis of historical pressures? To what extent do they develop a critical relationship with their past and their present in order to have better control over their future, and how relevant, effective and creative would such a relationship be? These questions constitute the itinerary of this self-interrogation. Such an itinerary can be proposed and achieved only by those who accept the need to combine respect for the rules of scientific research with the capacity to submit to philosophical criticism every stance of reason, every intellectual initiative and every question arising therefrom.

For a time, during the late 1970s, I called this approach '**applied Islamology**'<sup>2</sup> following the example set by a group of anthropologists who started the practice of '*applied anthropology*'. During the 1980s and 1990s, political scientists focused on political Islam, and in particular, fundamentalist movements, to such an extent that they succeeded in marginalizing classical Islamology, ignoring the methodological breakthrough offered by **Applied Islamology**. This situation applies both to classical Islamicists, long confined to the philological, historicist application of the most 'representative' classical texts, and to the new wave of Islamicists who have had no philological training in the main Islamic languages (Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Urdu) and who have confined their research to socio-political issues considered from a short-term perspective. **Applied Islamology** insists on the need to practise a **progressive-regressive** method, combining the long-term historical perspective with the short-term perspective, because all of the contemporary discourse emerging in Islamic contexts, inevitably refers to the emerging period of Islam, and the 'Golden Age' of its civilization used as mythological references to reactivate 'values' – ethical and legal paradigms –

- 
1. All the words and expressions in bold type are concepts which I have elaborated for the specific purpose of thinking the yet unthought in Islamic thought; beyond the example of Islam, I hope to extend the relevance of these concepts to the social sciences applied to the study of the religious phenomenon.
  2. I have re-written as an introduction to my coming book *Penser l'Islam aujourd'hui*, under the title *Les réponses de l'Islamologie appliquée*, the presentation of this notion which I hope to promote to the dignity of a discipline.

which need to be reassessed according to what I call a '*Critique of Islamic Reason*'. Not only do political scientists occupy key positions in academic institutions, they also have a strong relationship with the political decision-makers as well as a tacit solidarity with the most powerful media. As far as Islamic studies are concerned, the move from classical Islamology, dominated by the classical Orientalist *épistémè* and epistemology, to the pragmatic, factual, too often ideological practice of the social sciences by the political scientist, has had little material effect in improving the intellectual shortcomings of scholarship applied in the Islamic sphere of influence in research and teaching. It is my contention that Islam as a religion, a world vision perpetuated by a still living tradition, with a great variety of cultural, social and political expressions, remains, like all religions other than Christianity, a challenge to the social sciences. In the same way, social sciences, if applied properly, are a challenge to Islam, especially as a living tradition. For many reasons, the most decisive one being geopolitical, it can clearly be seen that the challenge has not yet been fully taken up by the opposing side. The intellectual and scientific reasons for what has been a recurrent failure since the nineteenth century will, I hope, be clarified, in this book.<sup>1</sup>

Although I often refer to the dialectic, creative tension between the **thought** and the **unthought**, the **thinkable** and the **unthinkable**, I feel there is still a need to explain this terminology which has always been unusual and remains so in current parlance and even in philosophical discourse. The question arises as to why there is such a focus on the achievements of reason, on the critical control of the rationalities it elaborates within the spatial limits assigned to the thinkable. What does a tradition of thought allow us to think in a particular period of its evolution, concerning a particular subject, within a particular domain of human existence? When we speak today about the modes of communication required by political correctness, we are clearly referring to limits imposed by political and social pressures on the innovative and critical faculties of reason. A number of ideas, values, explanations, horizons of meaning, artistic creations, initiatives, institutions and ways of life are thereby discarded, rejected, ignored or doomed to failure by the long-term historical evolution called tradition or 'living tradition' according to dogmatic theological definitions. Voices are silenced, creative talents are neglected, marginalized or obliged to reproduce orthodox frameworks of expression, established forms of aesthetics, currently received rules of judgement, evaluation, communication, transmission, teaching, relating to

---

1. My critical remarks are not addressed to the informative side, the quality of erudition displayed in the academic production during the two periods of classical Islamology and contemporary political sciences; this aspect remains valuable and has contributed to the enrichment of the understanding of historical evolution; my restrictions concern the lack of theoretical discussion of epistemological issues among scholars and the cognitive status of reason in the texts used as historical sources as well as in texts written by scholars of all disciplines, as applied to a 'foreign' object. See my remarks on the work of Cl. Cahen in *Arabica*, 1996/1, reworked in my forthcoming book *Penser l'Islam aujourd'hui*.

others . . . When social, economic, and political conditions change and new possibilities for creative thought and action open up, a struggle begins between the defenders of the living sacred and sacralizing tradition and the supporters of reformist or revolutionary change. This dialectic tension is at work, with differing intensity, in all societies, from the most conservative and traditional to our democratic, dynamic, 'free' societies. We know how horizons and themes of discourse change depending on whether a leftist or rightist majority accedes to power; not only are some laws changed, but the philosophical rationale underlying the creation of law shifts to a different thinkable.

When the field of the unthinkable is expanded and maintained for centuries in a particular tradition of thought, the intellectual horizons of reason are diminished and its critical functions narrowed and weakened because the sphere of the unthought becomes more determinate and there is little space left for the thinkable. The unthought is made up of the accumulated issues declared unthinkable in a given **logosphere**. A logosphere is the linguistic mental space shared by all those who use the same language with which to articulate their thoughts, their representations, their collective memory, and their knowledge according to the fundamental principles and values claimed as a unifying *weltanschauung*. I use this concept to introduce the important dimension of the linguistic constraints of each language on the activities of thought. When a language such as Arabic or English is currently used by different peoples, with different cultural backgrounds, it becomes a common **logosphere** which will affect the configuration of the faculties of the human mind and, consequently, will contribute to the creation of frontiers between the **thinkable** and the **unthinkable**, the **thought** and the **unthought**. This is evident in the case of the Arab philosophers who introduced the Greek philosophical **thinkable** into the Arabic language, thereby creating friction with the religious **thinkable** defended by the traditionalist builders of Islamic orthodoxies. Similarly, the concept of the logosphere assists in the understanding of how Islamic values taught in Arabic to Indonesian, Bangladeshi or Tajik peoples, for example, share the same **unthinkable** about religion with the rest of the world's Muslims. The impact of the **unthinkable** and the **unthought** is immediately identifiable in the discourse articulated in a given language; language is the authentic memory of what thought has achieved, or failed to achieve, in each **logosphere**. From this perspective, an hypothesis could be attempted to explain why the terminology that I am trying to produce on the subject of **thinkable/unthinkable, thought/unthought**, has so far been neglected by the historians of thought. Historiography has always been linked to a political focus, such as a king, a prince or other leader; it reports what is relevant in order to illustrate the glory of the ruler, the authority of a spiritual leader; only positive achievements and the related outstanding cultural, and intellectual works achieved by thinkers, artists, jurists and orthodox religious

authorities are quoted, celebrated and regularly taught as classical references for the living collective memory. The modern nation-state has been built and is supported by the selective creation and reproduction of the glorified national **identity**. A highly convincing illustration of this ideological practice, in contradistinction with the free, open, creative quest for meaning, is provided in *Les lieux de mémoire*, edited by Pierre Nora, which discusses the strategies used by the French Third Republic to unify the nation in accordance with the principles of the Republic. All the post-colonial states that emerged in the late 1950s, used the same strategy, with a much more authoritarian, obscurantist, intolerant will-to-power. In Muslim countries, this policy helped to expand the space of the **unthinkable** and the **unthought** because a dual censorship has been and still is imposed on intellectual and cultural activities, censorship from above exercised by the state and censorship from below imposed by public opinion, especially on matters related to religion. Many intellectuals came to interiorize this dual control in the name of the Nation, or the religion, adding self-censorship to that already imposed from outside.

An important remark is in order here. I have explained in my various writings how my Algerian origins, and my involvement in Algerian contemporary history since the late 1950s (especially in the War of Liberation) imposed on me, as a scholar and professor of the History of Islamic Thought, the obligation to rethink and rewrite this entire history within the dialectic framework of the **thinkable/unthinkable, thought/unthought**. As an historian, I have been struck by two major historical facts, namely the spectacular success of Greek philosophy and sciences in the Arabic logosphere under the political control of an Islamic regime from the eighth to the thirteenth century, and in the same period, the expanding of the horizons of religious reason through dynamic schools of theology and law. The Mu'tazilite school contributed to having **thinkable** issues – such as the issue of God's created speech – declared **unthinkable** afterwards by the Caliph al-Qādir. Many schools of thought started to be weakened and disappear after the thirteenth century. Philosophy, as inherited from Classical Greece, disappeared after the death of Ibn Rushd (1198), though it survived in Iran in the form of theodicy and theosophy; the Mu'tazilī school was banned by the well-known decrees of al-Qādir in 1017–18 and 1029 and to this day, the *'ulamā'* officially devoted to the defence of orthodoxy, refuses to reactivate the **thinkable** introduced and developed by original, innovative thinkers in the classical period.

Historians report these facts without opening up new fields of historical research devoted to the interaction between the changing sociological frameworks of knowledge and the emergence, or disappearance, of fields of intellectual and scientific endeavour. The same sociological, political, linguistic, economic and demographic factors that eliminated Ibn Rushd in his own **logosphere** helped to tremendous and enduring success of the same

Ibn Rushd in Latin Catholic Europe until as late as the sixteenth century. Historical research reveals the consequences generated in Islamic thought by the elimination of the philosophical standpoint of reason, while we know the decisive role played by this standpoint in the development of scientific reason as well as the democratic regimes in modern Europe.

It is not sufficient to describe the increasing gap that has emerged between modern Europe and the so-called Muslim societies since the sixteenth century; we need to determine whether this evolution is related to internal forces and mechanisms operating independently in each historical sphere, or whether it is also subject to correlative factors. The development of 'material civilization' in Europe since the eighteenth century, accelerated the collapse and the conquest of all the non-European societies in the world. In other words, material modernity has been used to enhance the political and economic expansion of the European capitalist bourgeoisie; it prevented, deviated or perverted the simultaneous transmission of intellectual modernity in non-European cultures and traditions of thought. This ambiguous process, often described as the clash between tradition and modernity, conservatism and progress, religious fundamentalism and historical change, led to the ideology of liberation with its radical political and social opposition to colonial domination from 1945 until today. During the Cold War, the struggle against 'Western imperialism' was inspired by the dialectical materialist option of the Socialist-Communist vision of human liberation. The philosophical dimension of political liberalism had been rejected as the weapon of the imperialist bourgeoisie. The dogmatic totalitarianism of the nation-state controlled by a single political party has dominated the intellectual and cultural life of all the countries emancipated from colonial domination. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and its ideological support of third-world countries, an 'Islamic' vision of the historical process of emancipation replaced the previous secularized socialist model in the so-called Muslim societies. Both visions share the will to eliminate the struggle of reason to autonomously perform the specific function of enabling unrestricted criticism of the initiatives of social protagonists through historical development (discourse, behaviour, political and economic options, cultural and intellectual achievements). From this perspective, more attention should be paid by historians to making explicit the historical correlation between the expanding European hegemony and the reactions, the ideological responses and the regressive changes seen more in the unthought, than in the thought in contemporary Islamic thought.

As a member of a society which went to war to liberate itself from colonial domination and had to 'welcome' a 'democratic popular republic' based on the model of the Soviet Socialist Republics, I felt more keenly than scholars without this revolutionary background, the intellectual responsibility to rethink in terms of social sciences and **historical epistemology**, the whole

legacy of Arabic culture in what I came to call the 'Maghrebian space'.<sup>1</sup> The Algerian one-party state tried to legitimize its 'socialist' collectivist option in a strong, formal political will to protect and recover the 'Arab-Islamic personality' of the Algerian nation. Morocco followed suit, defended by the *Istiqlāl* party, but under the supreme authority of a king opposed to any kind of socialist revolution as defined and imposed by the leadership of Nasser, Tito, Nehru and other 'historical' leaders who met at the famous Bandung Conference of 1955. The spirit of Bandung was an significant reference point for all those who embraced the socialist model of economic and political action as a way of quick deliverance from historical backwardness. The great majority of leading intellectuals, scholars and artists supported the socialist revolution with their works, teaching, militant rhetoric and their strong desire to reach high positions as political decision-makers. Historians, sociologists and political scientists have not yet assessed the negative intellectual and cultural consequences of this massive adhesion to a dogmatic, totalitarian ideology imposed on societies in which peasant cultures, traditional modes of thinking and oral communication were still the norm. That is why I have chosen to concentrate on this neglected aspect of the history of thought in contemporary Islamic contexts. To do this, I had to create methodological and epistemological options in order to conquer new territory not only to explore new fields of meaning, but primarily to initiate new levels and types of understanding of many inherited issues which remain unexamined. Religion, and all matters related to religious life and expression, is one of the most important fields where political and social forces generate a confusing and obscurantist thought which requires the problematisation suggested in my title *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*. Islam everywhere has been put under the control of the state (*étatisé*); but the religious discourse developed by the opposing social forces shifted to a **populist** ideology which increased the extent of the **unthought**, especially in the religious, political and legal fields.

## 1. Identifying the Unthinkable and the Unthought

It seems necessary to be more precise and explicit – more didactic – on the subject of the identification and practical evaluation of what I call 'the unthinkable' and the 'unthought'. English-speaking readers may be less familiar with these concepts than French speakers, owing to the fact that French school pupils all experience some philosophy teaching in their final

---

1. I have devoted several essays to problematize the history of Maghrebian space beyond the ideological definitions of national identities imposed by the one-party-states and also the representations developed by Arab-Islamic historiography since the political triumph of a 'Muslim' state. These essays will be collected into a forthcoming anthology entitled *Lecture de l'espace maghrébin*.

year at the *lycée*. It will become apparent, however, that I have given these concepts historical, sociological, psychological and political ramifications which go beyond abstract philosophical speculation.

Let me start with a paragraph from Jean De Munck's recent book *L'institution sociale de l'esprit* (PUF, 1999). I have italicized those terms and expressions that need critical or additional commentary in relation to my own concerns as a critical historian of Islamic thought.

While liberalism only promises a long process of planetary alignment of institutions with the *rational references* of human rights and the rights of the market, the very idea of *homogenizing historical evolution* is contested, criticized, dismantled by a *post-modernism* that sees only contexts and their '[small] narratives', unalignable with the '[wider] history' of emancipation. At a moment when the *formalism* of an *economic and political Reason* is being redeployed on a large scale, *post-modernism* is unmasking its persistent *irrationality*, the *injustice* that it generates, the untruth it transmits and the *violence* that upholds it. The fission of the Cold War has been replaced by the great new distribution: no longer *human rights* against *collective rights*, but *human rights* against the right to *difference*; no longer the *market* against the *state*, but the market against *cultures*; no longer the *Individual*, universal and abstract, against the material worker, but the *Individual*, still universal, still abstract, against the *diversity of faces*, the *plurality of tribes*, the diversification of *values*, styles and convictions (p. 3).

Clearly, this is a condensation of the history of thought in its European trajectory with its irresistible expansion into all contemporary societies to the point that the very destiny of the human species, even of planet Earth, is now at stake. What is inexorably decided or imposed upon all living beings is presented as the result of a play of forces, mechanisms and interactions that, in the final analysis, harks back to the workings of the human mind in historical contexts exclusive to that geopolitical space called 'Europe' or 'the West'. Outside this European/Western context, the intellectual, spiritual, cultural and especially the scientific and technological performance of the human mind is not radically different, but is considerably out-of-step when considered from the point of view of the effects of meaning and the practical consequences for the emancipation of the human condition and the price to be paid for what is considered progress, but which, in reality, is both alluring and dangerous.

Seen from the historical trajectory of Islam, Europe/the West is a hostile, hegemonic geopolitical sphere, unavoidable since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and broadly responsible for a historic decline which began in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. As a geocultural, intellectual and spiritual sphere, Europe, before the emergence of the economic, technological and monetary powerful sphere called the West, is in many ways



an extension and expansion of the thought and the scientific knowledge accumulated in the Islamicized area of the Mediterranean during the classical age of Arab-Islamic civilization (750–1300). The change of direction in intellectual, scientific and cultural exchanges between the Muslim Mediterranean and Europe can be dated from the year 1492 AD. Two major events signalled the inversion: Catholic Spain drove the Muslims and Jews out of Andalusia, and Europe discovered the American continent and opened up the Atlantic route, which resulted in supplanting the Mediterranean route with the growth of United States power, especially after 1945. This is not the place for a detailed account of all the stages and conditions of these developments, which include notably the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, the colonization of all the Muslim countries, the liberation wars of the 1950s and the ideological peregrinations of the so-called national states since the achievement of political 'liberation'. What interests us here is the accumulation of **unthinkables** and **unthoughts** during the four centuries from the sixteenth century to the present, during which Europe/the West was constructing intellectual, political, legislative and cultural modernity in Western Europe. Not only did Islamic thought play no part at all in this development; it cut itself off from its own classical heritage by eliminating the practice of philosophy and even theology, which so enriched religious thought in the past and has yet to be reinstated.

That is why the historical summary I have just provided is strictly unthinkable in the historical and cognitive contexts in which Islamic thought has been imprisoned since the political triumph of nationalist ideologies in the struggle for liberation, and the ensuing construction of single-party states either on the apparently claimed liberal European model or, until 1989, that of the 'people's democratic republics' of Communist Europe. From 1950 to 2000, two determining factors substituted a sociologically dominant **populist ideology** for a liberal culture, restricted to circumscribed and fragile urban élites: education systems, manipulated by one-party states universally promoted a nationalistic, militantly ethnic vision, sometimes openly xenophobic, in the guise of vigilance – not entirely unjustified – against imperialist exploitation by the 'West'; and the social settings of knowledge were thrown into confusion by a demographic growth rate unprecedented in the history of human society. In all Islamic contexts, the situations created in this way will never be superseded as long as the military and police-state regimes endure, with their total hostility to the most unarguable values of democratic development in modern societies.

It is in terms of these weighty and complex factors that we should interpret the militant 'argument' proclaiming the radical and definitive incompatibility of 'Western' science and thought with that of 'Islam'; in which 'Islam' has its own conceptual apparatus and horizons of meaning which admit absolutely no theoretical or pragmatic validity in the intellectual and spiritual 'wanderings' of Western positivist science. This position is

defended in the education systems and the religious rhetoric of Islamicist militants issuing from the sacred enclave of the mosques, and also by the official media compelled to take part in a mimetic escalation concerning the unsurpassable 'validity' of 'Islam' as the source and foundation (*asl*) of all religious, ethical, political, social and economic legitimacy. All discursive utterances in contemporary Islamic contexts are inspired to a greater or lesser degree by this ideological perception of the 'Western' protagonist of contemporary history, just as in that 'West' constructed by the politico-religious imaginary, the world of 'Islam' is generally perceived as radically incompatible with, and therefore threatening to, the superior 'values' of the West. This is the highly successful 'clash of civilizations' theory that has haunted the Western political imagination since the end of the Cold War. There certainly is a clash, but it is between collective **imaginaries** constructed and maintained on both sides through **unthinkables** and **unthoughts** cultivated by the education systems, the discourse of political and academic establishments, and the media that feed on this rhetoric and seek to increase their following by outdoing each other with anticipations of interpretations from the leading minds.<sup>1</sup>

Let us return to J. De Munck's historical summary. His critique of the dominant forms of rationality seeks to lay the groundwork for substituting what he calls *procedural* or pragmatic reason for the *substantive* reason of classical theology and metaphysics as well as the positivist *instrumental* reason of today, which others have called *tele-techno-scientific* reason. J. De Munck is a researcher at the Centre for the Philosophy of Law headed by Jacques Lenoble at the Catholic University of Louvain La Neuve. He follows a line of critical thought that seeks to supersede the contradictions of the forms of jurisprudence linked to the dominant cognitive postures of classical modernity as well as post-modernity. This orientation illustrates the most enduring feature of modern thought which never stops questioning its own structures and exploring its limitations; but it is noticeable that, like all the great critical interventionists (Nietzsche, Heidegger, J. Rawls, Ch. Taylor, H. Gadamer, J. Habermas, L. Wittgenstein, Gödel, etc.) who have tried to regain control of this reasoning, it leaves one essential question unexplored, since it has never, in practice, managed to master its own de facto solidarity with all the forms of government in place, including liberal democracies. The question consistently locked away in the **unthought** is that of a strategy for integrating into the same critical and cognitive movement, the trajectories of reason historically linked to non-'Western' contexts for the production of

- 
1. The recent gaffe by the French prime minister Lionel Jospin on the subject of Hizbullah terrorism is a perfect example of the connivance of official discourse with what I have called anticipations of 'meaning' from the dominant **imaginaries**, something that occurs on the Islamic side as well as on the Western one. There are numerous examples of this sort in both camps, going back to the theological and military confrontations of the Middle Ages (see Chapter 8).

meaning. By 'strategy of critical and cognitive integration' I mean that which inspired and made into essential reading the works of J. P. Vernant and M. D  tienne on thought and politics in classical Greece. 'Orientalist' explorations of the so-called 'Oriental' civilizations have never reached that threshold of intelligibility beyond which any cognitive and critical exercise of 'Western' reason should include the relevant data on all the epistemic and epistemological routes travelled within civilizations that until now have been explored as exotic places – 'primitive', 'archaic', 'traditional' or 'conservative' in their learning and culture. The undeniable advances in cultural anthropology have not succeeded here even in casting doubt on the universality of the struggles waged by 'Western' reason, let alone in introducing a more humanist rationality into the perception of non-Western cultures by the dominant ideological **imaginaries** (*imaginaires*). Philosophically, J. De Munck's critique of postmodernism is pertinent, but insufficient, implying as it does no effort to get out of the Western European trajectory of reason, which continues to construct its pertinencies and legitimacies in the linear, chronological deployment of successive or concomitant forms of substantive, instrumental, post-modern reason which may be overtaken, still in the same line of development, by '*procedural reason*'. The author does not even draw all the conclusions from the relevant and productive critique he makes on the basis of the philosophically new approach of '*the social institution of the mind*'; just as the great theoreticians in political science failed to draw conclusions from what C. Castoriadis called '*the imaginary institution of society*'. There is no sign of the emergence of the idea of using any means other than *procedural* modifications within the Western enclosure, to progress beyond the functional solidarity of Enlightenment reason, in its deployments as economic and political reason, with the so-called democratic institutions for the exercise of power and the social settings of knowledge established and instrumentalized by and for these institutions to ensure their survival. Irrationality, injustice, social exclusion, structural and physical violence, are not just persistent, as is recognized; they are being spread on a global scale in all types of societies across the frontiers drawn and maintained by the geopolitical and geo-economic strategies of the '  lites' of specialists, experts, engineers and technocrats who everywhere have a monopoly on practical decisions. Holders of political power are themselves mere 'executive officers' who carry out major decisions prepared, justified, 'founded' by these experts on the basis of national criteria and internal strategies for taking and holding power, or for increasing the profits of huge multinational firms.

A transition is now taking place from the ideological polarities of the time of the '*great narratives*' of emancipation of the human condition led by the abstract humanism of Enlightenment reason to the no-less ideological opposition of '**human-rightsism**' and humanitarian action to the identity-related demands of the many groups, peoples, communities, languages and

cultures that passed from colonial domination to the oppressive political voluntarism of single-party nation-states in the second half of the twentieth century—states wanted, supported, ‘enlightened’ by the geopolitical strategists of the great powers, themselves divided by nationalist rivalries that have still not been overcome. Since the 1960s, people have been calling in vain for a new economic and monetary order, and for the creation of an international law which would not only abolish the baleful inheritance of the dispossession of the world by a conquering Europe, but set up a juridical authority on an adequate scale for the violence unleashed by so many wills-to-power across the world. To prepare institutions to accept the diversity of faces, values, styles and cultures? Yes of course; but only on condition that the problems posed by the ‘plurality of the new tribes’ (political parties) are radically rethought, to undermine demands for ‘difference’ or ‘identity’ which are just dialectical responses (themselves bringing violence and antihumanism) to the devastating effects of the structural violence introduced everywhere by tele-technoscientific reason.

A purely philosophical critique of the cognitive standpoints of reason in the West cannot – we can see – go as deep as the more radical, fundamental and liberating critique of all the uses of reason, the irrational and the imaginary in all socio-political contexts in the contemporary world. I believe that I have already established that there is a need, both epistemological and political (in the sense of a political philosophy covering all the situations generated by the geopolitical manipulation of powers on a world scale), for this expansion of the horizons of criticism in the *Critique of Islamic Reason*. This work in effect comes up against the limits and arbitrary aspects of hegemonic reason and is involved in the most useful debates on the passage from the *Phenomenology of the Mind*, trapped in the ‘mytho-historico-transcendental thematic’,<sup>1</sup> to ‘*the social institution of the mind*’. Like all high-profile thinkers in the contemporary West, the young researcher J. De Munck never mentions hegemonic reason, or the **unthinkable**; when he refers to the **unthought**, it is only to announce the schedule for procedural reason; but the **unthinkable** and the **unthought** are inherent in the linear structure of any discursive statement; and also in the fact that any proposition is an act of power whether followed by a result or not; for a proposition implies selection from the range of significations in any tradition, thus an orientation of meaning in a particular direction from all the possible horizons of expectation of any given speaker of a particular language. To that may be added the selective pressures brought to bear by all protagonists in positions of power in every political and linguistic context. From clan leader, tribal chief or village mayor to king, caliph, sultān, emperor or president, from the smallest republic or kingdom to today’s United States; from bishop, rabbi,

---

1. See Michel Foucault, *Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, London, Routledge, 1970. It is essential to be acquainted with this basic notion, to grasp the difference between history of ideas and history of systems of thought.

village imām to pope, chief mufti or chief rabbi: all of these exercise control over the **thinkable** and the **unthinkable**, over the selection of what is thought in the orthodox line, and over what has to be eliminated and remain **unthought** if intellectually subversive. Among agents of the transmission of learning, even among the producers of knowledge which is presented as new, none escapes this dialectic of the powers and the residues.<sup>1</sup>

The residues, brought about by the centralising powers, liberal as well as communist, since the nineteenth century, have been trying to find ways and means of expression under today's democratic regimes; but in the new nation-states under construction within borders arbitrarily drawn by the colonizers, centralising voluntarism tends rather to erase the traces of languages, ethnic groups or cultures declared to be unassimilable by nationalism, communalism or fundamentalism, themselves products of the dialectic of the powers and the remainders. It is a sure fact, though one which would induce despair in the oppressed, excluded and eliminated millions, that the political rationale currently engaged in the construction of the European Union, and to an even greater extent, the one running the strategies of the US presence in the world, devote a lot more effort to manipulating this dialectic of the powers and the remainders than to recognising this dimension of the general history of human societies as one of the weightiest **unthoughts**, one that limits and continues to invalidate all the theologies and political philosophies past and present.

We need to dig a little deeper to identify the structural conditions for the exercise of a type or level of reason that intends to go beyond all these **unthoughts** and **unthinkables**. Religious reason in its Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Jewish, Christian, Islamic and animist traditions; secular reason in its African, Chinese, Indian, Indonesian, Arab, Persian, Turkish, etc., expressions; in short, all forms of thought emerging from non-Western contexts, must face the same philosophic refutations, the same denials by critical history, the same challenges and tests from anthropology, the neurosciences and biology, that theologies, philosophies and moral values had to face in the birthplaces and nurseries of modernity. It is from this *fait accompli* in the evolution of modern thought that the hegemonic reason on power in the West, draws its certainty that apart from the undeniable hegemonic situation existing since at least the eighteenth century, it also represents the paradigmatic forms, the cognitive stages and the extreme limits of the social and historical institution of the human mind, and not just the mind in its Western historical trajectory. We lack the data and the cognitive resources necessary to discuss this aporia; all we can do is furnish some elements of analysis and advise the principle of caution: we cannot prejudice

---

1. See 'Modes de présence de la pensée arabe en Occident musulman', in *Critique de la raison islamique*, Paris, 1984; and 'Transgresser, déplacer, dépasser', in *Arabica*, 1996/1, op. cit. The concept of the dialectic of powers/residues (*les puissances et les résidus*) is a key to interpret the current evolution of the ex-Third World societies.

the adequacy, the relevance and achievements, or on the other hand the digressions, the illusions and failures, of reason and imagination at work in all the contexts listed above; it is necessary to register all that occurs in these contexts and incorporate it into the critical work of what I prefer to call **emergent reason**, or reason in crisis : meanings, effects of meaning and horizons of meaning do not emerge only where hegemonic reason is active, along with its unequalled means of action, creation and invention; we have to be able to hear voices reduced to silence, heterodox voices, minority voices, the voices of the vanquished and the marginalized, if we are to develop a reason capable of encompassing the human condition.

This utopia is blocked for the present by the current conditions of the expansion of hegemonic reason. In all the satellite countries, we are witnessing the formation of political, economic and financial 'élites', very restricted in size and found in social settings where the middle classes are desperate either to join these 'élites' or at least to avoid sinking down into the masses and being doomed to live precarious lives. The élites for their part focus more on their own standard of living compared with that of their opposite numbers in the wealthy countries, than on tackling the fundamental problems of their own societies. They feel overwhelmed by the scale of these problems when they confront the national and international roots of these problems and their remorseless complication. The result is a tendency towards resigned and self-protective behaviour and an expectation of uncertain solutions. Those who succeed in amassing scandalous fortunes add the arrogance of wealth to that of power and in the meantime, make use of nationalist rhetoric. In Islamic contexts, they defend the superior values of Islam, thus absolving themselves from taking part in the courageous struggles for emancipation being waged by women and the very few male intellectuals who dare to attack the taboos of religious beliefs.

Women represent a particularly disadvantaged social body; it is they who have to suffer the oppression of regimes that instrumentalize religion to compensate for their own lack of political legitimacy; the resistance of the popular mentality to any questioning of the status of women as fixed by God Himself in the Qur'an; and the weight of beliefs and customs they have themselves internalized through the rearing process handed down by their mothers and grandmothers in the lineage of an ancient feminine memory. I was able to verify all these mechanisms recently in a broad debate taking place in Morocco around the '*Plan for the integration of women in the development process*' launched by the present government (April 2000). The fault line dividing society on the plan is not easy to trace; the simplistic terminology of opposition between progressives and conservatives, left and right, modernists and traditionalists, secular and religious, etc., is unsatisfactory. The use of these trivial, obsolete categorisations in political sociology is both an unavoidable ideological necessity and a backward conceptualisation damaging to proper critical thought: in politics, one has to be effective at

manipulating the social imagination with words and slogans that elicit immediate adhesion or rejection, while this manipulation avoids the intellectual need to introduce a more relevant emancipating critical discourse. This, of course, would require more enlightened political élites able to share intellectual concerns, accurate scientific references, and with the educational skills to use social debate as an opportunity to enhance the democratic culture and political consciousness of all citizens. There are many factors still delaying any significant move to this unavoidable trend towards modern political thought and practice. One of the most determining in this regard is the total irrelevance of the educational system as it is imposed everywhere at all levels, especially as concerns the teaching of social sciences.

Another determining, and totally **unthought** factor is sexuality. At the deepest level of the individual and collective psyche lies this unexplored, taboo continent of sexuality, apparently 'regulated' by religious codes, which really stem from anthropological structures in place long before the appearance of these religions in time. All religions have simply covered with a so-called sacred law, the archaic codes and structures prevailing in all societies. In the case of Islam, we know how the Qur'anic categorisations of the licit and illicit (*ḥalāl/ḥarām*) are still enforced as divine and intangible, rejecting any kind of secularized definitions. On top of this hard layer, invisible but determining, are deposited the customs, beliefs, representations and legislations appropriate to each socio-cultural environment, as shown by dialectology and ethnolinguistics. So long as this field of reality remains veiled, and under-analysed, it will be difficult to make progress in women's emancipation, unless legislators speed up the evolution of mentalities by introducing not only audacious reforms that will have educational effects on all social categories and all levels of culture, but also a subversive philosophy of Law (see my Concept of Islamic reason in *Penser l'Islam aujourd'hui*).

## 2. The Cognitive Status of Emerging Reason

I had to clarify my position on the attempt to assess the epistemological relevance of procedural reason so that I could propose my own elaboration of the concept of Emerging Reason (E. R.). I have alluded to it just to express my reluctance to follow the line of procedural reason which might be relevant to the critique of juridical discourse, but cannot fulfil all the tasks and the explorations I described above. Emerging Reason goes beyond the punctual, particular methodological improvements actualized in some fields of research, or in some disciplines applied to the study of different aspects of Islam and other non-Western cultures. It is concerned with the philosophical subversion of the use of reason itself and all forms of rationality produced so far and those which will be produced in the future so as not to repeat the ideological compromises and derivations of the precedent postures and

performances of reason. In that sense, E. R. will be continuously emerging to reassess its critical function.

Paying prior attention to the epistemological postures of reason is an essential requirement of philosophical activity. Social and political scientists are supposed to share this fundamental concern not only in their contributions to theoretical confrontations, but even more in the process of working out their concepts and articulating their discourse. It is easy to show that many western philosophers, not to mention the great majority of scholars, limit their epistemological control to what I would call the western historical logosphere. The common *weltanschauung* can be criticized, revised, opened or closed inside ideological frontiers fixed by binding historical, existential solidarities linking the members of a group, a minority, a majority, a large community or a powerful nation. There are hegemonic logospheres like the Arabic Muslim, the Greek, Latin Christian logospheres in the Medieval Ages and the English and French ones today; there are smaller, satellite logospheres where dialects, not written languages survive under the threat of expanding languages with their related civilizations. From that perspective, S. Huntington is right in trying to identify competing logospheres which might develop violent clashes if they remain indifferent, if not openly hostile, to any intellectual or cultural attempt to cross the ideological frontiers and create historical opportunities for sharing transnational, multicultural solidarities as the European Union is doing under the pressure of the internal European wars that have prevailed since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The European Union's experience is rejected, as we know, by defenders of the well-established national sovereignties; in France they are known as *les nationaux-républicains*. Within the political frontiers of each national sovereignty, there is another ongoing conflict between the foreign migrants of different nationalities who disturb the 'peaceful', fruitful functions of each national logosphere. Such debates have a paramount influence not only on political life, but also on the cognitive options of political and social scientists and even on leading philosophers in Canada and the United States. This is clearly reflected in titles like Richard Bernstein's *Dictatorship of Virtue: How the Battle Over Multiculturalism is Reshaping Our Schools, Our Country, Our Lives*; John J. Miller's *The Unmaking of America: How Multiculturalism Has Undermined the Assimilation Ethic* and Yehudi O. Webster's *Against the Multicultural Agenda*. For supporters of multiculturalism, I mention Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights*, and Charles Taylor 'The politics of recognition' in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. The most significant contribution to the discussion in French has just been made by Sylvie Mesure and Alain Renaut in *Alter ego: Les paradoxes de l'identité démocratique*.

But beyond the debates limited to national logospheres, we must also consider the prolific literature related to the process of globalization for



further indications of the way the frontiers of the human mind are moving at the turn of the century. Those who are in control of economic, financial, technological and telecommunications, globalization tend to be satisfied with the triumph throughout the world of a **tele-techno-scientific reason** with its purely pragmatic, empiricist expertise. Social and political sciences will continue to serve this new, expanding stage in material civilization, just as they did in the nineteenth century for the industrialized and industrializing societies. The rest of the world will be obliged either to travel in the same boat if it can afford such an uncertain and expensive journey, or to live in the margins until it is eliminated. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, industrialized capitalist Europe used colonial strategies to 'civilize' backward, traditional societies, just as Communist Europe announced the end of the history of the bourgeoisie with the triumph of the final proletarian revolution. After 1989, Francis Fukuyama declared from the United States that it was the end of history and the inauguration of the era of mastered, liberal, humanist history. All these debates emerge and develop in one hegemonic logosphere called the West; the hegemonic visions and concrete, constraining practices are discussed, refuted and rejected with the very tools of the abstract, helpless, polemical, ideological, religious discourse of the victims, or the new slaves. To the discourse of political, economic, financial and intellectual domination, the only response has been the discourse of victimization tempered occasionally by the discourse of 'co-operation'.

In these world-wide battles, we have to note the phenomenon that Julien Benda has called '*la trahison des clercs*' on both sides. Benda fulminated against writers who betrayed the specific function of literature by their political options in the late twenties. Today, the phenomenon is often pointed to as the '*silence of the intellectuals*' and the treason of political and social scientists who continue to serve the national interests of their nations or their communities while they ascribe their scholarship to a scientific, objective, humanist, intellectually-driven endeavour. It is true that scholars and intellectuals have much less easy access to the fields of research controlled by the nation-states that emerged after colonial liberation. Economists or experts in technology are admitted with official and limited contracts, restricting their freedom and presence to their specific field of expertise. Even the most innovative books and articles devoted by Western scholarship to Islamic studies, for example, long remain unknown in Muslim countries for several reasons. Either they are too expensive, or they are written in foreign languages, or they are censored by political or religious authorities. As long as the critical function of the social sciences is restricted for all the reasons mentioned, the intellectual, cultural, and scientific gap between the West and the former Third World societies will increase and have a negative effect on all the current debates between cultures and civilizations. It should be added that inside Western and Eastern Europe itself, there are gaps and discrepancies between the cognitive standpoints, the conceptual tools, and the

collective representations that actually dominate each society. Nevertheless, the ongoing conflicts in Ireland, Yugoslavia, Russia and even Israel/Palestine are perceived, 'explained' and interpreted using criteria, vocabulary and perspectives that are very different from those used in connection with similar conflicts in Africa, the Muslim world and Asia.

These remarks help to identify the cognitive status and the new functions of Emerging Reason. We need to elaborate the concept, to establish its philosophical relevance and its specific role among the still-conflicting cognitive postures of reason in the geopolitical contexts designed by recent historical developments and the rivalry between ancient and new aspirations for power.

I have explained why the concept of post-modernity cannot be used here, as a result of all the criticism it has attracted from various disciplines and schools of thought in the West itself. It had some relevance for a while in the 1970s and 1980s in the elimination of the limited, abstract postulates used by the rationale of the Enlightenment – the formalistic, vacuous humanism, especially during the period of the conquering liberal bourgeoisie on one side, and the Socialist-Communist proletarian revolution on the other. The definition and the tasks assigned to post-modern reason have remained limited to the European/Western historical perspective. During the 1970s, the political, cultural and economic failure of the revolutionary claims which had spread throughout the colonized countries during the wars of liberation (1945–1967) started to become evident with the decline of Soviet support. Some anthropologists, such as Margaret Mead, Malinowski, Cl. Geertz, J. Goody, Cl. Lévi-Strauss, L. Dumont and G. Dumézil, preferred to open the cognitive horizons of the Western mentality to other cultures and mentalities. But anthropology as a pluralist cognitive framework for interpretation still remains limited to specialists. Even in United States where this discipline is actively practised in several universities, it has little impact on the current way of thinking and of interpreting foreign cultures. The gulf between *us* and *them*, *I* and *he*, *we* and *others* is still determined by traditional religious systems of belief and non-belief, used and corroborated by political nationalist constructions of the self. In the most democratic regimes, the struggle between the so-called 'identities', claims for individual and communitarian 'difference' are encouraged and multiplied by an abstract discourse on human rights which is not enlightened by what James Clifford has called *anthropology as cultural criticism*, or what P. Bourdieu defends as *the theory of the social world* (see Louis Pinto: *P. Bourdieu et la théorie du monde social*).

I am not suggesting that this option is purely materialistic and should be limited, or rejected in the name of so-called spiritual and ethical values. I published a book in Arabic with the ambitious and unusual title, *al-Fikr al-uṣūlī wa-istiḥālat al-ta'ṣīl*. The title is more challenging and more evocative in Arabic than in any European language, because it refers to a long tradition of the search for foundations. In English it means: *The foundational thought and*

the impossibility of providing foundations. *Uṣūl* is the plural of *aṣl*, meaning roots, basic foundations, primary sources, origins. The teachings of the Qur'ān and the Prophet (*ḥadīth*) are received as divine, revealed by God; thus, they all have the power, the value of sanctifying, transcending and ontologizing all spiritual principles, and the ethical, legalistic norms derived from the teachings articulated by God in the Arabic language. Two 'scientific' disciplines have been developed and taught in Islamic thought under the name of *uṣūl al-dīn* and *uṣūl al-fiqh* which mean the roots/divine origins/foundations of religion and Law. The equivalent of the same disciplines commanding the same rationalizing procedures is to be found in Jewish and Christian traditions of thought. That is why one can speak of a religious reason with its Islamic, Jewish Christian instruments, references and procedures. This religious reason has been challenged, shaken, politically marginalized and intellectually disqualified by the reasoning of the Enlightenment and especially since the French Revolution which was more radical in this regard than the English and American Revolutions. It is a historical fact that Christian theological, legalistic reasoning has been more exposed than any other to the intellectual, scientific challenges and political marginalization generated by the reasoning of the Enlightenment. We know how the Muslim orthodox community reacted against Ibn Rushd and the Jewish community against Spinoza. We know also how Judaism has been involved in a nationalist struggle since the creation of the State of Israel, just as Islam had to support nationalist movements of liberation from colonial domination. Religious reason itself is differentiated by these different historical evolutions and contexts. These differences have been explicitly recognized in the inter-religious confrontations and dialogue since Vatican II. But neither the reasoning of the Enlightenment, nor so-called post-modern reason have been able so far to propose new possibilities to go beyond the principles, categories, definitions and forms of reasoning inherited from theological reason on one side, and enlightened, scientific reason on the other. The inherited frontiers of the mind are displaced by the *culture of disbelief* (see Stephen Carter, *Culture of disbelief: How American Law and Politics trivialize Religious devotion*) and sustained by scientific discoveries; but, as Marc Augé puts it in the quotation at the start of this introduction, new frontiers have been drawn between the conqueror mentality, shaped by 'hard' sciences and computer sciences, and the fragile disputed evidence proposed by human and social sciences and the unreachable mysteries of the lived experiences of the individual; these mysteries are left without any relevant answer because they remain beyond the scope and the speculation of **tele-techno-scientific reason**.

The philosopher Paul Ricœur who made so many important contributions to identifying the need to rethink all the problems related to the articulation of the religious field and the intellectual field with all its epistemological concerns, recently completed an illuminating new book, entitled *La mémoire*,

*l'histoire, l'oubli (Memory, history, oblivion)*. This deeply perceptive and innovative work reflects the growing dimension of intelligibility offered by Emerging Reason. The three concepts are applied to history as a scientific discipline which has the responsibility of shaping again and again the inaccessible 'objective' past, using an ocean of archives that are never explicit and exhaustive enough to correct the discrepancies between collective oral memories, the necessary work of *anamnesis* and the selective pressures of social groups to adapt the representation of the past to their present convictions, values and options. He introduces the correct distinction between history written just as the time over, *le révolu* (facts, events, personalities and historical monuments belonging to a past chronology) or as what has been, *l'avoir été* which requires the historian to go beyond the written record in order to revive by memory, imagination and historical sensibility the dead protagonists as those who have been living, acting, continuously placed as we ourselves are, in conditions of negotiation and decision-making. '*I challenge*', says Ricœur, '*the being for death*'; like Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, Emmanuel Lévinas, Bernard Lepetit and J. Revel, he denies the principle of fatalism in history. If the dead are considered as living persons in time, then the changing scales of such a person's actions must be considered within the contexts of micro-history and macro-history. Using this line of reasoning, Ricœur ends the book with an epilogue on the pardon as a dimension of the obligation to retain the memory and the need to go beyond justice which has to judge the criminal and say to the condemned person: '*your value as a human being goes far beyond your deeds as a criminal*'. Pope John Paul II visited his would-be assassin in prison, but he let the trial end with the verdict.

Now we are in a better position to grasp the meaning and to perceive the tasks of Emerging Reason. First of all, it does not necessarily emerge as an expanding evolutionary linear process of modern reasoning; certainly, it cannot ignore the abundant achievements of modernity; but neither can it disqualify *a priori* all the legacies of the living cultural traditions still linked to religious inspiration. Emerging Reason operates, creates, and innovates in the new contexts of **intercultural dialectic** which open up more possibilities for **intercreativity** at all levels, in all fields, all expectations, all possible politics of hope, all debates on human existence. It assumes the intellectual responsibility of helping so many people uprooted from their active cultural codes, systems of beliefs and values to be left aside from the main historical stream, the new political institutions of social integration. This is true for all Muslim communities. The majority of Muslim migrants to Europe are manual workers or youngsters looking for low-paid jobs rejected by jobless citizens. These exiled populations do not so far have any adapted spaces for learning, any opportunity to replace their disqualified cultural, religious references with 'modern', European standards of thought and life. Yet at the same time, sociologists describe them as 'fundamentalists', dangerous social categories, elements that threaten 'Western values'.

Here, E. R. faces two tasks. It points out the ideological solidarity of social and political sciences with hegemonic reason and it undertakes the neglected duties of the state in the fields of education, cultural activities, relevant criticism of the 'return of religion', the resurgence of the sacred, all of which mean, in fact, a dialectic response to an arbitrary policy or a total lack of effective policy. These tasks are not only required for the migrants in European/Western contexts; they are all the more urgent in Islamic contexts where many 'national' states are even more cynical and obscurantist in their religious, cultural and social policy. In other words, E. R. carries on several battles simultaneously in all contemporary contexts, namely the epistemological battles in the West, the didactic and educational battles in the traditional, marginalized societies and the political battles with all categories of establishments that monopolize the decision-making process in academic, bureaucratic, governmental and economic institutions. It is interested in all types of silenced voices throughout history, like all those voices silenced today in Islamic contexts, either by official censorship or by the pressures of public opinion manipulated by political activists; it reactivates the persecuted, innovative mind, it refuses to write a history of thought, literature and the arts based exclusively on the so-called representative authors and works selected, in fact, by the dominant tradition in each period and each milieu, neglecting to use the methodology of what, in relation to Ibn Rushd, the Mu'tazilites, and philosophy in general, I called the sociology of failure combined with the sociology of success.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Proposed Illustrations

Each of the essays presented in this book deals with a complex topic referring to a number of problems which remain **unthought** in contemporary Islamic thought. I do not mean that these topics are all unknown and have never been tackled in classical or contemporary Islamic thought. As I have mentioned in several contexts, some problems have been intensively discussed at some time or another and have been rejected and relegated to the domain of the **unthinkable**. One example is the famous theory of God's created speech defended by Ḥanafī, Džahmī, and Mu'tazilī thinkers especially between 800–848; others, like religious freedom, human rights, the individual and the citizen, toleration, logocentrism, historical epistemology, symbolic function, metaphoric organization of religious discourse, and so on, refer to the yet **unthought** as far as these themes are currently known and debated in Western thought, while contemporary Islamic thought remains suspicious, more

---

1. I did this already in my thesis about the generation of Miskawayh and al-Tawḥīdī, in *L'humanisme arabe au 9<sup>e</sup>/10<sup>e</sup> siècle*; see also 'La place d'Averroès dans l'histoire de la pensée', (Averroes' Place in the History of Thought) in *Rencontres d'Averroès. La Méditerranée, frontières et passages*, Thierry Fabre (ed.), Actes Sud, 1999.

polemical and apologetic than critically concerned and challenged by them and by intellectual modernity in general.

The first chapter deals with the frontiers of mind, a concept proposed by the Library of Congress as the subject of an international conference held in Washington in June, 1999. I took this unexpected opportunity to clarify my attempts to differentiate the cognitive status, the functions and the horizons of meaning and action of three competing cognitive types of reasoning – religious reason, philosophical reason and scientific reason. Since I began my research for a *Critique of Islamic reason*, I have had to determine how this reason integrates, ignores, or rejects the concerns, attitudes and goals of the three interacting attitudes or paradigms. I hope that the concepts developed through this enquiry will facilitate and contribute to the understanding of the analysis devoted throughout the book to the many delicate issues related to Islamic thought.<sup>1</sup>

Two chapters introduce a new problematisation of Revelation through the example of the Qur'ān. *A Critical Introduction to Qur'ānic Studies* was written for the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, a promising new project supervised by Jane McAuliffe and published by Brill in Leiden; and *The Cognitive Status and Normative Functions of Revelation* which is a revised version of an earlier essay on *The Concept of Revelation: From Ahl al-Kitāb to the Societies of the Book*. In my book *Lectures du Coran* published in 1982, I proposed a programme of research with the aim of opening a new field for a comparative study of Revelation as an historical, linguistic, cultural and anthropological articulation of thought common to the three 'revealed' religions. My purpose was then, and still is, to reverse the approach of Revelation from the dogmatic theological systems developed by competing, opposed, self-promoting ethno-cultural groups during the Middle Ages, to the critical, deconstructive analysis of social sciences applied to the rich topic of religious phenomena. This does not mean that theology should be discarded as an intellectual endeavour coupled with the quest for spiritual meaning in the light of the human experiences of the divine. For centuries, theologies have been developed as idealistic, abstract, but dogmatically, politically normative systems, outside and often contrary to the historical, sociological, biological and cosmological evidence. With the discoveries made by using scientific reasoning, theologians have been obliged to reinterpret their dogmatic propositions. Not all of them, however, have agreed to submit theological constructions of 'orthodox' faiths to the modern scientific theories and cognitive strategies aimed at universal recognition by the human mind beyond its local historical cultural creativity. Historical, anthropological and philosophical criticism is particularly decisive in this respect. I have shown how Islamic reasoning is weakened in this field by its ideological and apologetic use of the master-narratives and routinized

---

1. Following the tragedy of 11 September 2001, I have decided to postpone the publication of this important chapter. I need to enlarge the views and deepen my conceptualisation even more than I had done in June 1999, in my oral presentation to an American audience.

authority inherited from classical normative texts. I have insisted on what I call the foundational posture of religious reasoning in general. By this, I mean the search for ontological, spiritual and intellectual foundations upon which to base systems of belief, knowledge and interpretation, the normative law supposedly derived and currently taught as the genuine expression of the 'true religion'. In Islamic thought, this fundamental exercise (*ta'sīl*) has persisted thanks to the two central disciplines of *uṣūl al-dīn* and *uṣūl al-fiqh*; both disciplines have developed a systematic methodology to establish the divine origins, the textual sources and meaningful roots (*uṣūl*) on which theological propositions and legalistic norms have to be based. The discursive procedures used for this purpose are called *ta'sīl*. The scholarly impact of these disciplines on religious perception of what is called the Divine Law (*sharī'a*), has been confused with the regulations collected in the form of bodies of law (*majmū'āt fiqhīyya*), resulting in the present fundamentalist discourse coupled with the political activism of the so-called fundamentalist movements, not only in Islam, but in several political movements, religious and secular.<sup>1</sup> That is why I have introduced a firm distinction between fundamentalist vision and discursive practice and the foundationalist standpoint of reason looking for ontological origins, theoretical principles and coherent reasoning on which to base beliefs, ethical values, the law and 'scientific' knowledge. All these problems will be examined in several contexts, especially in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

The concept of logocentrism merits special consideration. I wrote this essay in 1970. Since the publication of J. Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, an interesting discussion has ensued concerning the deconstruction of classical metaphysics. It was more than a new field of research in the history of ideas as still practised, especially in the history of Islamic thought. Derrida was aiming to introduce new cognitive strategies in the interpretation of the long philosophical tradition of thought in the ontological framework of classical metaphysics which has influenced theological thinking in the three 'revealed' religions. As usual, not one historian of Islamic philosophy and theology paid any attention to the ensuing debate which, while far-reaching, was limited to the linear history of Western thought from classical Greece to the present day, bypassing the Middle Ages from Plato and Aristotle to Descartes, Leibniz and Spinoza. It is true that the concept of deconstruction as Derrida used it, raised objections and rejection even among Western historians of philosophy. At the present stage of the history of Islamic thought, I do not need to enter into a theoretical debate about the philosophical legitimacy and the methodological relevance of deconstructivism and logocentrism. I do not support any specific position, but I think that it is important to show that the impact of logocentrism on Islamic thought is as strong, although less durable,

---

1. A good example of this foundational activity was provided recently by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in his presentation of the Declaration 'Dominus Jesus'. See *L'Osservatore romano* 17/10/2000, the answers of Cardinal Ratzinger to the critiques raised by his positions.

as it was on European mediaeval thought. For further developments on the issue, I refer to John M. Ellis in *Against Deconstruction*; Christopher Norris: *Deconstruction. Theory and Practice*, where some interesting points are made.

I wanted to react against the prevailing scholastic division of Islamic thought into specialized disciplines (theology, philosophy, historiography, law, literature) without pointing out a more significant unifying differentiation, using the criteria of *epistémè* and discourse analysis. Abū-l-Ḥasan al-ʿĀmirī's *al-Iʿlām* was published as long ago as 1967; it set an inspiring example to test in a so-called 'oriental' culture, the relevance of the deconstructivist analysis of classical metaphysics and theology expressed in the Arabic language and in an Islamic context. Since the publication in 1972 of my essay in *Studia Islamica*, no scholar writing on al-ʿĀmirī or any other subject related to the history of thought, had referred to my text until Ian Richard Netton published his *al-Fārābī and his School* (1992) in which he writes 'in a stimulating, erudite and wide-ranging article, Professor M. Arkoun stresses that the *On Making known the virtues of Islam* operates within, or employs, a lexicon and cultural paradigm which is already well established. It is clearly a lexicon which gives a certain primacy to the noetic in its technical aspects . . .' (p. 75).

I am not complaining about the lack of interest in my contributions to scholarship. I know that my way of sharing the concerns of scholarship is different from the merely descriptive, narrative, informative style of scholarship; it is the style specific to what I call the scholar-thinker (*chercheur-penseur*) who pays as much attention to finding the epistemological options underlying each type of discourse used in the past and the present, as to the development of facts, events, ideas, beliefs, performances, institutions, works of art and individual biographies, based on reliable archives (see above, Paul Ricoeur). Writing history without making an issue of each word, each concept, each attitude used by the social protagonists, is misleading and even dangerous for people who assimilate the representations of the past as proposed by historians as the undisputable truth about this past. That is why each social group has itself built an image of its past without having the means of differentiating this mythical, or ideological image from the critical problematization provided by modern historians.

My point is about the epistemic and epistemological barrier that has always separated 'Orientalist' scholarship from the innovative, creative standpoints of reason emerging in the scholarship applied to European cultures and societies since the late sixties. In my attempt to identify a logocentrist attitude in classical Arab thought, I wanted to demonstrate that the axiomatic propositions, the postulates, the categories, the forms of demonstration used in Medieval thought expressed in the Syriac, Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, Greek, and Latin languages, were in fact shared and common to the Medieval mental space. And this strongly logocentrist frame of thinking imposed an epistemic **regime of truth** different from the other



discursive frame represented by what I call the **prophetic discourse**. The mental dividing-line between the technical logocentrist corpus and the wider and more diversified corpus of prophetic discourse (the Bible, Gospels, Qur'an considered apart from inherited theological definitions) runs at that 'deep' encompassing level, not on the 'surface' level particular to Jewish, Christian, Islamic logospheres on one side, to Western secularized, scientific sphere more and more separated from the monotheist religious sphere on the other side. I use the concepts deep and surface in the sense used by N. Chomsky in linguistics to discuss 'deep' and 'surface' structure. With this approach, the dividing-line does not stop with the advent of the modern age; the logocentrist frame was strengthened with the rationale of the Enlightenment, and to a greater extent today with tele-techno-scientific reason, while the religious frame is driven away from the prophetic discourse by the secularising forces operating in all religious traditions to shift the discourse from the religious to the ideological and militant.

We can then reinterpret the linguistic, semiotic and historical genesis, the semantic content and the functions of the three competing interacting logospheres: the religious, the scientific, and the philosophical in their changing sociological, historical contexts. I know that this terminology is too technical to be easily grasped and applied. To reach its full cognitive dimensions and its critical import, one needs to become familiar with several disciplines which are not currently properly taught with their interrelated conceptualisations and with the common concern for the epistemological shift of the frontiers of mind. All cultures and the languages used as vehicles, map the human mind with frontiers drawn and reproduced by systems of beliefs, non beliefs, representations and empirical knowledge. The problem for social sciences is to re-map the mind with a constant effort to retrace the frontiers according to the requirements of successive scientific revolutions and with radical criticism of the stance of reason. But we know that social sciences prefer to stick to the empirical, functionalist description of the 'facts', the 'objective realities' which are ultimately the result merely of social, psychological, conceptual constructions. If these remarks are in order on the cognitive status of the social sciences defined, taught and applied in Western societies, what would be the relevance of their practice and their products in the fields of foreign, sometimes hostile societies? We know how the exclusion of what is currently called 'Islam' from the Western intellectual and spiritual legacy, is more militant and more explicit than ever;<sup>1</sup> as I point out repeatedly, some Muslims themselves contribute to the extension and radicalisation of this exclusion with their apologetic endeavour to 'Islamise' modernity, to reject the Western 'materialism', 'immorality', 'atheism' labelled 'West-oxication'!

Seven other themes related to large and complex domains of Modern

---

1. On this important aspect, see *Islam and the West in the Mass Media: Fragmented Images in a Globalizing World*, edited by Kai Hafez, Hampton Press, Cresskill, 1999.

debates are introduced in the following chapters: problems of the state, civil society, individual and human rights; the concept of the person, the individual and the citizen; belief, non-belief and the construction of the human subject in Islamic contexts; authority and power, religious imaginary. I have dealt with many other themes in articles published in journals or collective books like the inter-religious dialogue and the recognition of the religious phenomenon; toleration, intolerance, intolerable; anthropology as a key discipline for rethinking the religious phenomenon and for deciphering many till now ignored aspects of traditional, pre-modern societies; the functions of religion in the quest for peace and legitimizing wars (see the Bibliography).

We cannot say that these themes are totally absent in the ongoing confrontations, the recurrent programs proposed in many conferences, seminars, colloquia organized throughout the world by different institutions and organisations. It is true that Western institutions, private associations are eager to enhance a dialogue with Muslims on these burning issues with the hope of reaching a better mutual understanding, to build a culture of peace through repeated exchanges, meetings, international conferences. Particular efforts are displayed in that perspective by Christian institutions; since talks for peace have been initiated between Israel and Palestine, Jewish personalities are taking part more than before in this international endeavour. Finally, UNESCO has recently shown interest in supporting and enlarging the activities aimed at the construction and the teaching of a culture for universal peace with the decisive participation of all the existing religions. Such an ambitious program cannot be fulfilled if religious reason continues to stick to the inherited tools and systems of thought. It is clear that the participants in these activities do not share the same values, the same social and historical solidarities; more than that, they come from very different epistemological backgrounds; most of them cannot stick to a rigorous historical reasoning, or conceive of the existence of several rationalities supporting different types and levels of what all of them call currently 'reason', truth, reality, history, culture, religion, society and so on. For example, when I try to explain the methodological necessity to suspend – not to ignore totally – all theological interference with a linguistic analysis of the Qur'ānic discourse, Muslims – ordinary believers as well as cultivated 'intellectuals' – would ask immediately 'how can you carry on a linguistic discourse analysis on a *divine* word expressed in Arabic which is itself elected as a *divine* language'? Or 'what you consider as a text is actually an indivisible part of the *uncreated Qur'an* collected in the *Mushaf*'. Not only do these questions reveal the intellectual impossibility of grasping a very simple methodological rule, but they stop the proposed exercise with naïve so-called theological objections betraying a total ignorance of the rich theoretical debates generated in classical theology on the issue of God's created speech. This is clearly what I call the unthinkable and the unthought in contemporary Islamic thought. The usefulness of such

meetings and dialogues lies in the opportunities given to each participant to increase awareness of the urgent necessity to create an adequate cultural and intellectual frame of communication, analysis and interpretation, whenever or wherever traditions of thought, belief systems, emotional claims of identity and 'values' are used to face challenges of modernity and globalisation.

Because I often had to introduce my own cognitive strategy and option for a general criticism of all forms of rationality, all procedures and postures of reason in various historical and cultural contexts, I felt obliged to repeat elementary explanations as a pedagogical device to enhance the intellectual communication with my changing audiences. Traces of this oral delivery will be noticed in the written version of the essays collected in this volume. My readers too belong to different cultural and epistemological, ideological backgrounds; they complained to me about the difficulty of going through several fields and levels of conceptualisation. Although Western scholars remain reluctant to share the task of rethinking the whole Islamic tradition, some of them dare to combine several methodologies, to rely on multiple disciplines and confer a more critical purport to their new scientific practice.<sup>1</sup> I mention many titles in the general bibliography to illustrate this new initiative of what I prefer to call Western scholarship on 'Islam' and 'Muslim' societies to avoid the heavily and polemically loaded word Orientalism. In a recently published book by Ḥamīd Dabashi, *Truth and Narrative: The Untimely Thoughts of 'Ayn al-Qudāt al-Hamadḥānī*, we read a vehement reactivation of the controversy about

*the unbelievable power of Orientalism as a colonialist ideology that even now, a good two decades into Said's destruction of the whole Orientalist discourse, people continue to exercise it in university halls and dissertations, conferences and journals [p. 39].*

I mention this author here just to avoid an intolerable amalgam between an illusionary deconstructivist discourse, a so-called critique limited to a polemical rhetoric and a legitimate epistemological reassessment of the systems of thought, the levels and types of knowledge transmitted, reproduced uncritically by all religious as well as modern, secularised traditions of thought and knowledge. Dabashi calls for a subversive epistemology and instrumentalises in 1999 – just as I have done since the seventies – the same vocabulary, the same option for deconstructing all the 'masternarratives, the nomocentricity of Islamic Law, the logocentricity of philosophy, the intoxicated theo-erotic counter narrative of the *taṣawwuf*. . . the power-based language of all discourses of Islamic thought', as well as for pursuing the 'de-essentialisation of what Muslims and Orientalists have hegemonically called "Islamic" history.' Not only he does this as if no one author has used this

---

1. Many titles can be mentioned here like Uri Rubin, *The Eye of the Beholder*, or J. Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft* (see the bibliography).

cognitive strategy for more than three decades, but he fails to recognize the still-needed rigorous philological methodology and even historicist writing in Islamic studies. He is also unfair to the significant moves made by Western Islamicists since the last twenty years towards new epistemological postures and cognitive explorations (see the bibliography). The book of Dabashi is in my view an eloquent counter-example to the intellectual and scholarly profile I try to illustrate under the concept of the **scholar-thinker**. I totally share the critical remarks made by Julie Scott Meisami in her review of the book (*Journal of Islamic Studies*, vol. 11, 3, September 2000); she rightly stresses the discrepancy between 'the theoretical pretensions of the author and the weakness, the inconsistencies of his scholarship and style. This should not authorize on the other side, the dismissal, with the same unfair irony used by Dabashi against the "the neo-Orientalist enterprise", the ritualistic invocation of Weber, Durkheim, Derrida, Foucault and a whole panoply of others in . . . jargon-ridden statements.' It remains true that the most admirable scholars who limit their search and their 'writing' to the erudite accumulation of factual knowledge, neglect to read and enhance their critical thinking with the conceptualisations and the epistemological shifts imposed by those scholars-thinkers who contributed so efficiently to the successive 'scientific revolutions' of intellectual modernity. The unique valid point in discussion here is how to bring Islamic thought and studies to the level of fertile criticism we witness since the seventeenth-eighteenth century in European scholarship and historical development.

I cannot end this introduction without mentioning other essays prepared in French for a book to be published soon under the title *Penser l'Islam aujourd'hui*. All these essays illustrate the large fields and important themes belonging to the *Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*. Two chapters in particular should be added to the present work: *Inaugurating a Critique of Islamic Reason* and *Introduction to a Critique of Juridical Reason in Islamic Contexts*. For various reasons I have preferred to delay this publication until reactions to the French edition are collected and evaluated. I hope the readers of the present book will also take into consideration the whole project and the common vision which inspired the English and the French versions of the same lifetime work.