

# Muhammad Arkoun's Idea of Humanization of Religious Science and Its Relevance for the Development of Islamic Astronomy

Ulil Albab Al aulia Alpaten <sup>a, 1, \*</sup>, Nur Afdal Purnama <sup>b, 2</sup>, Ariba Khairunnisa <sup>c, 3</sup>, Yusuf Nur Qolbi <sup>d, 4</sup>, Rizka Aulia <sup>e, 5</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo, Semarang, Jalan Prof. Hamka 50185, Indonesia.

<sup>b</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo, Semarang, Jalan Prof. Hamka 50185, Indonesia.

<sup>c</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo, Semarang, Jalan Prof. Hamka 50185, Indonesia.

<sup>d</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo, Semarang, Jalan Prof. Hamka 50185, Indonesia.

<sup>e</sup> Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo, Semarang, Jalan Prof. Hamka 50185, Indonesia.

<sup>1</sup> [ulilalbab80747@gmail.com](mailto:ulilalbab80747@gmail.com); <sup>2</sup> [Afdalpurnama692@gmail.com](mailto:Afdalpurnama692@gmail.com); <sup>3</sup> [ariba\\_1902046012@student.walisongo.ac.id](mailto:ariba_1902046012@student.walisongo.ac.id); <sup>4</sup> [yusufnqmicro98@gmail.com](mailto:yusufnqmicro98@gmail.com); <sup>5</sup> [Rizkaaulia76@gmail.com](mailto:Rizkaaulia76@gmail.com)

\* corresponding author

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the ideas of Muhammad Arkoun, a prominent contemporary Islamic thinker, with a focus on his concepts of the humanization of religious knowledge and their relevance to the development of astronomy in the present era. The research aims to analyze how Arkoun's critiques of traditional Islamic thought can contribute to addressing contemporary issues in religious and scientific contexts. Specifically, it explores the implications of his ideas for revisiting and refining the determination of the qibla direction in light of modern astronomical calculations. The study employs a library research method, relying on the critical analysis of literature and primary sources related to Arkoun's works. Central to Arkoun's thought are his notions of deconstruction and rethinking Islam, which challenge the tendency of Islamic societies to sanctify the views of past scholars without questioning their applicability to current contexts. This stagnation, Arkoun argues, impedes the ability of Islamic thought to evolve and address contemporary challenges. One practical example examined in this research is the resistance to reorienting the qibla direction in certain mosques, which are often assumed to be correctly aligned based on the authority of earlier scholars. However, modern astronomical calculations reveal deviations in some of these directions, necessitating corrective measures. By integrating Arkoun's critique with the advancements in astronomy, the*



Author correspondence email: [ulilalbab80747@gmail.com](mailto:ulilalbab80747@gmail.com)



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*study highlights the necessity of revisiting inherited religious knowledge to ensure its alignment with current scientific understanding. The findings demonstrate that Arkoun's approach provides a framework for bridging traditional religious knowledge with modern scientific advancements. This study concludes that applying Arkoun's humanistic critique and openness to interdisciplinary collaboration can foster a dynamic and responsive Islamic thought capable of addressing both religious and scientific developments in the contemporary world.*

## 1. Introduction

In a rapidly evolving modern world, Muslims face the challenge of aligning their traditional sciences with contemporary developments. One of the primary issues often highlighted is the stagnation in the development of Islamic knowledge, including in the field of Islamic astronomy (*'ilm al-falak*). Despite significant advancements in technology and science, the practices and methodologies of Islamic sciences frequently remain confined to traditional frameworks that are less responsive to contemporary demands. This stagnation not only hinders adaptation to societal needs but also limits the contributions of Muslims to global scientific advancements. (Ajhari, 2016) For instance, in the practice of determining the qibla direction, modern technology provides highly accurate calculations. Yet, many insist on maintaining traditional methods without verifying their accuracy. This reflects a tendency to revere past practices without assessing their relevance to the current context. Such a situation underscores the gap between the progression of Islamic sciences and the dynamics of modern scientific knowledge, particularly in the field of astronomy. (Ibda, 2020)

Muhammad Arkoun, a contemporary Islamic thinker, has presented a critical epistemological perspective on this stagnation. In his works, Arkoun emphasizes the importance of humanizing religious sciences as a way to make Islamic knowledge more adaptive to changing times. According to Arkoun, Islamic sciences need to be reconstructed with a more inclusive, critical, and humanistic approach to meet the demands of the modern era. However, this idea has rarely been explored in the context of the development of Islamic astronomy, despite its close ties to technology and modern science. (Arkoun, 1996)

Previous studies have explored Muhammad Arkoun's ideas from various perspectives, particularly in the contexts of religious education and the reform of Islamic thought. (Nasrullah, 2017) focused on Arkoun's critical and rational approaches to teaching Islamic sciences, highlighting the need for reconstructing religious education to address contemporary challenges. Similarly, (Hajriana, 2018) emphasized Arkoun's critique of traditional Islamic education systems, which have struggled to adapt to modern paradigms. Both studies, however, concentrated on general educational reforms and did not explore the practical implications of Arkoun's ideas in specific fields, such as Islamic astronomy.

In the context of Islamic thought reform, (Efendi, 2014) examined Arkoun's contributions to addressing the stagnation in Islamic epistemology. The study demonstrated how Arkoun's critiques challenge traditional methodologies but remained focused on general reform rather than specific applications in scientific disciplines. (Rasyid & Djafar, 2020) further discussed Arkoun's concept of rethinking Islamic thought and its relevance to contemporary challenges, highlighting the importance of interdisciplinary approaches. However, their research did not apply this interdisciplinary framework to specialized fields like *'ilm al-falak*.

Other studies have explored the integration of science and Islamic knowledge. (Mas'ud, 2020) highlighted the potential for merging modern scientific advancements with Islamic knowledge through the lens of humanization, emphasizing the importance of bridging traditional and contemporary paradigms. (Al-Jabiri, 2014) discussed the stagnation of Islamic thought and its impact on Muslim contributions to scientific advancements, calling for a paradigm shift in Islamic epistemology. Despite these valuable insights, neither study delved into practical implementations, particularly in fields such as Islamic astronomy.

While these studies provide a strong theoretical foundation, there is a significant gap in the literature concerning the application of Arkoun's humanization framework to specific disciplines. This research addresses that gap by examining how Arkoun's ideas can inform the development of Islamic astronomy (*'ilm al-falak*), offering a practical application of his epistemological critiques. By doing so, this study contributes a novel perspective, bridging the discourse on humanization of Islamic knowledge with its practical implementation in a specialized scientific field.

This study aims to answer the questions: What are Muhammad Arkoun's views on the humanization of religious knowledge, and how are they relevant to the development of Islamic astronomy? Through this approach, the research seeks to contribute new insights to Arkoun's studies by highlighting the application of his ideas to the field of Islamic astronomy. The urgency of this research lies in the need to reformulate the methodologies of Islamic astronomy to better meet the needs of contemporary Muslim communities while addressing the stagnation in Islamic thought that hampers the development of Islamic sciences.

Thus, this study is expected to offer new perspectives on the relationship between the humanization of religious knowledge and the development of Islamic astronomy while providing a theoretical foundation for creating methodologies in Islamic astronomy that are more contextual and responsive to contemporary challenges.

## 2. Research Method

This study employs a literature research method with a library-based approach, focusing on the collection and analysis of primary and secondary sources. The primary data in this research consists of the original works of Muhammad Arkoun, while the secondary data includes books, journal articles, documents, and other publications relevant to the themes of the humanization of religious knowledge and the development of Islamic astronomy (*'ilm al-falak*). Data collection was conducted systematically through a combination of manual note-taking and the use of bibliographic software to manage references and research notes. This process involved identifying relevant sources, recording key information, and classifying data based on the themes and focus of the study.

For data analysis, the study utilizes thematic analysis and a hermeneutic approach. Thematic analysis is used to identify and group the main themes emerging from Arkoun's works, such as the concept of humanization in religious knowledge and critiques of traditional epistemology. Meanwhile, the hermeneutic approach is applied to understand the context and deeper meanings of Arkoun's ideas, particularly their relevance to the development of Islamic astronomy. The analysis process involves several stages, including a critical review of the literature, organizing data by theme, and interpreting the findings to address the research questions. This methodological approach aims to produce a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the relevance of Muhammad Arkoun's ideas to the advancement of Islamic astronomy in the modern era.

### 3. Result and Discussion

#### 3. 1. Muhammad Arkoun's Idea of Humanization of Religious Science

Mohammed Arkoun, a renowned intellectual and scholar, was born on February 1, 1928, in Kabylia, Algeria, a region inhabited by Berber communities and known for its majestic mountain landscapes. Raised in a modest family, Arkoun grew up speaking Kabyle Berber, Arabic, and later French, reflecting Algeria's historical ties with France (1830-1962). (Arkoun, 1994) His multilingual environment and his mother's deep appreciation for education despite her illiteracy profoundly influenced his intellectual journey. Arkoun pursued higher education in Arabic literature and French studies at the prestigious Sorbonne University in Paris, where he completed his doctorate in 1961, focusing on humanism in the ethical philosophy of Miskawaih, a 10th-century Persian thinker. (Meuleman, 1996)

Arkoun's academic career flourished with teaching positions at esteemed institutions such as the University of Strasbourg, Sorbonne University, and the University of Lyon. He later became a professor of Islamic thought at Sorbonne University, where he integrated Western advancements in philosophy, linguistics, and social sciences into his research. (Putro, 1998) Influenced by figures like Paul Ricoeur, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Michel Foucault, Arkoun developed a critical approach to Islamic studies, emphasizing rationality, interdisciplinary analysis, and the humanization of Islamic knowledge. His works often challenged traditional frameworks, seeking to reconcile the rich legacy of Islamic thought with contemporary intellectual currents. (Sumarkan, 2012)

Arkoun's prolific contributions include books such as *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* and *Rethinking Islam Today*, as well as numerous articles in prestigious journals like *Studia Islamica* and *Ulumul Qur'an*. (Sani, 1998) Recognized for his groundbreaking ideas, he was awarded France's Legion of Honour and the title *Officier des Palmes Académiques*. As director of several academic institutions and journals, including *Arabica*, he engaged with global audiences, lecturing at institutions like Princeton, the University of California, and the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. Arkoun's enduring legacy lies in his relentless pursuit of integrating rationality and critical thinking into Islamic studies, offering innovative solutions to the challenges facing contemporary Muslim societies. (Masdani, 2020)

The historical method employed by Mohammad Arkoun focuses on the development of contemporary Western social sciences, heavily influenced by the ideas of French (post-)structuralist thinkers. (Asysyaukani, 1998) Arkoun drew upon the works of intellectuals such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Paul Ricoeur, along with anthropologists like Jack Goody and Pierre Bourdieu. These thinkers shaped his intellectual strategy, which combines synthetic and deconstructive approaches to study historical and social facts comprehensively. (Sanusi, 2020)

Arkoun's way of thinking reflects the intersection of two distinct traditions: one rooted in the Middle East, influenced by Greek philosophy, and the other grounded in the prophetic teachings of monotheism. (Zafi, 2020) He proposed a broad intellectual strategy encompassing three core dimensions: *ikhtiraq* (breakthrough), *izahah* (displacement), and *tajawuz* (transcendence), executed through seven distinct levels of analysis. (Barah, 2019)

1. Linguistic and Semiotic Level: This level explores the forms and content of ideas and words circulating in society, emphasizing the study of signs and their meanings. Arkoun viewed language as a critical medium connecting thought and communication, particularly in interpreting sacred texts. (Ardana & Sari, 2018) Semiotics, as a discipline, examines how language and signs convey meaning, with

- a specific focus on symbols and their role in understanding religion. (Fauzan & Alfian, 2011)
2. **Historical Level:** Arkoun examined past events as presented in written texts and references, connecting them to their historical contexts through the interplay of thought, memory, and imagination. He argued that the Qur'anic text should be understood within its historical framework to appreciate the values and beliefs of diverse communities, emphasizing that knowledge is bound by the time and space in which it is produced.
  3. **Social Structure Level:** This level investigates the relationship between societal structures, their advocates, and their critics, exploring how social dynamics are shaped by and reflected in these interactions.
  4. **Anthropological Level:** This level reveals how religion interacts with and adapts to other cultures by examining the dialectics between oral and written traditions, as well as between mythological and rational thought. Arkoun highlighted the role of imagination as a constantly evolving component of both knowledge and practice, particularly in creating ideologies that mobilize communities in religious and secular contexts. This approach emphasizes the symbolic and material aspects of human life. (Hidayati, 2017)
  5. **Philosophical Level:** Arkoun employed rigorous philosophical analysis to position ideas within the broader history of systems of thought. This historical epistemology examines the formation and evolution of ideas throughout history, offering a deeper understanding of their context and relevance.
  6. **Theological Level:** This level critically examines theological constructs within various religious traditions, exploring their foundational beliefs and their role in shaping thought and behavior.
  7. **Psychological Level:** Finally, Arkoun explored the subconscious influences of ideas and truths within societies, shaped by environmental, media, and social factors. He analyzed the mentalities of communities by studying their myths and the imagination underlying their belief systems. He argued that imagination and intellect are interdependent, each shaping and reinforcing the other.

Through these seven levels, Arkoun's historical method offers a multidimensional approach to understanding religion, culture, and society, emphasizing the need for critical and innovative perspectives that transcend traditional epistemological boundaries. This comprehensive strategy aims to address the challenges of modernity while fostering a dynamic reinterpretation of Islamic thought.

#### ***a. Cultural Heritage of Muhammad Arkoun***

Mohammed Arkoun emphasized the importance of humanism and openness in developing a new, open-minded reading of religious texts. His approach sought to move beyond narrow, extremist interpretations of religion and a limited understanding of politics as a modern science with foundations, laws, and management mechanisms. He objectively questioned the reasons behind the lack of critical rationality in the Arab and Islamic worlds, urging intellectual engagement to address these issues. (Arkoun, 1996) Arkoun's intellectual vision also involved advocating for the critical cleansing of Islamic heritage, freeing it from centuries of negative accumulation and dependency, and fostering self-reliance within Muslim societies. (Haq et al., 2024)

Arkoun's intellectual project focused on deconstructing dominant historical narratives and interpretations of Islamic heritage. He challenged the assumptions and biases that have shaped Islamic thought for centuries. By emphasizing a more rigorous and historical understanding of Islamic texts and traditions, he sought to uncover the influence of social, political, and cultural factors on their evolution. A central element of his legacy is the emphasis on the historicity and plurality of Islamic interpretations. Arkoun argued that Islamic thought is not a monolithic entity but rather a dynamic and diverse discourse shaped by the ever-changing contexts in which it is practiced. This perspective opens new

pathways for understanding the diversity of Islamic expressions and the evolution of Islamic thought over time.

### ***b. Humanism in Islamic Education***

The relationship between Islamic humanism and education is deeply significant. Before delving into Arkoun's perspective on religious humanism, it is essential to consider the broader concepts, theories, and ideas of humanism as they relate to Islamic humanism, which forms the foundation of religious humanism. (Ibda, 2020) According to Abraham Maslow, humanism in education focuses on treating individuals with respect and dignity. Maslow believed that teachers should act as guides rather than merely conveyors of information, helping students become the best versions of themselves and succeed in society. In humanistic theory, individuals have the right to decide their behavior and life paths without being solely dictated by their environment. (Hadziq, 2005)

Arkoun aimed to help Muslims understand Islam better by critically studying its various dimensions, including law, beliefs, and spiritual practices. He believed that examining Islam from a fresh perspective was vital, as Islamic education had become stagnant over time. Arkoun criticized the rigid and outdated aspects of Islamic history while acknowledging the enduring importance of communal care and compassion in the past. (Baedhowi, 2017; Putro, 1998) His primary focus was on understanding religious texts within their historical contexts while exploring the cultural and humanistic ideas embedded within them. By doing so, he sought to uncover deeper meanings and symbolism in Islamic texts.

Arkoun's ultimate goal was to dismantle closed-mindedness in Islamic research and education, fostering progress through open and refreshing discussions on humanism within Islamic societies. He advocated for a transformative approach to studying and understanding Islamic texts. While his work engaged deeply with worldly matters, Arkoun never disregarded the centrality of God in all human endeavors. His intellectual vision combined religious devotion with intellectual rigor, making his thought a distinctive blend of religious humanism and intellectualism.

### ***3. 2. Arkoun's Thought (Contradictions of Heritage and Knowledge in the Practice of Islamic Astronomy)***

According to Arkoun, Islam is not merely a civilization and history, but also a method of teaching. (Syar'i, 2022) Each period in Islamic history possesses its own distinct way of thinking, which he refers to as an episteme. As time progresses, ways of thinking also evolve. To understand a teaching or practice from a particular era, one must first understand the way of thinking prevalent during that period. When a new way of thinking emerges, it replaces the old one. This is crucial because religious teachings cannot be separated from the thought processes of their historical context. (Gauchet, 2021) The problem arises when we disregard the historical ways of thinking and treat religious teachings as isolated from their temporal context. For instance, practicing a religion without considering the intellectual framework of the era in which it developed leads to a lack of contextual understanding.

Arkoun critiques the view that Islamic civilization was purely shaped by doctrine, asserting that doctrines are divine, transcend history, and therefore make religion ahistorical. His groundbreaking theory of deconstruction brought him widespread recognition. Additionally, Arkoun is known for his critique of orthodoxy. In this theory, he challenges the ahistorical perspective of religious interpretations in Islam and the excessive veneration of earlier scholars' thoughts without considering their historical context. This critique is especially relevant in contemporary Indonesia, where such tendencies are often observed. Arkoun argues that this approach is flawed and instead proposes his theory of episteme, emphasizing that each era has its own unique intellectual framework for understanding and applying Islam. (Arkoun, 2004)

This study highlights a significant challenge in modern Islamic societies: the sacralization of traditions and the thoughts of past scholars, which hinders the acceptance of advancements in *'ilm al-falak* (Islamic astronomy), particularly in the recalibration of the Qibla. The tendency to treat the determinations of historical religious authorities as absolute leads to resistance against scientifically validated corrections. For instance, recalibrations of the Qibla direction in mosques such as Masjid Agung Demak and Masjid Al-Ijabah Gunung Pati were met with objections, despite evidence of misalignment. Communities often argue that any change would dishonor the legacy of respected religious figures who are believed to have determined it accurately. (Izzuddin, 2012)

In 2010, amidst the widespread efforts to realign mosque Qibla directions, Masjid Agung Demak also responded by recalibrating its Qibla. The recalibration involved various stakeholders, including the *Badan Hisab Rukyat Daerah* (BHRD) of Demak Regency, the mosque's management (*ta'mir*), the Demak branch of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), the Ministry of Religious Affairs of Central Java, and several local religious scholars (kyai). The process was led by KH. Slamet Hambali and Dr. H. Ahmad Izzuddin, representing the Central Java Ministry of Religious Affairs. (Munif, 2014)

The recalibration was conducted over two days, Thursday and Friday, July 15-16, 2010, using multiple methods, including *rashd al-qiblat*, as well as measurements with a theodolite and GPS. The results showed that the Qibla of Masjid Agung Demak deviated northward by 12 degrees. Following these findings, the mosque's Qibla direction was adjusted according to the new measurements by realigning the prayer rows (*shaf*) without altering the building's orientation. (Sabiq, 2021)

Muhammad Arkoun's epistemological framework provides a critical lens to address such resistance. His theory of episteme emphasizes that every era has its own intellectual framework, shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts. Arkoun argued that religious doctrines and practices must be understood as dynamic entities influenced by their time, rather than static, ahistorical truths. Applying this perspective to the issue of Qibla determination, Arkoun's approach encourages an acceptance of modern scientific methods as part of a continuous evolution of Islamic knowledge, rather than a rejection of sacred traditions.

Arkoun's notion of deconstruction also plays a pivotal role in addressing societal resistance. By deconstructing entrenched orthodoxies and questioning the sacralization of past scholars' decisions, his approach allows for a more critical and adaptive understanding of religious practices. In the context of Qibla recalibration, this means recognizing that historical determinations were based on the best knowledge available at the time but may require revision with the advent of more accurate methods. (Arkoun, 1996)

The findings of this study have broader implications for the development of Islamic knowledge in the modern era. (Haq, 2024) The recalibration efforts at Masjid Agung Demak illustrate the tension between honoring traditional religious authority and adopting modern scientific advancements. This resistance reflects a broader challenge within Muslim societies, where hesitation to embrace innovation can hinder the development of Islamic knowledge and its alignment with contemporary needs.

Arkoun's epistemological approach offers a pathway for integrating modern science into Islamic thought. By fostering a culture of critical rationality and historical awareness, his framework can help Muslim communities reconcile their religious traditions with contemporary scientific advancements. This reconciliation is crucial for the broader acceptance of innovation in Islamic societies, enabling Muslims to contribute meaningfully to global scientific and intellectual discourses.

This study underscores the importance of re-evaluating traditional practices through the lens of modern knowledge. The recalibration of Masjid Agung Demak exemplifies the potential for integrating scientific advancements with religious practices. By adopting

Arkoun's epistemological framework, Muslim societies can navigate the tension between tradition and progress more effectively, ensuring that Islamic knowledge remains dynamic and responsive to the demands of the modern era. This approach not only advances 'ilm al-falak but also strengthens the broader integration of science and religion, fostering a more enlightened and progressive Muslim community.

#### 4. Conclusion

Muhammad Arkoun's emphasis on the historicity and plurality of Islamic interpretations underscores that Islamic thought is dynamic and evolves with time. His critique of the sacralization of past practices highlights the need for contemporary adaptation. This perspective aligns with efforts by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Islamic astronomy experts to recalibrate the Qibla direction using modern methods. The advancements in astronomical calculations necessitate reevaluating traditional approaches to achieve greater accuracy, reflecting Arkoun's vision of keeping Islamic practices responsive to scientific and societal developments.

This study finds that the sacralization of traditional Islamic practices, including Qibla determination, often hinders the acceptance of advancements in 'ilm al-falak. By applying Arkoun's epistemological framework, the research demonstrates that historical practices were context-specific and should evolve with the growth of knowledge and technology. The recalibration of Masjid Agung Demak's Qibla direction serves as a case study of how Arkoun's ideas can be practically applied to ensure Islamic practices remain relevant and precise.

The study, however, is limited by its focus on a few specific cases and reliance on secondary data, which may not capture the full spectrum of community responses. Future research could explore a broader range of examples and incorporate field studies to address these limitations. Nonetheless, the findings highlight the importance of integrating Arkoun's critical and historical perspectives into the development of Islamic knowledge, promoting acceptance of scientific advancements while maintaining the spiritual essence of faith.

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