



The crisis of Muslim religious discourse: The necessary shift from Plato to Kant

by Lahouari Addi, translated from the French by Bonnie Einsiedel, London & New York, Routledge, 2022, 222 pp., £120/\$160 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-032-12964-8.

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To cite this article: Clement M. Henry (2022): The crisis of Muslim religious discourse: The necessary shift from Plato to Kant, *The Journal of North African Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/13629387.2022.2073705](https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2022.2073705)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2022.2073705>



Published online: 15 May 2022.



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BOOK REVIEW

The crisis of Muslim religious discourse: The necessary shift from Plato to Kant, by Lahouari Addi, translated from the French by Bonnie Einsiedel, London & New York, Routledge, 2022, 222 pp., £120/\$160 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-032-12964-8.

In this sequel to his 2017 *Radical Arab Nationalism and Political Islam*,¹ Lahouari Addi fulfils his promise to explain why a shift from Plato to Kant is necessary for a full reformation of Islam.² It may seem a stretch to associate medieval Islam with Plato and a fully reformed Islam with Immanuel Kant, but the exercise can be intellectually invigorating.³ Professor Addi has written a brilliant history of ideas with philosophic depth like Hegel's *History of Philosophy*, which he quotes (148–150). His argument deserves a serious reading, perhaps a required one for philosophy majors as well as for progressive Muslims and scholars of Islam.

For Addi, a sociologist by training, religion is necessarily part of its believers' culture. 'Sacred texts do not speak; they are spoken with regard to a culture and to a metaphysics ... the sacred has always been interpreted and, as a result, the crisis in Muslim is cultural' (viii). Every culture presupposes some sort of underlying philosophic mind set. For medieval Christianity and Islam, Plato did the job – with some help on the Christian side from Aristotle for St. Thomas Aquinas. Addi wishes 'to free Muslim culture from the old metaphysics, drawing attention to the European experience' (xvi).

In the first third of his book, the author examines the affinities of Platonism with monotheist religions and how it subsequently survived in Muslim societies. Platonism is derived from Plato's *Republic*, not his cosmology, which Addi does not discuss.⁴ In Platonism the philosopher king and his guardians enlighten the faithful cave dwellers living in a shadowy world of appearances. This version of Platonism is also that of Al Farabi (870–950), an eminent Muslim philosopher from what is today Kazakhstan. He demoted the ulama, official scholars of Islam, into the servile class, to be guided by philosophers.

Alas, that was not to be. Addi relates the familiar story of the ulama specialists of the word (*kalam*) of Quranic injunctions and sayings of the prophet getting their revenge and excommunicating the Muslim philosophers after the twelfth century – their citations of sayings replacing reasoning about them. The triumph of revelation over reason, however, did not upset Islam's Platonic underpinnings. For the Sunni mainstream, the ulema replaced the philosophers. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111), the most renowned theologian of his time, also embraced Sufi orders, and Ibn al-Arabi (1164–1240), a philosopher and mystic born in Spain, tied them to the teachings of Plotinus (204–270), the Greek founder in Roman Egypt of Neo-Platonism.

In an interesting twist, Addi sees contemporary 'Islamism' as equally bathed in the Platonic metaphysics that nurtured Sufism and its powerful spiritual experiences for masses of followers.

The social energy of Sufism has been harnessed by Islamism, which has 'secularized' and politicized it by promising to improve the lives of believers through the strict application of divine law ... Replacing mysticism with politics, Islamism – the secular continuation of Sufism – has desperately attempted to achieve the Platonic essence on earth, believing to carry it out by the imposition of *Shari'a*. (40–41)

In the Christian West, by contrast, Martin Luther attacked Aquinas and the corrupt Church establishment, and an internalised Protestant ethic challenged its external hierarchy. The Church fought back, persecuting Galileo for supporting the Copernican vision of a heliocentric world, but it could not stop Descartes and other modern philosophers from superseding the ancient Greek philosophers.

Addi sees Kant as the ultimate synthesiser of the secular world view that underpins modern culture.⁵ His Copernican Revolution in metaphysics elevated subjective consciousness and conscientiousness to be the sources of external objects of scientific inquiry, of ethical categorical imperatives, and of religious sensibility.⁶ Religion was no longer some Platonic abstraction 'out there' or '*in itself*'; it became '*for oneself*', a subjective faith that reason could scientifically neither prove nor disprove. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* had effectively separated religion from science and public affairs. Religious faith became a private matter. Kant perfected the metaphysical underpinnings of secular culture.

For Addi, modernisation logically entails secularisation. The crisis of Muslim religious discourse simply reflects a half-baked process of modernisation in a set of societies that have not yet fully secularised, where *haqq* (justice) and *haqiqa* (truth) are not fully differentiated. In most of the Muslim world, Western empire-builders imposed modernity by conquest, generating defensive reactions. He identifies Mohammed Abduh, an Egyptian scholar, as the key Muslim reformer trying to make Islam compatible with modern natural sciences. His work of apologetics is riddled with contradictions, however, because he could not make the necessary break with Platonism. He still defended the ulama in the face of the modern social sciences. Religion was still '*out there*', '*in itself*', not fully internalised as required in a secularised culture. The ulama were still supposed to be in control.

There is indeed a crisis of Muslim discourse, however, as the ulama are no longer in control. Muslim societies continue to evolve in their imposed modernity, whether on the streets of Cairo or the Paris *banlieue*. Addi sees Kantian influences at work, but now the new waves of reformers must overcome political Islamists as well as the weakened ulama. For instance, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, a professor of Arabic at Cairo University, insisted on modern linguistic interpretations of Quranic verses, not crude repetitions, and misunderstandings. He rejected the teachings not only of the official ulama but also, more so, of Muslim Brothers Sayyid Qutb and Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who were making an amalgam of thought and religion and abolishing the distance between subject and object. Abu

Zayd's critique of the Islamists as well as the official Egyptian religious authorities 'comes from the *constituting reason* of a new paradigm (that of Kant) against the *constituted reason* of the old paradigm (that of Plato)' (104). How so? Abu Zayd's interpretations of the Quran, following his linguistic mentor, Ferdinand de Saussure, would have been unthinkable without Kant. He was accused of impiety and condemned by an Egyptian court as an apostate, although he never questioned the sacredness of the Quran. 'In Egypt, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, it is forbidden to depart from the Platonic dualism' (105).

Addi identifies three recent reformers who meet his standards of full secularisation, Mahmoud Mohammed Taha of Sudan, Mohammed Shahrour of Syria, and Noureddine Boukrouh of Algeria, following Malek Bennabi, also of Algeria. At least two of them were also familiar with the works of Immanuel Kant, not that such learning guaranteed meeting Addi's high bar. For instance, Hasan Hanafi, who chaired Cairo University's philosophy department for many years and offered an Islamic interpretation of Hegel, did not qualify for Addi because he was just turning religion into ideology, not internalising Islam. Even Sadiq al-Azm, who wrote his thesis about Kant's antinomies of pure reason, did not measure up to Addi's iron law of secularism. He handled religion properly, even being expelled from teaching at the American University of Beirut for having castigated religious thought as false consciousness, but his Arab nationalism remained stuck in the old mind set, a 'reification of the Arabic culture and language ... without aiming at liberating the individual from the tyrannical memory of the past, of which the medieval interpretation of religion is just one form, among others' (107).

Mahmoud Mohammed Taha will, Addi believes, go down in history as the first truly Kantian reformer of Islam. Although trained as an engineer, he read the modern philosophers, 'whose concepts he implicitly uses to renew the religious discourse', notably that 'religion is at the service of the individual while the tradition has always taught the opposite' (115). The Quran needed reinterpretation, updating coercive older revelations of the prophet's Medina period with the gentler ones of the later Meccan period, always treating the individual not as a means but as an end in him or herself – indeed, he identified not with the Muslim Brotherhood but with 'Brothers and Sisters of the Republic'. The Sudanese government's attorney general, Hassan al-Tourabi, leader of the Sudanese version of the Muslim Brotherhood at the time, had him hanged in 1985 for apostasy.

The Syrian reformer, Mohammed Shahrour, was also an engineer, in fact a professor of civil engineering at Damascus University, where he was free to express his interpretations of *The Book and the Quran*, as he titled his book. It sold more than 150,000 copies in Cairo and Damascus. Like Abu Zayd, he insisted on modern linguistic analysis of the Quran, such as translating *hudud* not as punishment (such as chopping off the thief's hand) but as limits of possible punishment. 'The Book' is timeless revelation for all people, whereas other contents of the Quran are recommendations and rituals grounded in a particular historical context and subject to contemporary reinterpretation. By simply performing rituals and obeying teachings of ignorant ulama, Muslims have strayed from

The Book to violate human rights and to tolerate dirty streets, miserable hospitals, and the like.

In this vein Addi, with help from Omar Lardjane, also points to the sad state of education in his native Algeria, where he lived and taught sociology at the University of Oran until the 1990s. In high school curricula modern western philosophy gradually gave way to medieval Muslim philosophy without ever explaining why or how the philosophers lost out to official ulama, their science of words trumping philosophy. 'The teaching of philosophy in senior year seems to reinforce the validity of the religious discourse and does not awaken the critical spirit of the students' (84). In Algeria Nouredine Boukrouh, an intellectual at odds with other Islamists as well as official ulama, founded a political party but got few votes in elections.⁷ Like Shahrour, he called for a real religious revolution, but Addi doubts that the religion can be truly reformed as long as 'secular social thought is quite weak and do[es] not have an impact on cultural representations' (124). He points, however, to a trend in public opinion, at least among the middle class, that does not consider that secularisation is the way to get rid of religion, but another way to experience faith (125).

It may be the author's hope that his readers will overcome the cultural deficit. The present review cannot do justice to his rich intellectual history of Muslim thought and philosophy. Addi also critically examines contemporary theorising about Islam. He cites Clifford Geertz in support of his own argument that the question about faith is no longer what you must believe but rather how to: 'doubt is not religious; it is cultural'. He is also at home with Ernest Gellner (1925–1995), a British-Czech polymath – a philosopher who wrote *Words and Things* as well an anthropologist observing *Saints of the Atlas* in Morocco. Addi cites Gellner's *Muslim Society*: 'Plato divinized the word; Islam attributed the Word to deity' (24). He also gently corrects his sharp contrast between Sunni orthodoxy and Sufi saint worship in a long footnote (36: 4).


Addi might have pushed back further, for Gellner's religious typology undermines his entire argument about the need for Sunni reform. For Gellner urban Islam, like Protestantism, appears as scripture open to any reader, hence already born reformed, whereas Sufi saint worship resembles Catholic hierarchy. Addi clearly has the better of the argument while achieving an equally high level of theorising about Muslim Society. This book is a reflexive, far more significant contribution than Gellner's work to progressive members as well as scholars of Muslim society.

Notes

1. Reviewed by this writer in *The Journal of North African Studies* 24:2 (March 2019), 327–329.
2. Lahouari Addi's book under review was first published as *La crise du discours religieux musulman: Le nécessaire passage de Platon à Kant* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2019).
3. On a personal note, this book takes me back to my Harvard *summa* thesis on Plato and Kant.

4. In Plato's cosmology, as delineated in the *Timaeus*, the demiurge is an over-worked artisan struggling to shape restless matter into eternal forms. For recent discussions, see M.R. Wright, ed., *Reason and Necessity: Essays on Plato's Timaeus* (Swansea: Gerald Duckworth and the Classical Press of Wales, 2000).
5. Addi cites a famous speech of Pope Benedict XVI given at Regensburg in 2006 that gives evidence of Kant's centrality. The Pope singled out Kant, along with the Protestant Reformation and the new theology of the nineteenth and twentieth century, as one of the major waves of 'de-Hellenization' against the 'exclusive relationship between Greek philosophy and Christianity considered to be the cradle of the true faith' (153). The Pope 'explicitly rejects Kant, invoking Plato against him, which betrays a fear that faith is not confirmed by reason' (154).
6. Kant specifically compares his critique of pure reason, reversing the subject object dichotomy, to Copernicus' daring hypothesis of a heliocentric rather than earth-centered universe. See his Second Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant generates the categorical imperative from the individual's practical reason and capacity to legislate universal rules. Religious faith is grounded in the human aspiration that good intentions have beneficial outcomes.
7. Boukrouh's Party of Algerian Renewal won 1.46% of the vote in Algeria's relatively free legislative elections of 2012.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2022.2073705>

