Islamic revivalism and the activities of those who are its real or perceived proponents have monopolized the discourse on Islam. This article explores how this focus has totally ignored an overwhelming majority of Muslims. Social scientists have failed to liberate Islamic studies from pro- and anti-Orientalism clichés. Islam is still imagined as inferior (to Jewish and Christian traditions), unchanging, and militant by the West; and superior, dynamic, and peace loving by Muslims. The article outlines a need to study Islam as an epistemological project. It argues for a new *ijtihad* for Muslim as well as non-Muslim scholars to initiate a process of new thinking on Islam with tools such as history of thought rather than political events or fixed parameters; to make unthinkable notions—a historical rather than a religious postulate—thinkable; and to relate secularism, religion, and culture to contemporary challenges rather than substituting one for the other.

*Keywords*: Orientalism; rationalism; epistemology; historicity; deconstruction

Islam holds historical significance for all of us, but at the same time, our understanding of this phenomenon is sadly inadequate. There is a need to encourage and initiate audacious, free,

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productive thinking on Islam today. The so-called Islamic revivalism has monopolized the discourse on Islam; the social scientists, moreover, do not pay attention to what I call the “silent Islam”—the Islam of true believers who attach more importance to the religious relationship with the absolute of God than to the vehement demonstrations of political movements. I refer to the Islam of thinkers and intellectuals who are having great difficulties inserting their critical approach into a social and cultural space that is, at present, totally dominated by militant ideologies.

...[T]he main intellectual endeavor represented by thinking Islam or any religion today is to evaluate, with a new epistemological perspective, the characteristics and intricacy of systems of knowledge—both the historical and the mythical. I would even say that both are still interacting and interrelated in our modern thought after at least three hundred years of rationalism and historicism. There is no need to insist on the idea that thinking Islam today is a task much more urgent and significant than all the scholastic discussions of Orientalism; the ultimate goal of the project is to develop—through the example set by Islam as a religion and a social-historical space—a new epistemological strategy for the comparative study of cultures. All the polemics recently directed against Orientalism show clearly that so-called modern scholarship remains far from any epistemological project that would free Islam from the essentialist, substantialist postulates of classical metaphysics. Islam, in these discussions, is assumed to be a specific, essential, unchangeable system of thought, beliefs, and non-beliefs, one which is superior or inferior (according to Muslims or non-Muslims) to the Western (or Christian) system. It is time to stop this irrelevant confrontation between two dogmatic attitudes—the theological claims of believers and the ideological postulates of positivist rationalism. The study of religions, in particular, is handicapped by the rigid definitions and methods inherited from theology and classical metaphysics. The history of religion has collected facts and descriptions of various religions, but religion as a universal dimension of human existence is not approached from the relevant epistemological perspective. This weakness in modern thought is even more clearly illustrated by the poor, conformist, and sometimes polemical literature on the religions of the Book, as we shall see.

... Thus presented, the enterprise of thinking Islam today can only be achieved—if ever—by dynamic teams of thinkers, writers, artists, scholars, politicians, and economic producers. I am aware that long and deeply rooted traditions of thinking cannot be changed or even revised through a few essays or suggestions made by individuals. But I believe that thoughts have their own force and life. Some, at least, could survive and break through the wall of uncontrolled beliefs and dominating ideologies.

... Many other problems must be raised and solved because Islam has regulated every aspect of individual and collective life; but my wish here is to indicate a general direction of thinking and the main conditions necessary to practice an *ijtihād* [—my intellectual effort to find adequate answers—] recognized equally by Muslims and modern scholars.
I. Tools for New Thinking

Periodization of the history of thought and literature has been dictated by political events. We speak currently of the Umayyad, Abbasid, and Ottoman periods. However, there are more enlightening criteria that we can use to distinguish periods of change in the history of thought. We must consider the discontinuities affecting the conceptual framework used in a given cultural space. The concepts of reason and science ('ilm) used in the Qurʾān, for example, are not the same as those developed later by the falāsifa according to the Platonic and the Aristotelian schools. However, the concepts elaborated in Qurʾānic discourse are still used more or less accurately today because the epistème introduced by the Qurʾān has not been intellectually reconsidered.

Epistème is a better criterion for the study of thought because it concerns the structure of the discourse—the implicit postulates which command the syntactic construction of the discourse. To control the epistemological validity of any discourse, it is necessary to discover and analyze the implicit postulates. This work has never been done for any discourse in Islamic thought (I refer to my essay “Logocentrisme et vérité religieuse selon Abu al-Hasan al-ʿAmīrī,” in Essais sur la pensée islamique, Maisonneuve-Larose, third edition, 1984). This is why I must insist here on the new epistème implicit in the web of concepts used in human and social sciences since the late sixties.

It is not possible, for example, to use in Arabic the expression “problem of God,” associating Allah and mushkil (problem); Allah cannot be considered as problematic. He is well-known, well-presented in the Qurʾān; man has only to meditate, internalize, and worship what Allah revealed of Himself in His own words. The classical discussion of the attributes has not been accepted by all schools; and finally the attributes are recited as the most beautiful names of Allah (asmaʾ Allah al-ḥusna) but are neglected as subjects of intellectual inquiry.

This means that all the cultures and systems of thought related to pagan, polytheistic, jāhili (pre-Islamic), or modern secularized societies are maintained in the domain of the unthinkable and, consequently, remain unthought in the domain of “orthodox” Islamic thought or the thinkable. In European societies since the sixteenth century, the historical role that the study of classical antiquity played in initiating the modern ideas of free thinking and free examination of reality is significant; based on this link we can understand the intellectual gap between Muslim orthodoxy and Western secularized thought (cf. Marc Augé, Le Génie du paganisme, Gallimard, 1982).

Tradition, orthodoxy, myth, authority, and historicity do not yet have relevant conceptualizations in Arabic. Myth is translated as ustura, which is totally misleading because the Qurʾān uses the word for the false tales and images related in “the fables of the ancient people,” and these asatir are opposed to the truthful stories (qaṣaṣ ḥaqq or aḥsan al-qaṣaṣ) told by God in the Qurʾān. The concept of myth as it is used in contemporary anthropology is related more to qaṣaṣ than to uṣṭūra, but even anthropology has not yet clarified the difference between myth and mythol-
ogy, mystification and mythologization, as well as the semantic relationship between myth and symbol and the role of the metaphor in mythical and symbolic discourse.

We still approach these concepts and use them with a rationalist positivist system of definitions, as the Qur’ān did with asāfir al-āwwalin (pre-Islamic mythology of the ancient people). However, the Qur’ān created a symbolic alternative to the competing mythical and symbolic constructions of the ancient cultures in the Middle East. Our positivist rationalism criticizes symbols and myths and proposes, as an alternative, scientific conceptualism. We have neither a theory of symbol nor a clear conception of the metaphor to read, with a totalizing perspective, the religious texts. Religious tradition is one of the major problems we should rethink today. First, religions are mythical, symbolic, ritualistic ways of being, thinking, and knowing. They were conceived in and addressed to societies still dominated by oral and not written cultures. Scriptural religions based on a revealed Book contributed to a decisive change with far-reaching effects on the nature and functions of religion itself. Christianity and Islam (more than Judaism, until the creation of the Israeli state) became official ideologies used by a centralizing state which created written historiography and archives.

There is no possibility today of rethinking any religious tradition without making a careful distinction between the mythical dimension linked to oral cultures and the official ideological functions of the religion. We shall come back to this point because it is a permanent way of thinking that religion revealed and that social, cultural, and political activity maintained.

*Tradition* and *orthodoxy* are also unthought, unlabeled concepts in Islamic traditional thought. Tradition is reduced to a collection of “authentic” texts recognized in each community: Shi‘i, Sunni, and Khārīji. If we add to the Qur’ān and Hadith, the methodology used to derive the Sharī‘a and the *Corpus juris* in the various schools, we have other subdivisions of the three axes of Islamic tradition. I tried to introduce the concept of an *exhaustive tradition* worked up by a critical, modern confrontation of all the collections used by the communities, regardless of the “orthodox” limits traced by the classical authorities (Bukhari and Muslim for the Sunnis; Kul‘i, Ibn Bābūyē, Abu Ja‘far al-Tūsī for the Imāmis; Ibn ‘Ībād and others for the Khārījīs). This concept is used by the Islamic revolution in Iran, but more as an ideological tool to accomplish the political unity of the *umma*. The historical confrontation of the corpuses, and the theoretical elaboration of a new, coherent science of *Uṣūl al-fiqh* and *Uṣūl al-dīn*, are still unexplored and necessary tasks.

Beyond the concept of an *exhaustive tradition* based on a new definition of the *Uṣūl*, there is the concept of tradition as it is used in anthropology today—the sum of customs, laws, institutions, beliefs, rituals, and cultural values which constitute the identity of each ethno-linguistic group. This level of tradition has been partially integrated by the Sharī‘a under the name of *‘urf* or *‘amal* (like *‘amal al-fāsi* in Fās), but it is covered and legitimized by the *üşūlî* methodology of the jurists. This aspect of tradition can be expressed in Arabic by *taqālīd*, but the concept of exhaus-
tive tradition can be expressed by the word sunna only if it is re-elaborated in the perspective I mentioned.

Likewise, orthodoxy refers to two values. For the believers, it is the authentic expression of the religion as it has been taught by the pious ancestors (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ); the “orthodox” literature describes opposing groups as “sects” (fīraq). For the historian, orthodoxy refers to the ideological use of religion by the competing groups in the same political space, like the Sunnis who supported the caliphate—legitimized afterwards by the jurists—and who called themselves “the followers of the tradition and the united community” (ahl al-sunna wa-al-jamā’a). All the other groups were given polemical, disqualifying names like ṭawāfiḍ, khawārij, and bātinīyya. The Imamis called themselves “the followers of infallibility and justice” (ahl al-ʾismā wa-al-ʿadāla), referring to an orthodoxy opposed to that of the Sunnis.

There has been no effort (ijtiḥād) to separate orthodoxy as a militant ideological endeavor, a tool of legitimation for the state and the “values” enforced by this state, from religion as a way proposed to man to discover the Absolute. This is another task for our modern project of rethinking Islam, and other religions.

II. Modes of Thinking

I would like to clarify and differentiate between the two modes of thinking that Muslim thinkers adopted at the inception of intellectual modernity in their societies (not only in thought), that is, since the beginning of the Nahḍa in the nineteenth century. I do not need to emphasize the well-known trend of salafī reformist thought initiated by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī and Muhammadʿ Abduh. It is what I call the islāhi way of thinking which has characterized Islamic thought since the death of the Prophet. The principle common to all Muslim thinkers, the ‘ulamā’ mujtahidūn, as well as to historians who adopted the theological framework imposed by the division of time into two parts—before/after the Hijra (like before/after Christ)—is that all the transcendent divine Truth has been delivered to mankind by the Revelation and concretely realized by the Prophet through historical initiatives in Medina. There is, then, a definite model of perfect historical action for mankind, not only for Muslims. All groups at any time and in any social and cultural environment are bound to go back to this model in order to achieve the spirit and the perfection shown by the Prophet, his companions, and the first generation of Muslims called the pious ancestors (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ).

This vision has been faithfully adopted and assumed by the program of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (founded in 1981 in Washington, D.C., “for the reform and progress of Islamic thought”). The publication of the Institute’s International Conference in the Islamicization of Knowledge notes that the “human mind by itself with its limitations cannot comprehend the totality of the matter.” This means that there is an “Islamic framework” constantly valid, transcendent, authentic, and universal in which all human activities and initiatives ought to be controlled and correctly integrated. Since the Islamic framework is part of the “Islamic legacy,” one must always look back to the time when the Truth
was formulated and implemented either in the model set in Medina by the Prophet and the Revelation or by recognized 'ulama' mujtahidun who correctly derived the Sharīa using the rules of valid ʿītihād.

This is at the same time a methodology, an epistemology, and a theory of history. It is certainly an operative intellectual framework used and perpetuated by generations of Muslims since the debate on authority and power started inside the community according to patterns of thinking and representing the world specific to the islāhi movement.

... To rethink Islam one must comprehend the socio-cultural genesis of islāhi thinking and its impact on the historical destiny of the societies where this thinking has been or is actually dominant. To assess the epistemological validity of islāhi thinking, one has to start from the radical and initial problems concerning the generative process, the structure and the ideological use of knowledge. By this, I mean any kind and level of knowledge produced by man living, acting, and thinking in a given social-historical situation. Radical thinking refers to the biological, historical, linguistic, semiotic condition shared by people as natural beings. From this perspective, the Revelation of Islam is only one attempt, among many others, to emancipate human beings from the natural limitations of their biological, historical, and linguistic condition. That is why, today, “Islamicizing knowledge” must be preceded by a radical epistemological critique of knowledge at the deepest level of its construction as an operative system used by a group in a given social-historical space. We need to differentiate ideological discourses produced by groups for assessing their own identity, power, and protection, from ideational discourses, which are controlled along the socio-historical process of their elaboration in terms of the new critical epistemology.

... The difference between the new emerging rationality and all inherited rationalities—including Islamic reason—is that the implicit postulates are made explicit and used not as undemonstrated certitudes revealed by God or formed by a transcendental intellect, but as modest, heuristic trends for research. In this spirit, here are six fundamental heuristic lines of thinking to recapitulate Islamic knowledge and to confront it with contemporary knowledge in the process of elaboration.

1. Human beings emerge as such in societies through various changing uses. Each use in the society is converted into a sign of this use, which means that realities are expressed through languages as systems of signs. Signs are the radical issue for a critical, controlled knowledge. This issue occurs prior to any attempt to interpret Revelation. Holy scripture itself is communicated through natural languages used as systems of signs, and we know that each sign is a locus of convergent operations (perception, expression, interpretation, translation, communication) engaging all of the relations between language and thought.

**Remark 1.1:** This line of research is directly opposed to a set of postulates developed and shared by Islamic thought on the privilege of the Arabic language elected by God to “teach Adam all the names.” The ultimate teaching is the Qurān as revealed in the Arabic language. These postulates command the whole construction of Usūl al-dīn and Usūl al-fiqh as a correct methodology with which to derive
from the holy texts the divine laws. The core of Islamic thought is thus represented as a linguistic and semantic issue. (This is true for all religious traditions based on written texts.)

Remark 1.2: This same line is equally opposed to the philological, historicist, positivist postulates imposed by Western thinking since the sixteenth century. That is why we have made a clear distinction between the modernity (or rationality) of the Classical Age and the heuristic trends of the present rationality (Prefigurative Age). (I refer to my book, *L'Islam hier, demain*, Buchet-Chastel, second edition, 1982.)

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*It is time to stop this irrelevant confrontation between two dogmatic attitudes—the theological claims of believers and the ideological postulates of positivist rationalism.*

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2. All semiotic productions of a human being in the process of his social and cultural emergence are subject to historical change which I call historicity. As a semiotic articulation of meaning for social and cultural uses, the Qur‘an is subject to historicity. This means that there is no access to the absolute outside the phenomenal world of our terrestrial, historical existence. The various expressions given to the ontology, the first being the truth and the transcendence by theological and metaphysical reason, have neglected historicity as a dimension of the truth. Changing tools, concepts, definitions, and postulates are used to shape the truth.

Remark 2.1: This line is opposed to all medieval thinking based on stable essences and substances. The concept of Revelation should be reworked in the light of semiotic systems subjected to historicity. The Mu‘tazili theory of God’s created speech deserves special consideration along this new line.

Remark 2.2: The Aristotelian definition of formal logic and abstract categories also needs to be revised in the context of the semiotic theory of meaning and the historicity of reason.

3. There are many levels and forms of reason interacting with levels and forms of imagination as is shown in the tension between *logos* and *muthos*, or symbol and concept, metaphor and reality, or proper meaning, *zāhir* and *baṭīn* in Islam.

Recent anthropology has opened up the field of collective social *imaginaire*¹ not considered by traditional historiography and classical theology. Imagination and
social *imaginaire* are reconsidered as dynamic faculties of knowledge and action. All the mobilizing ideologies, expressed in a religious or a secular framework, are produced, received, and used by social *imaginaire*, which also is related to imagination. The concept of social *imaginaire* needs more elaboration through many societies and historical examples. In Muslim societies, its role today is as decisive as in the Middle Ages because rationalist culture has less impact and presence there than in Western societies, which, nevertheless, also have their own *imaginaire* competing with various levels and forms of rationality.

4. Discourse as an ideological articulation of realities as they are perceived and used by different competing groups occurs *prior* to the faith. Faith is shaped, expressed, and actualized in and through discourse. Conversely, faith, after it has taken shape and roots through religious, political, or scientific discourse, imposes its own direction and postulates to subsequent discourses and behaviors (individual and collective).

**Remark 4.1:** The concept or notion of faith given by God and the classical theories of free will, grace, and predestination need to be re-elaborated within the concrete context of discourses through which any system of beliefs is expressed and assimilated. Faith is the crystallization of images, representations, and ideas commonly shared by each group engaged in the same historical experience. It is more than the personal relation to religious beliefs; but it claims a spiritual or a metaphysical dimension to give a transcendental significance to the political, social, ethical and aesthetic values to which refers each individual inside each unified social group, or community.

5. The traditional system of legitimization, represented by *Uṣūl al-dīn* and *Uṣūl al-fiqh*, no longer has epistemological relevance. The new system is not yet established in a unanimously approved form inside the *umma*. But is it possible today, given the principles of critical epistemology, to propose a system of knowledge or science *particular* to Islamic thought? What are the theoretical conditions of a modern theology not only for political institutions, but also for universal knowledge, in the three revealed religions? We are in a crisis of legitimacy; that is why we can speak only of heuristic ways of thinking.

**Remark 5.1:** This line is opposed to the dogmatic assurance of theology based on the *unquestionable* legitimacy of the Shari‘a derived from Revelation or the classical ontology of the first Being, the neo-Platonic One, the Origin from which the Intellect derives and to which it desires to return. That is why the problem of the state and civil society is crucial today. Why should an individual obey the state? How is the legitimacy of power monopolized by a group over all other established groups?

6. The search for ultimate meaning depends on the radical question concerning the relevance and existence of an ultimate meaning. We have no right to reject the possibility of its existence. What is questionable is how to base all our thoughts on the postulate of its existence. Again, we encounter the true responsibility of the critical reason: To reach a better understanding of the relationship between meaning and reality, we must, first, improve our intellectual equipment—vocabulary, methods, strategies, procedures, definitions, and horizons of inquiry.
To illustrate all these theoretical perspectives, let us give an example from classical Islamic thought. Ghazali (d. 505/1111) and Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198) developed an interesting attempt to think Islam in their historical context. . . . The most relevant to our project is to be found in Faysal al-tafriqa bayn al-islām wa-al-zandāqa by Ghazālī and Fasl al-maqāl written as an answer by Ibn Rushd. Ghazālī declared the falāsīfa infidels on three bases: They deny the resurrection of the body; they deny the knowledge of particulars (juzʿīyyāt) by God; and they claim that God is anterior ontologically, not chronologically, to the world. These three theses are matters of belief, not demonstrative knowledge. The falāsīfa have been wrong in trying to transfer to demonstrative knowledge matters which, in fact, depend on belief. Ibn Rushd used the methodology of Uṣūl al-fiqh to solve a philosophical question; even the formulation of the problem, at the beginning of the Fasl, is typically juridical.

This does not mean that Ghazali chose the right way to tackle the question. Actually, the most significant teaching for us is to identify, through the discussion, the epistemic limits and the epistemological obstacles of Islamic thought as it has been used by its two illustrious representatives. The new task here is not to describe the arguments (cf. G. H. Hourani, ed. trans. of Fasl), but to think the consequences of the epistemic and epistemological discontinuities between classical Islamic thought (all included in medieval thought) and modern thought (Classical Age, from the fifteenth to the twentieth century, up to the 1950s; Prefigurative Age of a new thought, since the 1950s). Before we move ahead in the search for an unfettered way of thinking Islam today, it is worth noting some theories on the medieval system of intelligibility as it is shown in Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd’s discussion.

1. Both thinkers accept the cognitive priority of revealed truth in the Qurʾān. Reason has to be submitted totally to this clearly formulated truth (Ghazālī) or to be elaborated as a coherent articulation of the truth established through demonstrative knowledge (in the conceptual and logical framework of Aristotelian methodology and philosophy) and the revealed truth. This last contention is served by intermingling or interweaving juridical and philosophical methodologies.

2. Both mix at different degrees but with a common psychology commanded by beliefs between religious convictions and legal norms on one side (ahkām, explicated by the science of Uṣūl al-dīn and Uṣūl al-fiqh) and philosophical methodology and representations on the other side. Left to themselves, the milk-sisters (Sharʿ and Hikma) are “companions by nature and friends by essence and instinct” (Fasl 26).

3. Both ignore the decisive dimension of historicity to which even the revealed message is subjected. Historicity is the unthinkable and the unthought in medieval thought. It will be the conquest—not yet everywhere complete—of intellectual modernity.2

4. Historiography (taʾrīkh) has been practiced in Islamic thought as a collection of information, events, biographies (tarājim, siyār), genealogies (nasab), knowledge on countries (buldān), and various other subjects. This collection of facts is
related to a chronology representing time as *stable*, without a dynamic movement of change and progress. No link is established between time as a historical dynamic process (historicity) and the elements of knowledge collected by historiography. Ibn Khaldun can be cited as the exception who introduced the concept of society as an object of knowledge and thought, but even he could not think of religion, society, history, or philosophy as related levels and ways to achieve an improved intelligibility. On the contrary, he contributed to eliminating philosophy and to isolating the Ash'ari vision of Islam from history as a global evolution of societies influenced by various theological expressions of Islam.

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**Muslims do not feel concerned by the secularized culture and thought produced since the sixteenth century.**

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5. In the case of Islamic thought, the triumph of two major official orthodoxies with the Sunnis (since the fifth century Hijra) and the Shi’a (first with the Fatimids and second with the Safavids in Iran) imposed a mode of thinking narrower than those illustrated in the classical period (first to fifth century Hijra). Contemporary Islamic thought is under the influence of categories, themes, beliefs, and procedures of reasoning developed during the scholastic age (seventh to eighth century Hijra) more than it is open to the pluralism which characterized classical thought.

6. The historical evolution and intellectual structure of Islamic thought create the necessity of starting with a critique of Islamic reason (theological, legal, historiographical) as well as of philosophical reason as it has been understood and used through Aristotelian, Platonic, and Plotinist traditions (or legacies).

We shall not do this here. We have to think more clearly about new conditions and ways to *think* Islam today.

Intellectual modernity started with Renaissance and Reform movements in sixteenth-century Europe. The study of pagan antiquity and the demand for freedom to read the Bible without the mediation of priests (or “managers of the sacred,” as they are sometimes called) changed the conditions of intellectual activities. Later, scientific discoveries, political revolutions, secularized knowledge, and historically criticized knowledge (historicism practiced as philosophies of history) changed more radically the whole intellectual structure of thought for the generations involved in the Industrial Revolution with its continuous consequences.

This evolution was achieved in Europe without any participation of Islamic thought or Muslim societies dominated, on the contrary, by a rigid, narrow conser-
vatism. This is why Muslims do not feel concerned by the secularized culture and thought produced since the sixteenth century. It is legitimate, in this historical process leading to intellectual modernity, to differentiate between the ideological aspects limited to the conjunctural situations of Western societies and the anthropological structures of knowledge discovered through scientific research. Islamic thought has to reject or criticize the former and to apply the latter in its own contexts.

We cannot, for example, accept the concept of secularization or laïcité as it has been historically elaborated and used in Western societies. There is a political and social dimension of this concept represented by the struggle for power and the tools of legitimization between the church and the bourgeoisie. The intellectual implications of the issue concern the possibility—political and cultural—of separating education, learning, and research from any control by the state as well as by the church. This possibility remains problematical everywhere.

Similarly, we cannot interpret religion merely as positivist historicism and secularism did in the nineteenth century. Religion is addressed not only to miserable, uncultivated, primitive people who have not yet received the light of rational knowledge; human and social sciences, since 1950–60, have changed the ways of thinking and knowing by introducing a pluralist changing concept of rationality, according to which religion is interpreted in a wider perspective of knowledge and existence.

The project of thinking Islam is basically a response to two major needs: 1) the particular need of Muslim societies to think, for the first time, about their own problems which had been made unthinkable by the triumph of orthodox scholastic thought; and 2) the need of contemporary thought in general to open new fields and discover new horizons of knowledge, through a systematic cross cultural approach to the fundamental problems of human existence. These problems are raised and answered in their own ways by the traditional religions.

III. From the Unthinkable to the Thinkable

Islam is presented and lived as a definite system of beliefs and non-beliefs which cannot be submitted to any critical inquiry. Thus, it divides the space of thinking into two parts: the unthinkable and the thinkable. Both concepts are historical and not, at first, philosophical. The respective domain of each of them changes through history and varies from one social group to another. Before the systemization by Shafi‘i of the concept of sunna and the usūli use of it, many aspects of Islamic thought were still thinkable. They became unthinkable after the triumph of Shafi‘i’s theory and also the elaboration of authentic “collections,” as mentioned earlier. Similarly, the problems related to the historical process of collecting the Qur’ân in an official mushaf became more and more unthinkable under the official pressure of the caliphate because the Qur’ân has been used since the beginning of the Islamic state to legitimize political power and to unify the umma. The last official decision clos-
ing any discussion of the readings of the received orthodox mushaf was made by the qadi Ibn Mujahid after the trial of Ibn Shunbūd (fourth/tenth century).

We can add a third significant example to show how a thinkable is transformed into an unthinkable by the ideological decision of the leading politico-religious group. The Mu’tazila endeavored by their ijtihad to make thinkable the decisive question of God’s created speech, but in the fifth century the caliph al-Qadī made this question unthinkable by imposing, in his famous ‘Aqīda, the dogma of the uncreated Qurʾān as the “orthodox” belief (cf. G. Makdisi, *Ibn ‘Aqīl et la resurgences de l’Islam traditionaliste au Xiè siècle*, Damascus, 1963).

As we have said, the unthinkable or the not yet thought (l’impenœ) in Islamic thought has been enlarged since intellectual modernity was elaborated in the West. All the theories developed by sociology and anthropology on religion are still unknown, or rejected as irrelevant, by contemporary Islamic thought without any intellectual argument or scientific consideration.

It is true that traditional religions play decisive roles in our secularized, modernized societies. We even see secular religions emerging in industrialized societies, like fascism in Germany and Italy, Stalinism and Maoism in the communist world, and many new sects in liberal democracies. If we look at the revealed religions through the parameters set by recent secular religions, we are obliged to introduce new criteria to define religion as a universal phenomenon. To the traditional view of religion as totally revealed, created, and given by God, we cannot simply substitute the sociological theory of religion generated by a socio-historical process according to the cultural values and representations available in each group, community, or society. We must rethink the whole question of the nature and the functions of religion through the traditional theory of divine origin and the modern secular explanation of religion as a social historical production.

This means, in the case of Islam, rewriting the whole history of Islam as a revealed religion and as an active factor, among others, in the historical evolution of societies where it has been or still is received as a religion. Orientalist scholars have already started this study, inquiring even into the social and cultural conditions of the jahiliyya period in which Islam emerged; but I do not know any Orientalist who has raised the epistemological problems implicit in this historicist approach. No single intellectual effort is devoted to considering the consequences of historicist presentations of the origins and functions of a religion given and received as being revealed.5

We need to create an intellectual and cultural framework in which all historical, sociological, anthropological, and psychological presentations of revealed religions could be integrated into a system of thought and evolving knowledge. We cannot abandon the problem of revelation as irrelevant to human and social studies and let it be monopolized by theological speculation. One has to ask, then, why sociology and anthropology have been interested in the question of the sacred and in ritual, but not in revelation. Why, conversely, has theology considered revelation, but not so much the sacred and the secular, until it has been influenced by anthropology and social sciences.
IV. The Societies of the Book

... I call Societies of the Book those that have been shaped since the Middle Ages by the Book as a religious and a cultural phenomenon. The Book has two meanings in this perspective. The Heavenly Book preserved by God and containing the entire word of God is called Umm al-kitāb in the Qur’ān. Geo Widengren has demonstrated the very ancient origin of this conception in Near East religious history (cf. his Muḥammad, The Apostle of God and the Heavenly Book, Upsala, 1955). The importance of this belief for our purpose is that it refers to the verticality which has constituted the religious imaginaire in the Near East. Truth is located in Heaven with God, who reveals it in time and through the medium He chooses: the prophets, Himself incarnated in the “Son” who lived among people, the Book transmitted by the messenger Muḥammad. There are different modalities for the delivery of parts (not the whole) of the Heavenly Book, but the Word of God as God Himself is the same from the point of view of the anthropological structures of religious imaginaire.

The modalities for the delivery of parts of the Heavenly Book have been interpreted by each community, raised and guided by a prophet, as the absolute expression of God Himself. The cultural, linguistic, and social aspects of these modalities were unthinkable in the mythical framework of knowledge particular to people who received the “revelations.” When theologians came to systematize in conceptual, demonstrative ways the relations between the Word of God (Umm al-kitāb) and its manifested forms in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic, they used either literalist exegesis of the scripture itself or rational categories and procedures influenced by Greek philosophy. Grammar and logic have been used as two different ways to reach and to deliver the meaning of the manifested revelation in relation to the grammatical and logical “reading,” but they did not lead to a radical critique of the postulates used in the different exegeses developed in the Middle Ages. This issue needs to be rethought today in light of the new knowledge of language, mind, logic, and history, which means that all the ancient exegesis has to be reworked, too. We are obliged today to consider differently the second meaning of the concept of Book in our expression “Societies of the Book.” The Mu’tazila touched on this point in their theory of God’s created speech. The Muṣḥaf as well as the Bible, are the manifested, incarnated word of God in human languages, transmitted orally by human voices, or fixed in written material. One has to answer here to a Christian objection on the specificity of Christian revelation made through Jesus as the incarnated God, not through human mediators. As I said, this is a difference in modality, not in the relation between the Heavenly Book and its terrestrial manifestations through religious imaginaire. Theological theorizations transformed into substantial transcendental truths revealed by God what, in fact, had been historical, social, and cultural events and manifestations. The delivery of the Word of God by Jesus in a given society and period of history, using the Aramaic language, is a historical event just like the delivery of the Qur’ān by Muḥammad. That Jesus is presented as the “Son of God” and the Qur’ān a speech worded by God Himself are theological
The definitions used in systems of beliefs and non-beliefs particular to Christian and Islamic dogma. These definitions do not change the linguistic and historical fact that the messages of Jesus and Muḥammad (and, of course, the prophets of Israel) are transmitted in human languages and collected in an “orthodox” closed corpus (Bible, Gospels, and Qurʾān) in concrete historical conditions. Then, the Heavenly Book is accessible to the believers only through the written version of the books or scriptures adopted by the three communities. This second aspect of the Book is then submitted to all the constraints of arbitrary historicity. The books or scriptures are read and interpreted by the historical communities in concrete, changing, social, political, and cultural situations.

The societies where the Book—or Holy Scriptures—is used as the revelation of the divine will developed a global vision of the world, history, meaning, and human destiny by the use of hermeneutic procedures. All juridical, ethical, political, and intellectual norms had to be derived from the textual forms of the revelation. The Torah, Canon Law, and the Shariʿa have been elaborated on the basis of the same vision of revealed Truth and “rational” procedures from which norms have been derived. There is a common conception of human destiny commanded by the eschatological perspective (the search for salvation by obedience to God’s will) and guided in this world by the norms of the law.

The new dimension which I aim to explain by the concept of the Societies of the Book is the process of historicization of a divine category: Revelation. The believers in the three religions claim, even in the context of our secularized culture, that divine law derived from Revelation is not subject to historicity. It cannot be changed by any human legislation and it is a totally rationalized law. Scientific knowledge cannot demonstrate that this belief is based on a wrong assumption, but it can explain how it is possible psychologically to maintain the affirmation of a revealed law in the form presented in the Torah, Canon Law, and the Shariʿa, against the evidence of its historicity.

Traditional theological thought has not used the concept of social imaginaire and the related notions of myth, symbol, sign, or metaphor in the new meanings already mentioned. It refers constantly to reason as the faculty of true knowledge, differentiated from knowledge based on the representations of the imagination. The methodology elaborated and used by jurists-theologians shares with the Aristotelian tradition the same postulate of rationality as founding the true knowledge and excluding the constructions of the imagination. In fact, an analysis of the discourse produced by both trends of thinking—the theological and the philosophical—reveals a simultaneous use of reason and imagination. Beliefs and convictions are often used as “arguments” to “demonstrate” propositions of knowledge. In this stage of thinking, metaphor is understood and used as a rhetorical device to add an aesthetic emotion to the real content of the words; it was not perceived in its creative force as a semantic innovation or in its power to shift the discourse to a global metaphorical organization requiring the full participation of a coherent imagination. The philosophers, however, recognized the power that imagination as a faculty of privileged knowledge bestowed on the prophet especially. Ibn Sina and Ibn Tufayl used this faculty in each of their accounts of Ḥayy ibn yaqẓān, but this did
not create a trend comparable to the logocentrism of the jurists, the theologians, and the falāsifa who favored Aristotelianism.

This lack of attention to the imagination did not prevent the general activity of social imaginaire—the collective representations of the realities according to the system of beliefs and non-beliefs introduced by revelation in the Societies of the Book. The social imaginaire is partially elaborated and controlled by the ‘ulamā’ with their ‘Aqā’id (like the one written by Ibn Batta, French translation by H. Laoust, La profession de foi d’Ibn Baṭṭa, Damascus, 1958); but it is structured as well by beliefs and representations taken from the cultures preceding Islam. In all Islamic societies, there are two levels of traditions—the deepest archaic level going back to the jāhiliyya of each society and the more recent level represented by Islamic beliefs, norms, and practices as they have been developed since the foundation of the Muslim state. The revealed Book assumed a great importance

All the theories developed by sociology and anthropology on religion are still unknown, or rejected as irrelevant, by contemporary Islamic thought . . .

because it provided a strategy of integration for all norms, beliefs, and practices proper to each social group. This means that the social imaginaire is generated by the interacting layers of traditions, so that it is not correct from an anthropological point of view to describe the Societies of the Book as if they were produced exclusively by the Book used as their constitution. The revealed Book had an influence on all cultural activities and political institutions to some extent. It generated a civilization of written culture opposed to, or differentiated from, the oral civilization.

The key to the Societies of the Book is thus the intensive dialectic developed everywhere between two strongly competitive forces: On the one hand, there is the state using the phenomenon of the Book in its two dimensions—the transcendent, divine, ontological message and the written literature and culture derived from it. This comprises the official culture produced and used under the ideological supervision of the state, that is the orthodox religion defined and enforced by doctors of law (jurists-theologians). On the other hand, there are the non-integrated, resisting groups using oral, non-official culture and keeping alive non-orthodox beliefs (called heresies and condemned by the official ‘ulamā’). The struggle between the reformed church and the Catholic church in the sixteenth century is a typical example of this competition. In Islam, we have many examples in history from the first
century to the contemporary revivalist movements. The segmentary groups perpetuating oral cultures and traditions and adhering to archaic beliefs under the name of Islam, have resisted to their integration into the Muslim state. This is why the ‘ulama’ and contemporary—regularly condemned the “superstitions” and “heresies” of these groups, as long as they resisted the norms of the Societies of the Book.

... Religions are superior to any scientific theory because they give imaginative solutions to permanent issues in human life, and they mobilize the social imaginaire with beliefs, mythical explanations, and rites. (For more explanations, see my Lectures du Coran, op. cit.)

V. Strategies for Deconstruction

... Thinking about our new historical situation is a positive enterprise. We are not aiming for a negative critique of the previous attempts at the emancipation of human existence as much as we wish to propose relevant answers to pending and pressing questions. This is why we prefer to speak about a strategy for deconstruction. We need to deconstruct the social imaginaire structured over centuries by the phenomenon of the Book as well as the secularizing forces of the material civilization\(^6\) since the seventeenth century.

We speak of one social imaginaire because secularization has not totally eliminated from any society all the elements, principles, and postulates organizing the social imaginaire in the Societies of the Book.

This is, I know, a controversial point among historians. Karl Lowith (Meaning in History, 1968) has shown that so-called modern ideas are just the secularized reshaping and re-expressing of medieval Christian ideas. More recently, Regis Debray (Critique de la raison politique, Gallimard, 1981) underlined the Christian origins of the present socialist utopia.

Hans Blumenberg tried to refute these positions in his dissertation on The Legitimacy of the Modern Age (MIT Press, 1983). He showed how modernity is an alternative to Christian medieval conceptions. According to him, the modern idea of progress is the product of an imminent process of development rather than a messianic one. Long-term scientific progress guided by pluralist method and experimentation, continuity of problems rather than solutions, and history as a positive whole process cut from the transcendent God, are characteristics of the modern age. Should one, then, accept the definition of secularization as a long-term process through which religious ties, attitudes toward transcendence, the expectation of an afterlife, ritual performances, firmly established forms of speech, a typical structure of the individual imaginaire, specific articulation and use of reason and imagination, become a private concern separated from public life? One could add the triumph of pragmatism, which gives priority to action over contemplation, verification over truth, method over system, logic over rhetoric, future over past, and becoming over being.
Along this line of thinking, secularization is usually presented as one of the following: a decaying of the former capacity for receiving divine inspiration and guidance; a cultural and political program of emancipation from theological thinking and ecclesiastical dominance; the domination of nature to increase the powers of man; or the substitution of a public system of education for the private one. This is known in France as *laïcité*, which often has been expressed as a militant attitude against the religious vision of the world, as we saw during 1982–83 when the socialist government wanted to “unify” the national educational system (cf. Guy Gautier, *La laïcité en miroir*, Grasset, Paris, 1985).

Whatever the relevance of these observations to the long-term process of change undertaken first in Western societies and extended more and more to the rest of the world, two remarks are in order. First, references to traditional religions—especially the three revealed religions—are frequent and even dominating everywhere. Second, secular “religions,” like fascism, Stalinism, and Maoism, are produced by contemporary societies and govern the social *imaginaire* with their so-called values, norms, aims, beliefs, and representations. Secularism appears, then, as a change of methods, styles, procedures, and forms of expression in human existence; but it does not affect the ultimate force structuring and generating the human condition through the existential and historical process.

How can we obtain a clear vision of this force and describe it? Religions have mobilized it, shaped it, and formulated it by using various cultural systems, myths, rites, beliefs, and institutions. Modern ideologies do the same by using secularized languages and collective organizations. What is the common unifying reality of all these religious and ideological constructions? To answer this question we must avoid the usual opposition between the “true” religious teaching and the “false” secularist conceptions. We will be better able to discover the reality if we deconstruct methodically all the manifested cultural constructions in the various societies. Returning to the Societies of the Book, we can show a deep, common mechanism described by Marcel Gauchet (*Le désenchantement du monde*, Gallimard, 1985) as “the debt of meaning.”

All known societies are built on an *order*, a hierarchy of values and powers maintained and enforced by a political power. On what conditions is a political power accepted and obeyed by the members of the society? How is it legitimized? There is no possible legitimation of any exercised power without an authority spontaneously internalized by each individual as an ultimate reference to the absolute truth. In traditional societies, authority is the privilege of a charismatic leader able to mediate the meaning located in an extra- or super-worldliness, meaning possessed by a god (or gods), and this leader delivers it in various ways to human beings. Thus, this process creates a recognition of *debt* in each individual consciousness and, consequently, an adherence to all the commandments of the leader.

The example of Islam gives a clear illustration of this general mechanism, one which is at the same time psychological, social, political, and cultural. A very small group of believers followed Muḥammad, a charismatic leader related to the known paradigm of prophets and messengers of God in the history of salvation common to the “People of the Book.” Muḥammad, supported and inspired by God, had the
ability to create a new relationship to the divine through two simultaneous and interacting initiatives as all charismatic leaders do with different levels of success and innovation. He announced the absolute truth in an unusual Arabic form of expression, and he engaged the group in successive, concrete experiences of social, political, and institutional change. The Revelation translated into a sublime, symbolic, and transcendental language the daily public life of the group whose identity and imaginaire were separated from the hostile, non-converted groups (called infi-
dels, hypocrites, enemies of God, errants, and bedouins). We can follow in the Qur’ān the growth of a new collective social-cultural imaginaire nourished by new systems of connotation whose semantic substance was not primarily an abstract vision of an idealistic dreaming mind but the historic crystallization of events shared at the time by all the members of the group.

The “debt of meaning” incurred in such conditions is the most constraining for the individuals who are the actors of their own destiny. The relation to the source of authority is not separated from obedience to the political power exercised in the name of this authority. But already, in this first stage of setting up and internalizing the debt of meaning, we must pay special attention to a structural process not yet deconstructed by historians and anthropologists.

When we write the history of these twenty years (612-632) during which Muhammad created a new community, we mention the principal events in a narrative style. We neglect to point out the use made of these events by later generations of believers. In other words, how does the “debt of meaning” historically operate on the collective imaginaire to produce the concrete destiny of each group in each society? There is, in fact, a double line to follow in writing the history of societies commanded by an initial “debt of meaning” incurred in the Inaugural Age. The first is to index, describe, and articulate all the significant events and facts that occurred in each period; the second is to analyze the mental representations of these events, facts, and actions shaping the collective imaginaire which becomes the moving force of history. This study of psychological discussions of history is more explanatory than the positivist narration of “objective” history. It shows the powerful capacity of imagination to create symbolic figures and paradigms of meaning from very ordinary events and persons, at the first stage, then the transformation of these symbols into collective representations structuring the social imaginaire.

Thus, the idealized figures of Muhammad, ‘Ali, Husayn, and other imams have been constructed to enlighten and legitimate the historical development of the community. The biographies (ṣira) of Muhammad and ‘Ali, as they have been fixed in the Sunni and Shi‘i traditions, are the typical production of the same social imaginaire influenced by a highly elaborated mythical vision provided by the Qur’ān. The whole Qur’ānic discourse is already a perfect sublimation of the concrete history produced by the small group of “believers” in Mecca and Medina.

. . . [H]istorians of Islam, so far, have not considered the question of the imaginaire as an important historical field. I have mentioned this concept several times because it is unavoidable when we want to relate political, social, and cultural events to their psychological origins and impacts. The narrative history suggests
that all the events are understandable according to a “rational” system of knowledge. No one historian raises the question, How does one rationalize, for example, the history of Salvation as it is proposed by the Holy Scriptures—Bible, Gospels, and Qur‘an—and as it is received, integrated, and used by the individual and the collective imaginaire? There is no possibility to interpret the whole literature derived from those Scriptures without taking into account the representations of Salvation perpetuated in the behaviors and the thinking activity of all believers, so that all history produced in the Societies of the Book is legitimized and assimilated by the imaginaire of Salvation, not by any “rational” construction. The theological and juridical systems elaborated by so-called “reason” are also related to the imaginaire of Salvation.

The writing and the understanding of the so-called “Islamic” history would change totally if we accept to open the field of research on social imaginaire, and the anthropological structures of this imaginaire as we can describe it, for example, through Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn of Ghazali, the literature of Qur‘an exegesis, the present discourse of Islamist movements (I refer to my essay, “L’Islam dans l’histoire,” in Maghreb-Mashreq 1985, no. 102).

VI. Revelation and History

The strategy of deconstruction leads to the ultimate decisive confrontation in the Societies of the Book. When we discover the function of social imaginaire as producing the history of the group, we cannot maintain the theory of revelation as it has been elaborated previously, that is, as images produced by the complex phenomenon of prophetic intervention.

The Qur‘ān insists on the necessity of man to listen, to be aware, to reflect, to penetrate, to understand, and to meditate. All these verbs refer to intellectual activities leading to a kind of rationalization based on existential paradigms revealed with the history of salvation. Medieval thought derived from this an essentialist, substantialist, and unchangeable concept of rationality guaranteed by a divine intellect. Modern knowledge, on the contrary, is based on the concept of social-historical space continuously constructed and deconstructed by the activities of the social actors. Each group fights to impose its hegemony over the others not only through political power (control of the state) but also through a cultural system presented as the universal one. Seen from this perspective, the Qur‘ān is the expression of the historical process which led the small group of believers to power. This process is social, political, cultural, and psychological. Through it, the Qur‘ān, presented as the revelation and received as such by the individual and the collective memory, is continuously reproduced, rewritten, reread, and re-expressed in a changing social-historical space.

History is the actual incarnation of the revelation as it is interpreted by the ‘ulama‘ and preserved in the collective memory. Revelation maintains the possibility of giving a “transcendent” legitimization to the social order and the historical process accepted by the group. But this possibility can be maintained only as long
as the cognitive system, based on social *imaginaire*, is not replaced by a new, more plausible rationality linked to a different organization of the social-historical space. . . .

The struggle between the inherited thinkable and the not yet thought has become more intense in Muslim societies since the violent introduction of intellectual modernity: but, as we have seen, the same struggle between the paradigms of knowledge and action started in Western societies in the sixteenth century. The result has been the inversion of the priorities fixed by the revelation. Economic life and thought had been submitted to ethical-religious principles until the triumph of the capitalist system of production and exchange, which replaced the symbolic exchanges practiced in traditional societies with the rule of profit.

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**The nostalgia for a unified vision**
**[of human destiny] explains the re-emergence of religion.**

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Within this new value system, ethical thinking has less relevance than the technical regulations of the market and the efficient control of productive forces. Democracy limits the source of authority to the acquiescence expressed in different circumstances of various professional or political groups. There is no longer any reference to the transcendental origin of authority. The question of revelation is thus eliminated; it is neither solved intellectually nor maintained as a plausible truth according to the pragmatic reason prevailing in so-called modern thought. All relations are based on the respective power of nations, groups, and individuals; ethical principles, founded on metaphysical or religious visions, lose their appeal. I do not mean that we have to go back to the "revealed" truth according to *ishâhi* thinking. I am stressing a major difficulty of our time: the rupture between ethics and materialism. At the same time, social *imaginaire* is not more controlled or used in a better way by "scientific" knowledge. Rather, it is mobilized more than ever by ideologues who take advantage of the modern mass media to disseminate slogans taken from religious (in Muslim societies) or secular ideologies, or from a mixture of both (in the so-called socialist regimes).

If we sum up the foregoing analysis and observations, we can stress the following propositions:

1) The social-historical space in which religions emerged, exercised their functions, and shaped cultures and collective sensibilities is being replaced by the secular positivist space of scientific knowledge, technological activities, material civilization, individual pragmatic ethics and law.
2) Scientific knowledge is divided into separate, technical, highly specialized disciplines. Religions, on the contrary, have provided global, unified, and unifying systems of beliefs and non-beliefs, knowledge and practice, as well as pragmatic solutions to the fundamental problems of human destiny: life, death, love, justice, hope, truth, eternity, transcendence, and the absolute. The nostalgia for a unified vision explains the re-emergence of religion.

3) Positivist scientific knowledge has discredited or eliminated religious functions in society without providing an adequate alternative to religion as a symbol of human existence and a source of unifying ethical values for the group. This happened in Western societies under the name of secularism (or laïcisme in French), liberalism, and socialism.

4) Present thought has not yet recognized the positive aspect of secularism as a cultural and intellectual way to overcome fanatic divisions imposed by the dogmatic, superstitious use of religion. At the same time, the specific role of religion as a source for symbols in human existence also goes unrecognized.

5) Islam is not better prepared than Christianity to face the challenge of secularism, intellectual modernity, and technological civilization. The so-called religious revivalism is a powerful secular movement disguised by religious discourse, rites, and collective behaviors; but it is a secularization without the intellectual support needed to maintain the metaphysical mode of thinking and to search for an ethical coherence in human behavior. Theological and ethical thinking has reappeared in contemporary Islamic thought in the form of the ideology of liberation (political and economic). There is little intellectual concern with genuine religious issues like the consciousness of culpability, the eschatological perspective, or revelation as a springboard for mythical, or symbolic thinking.

6) The concept that the Societies of the Book could help to build a new humanism which would integrate religions as cultures and not as dogmas for confessional groups (or tawā'if, as in Lebanon or Ireland) is not taken seriously either in theology or in the social scientific study of religions. But there is hope that semiotics and linguistics can create the possibility of reading religious texts in the new way we have mentioned.

7) The study of Islam today suffers particularly from the ideological obstacles created, since the nineteenth century, by the decay of the Muslim intellectual tradition, as it had developed from the first to the fifth century Hijra, and by the economic pressure of the West, the general trend of positivist rationalism and material civilization, the powerful impact of demography since the late fifties and the necessity of building a modern state and unifying the nation.

8) World system economists insist on the opposition between the center and the periphery. Likewise, in intellectual evolution, we should pay attention to the increasing domination of Western patterns of thought which have not been duly criticized, controlled, or mastered in Western societies themselves. Islam, which has a rich cultural tradition, is facing major issues in a generalized climate of semantic disorder; our thinking should be directed to the dangers resulting from this threat.
9) We should not forget that man agrees to obey, to be devoted, and to obligate his life when he feels a "debt of meaning" to a natural or a supernatural being. This may be the ultimate legitimacy of the state understood as the power accepted and obeyed by a group, community, or nation. The crisis of meaning started when each individual claimed himself as the source of all or true meaning; in this case, there is no longer any transcendent authority. Relations of power are substituted for relations of symbolic exchanges of meaning. To whom do we owe a "debt of meaning"?

It is our responsibility to answer this question after man has changed himself by his own initiatives, discoveries, performances, and errors. It seems that the answer will be conjectural and more and more bound to empirical research instead of to divine guidance taught by traditional religions. I learned through the Algerian war of liberation how all revolutionary movements need to be backed by a struggle for meaning, and I discovered how meaning is manipulated by forces devoted to the conquest of power. The conflict between meaning and power has been, is, and will be the permanent condition through which man tries to emerge as a thinking being.

Notes

1. I prefer to use the French word for this important concept because it has no exact correspondent in English. Cf. C. Castoriadis, L'institution imaginaire de la société, Seuil, 1977.
5. Given and received are technical terms in linguistic and literary analyses. Islam is given as revealed in the grammatical structure of Qurʾānic discourse, and it is received as such by the psychological consciousness generated by this discourse and the ritual performances prescribed by it. For more thorough elaboration of this approach, I refer to my essay, The Concept of Revelation: From Ahl al-Kitāb to the Societies of the Book, Claremont Graduate School, California, 1987.
6. I use this expression according to its historical elaboration by F. Brandel.