

Enlightenment and Islam: From and beyond Kant

LARA SCAGLIA¹

Abstract

The first aim of this paper is to show that the characteristics that Kant attributes to Islam and the Arabs seem to make it impossible for them to be enlightened, thus giving evidence of the presence of racist cultural traits in his works. For Kant, the lack of respect for the boundaries between fields of knowledge and the tendency to be extremely passionate and irrational make Muslims for the most part incapable of developing autonomous thought. The second is to show how there have been cultural movements in the Arab world—such as the *Nahda*—that discuss notions similar to Kant's enlightenment, and that some contemporary Muslim authors used the thought of Kant and other Western philosophers in their attempts to understand, criticise and develop their own tradition—without denying it (al-Jabri)—by encouraging independent and rational interpretations of the *Qur'an* (Soroush).'

Keywords: Kant, enlightenment, Islams, Arabs, *Nahda*.

Ilustración e islam: Desde y más allá de Kant

Resumen

El primer objetivo de este artículo es mostrar que las características que Kant atribuye al islam y a los árabes parecen imposibilitar su ilustración, lo que demuestra la presencia de rasgos culturales racistas en sus obras. Para Kant, la falta de respeto por los límites entre los campos del conocimiento y la tendencia a ser extremadamente apasionados e irracionales hacen que los musulmanes sean, en su mayoría, incapaces de desarrollar un pensamiento autónomo. El segundo es mostrar cómo ha habido movimientos culturales en el mundo árabe, como la *Nahda*, que discuten nociones similares a la ilustración de Kant, y que algunos autores musulmanes contemporáneos utilizaron el pensamiento de Kant y otros filósofos occidentales en sus intentos por comprender, criticar y desarrollar su propia tradición, sin negarla (al-Yabri), fomentando interpretaciones independientes y racionales del Corán (Soroush).

Palabras clave: Kant, ilustración, islam, *Nahda*.

¹ Instituto de Investigaciones Filosóficas, UNAM. Contact: lara.scaglia@filosofica.unam.mx. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7148-7456>.

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1. Kant on Islam: The impossibility of enlightenment

1.1. What does it mean to be enlightened?

Kant's consideration of the Muslim East requires a reference to his concepts of enlightenment, which derives from his account of reason as a formal² and procedural function.

Apart from the differences among fields and uses of reason, there are common rules that should be followed to reason properly. In the *Lectures on logic* (Log, AA 09: 57),³ the *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view* (Anth, AA 07: 228) and the *Critique of the power of judgement*, Kant presents three rules⁴ or maxims to avoid error, attain wisdom or use properly the faculty of judgement:

1. To think for oneself; 2. To think in the position of everyone else; 3. Always to think in accord with oneself. The first is the maxim of the unprejudiced way of thinking, the second of the broad-minded way, the third that of the consistent way. The first is the maxim of a reason that is never passive. The tendency toward the latter, hence toward heteronomy of reason, is called prejudice; and the greatest prejudice of all is that of representing reason as if it were not subject to the rules of nature on which the understanding grounds it by means of its own essential law: i.e., superstition. Liberation from superstition is called enlightenment (KU, AA 05: 294).

Only by following these maxims, it is possible to emerge from a self-inflicted minority and live according to the motto of enlightenment *Sapere aude!* (WA, AA 08: 35). Another way of expressing this is to focus on the distinction between private and public use of reason. Before delving into the distinction between private and public use of reason, I will briefly

² Kant's formalism is to be understood neither as a substantive nor as a logical formalism; rather it is procedural because it lays down the procedure through which judgment must undergo, in order to make it possible to think and to will rationally (see Silber, 1966, p. 203).

³ References to Kant's works are by volume and page number of the Academy edition. Translations follow the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (1992–2016).

⁴ Kant repeatedly states that these rules characterise the proper use of reason and he does so, in a variety of fields (aesthetic, logical, anthropological, etc.). In the *Logic* he stresses that to avoid error one has to follow these rules: "1) to think for oneself; 2) to put oneself in thought in the place or point of view of another; and 3) always to think consistently" (Log, AA 09: 57). In *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*, to attain wisdom (the perfect practical use of reason according to law) the following rules must be respected: "1) To think for oneself. 2) In communication with men to imagine (*sich denken*) oneself in the place of every other person. 3) Always to think in agreement with oneself" (Anth, AA 07: 228–229).

introduce the context in which Kant wrote the famous essay on the enlightenment.

In 1784, Kant published the essay “An answer to the question: What is Enlightenment?” in the December issue of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. In September, Moses Mendelssohn published on the same topic (but Kant did not have the chance to read the essay before writing his own) after that Johann Friedrich Zöllner, a parson from Berlin, anonymously published an essay in the December 1783 issue with the title “Ist es rathsam, das Ehebündniß nicht ferner durch die Religion zu sancieren?” (“Is it advisable to no longer sanction marriage through religion?”), which contained the famous question: ‘What is Enlightenment?’ and was itself an answer to an anonymous⁵ essay published in September of the same year with the title “Vorschlag, die Geistlichen nicht mehr bei Vollziehung der Ehen zu bemühen”⁶ (“A proposal to prevent the clergy from engaging in marriages”). At a time of growing interest and need to define the role of religion in politics and society, a clarification of the widespread notion of enlightenment was required, which, as Zöllner emphasised, was just as important as answering the question of the nature of truth, because the spread of new enlightened customs deprived society of order and morality. That is why he opposed the proposal of the anonymous author and was convinced that priests should be present during the celebration of marriages.

However, this dispute about civil marriages, which opened the debate about the definition of enlightenment, was related to a cultural and social environment that advocated a new utopia and new elements of social cohesion. This, of course, did not affect just Christian Europe but also Jewish Europe. Between 1770 and 1881, the Haskalah (Jewish Wisdom or Enlightenment), which advocated moral reforms, spread. One of its members, Immanuel Wolf (1799–1847), wrote in his *Über den Begriff einer Wissenschaft des Judenthums* (*On the Concept of a Science of Judaism*) (1823) that Judaism had lost its original spirit and that it was necessary to separate the essential from the accidental in order to return to the original Judaism.

⁵ Most probably, it was written by Johann Erich Biester himself, who was the director of the journal, because he used to sign his articles with the initials E.v.K., which are present in this case, too (see Mondot, 2009).

⁶ Both articles were published in Hinske (1981).

In his essay “On Enlightening the Mind” (1784), Mendelssohn, who was an exponent of the *Haskalá*, distinguished between cultivation, which deals with practical domains (including not only morality, but also arts and techniques) and enlightenment, which refers to rational knowledge and theory. In the essay, he wrote that both cultivation and enlightenment can be negative for the society when they are not well balanced:

The abuse of this enlightened state of mind weakens the-moral sense, leads to insensibility, egotism, irreligion, and anarchy. The abuse of cultivation gives birth to licentiousness, hypocrisy, effeminacy, superstition, and slavery. Where the enlightening and cultivation of mankind advance with equal pace, they become to each other the best security against corruption, and that civilization of any nation, which, according to the above definitions, consists of cultivation and an enlightened state of the public mind, is therefore the least liable to corruption (1996, p. 42).

Kant’s essay also deals with the moral and social difficulties of the time, but, unlike Mendelssohn, who saw the cause of the disturbance and corruption of society in the lack of balance between the practical and theoretical domains, he grounded his understanding of enlightenment—as we anticipated above—in the distinction between the private and public use of reason:

For this enlightenment, however, nothing is required but freedom, and indeed the least harmful of anything that could even be called freedom: namely, freedom to make public use of one’s reason in all matters [...]. The public use of one’s reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among human beings; the private use of one’s reason may, however, often be very narrowly restricted without this particularly hindering the progress of enlightenment. But by the public use of one’s own reason I understand that use which someone makes of it as a scholar before the entire public of the world of readers. What I call the private use of reason is that which one may make of it in a certain civil post or office with which he is entrusted (WA, AA 08: 36–37).

In light of this, we can better understand the motto ‘Sapere aude’ as an encouragement, if not an imperative, to use reason also in a public way, thus following the first of the three maxims of the common human

understanding, namely to think for oneself or that reason should never be passive, i.e., being guided by prejudices, superstition and others. In the *Critique of the power of judgement*, this first maxim is followed by two others: to think from the point of view of all others and to think with consistency (KU, AA 05: 293–296). We can easily see that a proper public use of reason is intrinsically related to these two maxims, too. The kind of freedom of thought to which Kant alludes, namely, can be developed by being coherent (if thought is self-contradictory, then it makes little sense and is dominated by errors) and by adopting the point of view of all others. If one has to put oneself in a position freed from prejudices, freed from one's own habitual standards, from the contextual dynamics in which one has grown up, being willing to know the other and being able to think 'differently' is necessary to think freed from prejudices. Prejudices, namely, are misleading propositions, taken as principles, that lead us to erroneous judgements:

Prejudices are provisional judgments insofar as they are accepted as principles. Every prejudice is to be regarded as a principle of erroneous judgments, and from prejudices arise not prejudices, but rather erroneous judgments. Hence one must distinguish the false cognition that arises from prejudice from its source, the prejudice itself (Log, AA 09: 75).

Undoubtedly, when Kant wrote the essay he was concerned above all with the problem of political freedom: how can it be that, on the one hand, we need rules in order to live together peacefully and, on the other, we have to use our judgement freely (which can lead us to disagree about certain rules)? When should we limit ourselves to obeying a rule and when should we use our reason freely? But what I wanted to underline here is that the public use of reason in the political sphere is perfectly in line with the maxims of the *sensus communis*, which can be seen as a description of how we can use our reason freely (and consistently), i.e. in an enlightened way. Kant's way, as we have seen above in reporting Mendelshon's view, was only one of several ways of considering enlightenment, and what I intend to show in the following part is that Kant's philosophy ascribes to some people characteristics that seem to exclude them from that free and enlightened use of reason.

I do not point this out in order to devalue his theory as a whole, but only to underline its limits and biases.

1.2. Kant's view of Islam and the Arabs

Before delving into Kant's description, it should be noted that he does not distinguish between Muslims and Arabs, and sometimes does not even distinguish between Arabs, Turks and Mongols. This lack of precision means not only that he ends up talking about a fictitious group of people, but also that he has contributed to spreading a lot of prejudices and simplifications towards groups of people who do not share the same religion and sometimes not even the same language and traditions. This, of course, is already per se unenlightened, in the Kantian sense.

When Kant writes about Islam and the Arabs, there are many passages describing their religion and customs as the antithesis of all that is supposedly rational, and I will relate some of them, focusing on the characteristics of nomadism, an exaggerated use of imagination leading to the sublime, a pathological use of reason and passion.

In his preface to the first edition of the *Critique of pure reason*, Kant regards the evolution of the rules of metaphysics through time and describes scepticism as nomadism, which, abhorring the cultivation of the soil, offers no dwelling place for the residence of reason (KrV, A13). The image of nomads is thus metaphorical of the lack of boundaries and rational foundations.

In *On a recently prominent tone of superiority in philosophy*⁷ we find a description of the Arabs as pseudo-philosophers precisely because of their nomadism:

The Arab or Mongol despises the city-dweller and thinks himself distinguished in comparison with him: because wandering about in the deserts with his horses and sheep is more amusement than work. In a word, all think themselves noble to the extent that they believe they are not allowed to work; and on this principle it has recently come to such a pass that a pretended philosophy, in which one is not allowed to work, but only to listen to and enjoy the oracle within oneself (VT, AA 08: 390).

⁷ In this essay, Kant criticises the intuitionism and Platonic mysticism of intellectuals such as Schlosser.

The worthy (industrious, rational) philosopher is opposed to the visionary (rapturous, irrational) one, who draws conclusions without any work, simply by listening to the “oracle within oneself.” Kant’s description of the Arab is clearly in opposition to the Protestant commitment to work and be a useful member of the community and the understanding of religion as being within the boundaries of mere reason. But it seems that what Kant intends to criticise is not the theological doctrine of Islam in itself, but the lack of self-criticism of Islam, which is related, as we shall below, to a pathological empirical use of reason (von Scheliha, 2016, p. 162).

Kant’s concern for the ‘sanctity’ of the boundaries of the different fields of reason’s uses, which must not be crossed by the raptures of the East, is linked to his account of the sublime, which plays a central role in all his critical works and not only in the *Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and sublime* and in the *Critique of the power of judgement*.

The aim of the *Observations* is to use the distinction between the feeling of the beautiful and that of the sublime to discuss how empirical contingent characteristics (such as gender, nationality, etc.) affect human action.

Here Kant describes the Arabs as passionate and dreamy. Muhammad (as well as the Anabaptist John of Leyden) is regarded as a visionary and a fanatic, guided by his own visions and not by reason:

It is quite different from the fanatic (visionary, dreamer). This one is actually a madman of a supposed immediate inspiration and a great intimacy with the powers of heaven. Human nature knows no more dangerous delusion [...]. Enthusiasm leads the enthusiast to the utmost, Mahomet to the princely throne and John of Leyden to the scaffold of blood (GSE, AA 02: 267).

The exaggerated use of imagination—beyond and against the limits of reason—is what characterised the Arab:

If we now take a quick look through the other parts of the world, we find the Arab to be the noblest human being in the Orient, although with a feeling that very much degenerates into the adventurous. He is hospitable, generous, and truthful; but his tale and history and in general his sentiment always has something

marvellous woven into it. His inflamed power of imagination presents things to him in unnatural and distorted images, and even the spread of his religion was a great adventure (GSE, AA 02: 252).

The Orient is a region where inhabitants and cultures are receptive and weak to the impetuous excitations of the sublime, which causes a sense of inadequacy and cannot be grasped by the understanding because it is great beyond comparison (KU, AA 05: 256). The dignity of reason is therefore in jeopardy here: if no limits are set, then one can lose one's head in metaphysical dreams and even a precept that seems highly rational, such as the prohibition against making images of God, in practice becomes an incentive for the enthusiastic, boundless use of imagination:

Perhaps there is no more sublime passage in the Jewish code than the commandment: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness, either of that which is in heaven, or that which is in the earth, or that which is under the earth, etc. This commandment alone can inspire enthusiasm. This commandment alone can explain the enthusiasm which the Jewish people felt for their religion in their civilised epoch, when they compared themselves with other peoples, or that pride which Mohammedanism instils [...]. It is indeed a mistake to worry that depriving this presentation of whatever could commend it to the senses will result in its carrying with it no more than a cold and lifeless approval without any moving force or emotion. It is exactly the other way round. For once the senses no longer see anything before them, while yet the unmistakable and indelible idea of morality remains, one would sooner need to temper the momentum of an unbounded imagination so as to keep it from rising to the level of enthusiasm, than to seek to support these ideas with images and childish devices for fear that they would otherwise be powerless (KU, AA 05: 274).

Besides, he is introduced as the embodiment of unreason, nonsense and madness of the imagination: "Mahomet's paradise" is the symbol of a practical reason which cannot be pure but just "pathologically conditioned, i.e. merely administering the interest of the inclinations under the sensual principle of happiness" (KU, AA 05: 120–121). If reason is determined empirically, then it cannot determine the will in accordance with the moral law. Therefore, it seems that if a Muslim acts and determines his will in

order to receive a reward in the afterlife,⁸ it is impossible for her to properly apply the categorical imperative.

Besides, we find the last fundamental characteristic of the Arabs in *Anthropology* (Anth, AA 07: 268–269) and *Physical geography* (PG, AA 09: 398–400), namely passion.

In the *Anthropology*, Arabs are described as highly hospitable (Anth, AA 07: 279) and extremely passionate⁹ people:

Nomadic peoples, for example, the Arabs, since they (like pastoral peoples) are not attached to any land, cling so strongly to their way of life, even though it is not entirely free of constraint, and moreover they are so high-spirited, that they look with contempt on *settled* peoples, and the hardship that is inseparable from their way of life has not been able to dissuade them from it in thousands of years [...]. Thus it is not only the concept of freedom under moral laws that arouses an affect, which is called enthusiasm, but the mere sensible representation of outer freedom heightens the inclination to persist in it or to extend it into a violent passion, by analogy with the concept of right (Anth, AA 07: 268–269).

In *Physical geography*, Kant focused more on Islam and provides a three-page description in which he mentions some of its main historical and doctrinal contents, such as: that Islam is a strictly monotheistic religion, some data about the biography of Mohamad, as well as descriptions of Mecca and the holy Kaaba.

However, he also makes statements that are not accurate (see Haq and Karim, 2015). For instance, he writes that the use of drugs, which is prohibited in Qur'an,¹⁰ is accepted in Islam (PG, AA 09: 369), and that non-Muslims are not allowed to enter Saudi Arabia while the only restriction

⁸ This, however, could also be a criticism of other religions, including Christianity: if someone acts to be rewarded with paradise in life after death, then they are not acting according to the moral law.

⁹ This extremism concerns sensuality too: "The inhabitant of the Orient is of a very false taste in this point. Since he has no conception of the morally beautiful that can be combined with this drive, he also loses even the value of the sensuous gratification, and his harem is a constant source of unrest for him. He falls into all sorts of amorous grotesqueries, among which the imaginary jewel is one of the foremost, which he tries to secure above all others, whose entire value consists only in one's smashing it, and of which one in our part of the world generally raises much malicious doubt, and for the preservation of which he makes use of very improper and often disgusting means. Hence a woman there is always in prison, whether she be a maiden or have a barbaric, inept, and always suspicious husband" (GSE, AA 02: 254).

¹⁰ "They ask you about intoxicants and games of chance. Say: In both of them there is a great sin and means of profit for men, and their sin is greater than their profit" (Verse 2:219).

refers to entering Mecca. In light of this, we can conclude that he did not have an accurate knowledge of Islam. This is probably justified by the fact that it does not seem that he had direct contact with Muslim and therefore its descriptions are mainly consequences of hearsay, which, moreover, do not distinguish between what is written in the *Qur'an* and the *Hadits*, the different Muslim interpretations of it and the Arab practices and customs.

Still, we know that his explicit source was Carsten Niebuhr—who participated in the Danish Arabic Expedition—and wrote a book on the description of Arabia.¹¹ This work, which contained a small dictionary, consists of nine chapters, providing reports on the geographical characteristics of the so-called Arab provinces (for example: Yemen, Oman, Aden, etc.) as well as on the customs of the peoples living there (including the Bedouins) and their dialects. Interestingly, in the introduction, after describing the difficult conditions of the trip, he wrote that: “I didn’t find this nation so bad. We Europeans often make premature judgements about the customs of foreign nations before we get to know them properly” [“Ich habe diese Nation nicht so schlimm gefunden. Wir Europäer urtheilen oft zu früh über die Sitten fremden Nationen, ehe wir sie recht kennen lernen”] (Niebuhr, 1772, p. X, a. trans.).

In addition, Prussia was not ignorant of Islam: we know that Frederick William I provided a space to be used as a mosque for his Turkish soldiers in 1732.¹² On the other hand, it is known that there is a *bismillah* on an invitation sheet for the solemn conferment of ‘*gradum et insignia*’ to a doctor of philosophy (Kant), dated 12 June 1770. This presence provoked a debate among Kantian scholars about its meaning. Falaturi (1985) claimed that this document attested to the openness of the enlightened society of the time, open to accepting foreign values. More recent research (Bobzin, 1993) has shown, however, that the *bismillah* in Kant’s ‘doctoral certificate’ is not a sign of a new era but an oriental decorative element used to open official documents, namely a kind of invocation (e.g. I.N.J., *σὺν θεῷ*). If this is the case, then the *bismillah* has mere aesthetic value, it is an ornament, whose presence testifies for the spreading of a fascination towards the East. But, if

¹¹ Kant quotes Niebuhr (1772) in his *Physical geography* (PG, AA 09: 232) and in the essay *On the different races of the human beings* (VvRM, AA 02: 432).

¹² There is little work on the presence of Muslims and Tatars in Prussia, especially in the modern centuries. On the presence of Tatar soldiers and slaves in the XV-century Prussia, see Kwiatkowski (2015).

we sum this fascination together with the prejudices and inaccurate descriptions of Kant, we could say that Kant belongs to those European intellectuals that will be later accused by Edward Said of spreading an orientalist attitude. As he puts it in *Orientalism*:

The Orientalist surveys the Orient from above, with the aim of getting hold of the whole sprawling panorama before him —culture, religion, mind, history, society. To do this he must see every detail through the device of a set of reductive categories (the Semites, the Muslim mind, the Orient, and so forth). Since these categories are primarily schematic and efficient ones, and since it is more or less assumed that no Oriental can know himself the way an Orientalist can, any vision of the Orient ultimately comes to rely for its coherence and force on the person, institution, or discourse whose property it is [...]. We have noted how in the history of ideas about the Near Orient in the West these ideas have maintained themselves regardless of any evidence disputing them. (Indeed, we can argue that these ideas produce evidence that proves their validity) (2003, p. 239).

In the case of Kant's writings, the above mentioned characteristics that are attributed to Muslims and Arabs, seem to link them to a culture and religion that, to say the least, does not help to assume an enlightened attitude. Therefore, I would say that such prejudices, inaccurate statements and an orientalist 'taste' make it legitimate to claim that some of Kant's works spread a culturally racist view of Muslims and Arabs.

I will focus on the second aim of this paper, namely to show that there have been cultural movements in the Arab world—such as the Nahda—discussing notions similar to those of Kant's enlightenment and that some contemporary Muslim authors clashed with Kant and other Western philosophers in their attempts to understand, criticize and develop their own tradition—to promote independent and rational interpretations of the *Qur'an* (Soroush).

2. Arab enlightenments

One of the questions which tormented Arabic cultural debates during the last two centuries, is strictly related to Kant's harsh statements concerning

Islam and enlightenment:¹³ how should we conceive reason and what is its relationship with religion? Are modernity—in the Kantian sense, i.e. the defense of reason in its autonomous use—and democracy compatible with Islam?

These questions started to be asked from the second half of the XIX century and are still very topical. The invasion of Egypt by Napoleon (1798–1801) became a clear example of the failure of the Arab-Islamic world to confront the Western powers and gave impetus to begin to question itself, its cultural identity and the possibility of modernization. One of the first intellectual figures to promote such debates was Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi (1801–1873), sent by the government of Egypt to Paris. He spent five years in Paris studying politics and philosophy and, when he returned, he played an important role in the effort to modernize Egypt, convinced that there was no incompatibility between Western modernity and the values of Islam. He is considered as the pioneering figure of the *Nahda*¹⁴ movement (النهضة), which literally means ‘awakening’ and began around 1870 in Egypt and spread in Bilad al-Sham,¹⁵ Iraq, and Maghreb and has an influence among Arab and Muslim intellectuals till nowadays. The term derived from the history of Arabic Letters (*Tārīkh Ādāb al-lughā al-ʿArabiyya*) of the lebanese Jurjī Zaydān (1861–1914) who titled the last volume of this work *The recent Nahda (al-Nahda al-Akhīra)* to distinguish it from the oldest Nahda, which took place during the progressive times of the Abbasids (126–1517). Nahda soon became used to identify intellectual confrontations with

¹³ One could criticise the legitimacy of the use of the Enlightenment vocabulary and the questions that this paragraph opens up. I agree that if we believe that the Enlightenment is a kind of universal panacea—something the Arab countries have not experienced—we will end up adopting a dogmatic and falsely Eurocentric position. However, if we consider enlightenment in a strictly Kantian sense, as the willingness to think freely, and if we assume that to perform this task properly, we must exercise the maxims of *sensus communis*, which involve openness to forms of life other than our own and the continual questioning of our deepest convictions, then the use of this term can help bring different traditions into dialogue. In addition, as we shall see, there are Muslim authors who use this terminology.

¹⁴ Besides the term Nahda, but other terms have been used to describe the cultural, political, anti-colonialist and even feminist movements of these times—for example, enlightenment (*tanwīr*) or modernization (see Hill, 2020, p. 3). However, I decided to stick with the Arabic term Nahda because doing so can help focus on the peculiarities of this era that it is not a mere reproduction or imitation of Western enlightenment.

¹⁵ Bilad al-Sham (Arabic: بِلَادُ الشَّام), also historically known as Historical Syria and Levant, refers to modern countries of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, as well as regions of modern Turkey (Hatay, Gaziantep, and Diyarbakir).

Western thoughts and practice, such as the development of the press, cultural societies and public schools.¹⁶

Historians tend to divide this period of reform and spread of new political movements (not only in the Arab world, but also in Turkey and Iran) into three great waves: i) The time of reforms (inspired by contacts with western countries) in the Ottoman Empire, called Tanzimat (1839), in Iran and Egypt; ii) a reaction against capitalism and all forms of colonialism, which spread after World War II in Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, generally defending the Islamic origins (for example, the Egypt of the Muslim Brotherhood); iii) at the end of the XX century, globalization brought with it a mixture of pro-Western and nationalist tendencies and many intellectuals, as al-Jabri, began to investigate their own societies with modern tools taken from the intellectual currents of the West (Enlightenment and postmodernism) and propose new interpretations of Islam—such as Soroush—(Tagharobi and Zarei, 2016).

As we can see from these historical waves, the attitude of Arab intellectuals towards the West is not univocal. In his book *Averroes, Kant and the origin of the Enlightenment*, Al Tamamy distinguishes between a Westernised discourse and the authentic one. According to the first, the Arab tradition (*turath*) is an obstacle to enlightenment, and the Arab world should adopt modern, western values and practices; while the authentic discourse seek continuity with the tradition and asserts that it was the weakness of commitment with the values of the tradition that causes the weakness of the Arab-Islamic world. We can argue that it is this belief which was at the basis of the development of the fundamentalists movements of our age. A moderate version of the authentic discourse, which rejects both the blind reproduction of the Islamic traditional dogma and the supremacy of the West, proposes a re-interpretation of the tradition able to keep and develop the enlightened elements already present in it (al-Tamamy, 2014, p. 6). So according to this last position (to which belong the authors that I will later present here), the distinction between the Enlightenment and enlightenment(s) should be regarded as following: the Enlightenment describes the cultural, political historical changes that began in Europe in the XVIII century, while enlightenment is a broader category

¹⁶ Among the early intellectuals of the *Nahda* were Jamal al-Din Afghani and Muhammad 'Abduh, who defended the need to reform their countries, which must be freed from all forms of colonialism.

that includes all those cultural movements and historical periods of reforms that exalted values such as: freedom of thought, of movement, self-determination, the defence of rights and human dignity (al-Tamamy, 2014, pp. 10–13).

In the Arab world, before Kant, one can identify at least two examples of enlightenments: the *Mu'tazila* and Ibn Rushd.

Mu'tazilism was a rationalist movement that spread during the Abbasid era between 800 and 1050, mostly in Iraq (Basra and Baghdad) and which disappeared shortly after before the intellectual dominance of the Asharite¹⁷ theology. It saw a revival during the XX century (to the present day) due to the discovery of some manuscripts¹⁸ and intellectual figures such as Harun Nasution, in Indonesia, and Abdolkarim Soroush in Iran. This movement is called rational because, unlike, for instance Asharites,¹⁹ they highlighted the power of independent reasoning (*ijtihad*), the rationality of the natural world (justified theologically by claiming that God would not create an irrational universe) as well as the freedom and responsibility of human beings.²⁰ The forerunner of the *Mu'tazila* was Hasan al-Basri (d. 728) who held a circle of ascetic shaykh and wrote a letter to answer the question of caliph Abd-al Malik on the opposition between predestination and freedom. In the *Risālat al-qadar ilā 'Abd al-Malik* (*Epistle to 'Abd al-Malik against the Predestinarians*) he argued that God would be unjust if some people were predestined not to obey him, and he reported several passages from the Qur'an to defend free will (see Melchert, 2017, pp. 29–31). In addition, the *Mu'tazila* asserted that reason can demonstrate the existence of God and ethical principles, and it is human reason (*aql*) which has to understand the significance of the sacred texts (the *Qur'an* and the

¹⁷ In the X and XI centuries, the Ash'ari, that took their name from the founder Abu l-Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 935) who was the pupil of a *Mu'tazila* (al-Jubba'i) but took distance from him and founded one of the most orthodox views of Islam, that soon started to challenge the *Mu'tazila* influence in Iraq and Iran.

¹⁸ Taha Hussain, the Minister of Education of Egypt sent an expedition to Yemen, who discovered several *Mu'tazila* writings (many of which were of Abd al-Jabbar) in 1950. Microfilms of the manuscripts were brought to Cairo, while the original were left in Yemen.

¹⁹ For a clear and comprehensive overview of the theological and ethical theories of the *Mu'tazilite* and the Ash'arites, see López-Farjeat (2022, caps. 3, 8).

²⁰ The members of this school shared five fundamental principles: good and evil are objective; God only commands good but let human beings choose between good and evil; the good can be known by reason alone, i.e. those who do not know or do not accept the revelation, can still decide ethically; human beings are responsible for their decisions and they will be judged accordingly in the afterlife (Hourani, 1985, p. 69).

Hadith) under particular circumstances (Martin et al., 1997, pp. 10–15). As al-Jabbar,²¹ one of the last *Mu'tazila* writes in his *Kitab al- Usul al-khamsa* (*Book of the Five Fundamentals*):

1. If it is asked: What is the first duty that God imposes upon you? Say to him: Speculative reasoning (*al-nazar*) which leads to knowledge of God, because He is not known intuitively (*darur~tan*) nor by the senses (*bi l-mushahada*). Thus, He must be known by reflection and speculation (Martin et al., 1997, p. 90).

If it can be said that the *Mu'tazilites*, while defending the autonomous capacity of reason, were, de facto, still very close to the political regime of their time, it is different in the case of Ibn Rushd (Averroes), who is usually recognized as the most well-known example of a Muslim philosopher who has been related to the enlightenment and had a more complicated relationship with the political authorities of his time. Ibn Rushd (1126–1198) exalted the power of reason and the value of philosophy in his *Decisive treaty*, in which, responding to al-Ghazālī's fatwa against metaphysics, he states that philosophy is not only permitted, but obligatory:

Since it has been determined that the Law makes it obligatory to reflect upon existing things by means of the intellect; and to consider them; [...] it is obligatory that we go about reflecting upon the existing things by means of intellectual syllogistic reasoning (Averroes, 2011, p. 125).

Famous is his theory concerning apparent disagreement between the Islamic law and philosophy: since the truth cannot oppose itself, then the opposition is merely apparent and depends on a matter of interpretation: philosophical language, namely is demonstrative or apodeictic (*burhan*), while the religious one is figurative or analogous (*qiyas*) and needs to be interpreted (see Averroes, 2011, p. 128).

Now in both cases of the *Mu'tazila* and Ibn Rushd, we can see that they can be definitely regarded as defenders of the power of reason. It is

²¹ Al-Jabbar was probably born in 935 in Iran, from a peasant family. After studying *ash'ari kalam*, In Basra he studied *mu'tazili* and in 977 he was appointed *qadi al-qudat* (chief magistrate) in Rayy by the vizier ibn 'Abbad. But when Abbad died, in 995, al-Jabbar, for unknown reasons, lost his position and all his fortune.

therefore not surprising that the authors that I will now present, are not only readers of Kant and heirs of the Nahda, but also proclaim themselves as followers of Averroes and of the Mu'tazilite.

2.1. Soroush's rational pluralism between Kant and *Mu'tazilism*

Abdolkarim Soroush faces the question of modernity and the role of tradition and religion in Islamic thought and jurisprudence. Born in Teheran in 1945 and after studying chemistry (in Iran and in the UK) he went on to study philosophy of science until 1979, when he had to return to Iran because of the revolution. He is considered as one of the major reformists in Islamic thought and has been called 'the Luther of Shi'i Islam' (Amirpur, 1996) and the influence exerted by Kant on his thoughts is indisputable even if he is not a true Kantian scholar. There he was appointed adviser to the Higher Council of the Cultural Revolution, with the aim of reviewing the country's new education system. However, instead of devoting his work to spreading the ideology of the regime, he lectured on the poetry of Jalal al-din Rumi (on television) and in 1993 he left the High Council and began teaching at the University of Tehran. Given the polemical tone that he assumed towards the regime, he left Tehran in 2000, and he is affiliated with several universities, such as Harvard,²² Princeton, Yale, Columbia. His thinking has been influenced by several western philosophers: Descartes, Popper, Foucault and Kant.²³ From Kant, he took the distinction between phenomena and noumena and used it to characterise knowledge as relational:

In the same manner, the ancient sages did not propose a historical method for understanding the allegedly unfolding nature of water, man or fire. They did not entrust the definitions of these entities to the vicissitudes of history. Kant, who was awakened from his dogmatic slumber by Hume, recognised the human character of our knowledge, rightly acquiring the title 'Father of modern epistemology'. His main contention was that knowledge always bears the stamp of humanity. For Kant, it is an impossible dream to vanish in the embrace of the naked truth as if there were no knowing subject to capture the truth in the first place. In his view, knowledge is nasbi (relative), but only in relation to the world of humanity, not in

²² He titled one of his famous lectures of 1996 at Harvard "Is fiqh possible?" after Kant's question on the possibility of metaphysics (KrV, B22).

²³ The *Critique of pure reason* was translated into farsi in 1982 by Mir Shams al-din Adib-Sulphni and published in Tehran by Amir Kabir publishing house.

its relation to this or that specific knowing subject (Soroush, 1994, p. 257; Dahlén, 2003, p. 258).

For him, this relationality means that every kind of knowledge has theoretical presuppositions. Therefore, his epistemology, called *aqlaniyat-i intiqadi* (critical rationality), aims, on the one hand, to consider reason in an enlightened way, i.e. to constantly challenge our assumptions, and, on the other hand, to de-absolutize the notion of knowledge and recognise that each claim must be related to a context:

My position is in actual fact that of critical or sophisticated rationality in the sense that I believe that the world of reality, whether religion, philosophy or nature, has become too complex for us to describe with a number of pure rational principles or via the manifestation of our [inner] hearts. The most salient result of critical rationality is that the majority of human convictions are nothing but conjectures. This does not mean that we do not have the capacity to get hold of reality but rather that the grasping of reality has no clear sign and that the indications employed by traditional philosophy, such as *bidahat* ('invention'), *yaqin*, and the like, are flawed and insufficient. We cannot therefore simply claim that this is truth or that truth is erroneous [...]. We comprehend conjectures in common experience, in the interpretation of text or in religious experience, *fiqh* and science. As Kant says, these conjectures appear very natural to us and it lies in the nature of reason to arrive at a cul-de-sac from time to time, since multiple rationales disclose a variety of interpretations of one single observable fact and no interpretation is capable of refuting the others (Soroush, 1996c, pp. 144–146; Dahlén, 2003, p. 266).

Besides, he took and reinterpreted the distinction between a priori and a posteriori mostly to use it to develop his thoughts on religion rather than epistemology because, influenced by Popper, he is convinced that Kant's pure categories are merely provisional and that Kant mistakenly assumed them as the universal conditions of Newton's theory: "Kant accepted the absolute basis and validity of Newton's physics and this was the biggest error of his philosophy" (Soroush, 1996b, p. 168; Dahlén, 2003, p. 299).

However, the distinction between a priori and a posteriori is central to distinguishing between religious knowledge, which depends on context,

and the non-historical religious content, which is ethical and independent from the context (Dahlén, 2003, p. 238). This difference recalls the Kantian distinction between the pure religion of reason—the moral and non-contextual value of the religious message—and the historical one, which is empirical and changes through time and space and should be regarded as a mere vehicle of pure religion (Rel, AA 06: 12, 110, 115). However, he does not make reference to Kant's *Religion within the limits of the mere reason* when he distinguishes between the non-historical content of religion, and its historical form, but rather to the *Mu'tazila*:²⁴ “[L]ike the Mu'tazilites, I believe that human reason discovers them as evident and can, therefore, establish a revelation-independent reason” (Soroush, 2009, p. 143). In addition, he often refers to the Sufi Jalalu Addin al-Rumi, who distinguished between the Oneness of Being and the plurality of historical knowledge of Being and considered each religion as a system of truth, valid within a specific context.

In the book *Qabd wa bast-i ti urik-i shariat (The contraction and expansion of legal theory)*, Soroush describes the mechanism behind the dynamic of the alternation between historical periods of opening and closing of religion (in its relationship to law and science) stressing that religious knowledge is limited to the historical context and must be considered as human: “In the past, we regarded a certain act as contrary to the Divine Will and, nowadays, we don't, but all at once both claims equally preserve the spirit of religion” (Soroush, 1996a, p. 68; Dahlén, 2003, p. 238).

Such a historical understanding of religion allows pluralism: the verses of the Qur'an are not eternal, but signs of revelation, and reveal how Muhammad reacted to revelation and transmitted it in the language of his time (Soroush, 2009). He states that Qur'an contains accidental elements (linguistic, socio-political) which depend on past circumstances and must be reinterpreted to be meaningful in the present.²⁵ As he puts it:

²⁴ In an interview, Soroush (2008) declared: “We have to open the chests of tradition and modernity, take out their components and demonstrate the link between them. Speaking in this closed way is not going to take us anywhere. I started the Mu'tazilite project in order to breathe new life into tradition and modernity. Rereading, reconsidering, renewing and assessing the views and ideas of the Mu'tazilites and their school of thought, which are hefty components of tradition, can bring new gains, and truly show us the way both to using tradition and to extricating ourselves from tradition. This is the kind of potential I see in the Mu'tazilite project and I'm trying to take advantage of it.”

²⁵ This would allow for reforms and a clear openness towards the increase of interreligious dialogue.

The Prophet seeks the assistance of (1) a particular language, (2) particular concepts and (3) particular methods (fiqh and ethics). All of this occurs in a particular (4) time and (5) place (geographical and cultural) and for (6) a particular people with particular physical and mental capacities. The purveyor of religion is faced with specific (7) reactions and (8) questions and, in response to them, gives (9) specific answers (Soroush, 2009, pp. 90–91).

Soroush's thoughts is therefore characterised by rational pluralism, according to which the different religions are, as in Kant, vehicles of a mere rational content, adapted to historical and local contexts.²⁶ The path to truth is not unique and it is linked to specific circumstances: "The first sower of the seeds of pluralism in the world was God himself who sent us different Messengers" (Soroush, 2009, p. 130).

2.2. Al-Jabri's critique of Arab reason and the uprisings of 2001

Al-Jabri's philosophical project stems from an emancipatory impulse that seeks changes in post-colonial Morocco, where new cultural and social movements were flourishing. Al-Jabri, who died in 2010, wrote his dissertation on Ibn Khaldun and taught Arab philosophy, and Islamic thought in Mohammed V University in Rabat from the late 1960s. From 1959, he worked with the Moroccan opposition politician Mehdi Ben Barka in the Socialist Union Nationale des Forces Populaires (UNFP).

One of his most important works is the *Critique of Arab reason* which was published in four volumes in Beirut and Casablanca between 1984 and 2001. Al-Jabri himself, as reported in a footnote (2011, p. 31, n. 1) to the English edition of the book, entitled the book and used the Arabic term *al-'aql* inspired by Kant's *Critique of pure reason*. In the book, al-Jabri wants to show the process through which Arabic thought, in some of its manifestations, exceeded its legitimate limits. An example of this is provided by the unjustified excessive use of analogy, which led to mysticism (which was harshly criticised by Kant, too; see KpV, AA 05: 70–71) and irrationalism. In Islamic thought, particularly in *fiqh*

²⁶ As Kant puts it in *Towards perpetual peace*, reflecting on pluralism in religion: "Different religions: an odd expression! just as if one could also speak of different morals. There can indeed be historically different creeds,' [to be found] not in religion but in the history of means used to promote it, which is the province of scholarship, and just as many different religious books (the Zendavesta, the Vedas, the Koran, and so forth), but there can be only one single religion holding for all human beings and in all times. Those can therefore contain nothing more than the vehicle of religion, what is contingent and can differ according to differences of time and place" (ZcF, AA 08: 368).

(jurisprudence), analogy plays a fundamental role, but it is often used outside its legitimate field: to al-Jabri, its exaggerated use to derive conclusions based on mystical unreliable relations between the world of senses and the invisible one, must be rejected as an unacceptable means of achieving objective cognition.

The analogy and *irfan*, that is, a mystical and non-argumentative use of reason, damaged Arab thought and for centuries were preferred to the use of *burhan*—demonstrative thinking. For al-Jabri, Arab thought must free itself from these irrational elements—which for him, were inherited mostly from Persian thought—which affected not only philosophy and jurisprudence, but also ethics and politics, bringing passivity and docility to the Islamic culture (al-Jabri, 1999, p. 49).

In his struggle towards modernisation, al-Jabri saw himself in the tradition of Kant and Averroes, rejecting prejudices and dogmas of tradition (Scaglia, 2024). To him:

We, post-Averroes Arabs, have lived on the margin of history (in inertia and decline) [...]. As for Europeans, they went on to live the very history that we had exited, because they knew how to appropriate Averroes and how to keep living the Averroes moment to this day. The survival of our philosophical tradition, i.e., what is likely to contribute to our time, can only be Averroist (al-Jabri, 1999, p. 124).

The main features of Averroes' thought, that might help the regeneration of Arab culture, are: i) the break with gnosticism and mysticism; ii) the rejection of the limits imposed by some theologians on science (and philosophy); iii) his attitude towards the 'other' (which, for him, were the ancient Greeks): it consists in distinguishing between the circumstantial to a particular era and the universal (al-Jabri, 1999, pp. 124–130). We can easily see that these three characteristics are in line with Kant's thought and its definition of Enlightenment.

Al Jabri's struggle against authoritarianism can also be seen in his political thinking. He was convinced that maturity cannot be a precondition for a just state:

the maturity of the people cannot be realized except through the exercise of democracy. A child does not learn to walk except by actually practicing walking. To monopolize authority, even with good intentions—which is rarely the case—does not lead to the maturity of the people (al-Jabri, 2009, p. 156).

Moreover, he did not conceive the problem of the lack of modernisation and stagnation as something peculiar to the Arab world, but rather accentuated the commonalities between Arabs and other nations of the South of the world (Cherkaoui, 2016, p. 71), thus potentially opening the way for intercultural dialogue on modernisation, enlightenment and international relationships.

Unlike other unconventional Muslim thinkers, such as the Sudanese scholar Mahmud Mohammed Taha, who was hanged in 1985 for apostasy, al-Jabri was never censored, and his works were among the most read by young people in the Arab world. For this it is not surprising that he is considered to be one of the inspirational theoretical figures of the 2011 uprisings.

I cannot go into the details of that powerful period here, but I will limit myself to point out some features of the uprisings that have been qualified as being in line with enlightened ideas (Cherkaoui, 2016, p. 85f.). The first element is undoubtedly the search for freedom: defence of human rights, press and media freedom, defence of minorities rights. Secondly, many debates concerned the need to resize the boundaries between religion and state. In Tunisia, for example, lawmakers between 2013 and 2014 intensively discussed the relationship between religion, constitution, and state. Another characteristic was the tendency to prefer the form of a state system rather than a nation-state.

These values: freedom of thought, of press, autonomy of reason can be considered as enlightened values. We know that Kant was against the revolution (although he sympathised with the success of the French revolution) still, one could wonder what he would have thought of the uprisings. Cherkaoui, in his *What is Enlightenment? Continuity or rupture in the wake of the Arab uprisings* (2016), answered as follows:

One can visualize him [Kant] walking in Tahrir square in Cairo wondering how those energetic crowds of protestors decided to embrace reason, contest oppression and exploitation, and opt for freedom [...]. Apparently, Kant would not hesitate to join the crowds as they chanted the anthem of the Uprising's *Iradata al-hayat* (Will to live) across many Arab squares. This new unifying anthem is a poem written in 1933 by Tunisian poet Abu al-Qasim al-Chebbi (1909–1934).

If a people one day wills to live, fate must answer its call.
And the night must fade, and the chain must break.
Those who never been cuddled by the passion of life, will
evaporate in its air and perish (Cherkaoui, 2016, p. 92).

The 2011 uprisings should be added to the list of modernisation waves mentioned above.²⁷ Unfortunately, it has not gone well in all countries, which makes it clear that more is needed. It is difficult to define what this 'more' would consist of (more internal organization? More means? More support from the world community? More independence from external influences?).

It is beyond my capacity and aims to answer this question, but I can give voice to the Sudanese activist Amir Nasr who, in the book *My Isl@m: How fundamentalism stole my mind—and doubt freed my soul*, answered this question indirectly from a personal and philosophical perspective. He stresses that, on the one hand, the will to think freely and challenge all dogmas must be kept alive²⁸ and, on the other hand, it is highly important to reflect—again and again—on the question of identity. If we use an imaginative and negative Other to define us, to give us some sense of stability, identity and eternity, then we need the conflict to remain ourselves, to hold on to a sense of ourselves. But this crystallised identity is nothing more than a mere illusion and we are not definable by some modern-nationalistic features. Reflecting on the Arab-Israeli conflict, he wrote:

²⁷ I prefer to refer to the uprisings without calling them Arab spring. The expression Arab Spring is controversial because it was coined in the West and might lead to the expectation that these events are only a replica of what happened, for instance, in the 1848 revolutions known as 'Spring of Nations' and in the Prague Spring in 1968, in which a Czech student, Jan Palach, set himself on fire (as did Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia).

²⁸ "We have to bring back reason. We have to re-establish philosophy so we can liberate the Muslim mind from the shackles of dogma, so we can re-establish a Muslim culture of science, so we can rise again. It's possible—but it requires work, strong leaders, stronger thinkers, and the support of a people unwilling to remain subservient to literalism and faith" (Nasr, 2013, p. 164).

Where do we go from here? Well, less polarization and demonization of the Other in our discourse on all sides would be a nice start. Whether it can happen will depend on the realities on the ground, which influence the political climate. Can those realities change anytime soon? I don't know, but we, as individuals, can certainly do what we can to heal the rifts caused by the perils of identity in our communities, and combat the messages of those who seek to exploit them [...]. I am neither just Arab nor just African. Neither just Eastern nor just Western. I am Sudanese Afro-Arab by birth and proud heritage, Qatari and Malaysian by migration, Western and American by post-elementary knowledge, affinity, and education, science-affirming mystic by integral philosophical contemplation, lover of my Beloved by Sufi orientation, libertarian-leaning by political persuasion, writer, activist and entrepreneur by life vocation, and cosmopolitan world citizen by choice and dedication. I am the influence of all those parts in motion, but not their sum, for they have no sum (Nasr, 2013, pp. 314–315).

3. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I wanted to emphasize that the characteristics that Kant attributes to Islam and the Arabs, seem to exclude them from the enlightenment, here intended as an autonomous use of reason in accordance with the maxims of the *sensus communis*. Such exclusion allows us to see in the background of Kant's thought the features of a cultural racism. As described by Kant, the lack of respect for the boundaries between fields of knowledge and a tendency to be extremely passionate and irrational make Muslims unable to develop autonomous thinking. In the second part of the paper, I wanted to show that in the Arab world there have been cultural movements—such as the *Nahda*—that debate notions similar to Kant's enlightenment and that some contemporary Muslim authors used the thought of Kant and other Western philosophers in their attempts to understand, criticise and develop their own tradition—without denying it (al-Jabri)—promoting independent and rational interpretations of the *Qur'an* (Soroush).

I follow al-Tamamay distinction between the Enlightenment and the enlightened attitude, but I do not want to claim that the Enlightenment was a perfectly good cultural, social and political movement which improved the course of Western history (and that would be or would have been good for the Eastern countries, too [see Neuwirth, 2013]), but rather, that within some versions of the European Enlightenment—for instance, Kant's thought—there are certain features (which include the defence of the

capacity of reason and of basic expressions and exercises of freedom) that have been present in the thinking of Eastern intellectuals and which should be highlighted in order to encourage the development of a precise and fruitful way of making history of philosophy and of participating in an intercultural dialogue.

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