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## Modern Islamic Religious Education on the Move Epistemological Reorientation, Pedagogical Transformation, and Ethical-Political Engagement

### Abstract

Modern Islamic Religious Education (MIRE) reconciles traditional confessional instruction with contemporary critical inquiry. Drawing on the works of Muslim thinkers active in the West, namely, Mohammed Arkoun, Abdolkarim Soroush, and Tariq Ramadan, it is based on three foundations: epistemological reorientation, pedagogical transformation, and ethical-political engagement. Arkoun introduces deconstruction of orthodox power structures; Soroush advances epistemological pluralism and dialogical reasoning; and Ramadan links revelation to civic responsibility. Their approach is one of religious experimentality reanimating the relations between text and context and permitting educators to be pedagogical bricoleurs. Together, they shape a dynamic educational model cultivating learners as *mukallafin* – morally responsible, critically reflective, and civically engaged individuals.

**Keywords:** Modern Islamic Religious Education; Critical Fidelity; Political Engagement; Pluralism

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## Introduction

Islamic Religious Education (IRE) today operates within a bifurcated landscape. On one side stands a traditional, confessional model rooted in doctrinal orthodoxies and the transmission of fixed religious knowledge. On the other side lies a constructivist and critical model that emphasizes context, autonomy, and pluralism. Each model presents distinct limitations. Traditional IRE often resists epistemological plurality and remains relatively disengaged from the socio-cultural complexities of contemporary, particularly Western, contexts. It tends to approach modern discourses on science, ethics, politics and likewise either defensively or apologetically, while safeguarding inherited frameworks from critical scrutiny. Conversely, constructivist IRE, although attentive to contemporary discourses, may distance itself from the theological depth of the tradition. The result is an impasse: one model avoids reflective critique, while the other marginalizes transcendental spirituality.

In search of a way beyond this impasse, this paper turns to contemporary Muslim thinkers in search for avenues for reconceptualizing Islamic education that is capable of holding together theological inheritance and reflective critique. Specifically, it turns to the writings of Mohammed Arkoun, Abdolkarim Soroush, and Tariq Ramadan, drawing on three peer-reviewed publications we have co-authored. The first, published in *Religions* (Felsenthal & Agbaria, 2023), investigates Arkoun's epistemological deconstruction and his critique of closed systems of thought. The second, in the *Springer Journal of Religious Education* (Felsenthal & Agbaria, 2025b), examines Soroush's theory of religious knowledge and its curricular implications. The third, in the *British Journal of Religious Education* (Felsenthal & Agbaria, 2025a), analyzes Ramadan's integration of *maqāṣid* (objectives of Sharia) with contextual reasoning and ethical responsibility.

Building on these studies, the paper argues for a model of Modern Islamic Religious Education (MIRE) that draws on Arkoun, Soroush, and Ramadan to reconcile theological commitment with critical inquiry. Positioned between confessional traditionalism and secular constructivism, it proposes an educational approach that sustains revelation while legitimizing interpretation, plural reasoning, and public responsibility. The central claim is that Islamic education can move beyond transmission toward reflective, context-responsive learning without relinquishing its religious grounding. Yet before we delve further into the discussion, a word of caution is needed: what we propose does not aim to resolve all tensions within IRE. Rather, it seeks to provide a conceptual space in which such tensions can be productively reworked and negotiated.

The paper is organized into four parts and a conclusion. First, we introduce the three thinkers and draw on our prior scholarship to clarify the educational significance of their intellectual projects. Second, we analyze their intersections, highlighting convergences and divergences to map the conceptual terrain from which MIRE emerges. Third, we articulate the foundations of MIRE (epistemological reorientation, pedagogical transformation, and ethical-political engagement) while identifying experimentality as its constitutive ethos. Fourth, we suggest possible curricular directions, classroom pedagogies, and institutional considerations that follow from these foundations. The contribution is thus not only conceptual but also programmatic, offering a preliminary framework for moving from confessional transmission toward inquiry-within-faith. We conclude by situating MIRE across contemporary paradigms and tensions and by reflecting on our positionality as the authors of this study.

## Three Thinkers in Three Articles

Contemporary Muslim reformist thinkers embody both continuity and rupture in the relationship between Islamic tradition and non-Islamic intellectual currents. They do not simply revive classical doctrines but

reinterpret heritage through engagement with non-Islamic epistemological and ethical frameworks. Following Pierre Nora's (Nora & Cuesta, 1998, 16) distinction between *milieux de mémoire* (living memory) and *lieux de mémoire* (archived memory), their central challenge is reanimation: moving Islamic heritage from its current condition as a curated archive – accessed mainly for citation or critique – toward a continuous, dialogical, reflective, and above all lived practice capable of shaping the present. Arkoun's call to recover the "unthought," Soroush's vision of religious knowledge as expanding and contracting with human experience, and Ramadan's integration of revelation with ethical praxis and civic responsibility converge in this task of reanimation. Their work shows that returning to classical Muslim philosophers, theologians, and jurists is not about citation but about intellectual bricolage – reconstructing inherited concepts in conversation with non-Islamic frameworks of thought and redirecting them toward concrete lived practice. Together they recast Islamic thought as a living hermeneutic endeavor, capable of addressing the epistemological and ethical demands of pluralistic, democratic, and multireligious societies.

Mohammed Arkoun (1928–2010), an Algerian-born scholar, devoted much of his work to re-opening interpretive spaces both within, and vis-à-vis, what he termed the "official closed corpus" of Islamic orthodoxy. His distinction between the "Qur'anic fact" (*fait coranique*) – the divine revelation itself – and the "Islamic fact" (*fait islamique*) – its historical and ideological interpretations – served to challenge theological monopolies, historicize Islamic thought, uncover its "unthought," and re-situate it within broader humanistic and comparative frameworks (Ahmad et al., 2019). Drawing on intellectual currents such as Derridean deconstruction, Foucauldian historiography, and the historiography of the Annales school, Arkoun aimed to synthesize Islamic and Western traditions (Kersten, 2011; Shaikh, 2004). While his work is typically discussed in theological or philosophical terms, its educational implications remain under-explored. Leirvik (2015) alludes to the subject of education through emphasizing Arkoun's reading of the Qur'an as open-ended discourse rather than closed scripture.

Our interest in Arkoun is reflected in our article, "How to Read the Quran in Religious Islamic Education: What Educators Can Learn from the Work of Mohammed Arkoun" (Felsenthal & Agbaria, 2023). In this paper, we examine Arkoun's multi-layered hermeneutics of the Qur'an, demonstrating how his analytical framework – structured around four levels or "faces" of reading – promotes a pedagogy rooted in contingency and critical thinking. Central to Arkoun's approach is the concept of *unthought* (*impensé*), which invites students and educators to uncover repressed or unexplored aspects of Islamic thought, as well as marginalized traditions and voices. His notion of *mukallaf*, or moral agency, further encourages the development of personal responsibility within the context of communal ethics. By moving between close textual analysis and broader processes of meaning-making, for us, Arkoun exemplifies an educational attempt to reconcile religious tradition with modern rationality and postmodern tools.

Born in 1945, Abdolkarim Soroush is a leading Iranian intellectual whose post-revolutionary trajectory – from university reformer to exiled dissident – has shaped a project that bridges Islamic theology, philosophy of science, political theory, and Sufi mysticism. His most distinctive contribution is the theory of the "contraction and expansion" (*qabḍ wabaṣṭ*) of religious knowledge, which distinguishes between the immutable essence of divine revelation and the historically contingent, fallible nature of human interpretation (Fletcher, 2005; Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2004). This epistemological model enables a dynamic and pluralistic understanding of Islam (Arjomand, 2002), further deepened by his reinterpretation of revelation as a dialogical and human-divine interaction rather than a static transmission of propositions (Akbar, 2017; Chatelier, 2015). Soroush's pluralism is not merely an ethical stance but a philosophical imperative: it reflects the inherent multiplicity of human experiences of the divine. As Agbaria (2022) notes, his approach resonates with John Hick's distinction between the Real as-it-is-in-itself and the Real as-it-appears in

human perception, suggesting an education that cultivates openness to the noumenal through reflective, interreligious engagement.

Our interest in Soroush centers on his possible contribution to an IRE that is more critical, contextually responsive and above all humanistic. This focus is articulated in our article, “The Contraction and Expansion of Islamic Education: The Possible Contribution to Humanistic Islamic Religious Education in the Work of Abdolkarim Soroush” (Felsenthal & Agbaria, 2025b), where we analyze Soroush’s dual movements of contraction and expansion across three key concepts: reason, religious experience, and pluralism. These dynamic processes enable Soroush to reconceptualize Islamic education as inherently humanistic and dialogical. His distinction between immutable religion and mutable religious knowledge establishes an epistemological foundation for an educational model that is both historically conscious and adaptable. Furthermore, Soroush’s emphasis on inner religious experience, influenced by mystical traditions, anchors his vision in individual authenticity and pluralism. This ongoing interplay between rational critique and spiritual depth distinguishes Soroush’s thought as a significant and original contribution to a humanistic approach to MIRE (Felsenthal & Agbaria, 2025b).

Tariq Ramadan, born in Geneva in 1962, stands as a prominent Muslim intellectual advocating for a “European Islam” that reconciles Islamic values with Western civic frameworks (Brahimi & Brisson, 2020; Tampio, 2011). In recent years he has been accused of sexual harassment and rape, deepening his deeply controversial public persona. We find that his work carries important notions and ideas and should be treated separately from the man. Ramadan’s reformist vision pivots from rigid legalism to an ethical reinterpretation of Islamic jurisprudence, centering *maqāṣid al-sharī‘a* (objectives of Islamic law) and *maṣlaḥa* (public interest) as the core of modern *ijtihād* (MacDonald, 2014; March, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Ramadan’s “new geography of sources” proposes collaboration between textual scholars (*‘ulamā’ al-nuṣūṣ*) and contextual experts (*‘ulamā’ al-wāqi’*), notably from the natural and social sciences, aiming to produce an ethics-based hermeneutic relevant to contemporary life (Tampio, 2011). Furthermore, he extends the concept of *dār al-shahāda* (abode of witnessing), a departure from classical binaries like *dār al-Islām* and *dār al-ḥarb* (abode of Islam and abode of War), positing Europe as a space where Muslims can authentically live their faith and contribute positively to society. In this framework, civic engagement becomes not only permissible but essential to Islamic witness, grounding Ramadan’s religious and ethical vision within the participatory norms of democratic life (Weismann, 2019; Zemmin, 2015). This vision affirms the compatibility of Islamic ethics with pluralist political arrangements, thus bridging spiritual commitments and public reason.

In “Justice Before God: Critical Islamic Education Based on the Work of Tariq Ramadan” (Felsenthal & Agbaria, 2025a), we analyse Ramadan’s ethical-political reformism. Drawing on foundational Islamic concepts such as *ijihad*, *maslaha*, *maqasid*, *umma*, and *jihad*, Ramadan develops an Islamic ethics of civic engagement and social justice. Our analysis shows how he reclaims Islamic vocabulary to foster political responsibility, shaping an educational framework that emphasizes critical loyalty, ethical activism, social justice and faith-based reasoning. Ramadan’s approach integrates Islamic theology with democratic ethics and critical pedagogy.

In sum, Arkoun reopens what he terms the “Official Closed Corpus,” advancing a hermeneutics that unsettles inherited monopolies of interpretation. Soroush reframes the relation between immutable religion and mutable religious knowledge, situating revelation in ongoing dialogue with philosophy, science, and ethics. Ramadan, in turn, binds interpretation to moral formation, civic and political participation, social justice and spiritual integrity. Taken together, the intellectual projects of Arkoun,

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter these terms shall be written *maslaha*, *maqasid* and *ijihad* to facilitate reading.

Soroush, and Ramadan embody a shared effort to revitalize Islamic thought and education through dialogical engagement – both within the tradition and vis-à-vis non-Islamic intellectual currents. They not only refer to but dialogue with Islamic thinkers throughout the ages, such as Al-Ghazali, Miskawayhi and Ibn Rushd, among others. At the same time, their encounters with Western thinkers such as Derrida, Habermas, Hick, and Rawls, among others, are not instances of mere borrowing but of dialogical correspondence, where Islamic concepts are brought into critical exchange with liberal theories of deliberation, autonomy, and justice. This orientation sketches the contours of a MIRE attentive to history, critical inquiry, and ethical responsibility. What follows traces the distinct moves each thinker makes in reconceptualizing Islamic education and shows how – when read together – these moves converge to reposition teachers as “pedagogical bricoleurs” (Freatly et al., 2017), capable of designing pedagogies that enable students to interrogate and renew their own traditions critically and reflectively.

### Convergences and Divergences

The writings of Arkoun, Soroush and Ramadan reveal four key convergences: liminal positionalities, the embedding of reason within faith, historically sensitive hermeneutics and the democratization of responsibility. These convergences are not inferred abstractly but emerge from specific conceptual moves in their work – Arkoun’s distinction between the “Qur’anic fact” and the “Islamic fact,” Soroush’s theory of contraction and expansion of religious knowledge, and Ramadan’s reconstruction of *maqasid* and *maslaha* as ethical-legal tools.

The first convergence lies in their shared liminal positionalities. Each thinker operates at the intersection of Islamic and Western intellectual traditions while also navigating the boundaries between religious authority and secular public life. Arkoun’s use of post-structural tools, a “radical rethinking of Islam as a cultural and religious system” (Ahmad et al., 2019, 16), is a “dual edge diatribe” aiming at both “the loss of critical Qur’anic reading” and at the “carte blanche dismissals of Islam and religion by modern scholarship” (Shaikh, 2004, 100–101). And so, his *emerging reason* is aimed to subvert Islamic orthodoxy and thought and Western thought, which he terms the *tele-techno-scientific* reason creating a “meta-modern horizon of meaning, knowledge and action” (Arkoun, 2012, 60). Soroush adopts “Popperian perspectives” (Rizvi, 2013, 188) and combines this with the rationalistic Islamic thought of the Mu’tazila and Islamic mysticism “as a way of transcending Iranian Islamism and Western Secularism” (von Heyking, 2006, 73). Finally, Ramadan is “constantly doing the splits”, harmonizing Islamic Sunni tradition with Kantian philosophy in an attempt to “reconcile his loyalty to Islamic orthodoxy with the humanities as they are understood in the West” (Benthall, 2016, 165; Tampio, 2011). With all three scholars, liminality becomes a productive epistemic condition. This, in turn, helps their engagement with Rawlsian and Habermasian ideas of dialogue and consensus in the public sphere in a way which further reflects a commitment to civic reasoning and pluralism balancing Islamic and democratic positions (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2018; March, 2007).

A second convergence is their conviction that reason must remain embedded within faith. None of the three treats rational inquiry as corrosive to belief; rather, each frames it as a disciplined tool in the service of revelation. For Arkoun, reason is a method of “pushing the boundaries” of the *unthought* and opening “new avenues of thought” (Arkoun, 2012, 4–5), excavating silenced strata of tradition while keeping the “search for ultimate meaning” and without undermining faith (Arkoun, 2003, 25). Soroush embeds reason with the Prophet Muhammad which inaugurates an era of rationality where “people would henceforth have to adopt a critical approach to revelation” (Soroush, 2009, 30), while at the same time safeguarding the Divine and religion through his division between religion and religious knowledge and understanding. In this, reason develops through dialogue with philosophy, the social sciences and lived experience thereby using it to

reform religion and “for the resolution of the conflict between science and religion (and philosophy and religion and so on)” (Soroush, 2009, 62). Ramadan, likewise, situates reason as indispensable for reading both the Qur’an and the universe as the “two books” of divine signs, affirming that “there is no accomplished faith if it is not confirmed by an active and rational sense of reason” (Ramadan, 2017, 18). Despite their differences, all three affirm that reason is not a rival to faith but its disciplined companion.

A third convergence concerns hermeneutics. All three argue for historically sensitive readings of scripture, yet they carefully guard against historicism sliding into desacralization. Arkoun’s four level analysis of the Qur’an – Word of God, Prophetic discourse, Official Closed Corpus, and living Tradition – distinguishes eternal meaning from historical accretions and exposes processes that consolidated orthodoxy and created a “dogmatic enclosure” (Arkoun, 2012, 94). Soroush similarly distinguishes immutable “essentials” of religion which are “the necessary minimum of spirituality and guidance granted and bequeathed to humanity”, from contingent “accidentals”, thereby legitimizing adaptation while safeguarding the timeless (Soroush, 2009, 145). Ramadan builds on juristic tradition, reconstructing *maqasid al-shari’a* which should be “applied in the light of” *maslaha* to differentiate the fixed from the variable (Ramadan, 2005, 42). His expansion of *maqasid* from the original list of five goals to forty-one allows Islamic law to address contemporary challenges without abandoning fidelity to revelation (Ramadan, 2009, 138–143). In each case, historical analysis functions as a clarifying lens that reveals context and contingency while maintaining a ceiling of transcendence that protects the divine character of revelation.

A fourth convergence is their shared commitment to the democratization of responsibility. All three reject *taqlid*, obedience and conformity to the teaching of a specific person or school, as uncritical imitation and they aim to extend interpretive and moral agency beyond clerical elites. Arkoun urges readers to confront their tradition’s *unthought*, challenging monopolies of interpretation and encouraging direct engagement with texts “out of active resistance” in an act of “subversion” (Arkoun, 2012, 8). For him, the believer is a *mukallaf* “the subject of rights” who “enjoys fully the faculty of discernment (*‘aql*)” (Arkoun, 2016, 296) and is, therefore, “responsible in front of God” (Arkoun, 2016, 40). Soroush legitimizes the individual’s capacity to exercise rational doubt and “relentless individuality” (Soroush, 2009, 186), and to re-enact the Prophetic experience in “an active participation in the experiences of the guide” (Soroush, 2009, 201) thus authorizing broad participation in interpretive deliberation. Ramadan similarly warns against *taqlid* and calls on believers to cultivate deeper personal understanding of scripture which with faith and choice “make up the dimension of *responsibility*” (Ramadan, 2005, 80 italics in the original text) as empowerment with civic consequences.

Against this common architecture stand four major divergences – methodology, hermeneutics, authority, and teleology – each of which highlights the distinctive profiles of the three thinkers and presents a particular component of their contribution to MIRE.

The first divergence concerns methodology. Ramadan grounds his approach in juristic reform, relying on tools such as *ijtihad*, *maslaha*, and *maqasid al-shari’a* to address contemporary issues. He reframes ethical formation as a multi-faceted *jihad* that unites “working on one’s self” and self-examination with “struggle for greater justice” and social action (Ramadan, 2005, 113) to allow for “a flexible and open, yet authentic, Islamic doctrine of European citizenship” (March, 2011, 186). Soroush develops a dynamic epistemology in which religious knowledge contracts and expands through dialogue with human sciences and human experience. Exceeding the juristic framework, proposing a second-order *ijtihad* which is a “cultural translation” of the accidentals, “preserving the spirit and transforming the body” (Soroush, 2009, 89). This *ijtihad* is not limited to jurisprudence, but rather applied in philosophy, as well as theology, morality and so on. Arkoun, taking the most radical position, sees *ijtihad* as part of a “restrictive, uncritical definition of

authority” (Arkoun, 2012, 255). To him, *ijtihad*, like other Islamic concepts, should be submitted to *emerging reason* that situates the entire tradition within post-structuralist and archaeological analysis.

The second divergence lies in hermeneutics. Ramadan employs *maqasid* as discriminating tool for distinguishing the fixed from the contingent, integrating juristic continuity with democratic civic ethics in a “constant dialectical movement between the essential principals determined by the Revelation and the actual circumstances” (Ramadan, 2005, 36–37). Soroush legitimizes adaptation through his essentials/accidentals distinction, balancing fidelity with flexibility and creating a “humanist reinterpretation of sacred texts” (Pidluzny, 2013, 7). Arkoun’s four-level reading, by contrast, emphasizes the historical construction of orthodoxy in a “reflexive hermeneutics that is itself “subversive” (Arkoun, 2016, 390). Whereas Ramadan and Soroush combine continuity with adaptation, Arkoun, while valuing the different traditions, leans toward deconstruction, privileging genealogy and archaeology over closure.

The third divergence concerns authority and agency. Ramadan retains a structured hierarchy. While urging lay Muslims to move beyond blind imitation, he still preserves a crucial mediating role for jurists, as not all Muslims “should be able to determine *maslaha*, exercise *ijtihad*, or pronounce *fatawa*” (Ramadan, 2005, 244). Soroush flattens hierarchies more decisively by authorizing all believers to participate in negotiating revelation within their lifeworlds thereby keeping it relevant and “alive at the individual and social levels” (Soroush, 2009, 203). As with the other divergences, Arkoun goes further. Subverting orthodoxy, opening the *unthought*, listening to “voices reduced to silence, heterodox voices” (Arkoun, 2012, 32), Arkoun not only redistributes authority across the community, but does it in a radically egalitarian fashion.

The fourth divergence is teleological. Ramadan’s project is ethical-teleological, oriented toward realizing God’s justice in civic life and resonating with pedagogies of critical social action (Freire, 2014; Giroux, 2020). Soroush envisions an anthropological teleology aimed at human flourishing through reason, experience and pluralism carrying “revolutionary commitments” to human rights and human reason (Pidluzny, 2013, 16–17). Arkoun advances an epistemological teleology, treating truth as a horizon continually approached, and creating a “meta-modern horizon of meaning, knowledge and action” (Arkoun, 2012, 60) that privileges inquiry over closure. Each trajectory has strengths and risks: Ramadan offers cohesion and direction but risks reinforcing hierarchy; Soroush empowers agency and pluralism but risks fragmentation; Arkoun deepens critique and historical awareness but risks disorientation if not carefully scaffolded.

The convergences and divergences among Arkoun, Soroush and Ramadan yield a vision of modern Islamic thought that is both anchored in tradition and unsettled by critique. Their shared commitments – liminality, reason embedded in faith, historically sensitive hermeneutics, and democratized responsibility – establish a framework that resists both defensive traditionalism and secular reduction. Nonetheless, we argue, these shared commitments are realized through divergent strategies, as each thinker deploys different methodological, hermeneutical and teleological tools to pursue similar ends. Methodologically, Ramadan reformulates classical juristic tools, Soroush advances epistemological pluralism, and Arkoun pursues critical archaeology – three pathways that diverge on whether renewal should proceed through reform, expansion, or deconstruction. In hermeneutics, Ramadan recalibrates *maqasid*, Soroush distinguishes essentials from accidentals, and Arkoun unpacks the historical construction of orthodoxy, offering contrasting ways of situating revelation in history. Authority likewise divides them: Ramadan retains hierarchies, Soroush flattens them, and Arkoun renders them provisional. Finally, their teleologies pull toward different horizons – Ramadan toward civic justice and the political, Soroush toward human flourishing and the anthropological, and Arkoun toward open ended inquiry and recognition of the contingent.

This architecture of convergences and divergences generates a dynamic that animates the field of IRE. The convergences provide stability: revelation remains an anchor, reason a disciplined servant, and responsibility a shared task. The divergences, however, surface the pressing dilemmas Islamic educators must negotiate: how to balance reformist continuity with critical rupture? How to historicize without desacralizing? How to democratize interpretation without eroding coherence? How to orient education simultaneously toward spiritual depth and civic engagement? Each thinker contributes to this architecture in distinctive ways – Ramadan offers normative clarity and civic direction, Soroush brings epistemic modesty and pluralist agency, and Arkoun cultivates historical consciousness and the courage to reopen what orthodoxy has sealed. Read together, their projects reimagine Islamic education not as the passive transmission of fixed truths but as the active reanimation of tradition through inquiry, dialogue, and ethical responsibility. It is precisely from this interplay of convergence and divergence that the formative foundations of MIRE take shape.

## Foundations and Ethos of MIRE

This section identifies three core foundations that constitute the basis of the theoretical framework of MIRE: epistemological reorientation, pedagogical transformation and ethical-political engagement. These dimensions, drawn from the works of Arkoun, Soroush, and Ramadan, are held together by an underlying ethos of experimentality – the conviction that religious knowledge is never static but always subject to renewal, reinterpretation, and application.

### *1. Epistemological Reorientation: Contingency, Pluralism, and Evolving Knowledge*

Reorienting IRE requires moving from a view of knowledge as fixed and self-sufficient to one that treats understanding as historically contingent and contextually situated. This shift does not desacralize revelation; rather, it reframes how human beings apprehend it. Against epistemic closure, Mohammed Arkoun foregrounds the *unthought* and challenges the Official Closed Corpus, urging historical epistemology that places scripture within socio-political realities of its emergence. Abdolkarim Soroush complements this move by distinguishing immutable religion from mutable religious knowledge, insisting that every articulation of the sacred bears the marks of its time, language and experience. Tariq Ramadan, in turn, emphasizes the cultural-historical context of both revelation and believers throughout history, and reconnects revelation relevance to contemporary times and conditions. Together these claims unsettle absolutist certainties while preserving the transcendence that faith entails.

The reorientation also specifies how pluralism can be both principled and disciplined. Arkoun's layered hermeneutics – linguistic, contextual, historical, symbolic-critical – trains learners to hold reverence and critique in productive tension, retrieving marginalized voices without dissolving the text's claim upon the believer. Soroush's "contraction and expansion" frames religious knowing as an evolving conversation with philosophy, science, and lived experience. Plurality, across and within religious traditions alike, is not a concession to modernity but the outcome of responsible inquiry into a reality that always exceeds its formulations. Pluralism, in this sense, embodies epistemic modesty in practice: it legitimizes multiple interpretive perspectives while requiring disciplined methods that test, refine, and situate those perspectives within their historical and ethical conditions.

Tariq Ramadan extends the reorientation by tying knowledge to ethical and civic responsibility. Tools such as *ijtihad*, *maslaha*, and *maqasid* are redeployed as instruments for reasoning about contemporary

dilemmas, from social inequity to ecological harm. Epistemology here is not abstract theory, but a discipline ordered toward justice before God. Here, knowing is incomplete unless it leads to discerning action.

Interweaving these strands yields a field that is open, reflexive, and normatively guided. In it, revelation remains an anchor, yet human understandings are recognized as provisional, corrigible, and responsive to new conditions. In resisting both epistemic absolutism and secular relativism, this foundation for MIRE affirms knowledge as situated and evolving – plural in its genuinely human expressions and purposive in its ethical orientation.

## 2. *Pedagogical Transformation: From Transmission to Interpretation*

The second foundation of MIRE concerns pedagogy – not only *what* taught but *how*. Traditional IRE has often privileged memorization, doctrinal repetition, and passive reception. By contrast, the projects of Arkoun, Soroush, and Ramadan invite a reimagining of purposes and practices. Each, in a different register, refuses to reduce religious learning either to rote transmission or to a desacralizing critique detached from faith. Arkoun's insistence on layered hermeneutics – linguistic, contextual, historical and symbolic-critical – exposes *unthought*, unsettles monopolies of interpretation, and trains learners to read critically without forfeiting reverence. This is a critical reading whose objective is “to reveal meanings without reducing mystery” (Arkoun, 1994, 42) and one where the “religious marvelous asserts itself” (Arkoun, 2016, 216).

Soroush complements this by refusing the split between reason and inward formation. To him, it is the combined reason which emerges from religious knowledge contraction and expansion with lived experience and the individual reproduction of the Prophetic experience – that leads to authentic education which cultivates conscience and moral autonomy alongside analytic skill. This in turn brings “experiential believers” to be “sources of goodness” to themselves and their communities and cultivate conscience and moral autonomy alongside analytic skill (Soroush, 2009, 218). In other words, it is a pedagogy that utilizes experiences as well as reason and analysis.

Ramadan binds the pedagogical action to civic practice. Concepts like *maslaha*, *maqasid*, and *jihad* become pedagogical sources for confronting racism, inequality, and ecological degradation. This leads toward an “active contribution” in the civic sphere (Ourghi, 2010, 293).

The upshot is not a new orthodoxy but an ethos of formation in which critique and fidelity remain in disciplined tension. With that tension as its motor, MIRE shifts pedagogy from transmission to transformation: learners do not merely master specific contents; rather they interpret, question, experience, and act. They advance their intellectual depth, their religious awareness, their ethical sensitivity, and their civic responsibility in tandem.

## 3. *Ethical-Political Engagement: Spirituality and Justice in the Public Sphere*

In MIRE, ethical-political engagement starts from the conviction that spirituality must find form as justice in the public sphere. Islamic learning is therefore more than private piety or doctrinal accuracy; it is a formative process oriented to responsible action amid plural institutions, contested norms, and real asymmetries of power. Framed this way, spirituality and public responsibility are mutually implicative: faith is tested where convictions meet collective dilemmas, and civic discernment is deepened by spiritual discipline.

In this sense, MIRE responds to the challenge of living together justly while sustaining both individual and collective differences and recognizing the legitimacy of multiple, overlapping identities. In answering, MIRE implements John Rawls' concept of "overlapping consensus" where political justice is achieved through a consensus that is justified differently according to diverse worldviews (Rawls, 1997). It also implements Jurgen Habermas' suggestion for a deliberation and political debate where worldviews are translated into concepts, terms and language that is understandable by different citizens in a mutual hermeneutical process (Habermas, 2006).

Read through this lens, Ramadan's corpus provides resources for linking interpretation to action, in what we have termed Critical Islamic Religious Education (CIRE). Concepts such as *ijtihad*, *maslaha*, *maqasid*, and *jihad* can be taught as tools for ethical-political engagement, enabling learners to diagnose social harm, deliberate across difference, and align religious conviction with duties in the public sphere. Here, spiritual formation animates civic agency rather than retreat; scriptural reasoning becomes a civic practice for pursuing common good in the public sphere, so that worship and witness cohere in lived commitments to dignity, equity, and care for earth.

While less political, Arkoun and Soroush share this important foundation for MIRE. Arkoun's historical consciousness and critique of power help students recognize how religious language can be instrumentalized, and how tradition can be re-read as a resource for ethical plurality and cultural openness. Soroush focuses on conscience and moral autonomy, insisting that harmonizing modern and Muslim structures, as well as translating religion's *essentials* to specific contexts – are necessary for Muslims in order to contribute to democratic procedures and discourse in the public sphere in ways which helps students and teachers to live with the plurality of religious and civic identities.

Taken together, these trajectories recast Islamic Religious Education as the cultivation of responsible *mukallafin* – learners who integrate spiritual depth with public responsibility. It is the *mukallaf*, the sovereign subject, who participates in civic life and in the public sphere working towards justice in ways that are religiously informed and spiritually sustained.

### **The Ethos of Experimentality – Open Inquiry, Pluralism and Individualism**

The three foundations of MIRE mentioned above are held together by an animating ethos of experimentality. This ethos reflects the conviction that religious knowledge is never static but always subject to renewal, reinterpretation, and application. Its significance can be observed across three key dimensions, which will be explained in what follows.

First, by embracing experimentality, MIRE directly addresses rigidity and closure in religious discourse. Arkoun's program dismantles the Official Closed Corpus, calling for a reopening of tradition through sustained engagement with the *unthought* and with voices marginalized by monopolized authority. This is an attempt to reconnect a "neglected but exuberant Islam" (Arkoun, 2012, 154) to "religion as a way proposed to man to discover the Absolute" (Arkoun, 2003, 22). The aim is recovery of meaning in a continued search for "the ultimate meaning" (Arkoun, 2003, 25). It is this, rather than nihilistic deconstruction, which allows inherited texts to speak with integrity to contemporary seekers.

Soroush makes a threefold case. a) distinguishing immutable divine religion from its mutable human reception, and so allowing for less rigidity and more flexibility with the religious (or more accurately with human religious knowledge and understanding); b) warning against both dogmatic literalism and purely pragmatic religiosity which is (among other things) "mundane... imitative... traditional and habitual"

(Soroush, 2009, 182); c) endorsing an experiential religiosity which aspires to reenact the Prophet's encounter with revelation in an "active participation in the experiences of the guide" (Soroush, 2009, 201).

Ramadan likewise rejects *taqlid* and proposes a flexible ethical framework grounded in critical reason through which "the Creator" guides the individual "to the good" (Ramadan, 2005, 42). In his multi-faceted *jihad*, Ramadan also offers continuous testing of principles in new contexts to preserve responsiveness.

Second, experimentality reframes religious thought as ongoing inquiry (*in perpetuo mobile*). Arkoun's continual retrieval of the *unthought* prevents calcification and sustains the search for new layers of meaning. Soroush's view that human religious knowledge contracts and expands as it encounters philosophy, social sciences and lived experience – underscores that each era brings fresh insights to classical sources. His construction of *ijtihad* as translation of religion's *essentials* to cultural and historical contexts – invigorates the connection between text and context. Ramadan calls for an eternal search of meaning, situating Muslim ethics as an active conversation between revelation and present realities (Ramadan, 2010a). Across these accounts, religion is approached as inquiry rather than prescription making experimentality not an add-on but the core posture of learning.

Third, experimentality yields pluralism and individual agency as internal outcomes of Islamic learning. If religiosity is an open-ended experiment oriented toward the Divine – human in its modalities yet sacred in its aim – then multiple interpretations and practices are both expected and desirable. Arkoun locates Truth within a plural field: "one of a plurality of truths" that interact and enrich one another (Arkoun, 2012, 251). Soroush argues that partial truths accumulate across a broad epistemic landscape, producing "unavoidable diversity" as believers work to implement guidance (Soroush, 2009, 136). Ramadan, drawing on Qur'anic injunctions, notes that revelation "opens manifold diverse horizons" and that renewal must honor "all of the world's cultures and their essential diversity" (Ramadan, 2009, 92, 195). This theologically grounded pluralism, originating from both the will of God and from the nature of text and experience, answers worries about whether a liberal framing of religious education is "religious enough" (Lewin, 2017, 456).

Individualism and individual agency in MIRE are also religious and are situated within the *umma*. Arkoun ties freedom to the *mukallaf*, the morally responsible agent. His is a "great force of social, political and religious integration" (Arkoun, 2016, 297) that realizes "the dynamics of belonging to communities" as "a process of individualization" (Panjwani & Agbaria, 2019, 16). Soroush's call for rational and experiential engagement remains Qur'an-anchored and based on the personality of the Prophet. Ramadan urges a loyalty that is personal and communal, in a situated discernment he terms "critical loyalty" (Ramadan, 2010b, 39). In educational terms, this addresses the tension between socialization and individualization (Arendt, 1961; Lam, 2000), forming a "rooted cosmopolitan" (Vryhof, 2012) whose critical capacities are nourished by culture, history, and language (Alexander, 2012).

Just as experimentality infuses each foundation with dynamism, the foundations also prevent experimentality from dissolving into relativism. Arkoun's insistence on historical consciousness is tethered to reverence for revelation, ensuring that epistemological critique does not collapse into desacralization. Soroush's epistemological pluralism is framed by religious sources and disciplined methods of interpretation, so that expansion and contraction of knowledge and the reproduction of experience remain coherent and constructive. Ramadan's civic and ethical emphasis situates inquiry within a teleology of justice before God, providing normative orientation that keeps openness accountable to faith. Read together, these contributions demonstrate how the ethos of experimentality and the three foundations are mutually sustaining: the former energizes the process of reinterpretation, inquiry, and engagement, while the latter supply the boundaries and structures which preserve Islamic identity and continuity.

## MIRE – Goals, Curriculum and Pedagogy

Having established the conceptual foundations, the remainder of the paper translates them into learning goals, curricular design, and pedagogical approaches, thereby clarifying their classroom implications and making the educational relevance of our framework more explicit and actionable

MIRE's goals cohere in a learner profile that relates to the *mukallaf* as a rooted cosmopolitan, a morally responsible agent embedded in community who reasons critically from within tradition, articulates faith-informed arguments in public, and act with civic responsibility towards the community, the general public and the environment. Four graduate capabilities follow: (i) historical consciousness – locating claims within their genealogies and conditions of production; (ii) multi-perspectival hermeneutics – discerning essentials from accidentals and justifying that distinction; (iii) ethical discernment – using religious tools, notions and concepts to navigate concrete dilemmas; and (iv) civic agency – deliberating across difference towards shared goods in Rawlsian or Habermasian manner, while avoiding “dogmatic pluralism” (Lewin, 2017, 448). Assessment aligns accordingly: capstones that pair close reading with social analysis; reflective journals tracing shifts in consciousness; and public-facing briefs that render religious reasons intelligible in plural settings.

Translating MIRE's foundations into content, the curriculum turns on a triad – *text, context, and conscience*. Canon seminars (Qur'ān, sīra, uṣūl al-fiqh) run alongside intellectual history and social thought so textual claims are continuously read against historical sediment and present stakes. An Arkoun-inspired “archive lab” surfaces the *unthought*, marginalized voices and traditions, and makes visible the construction of orthodoxy. A Soroush-oriented set in comparative epistemologies in which multi- or interdisciplinary program trains students to map the contraction and expansion of religious knowledge as it encounters philosophy, science and experience, as well as, to discern the essentials/accidentals distinction in live cases. A Ramadan-shaped applied-ethics sequence mobilizes *maqasid* and *maslaha* across domains – economy, bioethics, ecology – so that scriptural reasoning is habitually connected to policy and community life. Throughout, dual contextualization is enforced: sources are situated historically, and learners' lifeworlds are brought into view through community interviews, problem framings, and case dossiers.

As pedagogy, MIRE institutionalizes interpretation and action-testing. Interpretive seminars and *tafsīr* workshops cultivate slow reading and reason-giving; *maqasid* clinics and case methods bring normative tools to contested questions; studio-practica pair students with community partners to prototype faith-informed responses. Co-teaching by a textual scholar and a contextual expert operationalizes Ramadan's “new geography” between sources and situations and across disciplines.

Teachers act as pedagogical bricoleurs (Freathy et al., 2017). They assemble methods (linguistic, historical, axiological), curate counter-voices, and stage tensions rather than prematurely resolving them. Dialogic norms – responsiveness to evidence, charity in interpretation, and public-reason translation – are explicitly taught and assessed. Contemplative exercises (*adab*-guided reading, gratitude or accountability reflections) discipline attention without enforcing confession, keeping critique and reverence in disciplined tension.

Across goals, content and pedagogy, MIRE is held together by experimentality. In the dimension of goals, experimentality guards against rigidity and closure by orienting formation toward the *mukallaf* who thinks critically from within, and toward a pluralism that is grounded theologically rather than merely politically. In content, it licenses historical and axiological scrutiny, deconstruction of power. In the division between *naql* “transmitted knowledge” and *'aql*, “rational thinking”, content in MIRE leans clearly toward the more rational (*'aqli*) elaboration of transmitted knowledge (Saada, 2018, 416). In pedagogy, it privileges inquiry over rote learning, interdisciplinary dialogue over siloed instruction, and structured hermeneutics over

mere opinion. In such, MIRE is rendered as both rooted and responsive – anchored in revelation and tradition, yet capable of adaptation to contemporary realities.

### **Concluding Thoughts: MIRE Between Paradigms, Tensions, and Futures**

The MIRE model operates differently across contexts. In Muslim-minority settings, it safeguards theological integrity within plural civic institutions through translation and dialogue. In Muslim-majority settings, it protects inquiry and pluralism against state or clerical monopolies. These contrasting pressures shape distinct curricular emphases while preserving the same foundations. Yet these contextual differences do not generate separate models; rather, they reveal a deeper structural tension common to both settings, that is between closure and openness, authority and inquiry, transmission and interpretation. It is precisely this tension that situates MIRE between competing educational paradigms and clarifies the need for an alternative posture.

Modern Islamic Religious Education sits between paradigms that often talk past each other. One treats doctrine as a closed inheritance. The other treats religion as a cultural resource emptied of transcendence. MIRE stems from a different posture: critical fidelity which keeps revelation central, refuses epistemic closure and makes critique, dialogue, and civic responsibility internal to religious learning. The aim is not a third orthodoxy but a workable architecture for teachers and students who must inhabit plural institutions without erasing theological depth. The question is practical: what allows classrooms to hold faith and critique together without collapsing to dogma or drifting into relativism? Framed this way, MIRE is the deliberate transition from IRE's transmission-and-defense habits to inquiry-within-faith, under standards that bind criticism to reverence and action.

The three thinkers studied here furnish distinct levers for that task, and crucially, for the transition from IRE to MIRE. Mohammed Arkoun reopens what authority has sealed by recovering the *unthought*. His layered reading does more than historicize. It shows how doctrines became “official” and where alternative lines of sense were suppressed. The gain is courage and method. The risk is vertigo if teachers deconstruct the traditional religious sources, thereby exposing an infinite array of interpretive possibilities, and leaving students lost in interpretation. The payoff is clear: Arkoun moves classrooms from confessional repetition to historical consciousness – turning IRE's guarded transmission into MIRE's reflective reconstruction without desacralization.

Abdolkarim Soroush supplies the hinge that keeps critique educative: immutable religion versus mutable religious knowledge. This distinction licenses disciplined pluralism and insists that experience, science, and philosophy legitimately reshape our religious understanding. It binds teaching and interpretation to reason that responds to new evidence, lived experience, and scientific knowledge, requiring justified adjustments argued through the essentials/accidentals distinction rather than deference to authority or personal taste. The risk here is fragmentation – if classrooms cannot adjudicate claims beyond personal sincerity and if discussions do not move past individual opinions. The value, however, with Soroush is that IRE shifts from univocal certainty to MIRE's essentials/accidentals reasoning, where loyalty to revelation is expressed through reason influenced by the plurality of human understandings.

Tariq Ramadan orients interpretation to justice before God and to shared civic goods through *maqasid* and *maslaha*. He links revelation to civic practice and gives classrooms direction and public intelligibility. These tools must work as argued, text-anchored criteria that demand reasons and attention to context. When reduced to slogans, judgement hardens into moralizing rhetoric and loses traction with sources and lived cases. Used properly, they carry IRE beyond legalism and private pietism into MIRE's ethical-civil agency.

Interpretation then results in accountable action, co-teaching across sources and situations, and live cases that require choice. Thus, taken together, the sequence is straightforward: Arkoun opens the space of inquiry, Soroush governs its adjudication, and Ramadan directs it toward practice. This is critically fidelity in practice.

That said, the article's contribution has been to integrate these levels through an ethos of experimentality and to operationalize that ethos in three foundations: epistemological reorientation, pedagogical transformation, and ethical-political engagement. Experimentality does not mean free play, rather it is a posture of ongoing inquiry under standards of argument, evidence, and purpose. Epistemological reorientation treats human apprehensions of revelation as historically situated yet answerable to a ceiling of transcendence. This is critical fidelity in epistemic form. Pedagogical transformation shifts the center of gravity from transmission to interpretation, dialogue, and action-testing. This is critical fidelity in classroom form. Ethical-political engagement orients learning toward active participation in the public sphere articulating concrete harms and goods rather than abstract assent. This is critical fidelity in civic form. The novelty lies in binding openness to method and teleology so reverence does not block critique and critique does not hollow faith.

This integration yields concrete classroom design that affects the IRE→MIRE transition. An “archive lab” modeled on Arkoun invites students to read a passage as text, discourse, archive, and living tradition, and then trace how a ruling became authoritative and which voices fell silent. An “essentials/accidentals” rubric modeled on Soroush has students justify boundaries with reasons drawn from language, history, and experience, and then defend their line against counter-examples in an ongoing guided discussion. “*Maqasid* clinics” modeled on Ramadan engage students to work in teams through live cases in bioethics, economy, or ecology, bringing scriptural warrants into inquisitive dialogue with empirical data and stakeholder testimony. Co-teaching by a textual scholar and a contextual expert operationalizes a “new geography of sources”. Assessment aligns accordingly with close readings based on explicit criteria distinguishing essentials versus accidentals; reflective journals logging how conscience shifts when claims are tested; and public briefs rendering religious reasons intelligible to non-specialists. The graduate profile is clear: a *mukallaf* who is both rooted in tradition and a cosmopolitan, able to argue from within religion and to act with civic responsibility. These instruments make the transition visible and teachable, not rhetorical.

To keep such action rigorous, guardrails are explicit. Method is the first guardrail. Structured hermeneutics along the four layered reading of Arkoun, the essentials/accidentals rubric of Soroush, and the *maqasid* reasoning of Ramadan – prevent the inquiry from collapsing into relativism and personal, unsolicited momentary opinion. Reverence is the second. A theological ceiling marks the difference between historicizing a concept and desacralizing revelation. It also marks this education as religious, and not just modern. A civic teleology is the third. Justice before God disciplines interpretation toward duties in shared life and active engagement in the public sphere. With these in place, key tensions remain productive rather than paralyzing. Authority and autonomy, tradition and innovation, individual conscience and communal accountability – are expressed as teachers scaffold interpretation without monopoly; learners exercise agency without severing belonging; and communities test claims without silencing dissent. The aim is not harmony, but a structured agonism in which disagreement becomes formative. All these preserve a tension and a movement that is the fourth guardrail of MIRE preventing it from becoming too constructivist or too confessional. This is critical fidelity as an institutional habit: openness yoked to discipline and purpose.

Admittedly, this article stages a negotiated middle in authorship. One of us, Ayman Agbaria, is a Muslim believer; the other, Iddo Felsenthal, is a Jewish atheist. This difference is a stress test of the model. Writing together kept truth claims audible without demanding confession and preserved public standards of reason without emptying revelation. The result is not lowest-common denominator consensus, but accountable

co-labor that treats difference as a resource for stronger argument and pedagogy. This is the stance teachers and students need between communities and publics. Accordingly, in Muslim-minority settings MIRE must secure space for theological integrity within civic mandates; in Muslim-majority settings it must protect inquiry against state and clerical capture. This dual accountability sets the terms for how the model should be evaluated and advanced.

Given this dual accountability to securing theological integrity and safeguarding open inquiry, we propose three indicators: growth in historical consciousness, improvement in essentials/accidentals judgement, and demonstrated civic agency in a capstone addressing a real problem. As cautioned in the Introduction, MIRE is not designed to resolve all tensions; rather it treats tensions as fertile and builds on movement between concepts advancing a pedagogy of critical fidelity. A pedagogy that treats revelation as an anchor, not an alibi; history as illumination, not acid; and pluralism as a discipline of judgement, not a shrug. Between paradigms, amid tensions, and oriented to futures, MIRE remains on the move.

## Appendix A: Corpus of writings analyzed

This study is based on a close reading and analysis of selected works by Mohammed Arkoun, Abdolkarim Soroush, and Tariq Ramadan. The following corpus constitutes the textual foundation for the research.

Arkoun, Mohammed (1994). *Rethinking Islam: Common questions, uncommon answers* (R. D. Lee, Ed.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Arkoun, Mohammed (2003). Rethinking Islam today. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588, 18–39. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716203588001003>

Arkoun, Mohammed (2006). *Humanisme et Islam: Combats et propositions* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Paris: Vrin.

Arkoun, Mohammed (2012). *Islam: To reform or to subvert?* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Saqi Essentials.

Arkoun, Mohammed (2016). *La pensée arabe* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Arkoun, Mohammed (2016). *Lectures du Coran*. Paris: Albin Michel.

Soroush, Abdolkarim (1996). Evolution and devolution of religious knowledge. *Journal of Islamic Research (İslami Araştırmalar Dergisi)* 9(1–4).

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Soroush, Abdolkarim (2009). *Al-sirātāt al-mustaqīma. Qirā'a jadīda li-naẓariyyat al-ta'addudiyya al-dīniyya* [The straight paths: A new reading of the theory of religious pluralism]. Manshūrāt al-Jamal. (Arabic)

Ramadan, Tariq (2001). *Islam, the West and the challenges of modernity*. Leicester: The Islamic Foundation.

Ramadan, Tariq (2002). *To be a European Muslim*. Leicester: The Islamic Foundation.

Ramadan, Tariq (2005). *Western Muslims and the future of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXi\\_upGafnw&t=2s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXi_upGafnw&t=2s)

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