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NASR HAMID ABU ZAYD.
HERMENEUTICS APPLIED TO THE HOLY QUR'AN

Maria Albano

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was born in Qufaha (Egypt) in 1943 and educated in Delta countryside. After having been a professionist (engineer), then lecturer in Cairo University and in many countries as visiting professor, he is currently teaching at Leiden University in Nertherlands. In fact, after having been accused of apostasy and condemned to divorce, in 1995, he and his wife were obliged to leave Egypt.

He wrote his doctoral thesis on Ibn al-ʿArabi, an Islamic theologian and mystic and, later, came to criticise the spiritual monopoly of Islamic orthodoxy, arguing that it had blocked rationalism and distorted the essential message of the Qur'an.

According to the thesis of the so-called 'new thinkers of Islam'[1] Abu Zayd claims that is vital, for Muslims, to rethink the Qur'an, especially after the trauma of September 11th, and the aftermath of terrorist operations which reduced Islam to nothing but a radical, violent and exclusivist expression.[2] As he himself asserts:

The world has already become, whether for good or for bad, one small village in which no independent closed culture, if there is any, can survive.

Cultures have to negotiate, to give and take, to borrow and deliver, a phenomenon that is not new or invented in the modern context of globalization.[3]

This in order to counterbalance the torrent of theories on political radicalism and on muslim fundamentalism whose tragic consequences have been announced in Huntington's Clash of Civilization thesis. Moreover it is important to separate Islam from its political dimension as

for most regimes and in most countries, however, Islam does not provide the exclusive language of politics. To be effective, it needs to be combined with two other languages: that of nationalism, with its appeal to the unity, strength, and honour of the nation…and that of social justice, and specifically an equitable distribution of wealth.[4]

One must accept the necessity of reinterpreting the social morality as well as the moral values derived from the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet in order to advocate a common effort whose aim is that of improving social conditions in the world. «Such a version of Islam is particularly suited to the needs of a 'modernizing' society. Its insistence on the need to reinterpret the social *teaching*

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[1] See Rachide Benzine, *Les noveaux penseurs de l'Islam,* Paris, Editions Albin Michel, 2004.

[2] See N. H. Abu Zayd, *Rethinking the Qur'an: towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics* in *Islamochristiana*, n. 30, Roma, Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi ed Islamistica, 2004. [3] *Ibidem,* p. 24.

[4] Albert Hourani, *Conclusion* in *Islam in the political process,* edited by James P. Piscatori, Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 228-229.

of the faith makes it possible to accept and legitimate whatever living in the modern world demands…».[1]

Abu Zayd is deeply convinced of the necessity of a historical recontextualisation of the Qur'an which can provide a more objective way of analysing social issues such as equality or justice.

There are certain issues – he asserts – that seem in contradiction with the concept of justice from modern view at least. Issues like polygamy, the position of women as well as non-Muslims, and freedom of religion are continuously provoked in any discussion about the Qur'an and Islam. There are so many apologetic responses by Muslim trying to tackle such issues, but the historical explanation as well as textual recontextualization of the Qur'an might provide an objective way of analyzing the above mentioned issues.[2]

Talking about polygamy Abu Zayd points out that, historically speaking, it was practiced in human societies before Islam, so it is a big mistake to think of polygamy as part of the Islamic revelation, stipulated by the Qur'an. It is true that the issue is addressed in the Qur'an but it is more important to measure the Islamic discourse according to the pre-islamic environment, in order to re-contextualize the Qur'anic message.

The qur'anic verse that stipulated poliygamy is basically addressed to the custody of orphans, after the battle of Uhud (3AH/625 CE), where many Muslims were killed, leaving behind their children.

As concerns the historical context the permission to marry more than a woman is given for an orphan's mother (and widow) or a female orphan: «If you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, you are allowed to marry women of your choice, two or three or four. But if you fear that you shall not be able to deal justly (with them) then only one … That will be more suitable to prevent you from doing injustice» (Qur. 4:3).[3] According to the Author's interpretation the Qur'an is not in itself a book of law. Legal stipulations are expressed in discourse style, which reveal a context of engagements with human needs in specific time. Thus the Qur'an provides multioptions, various solutions, and an open gate of understanding.

The contextualization of the Qur'an stresses its social dimension as well. Even if we can find in all scriptures the condemnation of any ill-treatment of the poor, the needy, the helpless or the handicapped, nevertheless the Qur'an goes beyond as it stipulates as a religious duty the rights of the poor to have their own share from what belong to the rich people, thus creating the first social welfare in the history of mankind.[4]

In developing his revolutionary thesis on the Qur'an Abu Zayd follows the steps of the reformer Mohammed Arkoun,[5] especially as concerns the relationship between Muslim and their past or traditions. Arkoun points out that adher-

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[1] *Ibidem,* p. 230.   [2] N. H. Abu Zayd, *The Qur'anic concept of Justice*, Internet situs.
[3] *Ibidem.*   [4] *Ibidem.*
[5] Muhammad Arkoun was born in 1928 at Tourirt-Mimoun in the Kabilya region of Algeria. Actually he is Emeritus Professor of the History of Islamic Thought at the Sorbonne (Paris III), and visiting professor at Universities in the United States, Europe and the Muslim world.

ing to a tradition allows muslims to create a world of discourse called logosphere. «A number of ideas, values, explanations, horizons of meaning, artistic creations, initiatives, institutions and ways of life are thereby discarded, rejected, ignored or doomed to failure by the long-term historical evolution called tradition».[1] He invents the method of 'Applied Islamology' that is to say the systematic interrogation of what we know about Islam and how we know it. «How do [Muslims] develop a critical relationship with their past and their present in order to have better control over their failure, and how relevant, affective and creative would such a relationship be?».[2]

The influence of Mohammed Arkoun on Abu Zayd's writing is evident especially when he reconsiders the Qur'an, transformed from a mere holy text into a discourse.

Recently, Arkoun and others rightly distinguished between the phenomenon of the Qur'an, the recited discourse, and the *Mushaf*, which contains what Arkoun calls the *Closed Corpus* or Scripture through the canonization process I have already mentioned above, which transformed the recited discourse into scripture or *text*. Today I would like to retrace my steps beyond this historical moment of transformation known in the history of every religion. Since that historical moment Muslim scholars of the Qur'an, though theoretically aware of the impact of this transformation and occasionally turning back to the pre-text structure of the Qur'an, were always unable to recapture the living phenomenon, the Qur'an as a *discourse*.[3]

Following this starting point the Author goes beyond, moving from the vertical to the horizontal dimension of the Qur'an, that is to say the dimension embedded in the structure of the Qur'an and manifested during the process of communicating it, and applies to the Qur'an the laws of hermeneutics[4] asserting that this might enable Muslims to build a bridge between their own tradition and the modern world of freedom, equality, human rights, democracy.

It is no longer sufficient to recontextualize a passage or some passages [of the Qur'an] when it is only necessary to fight against literalism and fundamentalism or when it is necessary to renounce a certain historical practice that seems unfit in our modern context. It is also not enough to invoke modern hermeneutics in order to justify the historicity and, therefore, the relativity of every mode of understanding, claiming in the meantime that our modern interpretation is the more appropriate and the more valid. These insufficient approaches produce either polemic or apologetic hermeneutics. Without rethinking the Qur'an, re-invoking its living status as a 'discourse', whether in the academia or in everyday life, no democratic and open hermeneutics can be achieved. But why should hermeneutics be democratic and open? Because it is about the 'meaning of life'. If we are serious about freeing religious thought from power manipulation, whether po-

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[1] M. Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought,* London, 2002, p. 11.

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 10.

[3] N. H. Abu Zayd, *Rethinking the Qur'an: towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics* in *Islamochristiana*, n. 30, Roma, Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi ed Islamistica, 2004, p. 27.

[4] See N. H. Abu Zayd, *Mafhum al-nass: dirasa fi 'ulum al-Qur'an (The Concept of the Text, a Study of the Qur'anic Sciences),* Beirut and Casablanca, 1999 and N. H. Abu Zayd, *Al-Kitab wa al-ta'wil (Discourse and Hermeneutics),* Beirut and Casablanca, 2000.

litical, social or religious in order to empower the community of believers to formulate 'meaning', we need to construct open democratic hermeneutics.[1]

In his book *Mafhum al-nass*[2] Abu Zayd introduces the historical and linguistic dimensions of the Qur'an by critically rereading the classical sciences of the Qur'an (*'ulum al-Qur'an*). He concludes that the Qur'an was a cultural production, meaning that pre-islamic culture and concepts are re-articulated via the specific language structure. In doing this the Author adds to the historical and cultural dimensions of the Qur'an its human dimension.

I presented the concept of the Qur'an as a space of Divine and Human communication. Under the title 'The Qur'an: God and Man in communication' I attempted an elaboration of my re-reading, and therefore a re-interpretation, of the sciences of the Qur'an, especially those sciences which deal with the nature of the Qur'an, its history and its structure. In this enterprise I employed some methodological approaches, such as semantics, semiotics as well as historical criticism and hermeneutics that are not generally applied, nor appreciated, in the traditional Qur'anic studies in the Muslim world. I focused my analysis on the *vertical* dimension of the Revelation, *wahy* in Arabic, i.e. the communicative process between God and the Prophet Muhammad that produced the Qur'an.[3]

The Author's last book, *Ein Leben mit dem Islam (A Life with Islam)*[4] is an autobiography containing most of Abu Zayd's revolutionary theories, on the study of the Qur'an as well as on the concepts of modernity, democracy, relationships between Muslim and the Western world.

In his autobiography the Author stresses the necessity of rethinking the Qur'an as well as rethinking the tradition.

«The re-reading of the Qur'an aims at modernizing Islam, contextualizing it. This theory is not different, in substance, from that considering Islam a basis on which it is possible to construct an alternative model to Western modernity.».[5] And the author himself writes: «What is a text? And what's the nature of its language? These questions are necessary if we want to find a method of interpreting the Qur'an fit for modern times».[6]

Since the reign of the Abbasid Caliph at Baghdad, al-Mutawakil (847-861), more than eleven centuries ago, the discussion about the nature of the Qur'an has been blocked in favour of the orthodox view that it is the exclusive 'word of God'. The human dimension, which includes the language as well as the recipient, is almost absent. The basic question, in Abu Zayd's intention, is whether or not Muslim can modernize their societies without disregarding their own beliefs.

The process of rethinking the tradition has been an ongoing development since the eighteenth century. Starting from this matter the Author stresses the

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[1] N. H. Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought: Shari'a, Democracy and Human Rights,* Conference held at the University 'L'Orientale' in Naples, February 24th, 2005.

[2] See N. H. Abu Zayd, *Mafhum al-nass dirasa fi 'ulum…, op. cit.*

[3] N. H. Abu Zayd, Inaugural Lecture for the Cleveringa rotated Chair of Law, Freedom and Responsability, University of Leiden, 2000.

[4] See N. H. Abu Zayd, *Ein Leben mit dem Islam (A Life with Islam),* Freiburg i.B., Verlag Herder, 2001, in its Italian translation *Una vita con l'Islam,* Bologna, il Mulino, 2004.

[5] Paolo Branca, *Presentazione* in N. H. Abu Zayd, *Una vita con l'Islam…*, p. 13.

[6] N. H. Abu Zayd, *Una vita…*, p. 120.

importance, for Muslims, wherever they are, to construct a new meaning of the Qur'an, strictly connected to the world in which they live that becomes a meaning of life. Thus the Qur'an, through a methodological process of contextualization and recontextualization, becomes a producer of a new culture. The Qur'an is not only a text in itself but it becomes a discourse and, as a discourse, it provides many solutions and a braoad gate of understanding.

Abu Zayd had travelled a lot during his lifetime. In particular he spent some years in the United States and in Japan. In his autobiography he tries to analyze the contradictions of American society. «For the first time – he writes – I had the impression that American people would consider their own country as a Garden of Eden».[1] The Author is deeply convinced that, especially after September 11th, the battle against terrorism – which in itself is legitimate – has turned into a perpetual battle against all others who are not on American side, as the U.S. President declared. Expressions such as 'our values', 'our societies' and 'our culture' clearly imply that the others are uncivilized.[2]

Nonetheless, in his last work, it emerges Abu Zayd's constant will to develop a dialogue, non only in Egypt, his hometown, but also, during his years spent abroad, in the United States as well as in other foreign countries. «A dialogue – he says – could be polemic or apologetic, but it could be also inclusive or exclusive; it could be as well productive or desctructive».[3]

Abu Zayd uses a constructive dialogue, through which he approaches new cultures as well as new ways of living, perceiving the advantages of living in some societies, for example the defense of human rights much more developed in the United States than in Egypt. «It was an important experience to notice that in America you can claim your rights even to people belonging to upper classes. I told myself: this criticized western world gives you the possibility to claim your rights».[4] Even his life experience in Japan gives Abu Zayd the possibility to approach a new world, a new culture, discovering its advantages but mantaining, at the same time, his Muslim as well as Arabic identity. «America is still to me the place where I discovered hermeneutics. The second discovery was Toshihiko Izutsu, a Japanese scholar of the Qur'an».[5]

Abu Zayd is deeply convinced that islamic theology has infuenced the process of democratization. He asserts that the Arabic conception of society is a reflex of theology and of its hierarchical order. In a vertical progression God is on the top, below Him there are his angels, and below them His prophets, and below prophets muslims followed by non-muslims, animals, plants and finally stones. Islamists, in a *shari'a* oriented mentality, made *shura,* a practice which existed in pre-islamic society, as a social instrument. But *shura*, Abu Zayd asserts, cannot be developed into something democratic because it's traditional and it implies consulting vertically «from the top to down – he says – but not too down». In a mod-

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[1] *Ibidem,* p. 124.
[2] N. H. Abu Zayd, *Modernity, Democracy are only for the Privileged,* in Qantara.de, *Dialogue with the Islamic World,* Internet Situs.
[3] N. H. Abu Zayd, *Rethinking the Qur'an: towards a Humanistic…,* p. 36.
[4] N. H. Abu Zayd, *Una vita…,* pp. 125-126.   [5] *Ibidem,* p. 131.

ern, democratically structured society, which faces a pluralistically politicised world, *shura* cannot fill the gap. «Nowadays, in Saudi Arabia, there exist the Parliament of *shura* whose members have been appointed by the king. This is very interesting but it doesn't tell us how we can realize, in our times, a democratic system».[1] The solution is, again, a *rethinking* of the Qur'an as a discourse and not as a text, developing, in its horizontal dimension, its meaning of life.

«It is not Islam that stands against democracy, progress or modernity … it is the Muslim, here and now, who is not able to accept modernisation».[2] Through open, democratic, hermeneutics muslims can rethink the Qur'an achieving real reformation without clinging to tradition, specially religious tradition.

As concerns the relationship between the west and the islamic world in his autobiography Professor Abu Zayd asserts: «I don't think that there exist different civilizations. There are different cultures but only one civilization which belongs to the whole humanity. It is not the western civilization…it is the world civilization…the scenery echoed in Huntington's 'Clash of Civilization' is banal and contradictory».[3] Then he stresses the responsibilities both of Europe as well as of the islamic world.

Europe has to take on its own responsibilities especially those deriving from the crimes of colonialism. But is it possible to solve our problems claiming that we don't have, and never we had, something to do with the West? Claiming that there exist two different ways, the Islamic way and the Western one, that never will meet?[4]

The Author continues talking about the importance of the concept of identity as everybody looks for his own identity, in the islamic world as well as in the western societies. Only religion, he concludes, still so present in the muslim societies, both with ethnicity and nationalism, can provide identity[5] as «religion, above all, keeps man from turning himself into a wolf against other men».[6]

Abstract

How could contemporary Muslims rethink the Qur'an, applying to it a humanistic hermeneutics? The well known author Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd considers the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the Qur'an and proposes a first distinction in its approach as a 'text' and as a 'discourse' in order to better find its various meanings. The Qur'an supports many interpretations and its verses (which can be clear or ambiguous) allow people to multiply the levels of their understanding. Some examples are proposed by the Author to illustrate his critical analysis.

The Author stresses the necessity of reinterpreting the social morality derived from the Qur'an in order to advocate a common effort whose aim is that of improving social conditions in the world.

The necessity of a historical recontextualisation of the Qur'an can provide a more objective way of analysing social issues such as equality or justice.

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[1] *Ibidem*, p. 77.
[2] N. H. Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought: Shari'a, Democracy and Human Rights…*, *op. cit.*
[3] N. H. Abu Zayd, *Una vita…*, p. 82.   [4] *Ibidem*, p. 71.
[5] *Ibidem*, p. 82.   [6] *Ibidem*, p. 72.