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**Proceedings of the International Memorial
Conference in Honour of Nasr Abu Zayd:
*How Can a Humanistic Approach to Islam Be
Realized?* April 14th and 15th, 2011, Univer-
sity of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht, The
Netherlands**

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Editorial

Joachim Duyndam & Renée van Riessen

By exception, the present issue of the Journal of the Dutch-Flemish Levinas Society (*Mededelingen van de Levinas Studiekring*), volume 16, 2011, is published in English. Covered by the theme 'Interreligious Dialogue', the volume at hand includes contributions to the International Memorial Conference in Honour of Nasr Abu Zayd, organized by the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, The Netherlands, on April 14-15, 2011. Although only a few of the conference papers are explicitly related to Levinas' thought, the central theme of the memorial conference – *How Can a Humanistic Approach to Islam Be Realized?* – is in the spirit of Levinas' philosophy as it can be articulated as a 'humanism of the other' and 'intercultural / interreligious dialogue'. Therefore, the editors have considered it justifiable to share the present variety of interesting papers with the Levinas-minded scholarly audience of this Journal. Despite their different cultural and religious roots, Nasr Abu Zayd (1943-2010) and Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) have their humanism of the other – or should we say: humanism *to* the other – in common, including their striving for peaceful dialogue and careful interpretation.

The editors are indebted to Coby van Pagée and Annelot de Wit for their assistance in editing this volume.



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Introduction: Why Nasr Abu Zayd Fascinates Me

Joachim Duyndam

Chair of the conference

Having pointed at the parallels between Nasr Abu Zayd and Levinas in the editorial (see above), I will briefly introduce Abu Zayd's thought and spirit by testifying personally to my threefold fascination with him.

Nasr Abu Zayd fascinates me in the first place because he genuinely embodies the hermeneutic nature of life stance and religion. As a devout Muslim, he found that the source texts of his faith do not have a fixed and immovable meaning, but that their meaning should permanently be conquered in a careful process of interpretation. A text only becomes meaningful in a context – and these contexts are historically and culturally variable. This applies not only to Islam but also to Christianity and other religions and philosophies of life. If for example the Bible says, 'love thy neighbour', the truth and the meaning of such a command depend on its application to a specific context, for instance to my own life. Therefore, I must first understand what it really means to love and what love requires from me, and moreover I should know who actually is my neighbour. So I *have to* translate and to apply, in order that the general demand 'love thy neighbour' can mean anything at all. I consider the appeal, defended by some orthodox believers, to read the texts 'literally' as a warning to take the text seriously, not as an admonition to stick to one unchanging sense.

This is the way Nasr worked. It made him collide with orthodoxy, who want to hold to a standard explanation. Finally they didn't even consider Nasr to be a true Muslim anymore, and as a result a court dissolved his marriage (since his wife wasn't allowed to be married with a 'non-Muslim'). Nasr and his wife left their native Egypt, and came to the Netherlands. First to Leyden, and later to the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, where he held the Ibn Rushd Chair of Humanism and Islam until his untimely death in on July 5th, 2010.

This brings me to my second fascination with Nasr. He embodies the interreligious dialogue. On the one hand, and he was faithful Muslim, who undoubtedly assumed that the Qur'an is the word of God, but on the other hand, he found that it is the right and even the duty of human beings to interpret and to apply the word of God. In this respect he was also a humanist. He is a Muslim and a humanist likewise: as



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a Muslim he is humanist, as a humanist he is Muslim. But not in a watery compromise attitude: as if they all have a little bit right. No, convinced Muslim, with knowledge of the sources, and rooted in it. And a genuine humanist, precisely because of his hermeneutical dealing with the sources, based on his knowledge of the Western humanistic tradition.

My third fascination concerns Nasr as a teacher. I very much appreciate his knowledge, his patience, his dislike of fast one-liners, of fashionable opinions and easy conclusions. I will always remember his erudition and at the same time his enormous dedication to his students. Nasr is an exemplary scholar, an exemplary teacher, and an exemplary human being. I express my deep gratitude for what he has taught us.

On July 5th, 2010, the world famous Islam scholar Nasr Abu Zayd passed away. He had held the Ibn Rushd chair for Islam and Humanism at the University of Humanistic Studies in the Netherlands since 2002. During his working life, professor Abu Zayd has laid bare a non-dogmatic, contextualised, so-called 'humanistic' interpretation of the Qur'an. Rereading and reinterpreting the sources Islam is founded upon from the perspective of modern values such as human rights, equality, and democracy, is a task of vital importance. In the present-day global situation, tension between disparate worldviews and cultural traditions holds sway. Through exploring and studying humanistic principles and predilections in Islam, Nasr Abu Zayd has supported the development of self-critical, liberal portrayals of Islam in Western culture.



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Nasr Abu Zayd: A Humanistic Face of Islam.

Ebtehal Younes

My starting point is the title of the original seminar that was supposed to take place last July as a farewell to Nasr on the occasion of his retirement. The title was raising the question: Is a humanistic Islam possible? This question leads to another one: was it a coincidence for the University of Humanistics to appoint him for the Ibn Rushd Chair or was this choice pertinent? To answer these questions, it is necessary to approach Nasr Abu Zayd as a scholar as well as a human being. First of all because it's impossible to dissociate between the two levels, considering that his life and behavior were in accordance with his ideas. Secondly, because as author of this paper, I am his wife as well as a fellow scholar.

The basic concept in Nasr's life and work is that the role of the religion, any religion, is to improve human condition, towards human welfare; in the sense that religion is in service of Man and not vice versa. That is why the main focus must be the search of human values. Let us not forget that, as a boy and a teenager, Nasr's attraction towards the Muslim Brotherhood was only based on their concept of social justice, not any theological issues. As a scholar, all his studies are focusing on human values and condition, emphasizing the human dimension in Islam and Quran. In this humanistic perspective, the accent was put on what he called "The First receiver", i.e. Prophet Mohamed as a Man: his personality, his culture, his emotions, his aspirations... as essential factors in transmitting the divine message. In "Man and God in communication", communication is presented as negotiations between the human and the divine through the multiplicity of discourses and dialogues in the Quran towards human welfare, opening the meanings to all mankind. The starting point of "The Perfect Man in Islam" is the notion of man as the unique and most respected creature of God (as a reflection of His image), based on the two concepts of freedom and reason, taking into consideration the social developments and the historical changes. The universal dimension of this notion is clearly mentioned by Nasr in the conclusion of this study: "a lot of efforts has to be done in order to find out what Islam can present to the modern situation not only for the societies in which the majority of population confess Islam but for all the societies of the world as well."

Since those early studies, Nasr's humanistic and universal perspective led him to focus on the Others, i.e. the non-Muslim, in the Quran, as well as the non-Muslim view of the Quran. This notion was so important for him that he



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achieved several studies based upon this theme like: “Humanistic Islam”, “The Quran concept of the others”, “The Quran from non-Muslim perspective”, “The diversity of the Quranic view towards the Other” etc...

In Nasr’s scientific research, we can realize the rational trend inherited from Ibn Rushd, in addition to the essential human values of freedom and justice inherited from the Mutazilites. But we have also to take into consideration the encounter and the combination between this rational trend and the sufi trend that deeply affected both his thoughts and his life. Let us not forget that his PHD was about the great andalusian sufi Ibn Arabi who was the greatest love of his life and my concurrent in Nasr’s heart. As a symbol of the sufi trend, the poetry of Ibn Arabi became Nasr’s slogan: the religion of love in which the heart is the sanctuary of a mosque, a church, a synagogue, a pagan temple..., and in which love is the religion and the religious believe, worshipping the hidden God behind and beyond the dogmas.

This encounter and combination between the rational trend and the sufi trend guided the humanistic perspective in his scientific research and formed the link between his thoughts and studies on one hand, and his life and behavior on the other hand. As I said in the beginning, it is impossible to dissociate between Nasr as a scholar and Nasr as a human being because the two levels are in perfect accordance and harmony. On the personal level, Nasr is open to all, without any prejudgments. He never rejects what he doesn’t know. On the contrary, he has this lovely curiosity to discover new worlds, new cultures, new food... and above all, to discover and understand other religions. When he was in Japan, he spend time in a Shinto temple and in a Buddhist temple to learn profoundly about those religions, not only through reading books, but most of all, through living experience on a human level and direct contact with the people believing in those religions. For him, all the cultures and religions of the world are parts of a whole called humanity.

Going back to the question raised by the title of the original seminar: Is a humanistic Islam possible?, I think, not only through his thoughts and studies, but above all, just by being himself, Nasr proved that the answer is yes.

At the end, the best tribute to Nasr Abu Zayd is to carry on his views, his research line and his efforts towards a humanistic Islam.



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Relationships between Humanism and Islam

Abdelilah Ljamai

Introduction

Humanism is an ethical philosophy which insists that man alone is responsible for what he is. The fundamental difference between Islam and Humanism is that religion has a vertical relation with God above men. While within humanism there is a horizontal relation from men to men. In the inter-religious dialogue this causes ethical and methodological issues. At first glance it seems that Humanism and Islam have little to do with each other. Yet the traditions have more in common than we think. Based on a study of Classical Islamic texts, we will discuss how 'humanization' appears within Islamic thought. For instance within the Mu'tazilite school (end of 8th Century) in which there was a great focus on key humanist principles, including freedom of expression; freedom of interpretation of text; and the idea of Ratio first - Holy Script second. We see similar ideas in the work of Islamic philosophers from the East, such as al-Farabi (d. 950) and Ibn Sina (d. 1037) and in texts from Ibn Baja (d. 1138) and Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), who came from Andalucia. All of them encouraged critical thought and a rational reinterpretation of the Holy Script. After an introduction, we will focus on ethical and methodological questions that emerge when Islam and humanism meet: both in theory and how they appear in practices for example practices of gender equality as a foundation of human rights. I will deal with the following aspects. Firstly, the humanization in the works of the Mu'tazilite school. Secondly the humanization in the works of Muslim philosophers. Finally, the ethical and methodological questions regarding the relationship between contemporary Islam and humanism in the West.

1. Humanization in the works of the Mu'tazilite school

The Mu'tazilite school is originated in the eighth century. The genesis was related to a debate on a theological issue as follows: if a Muslim has committed a sin (adultery) does he stays in hell forever or not? According to the founder of the Mu'tazilite school, Wasil Ibn Ata' (d. 748), the person who has committed this sin will not be sent to heaven or hell. But he stays in the 'between two degrees' (between heaven and hell). This interpretation is based on his (Wasil) ratio to answer these complex religious issues. Wasil's teacher (al-Hasan al-Basri) was very angry with his student, accusing him of using his ratio (not the religious text). Wasil and his supporters have taken distance from the crowd and got the



name Mu'tazili (derived from the verb i'tazal: take distance)¹.

Adherents of this school plead a rational interpretation of the Quran and have developed several theories about humanizing. This could include al-Jubba'i (d. 915) who has developed a theory about "The individual freedom of choice of humans". He said: "God created humans as free. The one who can make good decisions about his faith is the person himself. Nobody is allowed to decide for you how to think. It depends on your human beliefs..."². This statement clearly shows that Muslims in the history of Islam were actively involved with the applications of the notion "individual free choice of the man".

Al-Qadi Abd al-Jabbar (d. 1025), the author of al-Mughni emphasized in his works the interests of justice in society. His message was more focused on the socio-political context of the Muslims under the Abbasid Dynasty. Abd al-Jabbar makes a distinction between two types of justice: divine justice and human justice. According to al-Qadi-Abd al-Jabbar, justice means giving rights to others while retaining one's own rights. This law applies to God and to humans³. Especially the human justice had received much attention in the works of such scholars. It clearly indicates that the continuity of humanity on earth is related to all forms of justice. Justice must not philosophize, but also see in practice, both in private and in public spaces, said Abd al-Jabbar. He emphasizes that social and political justice is the responsibility of the Muslim caliphs.

The eleventh century Ash'arite scholar Al-Mawardi (d.1058) has focused on the role of political and social justice in the realization of stability and harmony in the Islamic capital Baghdad⁴. Besides the notions of 'individual free choice of man' and 'justice' al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144), the famous exegete in the Mu'tazilite school, also defends in his book Al-Kashshaf the right 'of freedom of speech' mainly in the reinterpretation of the religious text. The application of this principle is evident in the tafsir of Al-Zamakhshari based on making use of reason to clarify the Quranic verses. He usually chooses for the metaphorical aspects of a verse and does not remain clinging to the literal meaning of the text⁵.

The Mu'tazilite scholar Al-Jahiz (d. 869) emphasizes in his Epistle *al-masa'il wa-l-jawabat fi-al-ma'rifa* (*Questions and answers in the knowledge*) that the individual is free in his actions. In his analyses about the eight categories of knowledge he indicates that the freedom of choice is the major category. According to al-Jahiz, freedom of choice means the knowledge of God and his messenger and the

¹ Al-Shahrastani, M., *Al-milal wa-l-nihal*. Tahqiq Abdelaziz al-Wakil. Cairo, 1968, vol, 1, pp. 47-48.

² Compare Al-Qadi Abd al-Jabbar, *Sharh al-'usul al-khamsa*. Cairo, 2006.

³ *Ibid*, p. 301.

⁴ Compare Al-Ahkam al-sultaniya wa-'l-wilayat al-diniya. Cairo, 1973.

⁵ Compare Ljamai, A., *Inleiding to de studie van de koran. Ontstaansgeschiedenis en methodes van de koranexegese*. Meinema, Zoetermeer, 2005, p. 107.



ability to interpret the Holy Books. In another chapter of his Epistle he creates a connection between this description and awareness of committing mistakes. He said: "there is no one on earth that committed mistakes without the knowledge of his own mistakes"⁶.

This quote indicates that each individual is responsible for his actions according to al-Jahiz. The value of equality is also addressed in the works of al-Jahiz. Politically, he was active in spreading the values of justice and equality between Muslims, Jews and Christians. He believes that every individual should have the right to choose their own faith, because in the Islam there is no compulsion in religion. With this remark al-Jahiz clarifies that "religious freedom" is central in the Islam.

In summary, in Islamic thinking, particularly among the Mmu'tazilite school, humanization takes a crucial role. The universal values of Humanism, including individual free choice, justice, equality, freedom of speech and freedom of religion are found in the classical works of the Muslim rationalists or the Mu'tazilites. But what is the position of the Muslim philosophers towards humanization?

2. Humanization in the works of Muslim philosophers

The publication of Muslim philosophers in the Middle Ages, shows that they have paid great attention to the development of humanization in Islamic societies, both in the East and in Andalusia. The scope of this article is limited to two philosophers from the East: al-Farabi and Ibn Sina.

Al-Farabi (d. 950)

In his book *Risala fi al-'aql (Epistle on the Intellect)*, he clarifies his ideas about human cognition. He emphasizes the question of what kind of thing the intellect, or even ethical and political issues such as how happiness (*sa'ada*) in the individual and society can be known and realized. But what is happiness according to al-Farabi? "Happiness is that the human soul attains a degree of perfection in its existence in which it no longer has to rely on the matter, because it becomes one of the intangible things and substances, and forever remains in that state". In the theory of happiness (*sa'ada*) he treated the key concepts of humanistic including equality, justice and freedom, because without those concepts you cannot achieve happiness in practice. In his book *The Virtuous City (al-Madina al-fadila)* he emphasized that political justice is the basis for the ideal city. Al-Farabi shares his vision of human freedom, and his expression of "free choice" (*ikhtiyar*) with the Mu'tazilites. Unlike al-Kindi

⁶ Compare al-Jahiz, *Al-Masa'il wa-'l-jawabat fi- al-ma'rifa*. Published by Harun and Abu Mulhim in *Majmu' Rasa'il al-Jahiz*.



(d. 873), however, he is not explicitly concerned with theological issues. He refers explicitly to his own time (political context) and he mentions his dynasty as an example of virtuous city.

Ibn Sina (d. 1037)

In his philosophical works, including his *allegory of Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, Ibn Sina emphasizes the importance of freedom and justice as universal values. Ibn Sina's attention focuses on translating the dimensions of both concepts to the practice of Muslims. Injustice creates an unhealthy society. Freedom of thought is the basis for the development of all civilizations. Without freedom of religion or freedom of expression it is impossible for one nation to further develop. The civilization of mankind cannot be considered apart from these universal values, according to Ibn Sina.

We can conclude that humanization is central in the classical works of Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. Both philosophers were looking for happiness (*sa'ada*) and the application of social and political skills. These ideal descriptions should be seen within the context of Islamic Caliphate at that time. The School of rationalists (Mu'tazilites and philosophers) was still highly criticized by Muslim theologians who do not abandon the literal interpretation of the Quran. The battle between theologians and rationalists about the degree of freedom and the use of ratio in the reading of the holy text, undoubtedly rise to heated discussions among Muslims in the modern world about the following questions: Is a humanistic reinterpretation of the Quran possible? What is the position Muslim intellectuals take towards modernity?

The historian Iftikhar Malik⁷ distinguishes the following three positions among Muslim intellectuals regarding their attitudes towards modernity:

1. Those who believe that Islam and modernity are incompatible. According to them are Muslims only by actually choosing secularism capable of integration, democracy, pluralism and human rights. Therefore Muslims must totally abandon their Islamic heritage.
2. Those who believe that a return to pure Islam of Muhammad and the four rightly guided caliphs, is the only possibility to face and solve the contemporary problems and malaise of Muslims.
3. Those who note that a synthesising strategy is needed so the Islam can enjoy the varieties of modernity.

For Muslim intellectuals who subscribe to the third position the claim: "that Islam and modernity are incompatible" is untenable. They are convinced of the compatibility of Islam

⁷ Compare *Islam and modernity: Muslims in Europe and the united States*. London: Pluto Press, 2004.



and modernity and substantiate their views with the Qur'an, which the Muslim fundamentalists also do.

But how do Muslims think about humanization? In answering the question of how Muslims relate to modernity the recognition that a considerable variation exists in the way in which being a Muslim is articulated by Muslims is very significant. An example is Muslim Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) who is considered one of the ideologists of Islamic fundamentalism. It was partly due to his stay of several years (1948-1951) in the United States that he came to realize that the West and Islam were incompatible. He rejected modernity and everything that was connected to as defined by and a product of Western culture. It seems that the claim "Islam and modernity are incompatible" is echoed in Islamic fundamentalist circles, especially because of the feeling that the acceptance of modernity automatically leads to westernization⁸.

3. Ethical and methodological questions regarding the relationship between Islam and humanism in the West

How do Humanism and Islam relate to each other? What kind of ethical and methodological questions emerge when they meet? The studies of modern intellectuals, such as Nasr Abu Zayd suggests that the relationship between Islam and humanization in the West is characterized by methodological and ethical dilemmas⁹.

With regard to ethical issues in this context often referred to the position of women in Islam, equality between men and women. The mixed marriage is usually mentioned as an example when it comes to ethical issues. Why are Muslim men allowed to marry a non-Muslim woman, while it is not permissible for a Muslim woman to marry a non-Muslim man? On this point there are two distinct views:

- The first is the opinion of jurists and exegetes. They clearly show that Islam wants to protect the religious identity of Muslim women, because after the marriage of a Muslim woman with non-Muslim man is feared that the man can influence the religious identity of the woman. Exegetes and jurists refer in their works to various examples of Muslim women in the history of Islam who were influenced by the faith of their husbands¹⁰.

- The second opinion is that of modernists who look at things within the framework of human rights: equality and individual choice in life are central to this approach.

If we take the example of the ethical dilemmas in Islam, and humanization proportions we see that each party wanted to give shape to the meaning of free choice in life and equality. The similarities between the two sides appear most often in terms of possible interpretation. Each group tries to re-interpret this ethical issue in its own way but they disagree

⁸ Compare Herman I. Beck, *Muslims en moderniteit*. Rede uitgesproken bij de viering van de 77^e dies natalis van de universiteit van Tilburg op donderdag 18 november 2004.

⁹ Compare for example *Rethinking the Qur'an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics*. (elsewhere in this volume)

¹⁰ A good example of the exegetes in this regard, is Rashid Rida in his exegesis *Al-Manar* and in his book *Shubhat fi al-Radda ala al-Nasara*.



about the consequences. According to modernists, Islam is incompatible with humanizing, while another group (jurists and exegetes) believes that preserving the religious identity of Muslim women get priority in Islam. The transcendental aspect of religion should provide a moral framework for the actual experiences of believers, and can only be understood in the concrete historical context of each religious community.

Concerning the methodological issues in the relationship between Islam and humanization it is important to reflect on the following: The way Muslim scholars want to shape this ratio can be right in theory. Most conventional wisdom says that in Islam there is no compulsion in religion as a very relevant value in humanistics. But in practice, Muslim scholars cannot answer the various Qur'anic texts which clearly state that non-Muslims are under the category of disbelievers! For a humanist, it is unclear how to handle this question. This conclusion raises a number of methodological issues in the relationship between Islam and humanism. A revolutionary attempt is that of Taha Abderrahman¹¹ that clearly indicated that in all religions, the religious identity has a central position. The way people speak about religion, influences, in generally, the debate about religion and humanism, because if you look to religion from an anthropological perspective, you see religion as part of culture. In this case, the hermeneutics have a very important role in the interpretation of the relationship between Islam and humanism. The levels of interpretation in this context offer more opportunities to resolve this methodological issue by linking theoretical framework in all religions with the practice of people who have chosen certain interpretations. But the insistence on the equality of all believers, the emphasis on individual responsibility, and the tolerance toward other faiths (particularly the revealed religions) are all strongly indicative of substantive democracy.

Conclusion

Based on these analyses it is clearly shown that humanization was present in the classical works of Muslim scholars. The named ethical and methodological issues in the relationship between Islam and humanism can be interpreted in different ways. That is basically the basis of the development of mechanisms within scientific research (for example social interaction model, self-confrontation method, psychological and anthropological methods) that can help students to understand the relationship between Islam and humanization in wide context and to participate

¹¹ In his lecture about the Crisis of Arabic mind in Rabat 1992.



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in ethical and philosophical discussions on basic values of critical Humanism and Humanistics.

In my view, Humanism and Islam should be seen from the present cultural, political and ideological context of the Netherlands with an orientation to the future. The openness for other ideas and cultures is a very important feature for the relationship between Islam and humanism. This implies de willingness to self criticism. The discussion about Humanism and Islam offers the opportunity to reinterpret the Quran Text within de new context of Muslims. This requests a critical attitude against the Holy Script.



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Gender Equality: Rereading the Legal Sources

Mona Zulficar

The three constitutions that have so far been adopted by Egypt (in 1923, 1956 and finally 1971) as well as the Constitutional Declaration issued on 30 March, 2011 after the Revolution of 25 January, confirm the principle of equality before the law and equal opportunity between all citizens, without any discrimination based on sex, race, language, religion or creed.

It should be noted that the vast majority of the laws in Egypt provide women with equal opportunities, free of discrimination, in compliance with the successive Egyptian constitutions. However, Egyptian personal status and family laws, which are generally based on *Shari'a*, discriminate against women and have attempted to justify such discrimination through tradition, customs or unfair exploitation of religious texts. This reflects the dichotomy in which Muslim women live and the contradictions which exist between their public and private lives. While modern secular laws govern employment, education, property, economic activities, politics, crime and punishment, laws derived from or based on *Shari'a* govern their family relations. This dichotomy is illustrated by one commentator who said: "*Nothing exemplifies more the contradictions of modern state patriarchy than the fact that Muslim women can aspire to becoming the heads of governments, yet they face other insurmountable difficulties in divorcing their husbands.*" (El Azhary Sonbol, 1996).

The 1981 amendment of the 1971 Constitution making the principles of *Shari'a* the principal source of legislation, is an attempt to legitimize this dichotomy. Egypt's reservations on Article 2 (State's obligation to take the necessary procedures to eliminate discrimination against women at law and in practice) and Article 16 (Marriage and Family Relations) of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) specifically barring any "prejudice to the principles of *Shari'a*" provide further proof and reinforcement of this dichotomy.

In this connection, attention should be given to the meaning of the "principles of *Shari'a*", which is used to qualify any commitment by the State provided under CEDAW to ensure gender equality under family laws. There is no agreed definition in the Constitution or Egyptian law on the meaning of this term. However the explanatory memorandum issued in connection with the 1981 amendment of the 1971 Constitu-



tion defined the term as “*the general principles of Shari’a consistently agreed upon by Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh or legal doctrine).*” Reference to “principles” rather than “provisions” of *Shari’a* is of critical importance, in that it only refers to the fundamental and conclusive principles of *Shari’a*, in terms of meaning and significance, which are constant and not disputed, as the principal source of legislation. This applies to principles of justice, equality, freedom, solidarity and human dignity among other human rights generally recognized by all religions and international treaties. The Supreme Constitutional Court confirmed the foregoing and emphasized that Article 2 of the Constitution, which by the way is still Article 2 of the present Constitutional Declaration, is addressed to the legislator and is not addressed to the judiciary for direct application by the courts.

The Need to Reread the Legal Texts

It is therefore not possible for liberal men and women to advocate gender equality only on the basis of the Constitution, CEDAW or other international human rights treaties. This could work in all fields but would not suffice in the field of family laws and relations, relating to matters such as marriage, divorce, polygamy or inheritance. It is necessary to be involved in the religious discourse, to challenge patriarchal control, religious misinterpretations and discriminatory family laws. We have to claim ownership of our cultural and religious heritage and the right to reread the religious texts and identify those that support our cause and those which are being used or rather abused to discriminate against women. By religious texts, I mean the Quran and the authentic traditions of the Prophet. Relevant interpretations of Islamic schools of thought found primarily in the four major disciplines of Islamic discourse as well as more modern scholars like Mohamed Abdu, the Grand Imam of Al Azhar in the late 19th early 20th century, became important tools in our advocacy campaigns during the last two decades for matters like restricting polygamy, admitting moral damages as basis for divorce, the right to *Khul* or repudiation and the right to include substantive conditions in the marriage contract as a method of protecting women’s rights which are not protected by prevailing family laws in Egypt.

Professor Nasr Abu Zayd provided me with great support as a scholar and a close friend. In the matter of rereading the texts, he said in an article on Academic Freedom:

It will always be necessary, however, to analyse and interpret the Quran and the authentic Traditions of the Prophet within the contextual background from which they originated. In other words: the message of



Islam could not have had any effect if the people who received it first could not have understood it; they must have understood it within their socio-cultural context; and by their understanding and application of it their society changed. The understanding of the first Muslim generation and the generations that followed should not by any means be considered as final or absolute. The specific linguistic encoding dynamics of the text of the Quran always allows for an endless process of decoding. In this process the contextual socio-cultural meaning should not be ignored or simplified, because this 'meaning' is ever so vital as an indication of the direction of the 'new' message of the text. Having identified the direction of the text will facilitate moving from its 'meaning' to its 'significance' for the present socio-cultural context. It will also enable the interpreter to correctly and efficiently extract the 'historical' and 'temporal' aspects of the text that no longer carry any significance for the present context. As interpretation is an inseparable side of the text, the Quran, being decoded in the light of its historical, cultural, and linguistic context, has to be re-encoded into the code of the cultural and linguistic context of the interpreter. In other words, the deeper structure of the Quran must be reconstructed from the surface structure. Subsequently, the deep structure must be rewritten in another surface structure, which is that of today.

This entails an interpretative diversity, because the endless process of interpretation and re-interpretation cannot but differ in time. This is also necessary, because otherwise the message will inevitably degenerate and the Quran will always remain as it is now, namely subject to political and pragmatic manipulation. Since the message of Islam is believed to be valid for all mankind regardless of time and space, diversity of interpretation is inevitable."

In application of the above, the following examples of campaigns for gender equality have been launched during the last 25 years and succeeded in achieving significant progress for the cause of gender equality in general and in family laws in particular:

1. *Marriage*

Analysts may argue with merit that the marriage institution legitimized by Islam has created a hierarchical structure which discriminates against women and paves the ground



for male control and women's seclusion. Its patriarchal and polygynous features seem to have a negative impact on the position of women. On the other hand, feminists engaged in Islamic religious discourse may argue that: (i) Marriage in pre-Islamic Arabia took a variety of forms, including polyandrous, temporary, polygynous, slave-marriage and marriage by inheritance (where the wife would be inherited by her deceased husband's next of kin without a new *mahr* (dower) and the children conceived during that second union would carry the deceased husband's name). All those forms were vastly regulated by custom and affected the understanding and implementation of the Quranic texts relating to marriage, which provided for polygamy, only as a condoned exception, and directed towards a single wife as the rule; and (ii) The Quranic texts, including explicit texts related to marriage, provide a strong basis for equality between the sexes in general, as well as equality and reciprocity within the marriage institution in particular. For example, the Quran states that God has created all mankind *"from a single soul and created its mate from the same soul and spread from both of them too many men and women"* (4:1) and that *"Wives have rights corresponding to those which husbands have, in equitable reciprocity."* (2:229). Further, Islamic legal provisions of equal rights and obligations with respect to religious duties, crime and punishment, economic and financial independence, equal rights to contract and own and dispose of property challenge the assumption that patriarchal control is inherent in the original sacred book.

1. Polygamy

Discriminatory practices such as polygamy may be interpreted as a condoned exception which may be restricted or regulated by law. The relevant provision of Surat Al Nissa'a allowing polygamy should also be understood in the historical and social context when revealed in the 4th year Hijri after defeat in a war and loss of lives, leaving many orphans and widows unattended, and attempting to secure their fair treatment. *"And if you fear that you cannot do justice to orphans, marry such women as deemed good to you, two, or three, or four, but if you fear that you will not do justice, then only one or that which your right hands possess. This is more proper that you may not do injustice."* Further, it should also be understood in the context of the preceding provision strongly reflecting equality through the creation of man and his mate, the woman, from a single soul. The Grand Imam Mohamed Abdu issued a fatwa towards the end of the 19th century authorizing the restriction of polygamy based on: (i) the impossibility of satisfying the condition of justice between the wives; (ii) the adverse impact it has on the



wives which are most likely to be mistreated; and (iii) the animosity and hatred which arises between the children of different mothers as a result of polygamy. On that basis, Tunisia barred polygamy, Morocco, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen restricted polygamy and made it subject to prior court permission. As for Egypt, taking a second wife must be notified officially to the first and second wife by the husband and the marriage registrar and breach is subject to a penalty of imprisonment for six months. Moreover, the law allows inclusion of a condition in the marriage contract prohibiting the husband from taking a second wife without the first wife's prior permission. Finally the first wife may claim divorce for moral or material damage.

2. Divorce

Similarly, the husband's unilateral right of divorce is condemned by the Quran as most abhorrent to God, and Islamic law allows it to be balanced by a similar right retained by the wife in the marriage contract. The New Marriage Contract, introduced in 2000 in Egypt, after a 10 year campaign, explicitly provides the wife with the right to retain the *isma*, i.e. the right to retain an equal right of divorce in her marriage contract. Although jurists construe such a condition as a delegation of authority by the husband, they unanimously recognize it as irrevocable, treating it like a contractual term. The wife's retention of *isma* is allowed and exercised in Egypt today and is immediately enforceable before the *maazoun*, i.e. the marriage registrar, without recourse to the court. However, prevailing patriarchal culture and tradition discourage the inclusion of such a term in the contract, as it is socially perceived as sign of mistrust in the husband and his family.

In the year 2000, Law 1 was issued giving the wife a unilateral right to terminate her marriage contract in exchange for a waiver of her financial rights to deferred dower (*mahr*) and her financial maintenance under the law. Such waiver does not affect the children's rights in any manner. As such, the Egyptian women succeeded in achieving equal rights to unilateral termination of the marriage contract, based on texts provided for in the Quran and the authentic traditions of the Prophet. It was a challenging struggle which was opposed by the promoters of patriarchal culture using religious, social and cultural arguments. The right to *Khul* was also challenged as unconstitutional 60 times within three months from issuance of the law, but the Supreme Constitutional Court upheld it as constitutional. Experience shows that the right to *Khul* represented a social revolution that restored balance and equilibrium into the marriage relationship and saved many marriages much more than those



terminated by women through *Khul*, as claimed by the opposition. Finally, the majority of women who sought *Khul* proved to be poor women with husbands who failed to financially maintain their families and mistreated their wives and children, while making divorce for their wives difficult.

A New Marriage Contract

The movement for the New Marriage Contract started in 1985 in response to a set-back resulting from a judgment by the Supreme Constitutional Court based on an action filed by a group of religious extremists against a 1979 amendment to the family law which provided limited progress in favor of gender equality. The women's movement struggled to reinstate the repealed law and succeeded with concessions. It was therefore necessary to adopt a strategy of engagement in the religious discourse based on women's reading of their rights under the principles of *Shari'a*. We could not afford to shy away from the challenge and continue using a strategy based solely on constitutional and human rights. We had to prove that the standard religious discourse could also be used by women to defend their cause. During distressed times, the religious extremist groups consistently place women's issues at the forefront of their published agenda to implement *Shari'a* principles, with the target of restricting women's rights. They therefore accuse any secular feminist opposition of being anti-Islamic, an agent of either the "non-religious" Eastern bloc or the "corrupt" Western bloc. It was therefore essential for the women's movement to diversify its approach and adopt a credible strategy that could reach out and win the support of simple, ordinary religious men and women. The New Marriage Contract, an Islamic concept deep rooted in indigenous culture, represented a new vision of cultural and social realities of women in their everyday lives which reconciled issues common to both the religious discourse and the secular feminist discourse.

Ibn Hanbal (eponym of the Hanbali school of Islamic law) and Ibn Taymiyyah (a famous Hanbali jurist) approved the inclusion of substantive conditions in the marriage contract, provided such conditions did not violate the imperative rules of Islam. The other three major schools of Islamic thought did not prohibit the inclusion of conditions in the marriage contract, but required that such conditions should be compatible with the object of the contract, a test they interpreted much more restrictively than the Hanbalis. Under Egyptian law, the personal status laws are not based on the teachings of a single school of thought. Although the Hanafi school is predominant, the legislator has often adopted the opinions or solutions of one or several schools



on any one issue, as deemed in the best interest of society. For example, divorce for prejudice is based on the *Maliki* school of thought while on proof of prejudice to obtain divorce is based on the *Hanafi* school of thought. Hence, it would be legitimate and consistent with common Egyptian legislative practice to adopt the Hanbali theory on stipulations in marriage contracts. With the issue of Law 1 of 2000, these arguments were adopted by the Drafting Committee formed by the Minister of Justice, and a new form of the marriage contract allowing the inclusion of substantive conditions was issued as the new standard form. The New Marriage Contract, as currently applicable, has been drafted in a manner that respects the human right of informed choice by women and men, in that it does not impose any conditions. All the conditions currently suggested, such as retaining the right to *Isma*, prohibiting taking a second wife without the first wife's permission, asserting certain agreed financial rights in case of divorce against the wife's will, etc. are merely stated as options to be freely selected by the parties to the contract. There was only one mandatory condition in the standard form advocated by both the women's movement and the Ministry of Justice which was the medical examination prior to marriage. This condition only became mandatory recently under the Child Protection Law. In respecting the human right to informed choice, the Egyptian women's movement for the New Marriage Contract demonstrated that its engagement in the religious discourse was not inconsistent with the mainstream human rights and secular feminist movements.

Conclusion

Women have been traditionally the first victims of religious extremism movements and have therefore to be part of the first line of defence against such movements. So long as the family laws in Egypt are based on Sharia, using a human rights strategy based on CEDAW will not be enough to address the prevailing patriarchal culture abusing religion to perpetuate discrimination against women. Rereading the text of the Quran and the authentic traditions of the Prophet as they relate to gender equality in the present socio-cultural context, rather than their historical context, will therefore continue to be instrumental for the struggle to eliminate discrimination against women under family laws. In fact women in Egypt have achieved significant reforms to the family laws and asserted equality in the right to terminate marriage and the right of informed choice in the marriage contract, among others, through engagement in the religious discourse and the dynamic process of reinterpretation. The scholarly work of Professor Abu Zayd provides strong support to the women's movement in Egypt in their struggle for equality under family laws.



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Rereading the Qur'an: A Muslim's Woman Perspective●

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'It is the Qur'an that we have to deal with, if we are to succeed in paving the path for a humanistic Islam. Qur'an has been treated as synonyms to God. It is as if we dared to question the nature of Qur'an, we are questioning our faith in God, and at the same time we declare our rejection of Islam itself. Qur'an in this sense is the Church of Islam. Separating this church of Islam from state's laws and jurisprudence is imperative; not only for the future of a humanistic Islam, but also for instituting legal gender equality.

If there is one sphere that illustrates this statement in no compromising manner, it would be the private sphere of the family in Arab societies. The reason is straightforward; family laws, with the one exception of Tunisia, are justified and based on religious provisions! All of them!

Perhaps this fact can clarify to a great extent the confusion that many here in Europe feel when approaching cosmopolitan Arab societies such as Egypt, Lebanon, or Syria. On the one hand, these states took drastic steps to modernize their legal structures after their independence; on the other hand, they left the religious provisions governing the family sphere untouched. They tried to codify some of these provisions; making them more 'friendly' to women; but the basis remained religious, and thus inherently biased towards women.

Notice that I did not use the word Islamic provisions here. I said religious provisions. The reason is also surprising. Arab women are left to the laws of their respective religions to govern their family relations. A Syrian Orthodox, a Lebanese Maronite, or an Egyptian Copt who would like to divorce her husband will be subject to the religious laws set by their respective churches. And these, just like their Islamic counterparts, are not exactly gender friendly. This clarifies the joke told to me by Syrian women' activists in a dinner I attended in Damascus in mid summer 2007. The activists, representing a wide spectrum of NGOs of different ideological backgrounds (Islamic, Christian, and secular) said while laughing: *"The Vatican and Arab countries disagree on everything. But when it comes to our rights (in international conferences), they miraculously agree!"* Why have Arab societies refrained from modernizing their family laws and steering them from their religious basis is the question I pose in a

● This paper is adapted from a chapter from Manea, Elham, *Ich will nicht mehr schweigen: Der Islam, der Westen und die Menschenrechte*, Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 2009.

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book that is due to be published this summer by Routledge in London. Answering it goes beyond the scope of this note.

But how Qur'anic verses are interpreted and how religious provisions are being applied, contribute greatly to the problem of women in Arab societies. No reformation of Islam is possible, in my opinion, without dealing with the gender question. And *a real reformation has to acknowledge the shortcomings and limits of Islamic stipulations regarding women*. Acknowledging that will pave the way for adopting positive and civil laws, that best protect the woman as a human equal to man in dignity and rights.

In the next part, I will present how the issue of women's rights has been constantly discussed in a '*safe boundary of thinking*'. Two examples of discourses will be presented, the first acknowledge that there is a problem and tries to find a solution through new interpretation of Qur'anic verses, and the second denies that there is a problem to deal with, and instead urges women to accept God's orders and submit to their natural duty. In a second phase I will then try to step out of that safe boundary and set the mode for a counter humanistic argument.

Women's rights: Talking from a Safe Boundary of Thinking

Two discourses can be discerned in discussing the issue of women's rights in Islamic societies from a '*safe boundary of thinking*'. *Both argue that 'Islam respects women's rights and has always guaranteed them; the problem has mainly to do with the society that is interpreting or implementing these rights. The problem has to do with the people themselves'*.

A Reformist Argument

The first discourse is espoused by Muslim reformers and scholars, who recognize that women are discriminated against within Islamic legal tradition and seek to find an enlightened interpretation of Qur'anic verses. In this endeavor they use modern interpretations techniques and activate the Islamic principle of Ijtihad.

Muslims, according to this paradigm have to re-read their Qur'anic text and separate its message from their traditions and patriarchal structures. That was the argument of some of the early reformers of the 19th and early 20th Century and it is still the argument of some enlightened reformers today. The discourse is featured with heterogeneity especially in the type of approaches used and the scope of reforms they call for. Baring this heterogeneity in mind, I will use the scholar Amina Wadud as an example to illustrate her



argument.

Amina Wadud is a modern scholar who seeks to reform Islam from a feministic perspective. Her arguments, important as they are, were made from a *safe boundary of thinking*, which did not question the nature of Qur'an as God's literal word.

*Amina argues that the "Qur'an acknowledges that men and women function as individuals in society. However there is no detailed prescription set on how to function, culturally. Such a specification would be an imposition that would reduce the Qur'an from a universal text to a culturally specific text – a claim that many have erroneously made. What Qur'an proposes is transcendental in time and space."*²

Using hermeneutical techniques, Wadud tried in her book entitled '*Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*', to prove that the Qur'an has indeed provided a universal message, treating man and woman as different but equal individuals. And she came to the conclusion that *"they have the same rights and obligations on the ethico-religious level, and have equally significant responsibilities on the social-functional level"*.³

Wadud does have a point in arguing that the Qur'an treated man and woman as equal in front of God in their religious responsibilities and treatment in the afterlife. There are several Qur'anic verses that corroborate this argument. Nevertheless it is very difficult to draw the same conclusion when we talk about the social functional level. Often, when it concerns this level, when it involves rights in family and society, the *Qur'an does not provide a universal message*, certainly not for a woman living in the 21st century. I will come back to this point later.

An Islamist Argument

The second discourse argues that the problem with women has to do with the Muslims themselves, who are not Muslims enough. This has been the argument of the early Islamists like Hasan al Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brothers movement, and it is the argument that has been used in the re-islamization process that is taking place in Arab societies. Islam, according to this line of argument, is in no need for reformation. The religion is there, pure and solid, and it is the duty of Muslims to return to its puritanical provisions and doctrines, and stick to its rituals to the letter. Accordingly, there is no need to seek a '*solution*' to the problem; for there is no problem to start with.

² Wadud, Amina, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 8-9.

³ Ibid, p. 102



This discourse insists too that Islam is not the problem. But unlike the reformers who, while reiterating the statement, try to come up with different interpretations to what they clearly see as problematic religious provisions; Islamists consider what Islam offers a woman an idealistic system that guarantees her dignity and protection and *'perfectly suits' her 'natural duty' and "biological nature"*. So instead of seeking a new reading of Islamic text, they focus on convincing Muslim women to accept the *'Islamic social order'* as they see it.

The writing of Hasan Al Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brothers movement, on women is a very good example in this regard, for he set the tone for the discussion of women's rights from an Islamist perspective in his famous tract entitled *"The Muslim Woman"*. He argued that knowing the opinion of Islam towards woman and man, their relationship and duties, *"is not important!" "What is important, and i am quoting him here, is to ask ourselves are we prepared to accept the judgment of Islam"*.⁴

The question is vital because al Banna sees a danger looming, coming from the West: *"In reality, this country and other Islamic countries are swamped by a cruel unruly wave of infatuation with the imitation of European (way)"*. And he insists that Muslims have to prepare themselves *"to accept God's orders and prohibitions"*.

Writing the sentence *"to accept God's orders and prohibitions"* was necessary in my opinion. For Al Banna is very aware that, while Islam *"elevates the status (value) of woman and makes her a partner to man in rights and duties"*, Islamic provisions do discriminate between man and woman. He said: *"But on the other hand, it should be noticed that when Islam took away something from the right of woman, it called for something better in another side; or this detracting is done for her benefit and well-being before anything else"*.

He justifies this discrimination by saying that it *"comes from their natural differences, which are unavoidable (inevitable), compatible with the difference in the task each is conducting, and for the protection of the rights given to each"*.

Women's Rights - Stepping out of the Safe Boundary of Thinking

So far we have been discussing discourses that were either trying to provide an enlightened and a different interpretation to religious texts dealing with woman's

⁴ Al Banna, Hasan, "The Muslim Woman", In Arabic.



position while insisting that Islam by itself is not the problem; or arguments that do not see a problem to solve and rather implore the Muslim woman to accept her position in the social hierarchy of an Islamic order. Both however never questioned the nature of Qur'an as God's literal words. A humanistic reading of Islam seeks to approach this issue by stepping out of the safe boundary of thinking. It argues that insisting that '*Islam is not the problem*' is counterproductive and rather complicates the matter, for it sets the argument on a defensive level. Trying to defend an 'idea' will reflect on the outcome, makes it hard to provide a rational reading of the problem, call it by its name, and then deal with it.

A humanistic reading of Islam insists that a real reformation of Islam has to *acknowledge the limits of the religious texts in providing solutions to the women's problem and maintain that these religious texts must be seen within its historical context and should therefore cease to be relevant when regulating the social reality of family and state in the 21st century*. In other words, it argues for the separation of state and religion. Again, it insists that *it is the Qur'an that we have to deal*

with, if we are to succeed in separating religion from state'. The Qur'an is the church of Islam.

The limits of the religious texts in providing solutions are clear regarding the issue of women's rights. Qur'anic verses did treat women as equal to men in their judgment in front of God in the afterlife. Verse 40:40 states: "*whoso does evil will be requited only with the like of it; but whoso does good, whether male or female, and is a believer – these will be provided therein without measure*".

”من عَمِلَ سَيِّئَةً فَلَا يُجْزَىٰ إِلَّا مِثْلَهَا وَمَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا مِّن ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُولَٰئِكَ يَدْخُلُونَ الْجَنَّةَ يُرْزَقُونَ فِيهَا بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ“

My interest, however, pertains to the verses that concern a woman's status in this life. Put simple, on the social level Qur'anic verses discriminated against women to the advantage of man. This discrepancy is obvious in verses regulating family relations, sexual relations within marriage, inheritance, and testimony - the culmination of which points to the end that, indeed, there are clear inconsistencies between Qur'anic provisions and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) of 1987 in relation to the status of women.⁵

⁵ This opinion has been emphasized by thinkers who are seeking a reformation from within Islam such as Abullahi Ahmed An-Na'im in his book "Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990;



These inconsistencies are not theoretical when it concerns women's daily lives. Qur'anic verses have been translated into family laws that sanction the inferior role of women in family and society. They are very much anchored in the most basic unit of society – the family - and its relations, perpetuating a system of inequality between husband and wife. A serious reformation will have to address this inequality. The question is therefore how do we address this inequality?

One way of addressing the problem is to resort to a selective reading of Qur'an trying to come up with an argument supporting gender equality in family relations. *The problem with this method is that once it makes Qur'an its point of reference it is bound to be confronted with the passages that do not corroborate the equality argument.*

Let me use Qur'anic verse 34 of Sura 4 as an example of what I just stated above. Verse 34 is a long verse, but I want to focus on one part of it which says: "(...) *Ermahnt diejenigen, von denen ihr Widerspenstigkeit befürchtet, und entfernt euch von ihnen in den Schlafgemächern und schlägt sie. Wenn sie euch gehorchen, dann wendet nichts Weiteres gegen sie an. Gott ist erhaben und groß*"

”واللاتي تخافون نشوزهن فَعْظُوهُنَّ وَاهْجُرُوهُنَّ فِي الْمَضَاجِعِ
وَاضْرِبُوهُنَّ..”

This part of verse 34 provides the 'disciplinary' steps in which a husband can follow in the case of his wife's *noshouz* - *disobedience*. The word *Noshouz* has generally been defined as *rising against the husband, deserting him, or resisting him*.⁶ Fatima Mernissi emphasized her opinion that this type of *noshouz* covers also a woman's *rejection of her husband sexual demands*, while Amina Wadud was of the opinion that the word means *disruption of marital harmony*.⁷

Whether the word means rising against the husband or disruption of marital harmony, the question that many Muslims have been struggling with has been *'how to deal with the fact that this verse allows the man to beat his wife as a last disciplinary measure?'*

While the reactions differ, two approaches are discernable. The first is more common and tries to *justify* it; the second is scholarly and attempts to *explain* it using a hermetical approach, but often falls in a *denial* syndrome. Both are missing the point!

The first has been propagated by male Muslim preachers and scholars alike who would argue along the following line: *beating a wife is the husband's last resort that he can use if his wife insists on disobeying him. Women are irrational, and*

⁶ The Holy Qur'an: Arabic Text with English Translation & Short Commentary, Edited by Farid, Malik Ghulam, London: Islamic International Publications Limited, 2002, p. 196; The Holy Qur'an, Tafsir Al Imamien al Jalalien, in Arabic, p. 84; Ghalib, Hanna, Thesaurus of Arabic: An Encyclopedic Reference of Synonyms, Antonyms & Espressions, Beirut Librairie du Liban Publishers, 2003, p.486
⁷ Mernissin, Fatima, The Political Hareem: Mohammad and the Women, in Arabic, Second edition, Damascus: Dar Hasad, 1993, pp.196-203; Wadud, Amina, Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp.74-78.



sometimes they do not see where their interests are. They can jeopardize the wellbeing of their family. A man, being rational as he is, has sometimes no resort to this method to bring her to reason! But if he did that, there are conditions as to how he beats her. He should not slap her on her face! No, he should not. He should not leave any marks on her body. No, he should not. Other than that, he can of course beat her!

Every time I hear this line of argument, my blood pressure raises. But this type of discourse is common in Saudi, Kuwaiti, Yemeni, or even Egyptian TVs. In many religious programs the issue will be discussed within the above parameters to justify the Qur'anic verse. And of course part of the

argument is to make sure to mention that *Mohammad the Prophet never used force against his wives and that he repeatedly called on Muslim men not to beat their wives!* Logic is not the basis on which this type of justification is founded.

The second reaction is scholarly, conducted mainly by feminists Muslim Scholars, and is meant to find an explanation for the verse from a hermeneutic perspective. The work of Amina Wadud in her book "Qur'an and Woman" and that of a group of scholars in their book "Ein einziges Wort und seine grosse Wirkung" falls within this category.⁸

The two books mentioned above tried to shed doubts on the word "daraba" – beating- saying that it may have a different meaning than, well, beating. Amina Wadud, for instance, argued that in some references this word 'does not necessarily indicate force or violence', rather it has been used to indicate setting an example or leaving.⁹

Although this type of academic research deserves to be highly commended for seeking a different feministic approach to understanding the Qur'an, there are limits as to how far one can go with this approach.

Try hard as you may, the meaning of the word 'beating' will not change, especially if read within the context of the whole verse itself. A man trying to get his wife to stop disobeying him may use several methods, the last of which is the hardest - beating her. If the woman 'obeyed' him, then he should stop these measures.

Try hard as you may, the meaning of the verse can not be separated from its historical context which provided the reason why this verse was issued and formulated in the first place. It came after a woman, hit by her husband,

⁸ Wadud, Amina, *ibid*; Zentrum für Islamische Frauenforschung und Frauenförderung (Hrsg.), *Ein einziges Wort und seine große Wirkung*, Cologne, 2005.

⁹ Wadud, Amina, *ibid*, p. 76.



complained to the Prophet. The latter decided to punish him, but the verse then came setting the course as to how to deal with this case.

Fatima Mernissi provided an excellent account of the difficult political situation the Prophet was facing, even within his own Muslim community. His rejection of using violence against women only complicated his position and caused much resentment against him. The verse was *necessary* to calm down the angry Muslim men.¹⁰

Our Egyptian thinker Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid was a matter of fact about this issue when he said that: "Daraba is correctly translated as beating; it is allowed according to this verse if only in a certain context. One sees that this verse is quite obviously directed to a male audience. The Koran is a text that is principally aimed to men, simply because it arose in a male dominated surroundings."¹¹

In other words, because the discourse used in the verse was directed to men, it reflected the social context of the period when Mohammad lived. A context which could be described as male dominated, tribal and patriarchal by nature. Can one expect from such a social and historical context equality between sexes that corresponds to our current understanding of gender equality? It is too much to ask for.

Trying to find a linguistic 'way out' of this dilemma of 'daraba' is, therefore, not convincing, not to me at least. The conclusion it came to, reflects rather the assumption that '*Qur'an can not sanction beating a wife. Hence the word beating may not have meant beating*'. Denial is not a good course of action.

A humanistic Islam approaches this issue differently. It does seek situating the verse within its historical and political context and provides an explanation to it. But it acknowledges at the same time the limits of such an approach in our daily conduct. For the question that one should pose is: *if we did indeed situate this verse within its historical and social contexts, what should we do next? Leave it, and say, yes Qur'an does contain a verse that sanction beating the wife, but that was a different historical period?*

That is one step in the right direction, but in itself it will not do. It is not enough; not when you have those who are using this very verse to justify domestic violence, it is necessary to set the lines straight. Hence, the rationality upon which a humanistic Islam is based on will empathize *that understanding the historical context of this verse is one step in the right direction. Making it clear at the same time that this verse*

¹⁰ Mernissi, Fatima, pp. 179-203.

¹¹ Abu Zaid, Nasr Hamid, Mohammed und die Zeichen Gottes: Der Koran und die Zukunft des Islam, Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 2008, p.160.



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*is not the point of reference when it comes to family relations is the logical step that should follow. Saying it clear and loud that this verse ceases to be relevant to society is the logical step that should follow. It ceases to be relevant to society because, quite frankly, using today's standards; to act on this verse will constitute a violation of human rights. For Today, we consider the woman an individual, a human, equal to man. Today we do not expect women to *obey* their husbands. We expect man and woman to be partners when they decide to establish a family. And today, we call the act of a man or a husband beating his partner or wife, we call it domestic violence. It is considered an offence, a *crime*.*

To be able to argue along this line, a humanistic approach to Islam requires that we distinguish between two levels of the Islamic religion: a) a spiritual side which seeks to establish a connection between the individual and God; and b) a legalistic and Sharia side whose provisions should cease to be a point of reference to our legislation.

Often, it is this legalistic and Sharia side of religion that we seem to be stuck with. It is as if we are kept paralyzed and frozen inside a certain historical period, a bubble of time-unable to break away of it to the 21 century. And we are frozen in time for good reasons. For we seem to keep using the same paradigm of thinking and lines of arguments in approaching the most critical question that should have been addressed long time ago: *What is the nature of Qur'an?*

Posing this question in this form will force us to step *into the forbidden Areas of Thinking and face the church of Islam. Without acknowledging the human nature of Qur'an we will remain stuck, posing the same questions about women's role in society that were asked more than one hundred years ago, and coming with answers that do not guarantee full gender equality.*



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Abraham / Ibrahim: The First Humanist and Father of Believers.

Marcel Poorthuis

A humanistic Islam is an ambiguous concept. Humanism knows of strong anti-religious currents. It is not sure that these currents succeed in a prophetic appeal to religion to appreciate human values, while respecting traditional religious values. A humanistic Islam could as well be understood as a ethical orientation completely stripped of its religious dimensions. It is not in this sense that Nasr Abu Zayd advocated a humanistic Islam, as he considered Islam as a religion fully valid for modern man. The hermeneutics of the Quran as communication should free Islam from obsolete ideas and of an anti-scientific attitude. It reminds of a similar process within Christianity one century ago, when historic-critical exegesis claimed a scientific approach to the Bible. Again it is not sure that the historic critical approach as such is able to lay bare the humane message of religion. I choose another approach: to demonstrate how the figure of Abraham/Ibrahim as understood in monotheistic traditions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, may pose central questions to modernity, questions that are vital both for humanists and believers.

Bible, Midrash, Quran and post Quranic motifs of Abraham/Ibrahim

The Biblical account of Abraham is quite different from the Quranic references to Ibrahim. To account for those widely divergent pictures, one should not just compare Bible and Quran. One has to delve into the post-Biblical Jewish and Christian developments of Abraham, bridging the gap of the millennia that separate Bible from Quran. In addition, post-Quranic literature on Ibrahim, as preserved in the *Qisas al-Anbiyā*, the tales of the prophets, and the *tafsir*, the exegesis of the Quran, is important as well for understanding the Islamic view of Ibrahim. The wide range of sources, commonly referred to as *Isra'iliyyāt*, displays a thorough knowledge of pre-Quranic traditions, without however slavishly imitating them. Such historical research does not need to infringe upon Islamic convictions of revelation, as even the Quran itself describes Ibrahim as a person already widely known among Jews, Christians and others, such as the mysterious group of the *Hanifiyya*. Oral traditions about Abraham may have circulated widely, transcending existing denominational frontiers. Apparently, the Quran treats Biblical persons as adhortative models to corroborate Mohammed's own mission, using all kinds of narrative



motifs from post-Biblical provenance, but without the aim to relate the whole story in all details. The major intention of the Quranic use of Biblical figures is to view Mohammed's mission and his rejection in the light of these great predecessors. Especially Abraham's struggle against the idols is presented as strongly applicable to Mohammed's own mission. In Mohammed's biography, the *Sira*, the Biblical heroes are explicitly portrayed as introduction to the life of Mohammed, Abraham in particular.¹ Again, the story of Abraham smashing the idols precedes Mohammed's mission as it is without any doubt pre-Quranic. The transformation of the Biblical Abraham leaving his country without further ado into a prophet in debate with those eventually left behind after being persecuted by them, can be traced already in the Jewish Book of Jubilees, (2th century BCE). This book is partly preserved in Hebrew in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and virtually complete in Ethiopian by the Ethiopian Church and in some other languages.

In the past, scholars sometimes referred to pre-Islamic Jewish (and sometimes Christian) sources in order to reduce Islam to its predecessors, as if it had brought nothing new and as if Islam had half misunderstood what it took over. However, this reductive approach is possible with all historical religions, Judaism and Christianity not excepted. Tracing developments to its sources rather allows us to point to transformations and shifts of meaning in which Islam displays its authenticity; hence such a search for sources should always be combined with an assessment of what is essentially Islamic.

It is not my intention, however, to deal here with these complicated historical and philological issues, which probably require an interdisciplinary effort. I want to explore the significance of the stories of Abraham/Ibrahim for present-day reflection. I claim that it is possible to detect important common elements in both Judaism, Christianity and Islam, connected to one and the same figure of Abraham. These common elements may offer food for contemporary reflection upon autonomy, ethnic belonging and its limits, and also upon freedom and the use of reason as ways to God. The differences between Islamic and Jewish traditions deserve to be studied as well, but that is not my focus presently.² My approach will be synthetic.

In a way, modern culture itself cannot be fully understood without the towering figure of Abraham, who may, in that respect, be compared with Socrates, Buddha and others.

¹ G.D. Newby, *The Making of the Last Prophet. A Reconstruction of the Earliest Biography of Muhammad*, South Carolina 1989, p. 65 f.

² Previous research, studies, mainly by Jewish scholars, include Grünbaum, Weil, Beer, Shapira, Ginzberg, Katsh, Sidersky, and the Islamic scholar Moubarac. Special mention should be made of: H. Schützinger, *Ursprung und Entwicklung der Abraham-Nimrod Legende*, Bonn 1961. The most in depth treatment of Islamic sources of Abraham in recent times is R. Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands. The Evolution of Abraham-Ishmael Legends in Islamic Exegesis*, Albany N.Y. 1990.



Abraham as father of the faith in monotheistic traditions

Abraham is referred to in the New Testament quite often as a paragon of faith and as such transcending ethnic belonging. John the Baptist emphasizes that his Jewish audience should not, as it were, count upon their Abrahamic ancestry, but should amend their ways of behavior, “for God can make out of these stones children of Abraham” (Matthew 3:9; Luke 3:8).³ Likewise the Gospel of John maintains that genuine children of Abraham would perform the works of Abraham, whereas the Jews do not do that, according to this gospel (John 8: 39). Paul argues in his *Letter to the Romans* (4:10) that Abraham was called righteous already before he was circumcised. Of course one can explain all this as an argument between two denominations, Jewish and Christian. It is also possible however, to view Abraham as a exemplary person, not because he belongs to a specific religious or ethnic group, Christianity not excepted, but because of his trust in God and because of his deeds testifying to that faithful trust. As such he contains a message not only to the adherents of an established religion, but even more to those outside that religion. In this perspective, not only his faith, but also his hospitality should at least be mentioned as a proof of his philanthropic attitude and open mindedness to foreigners.⁴

The Quran states: “Ibrahim was neither a Jew, not a Christian. He was an adherent of the pure faith, submissive to God (*hanifan musliman*)” (3:69). Some translations simply render: “Ibrahim was a muslim”, assuming without further ado Islam as the only genuine heir of the patriarch. However, when we interpret ‘muslim’ not as ‘belonging to the religion of Islam’, which may well be anachronistic, but as: ‘submissive to God’, and as adherent of the pure religion⁵, we may trace a meaning similar to that in the New Testament: Abraham defies ethnic and institutional claims. His religious identity cannot be understood merely as rooted in an ethnic group or in a tradition.

This becomes clear when we return to the story of Abraham as told in the Bible. Without any previous announcement and all of a sudden, the mysterious voice of an unknown God commands him to leave his country and his family. His father Terach, in the Quran Azar, belongs to the generations after the Tower of Babel, during which no revelation of God has occurred.⁶ Hence tradition has it that Terach served idols (cp. Josua 24:2). Although Terach leaves Ur of the Chaldees together with Abraham, he dies in Haran. Later Jewish interpretations conclude that a major rift had occurred between Abraham and his father. In addition, the place of Ur of the Chaldees, *Ur Kasdim*, is interpreted as the

³ Possibly a wordplay on ‘*ebnei*, stones, and *bnei*, children.

⁴ See Clement, *Letter to the Corinthians* 10 (2d century), in which Abraham’s hospitality is extolled.

⁵ See the elaborate discussion by Sj. van Koningsveld in: R. Haleber, *Islam. De wereld van Mohammed Arkoun*, Amsterdam 1992, pp. 221 ff. Van Koningsveld criticizes Arkoun for his interpretation of *musliman* as an ideal attitude preceding the three religions. Still, the parallel between Arkoun’s option and the New Testament connotation of Abraham is remarkable.

⁶ Note, however, that the Quran knows of extra-Biblical messengers to extra-Biblical peoples, like Hud to the people of ‘Ad and Salih to the people of Thamud (Sura 7:65 ff.).



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fire (Ur) of the Chaldees.⁷ The name is supposed to refer to religious persecution perpetrated by the megalomaniac tyrant Nimrod, who had already built the tower to glorify himself as a god. He is the one to throw Abraham into the fire oven (Ur Kasdim), to punish him for his refusal to worship Nimrod or the gods, as we will see presently.

How should we define idolatry? The term is normative rather than descriptive. The answer that idolatry is everything outside one's own religion does not clarify much and is a dangerous simplification. I propose to understand idolatry first and foremost as an integral element of monotheism, rather than an adequate description of what constitutes other religions.

The Jewish humanist philosopher and member of the Frankfurter Schule, Erich Fromm, defines the abandonment of idolatry as the cutting through of the incestuous ties of blood and soil. By identifying with the hand-made gods, i.e. one's own ambitions as religious projections by granting them a divine status, such as the peoplehood, the flag, the soil, possessions and personal ambitions, one is kept in slavery and submission. Liberation means not only being freed from a tyrant outside, but even more from an internalized oppression. Idolatry can be defined both from a theocentric and from an anthropocentric perspective, i.e. from an ethical perspective. Commentaries like to point out how harsh human beings were treated during the building of the Tower: when someone fell down, nobody cared, but when a stone fell, everybody wept, for its loss jeopardized the building.⁸ Hence, where human beings are treated as a means and not as a goal, this seems an apt definition of idolatry. We should note that Abraham does not only abandon his past and his ancestors, but even gives up his future, as is told in the story of Abraham being told to sacrifice his son. Of course by receiving the boy back, his son is no longer the prolongation of his own ambitions, but henceforth his child is a real gift from God, not merely the father's possession.

Abraham then breaks with his past and even with his own father. We are far remote from the idea that family and the authority of the parents are the cornerstones for a religion! On the contrary, Abraham's identity can only take shape by cutting through his family ties.

There are several episodes told both in Jewish, Christian and Islamic sources that account for this rupture between father Terach and son Abraham.

⁷ See the Aramaic Bible translation: *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Gen 15: 6. This Targum is quite late and even displays some Islamic notions. The Church Father Hieronymus knows of this interpretation, see *Quaestiones Hebraicae* on Gen 11:28. The first connection of Abraham with the fire of an oven may be in Pseudo-Philo (1st century C.E., Jewish).

⁸ Of course, these midrashic elaborations are not meant as a historical reconstruction of how things went with the building of the Tower, but serve to underline the idolatrous nature of the project, comparable to the slavery and dehumanization in Egypt, the Biblical model par excellence of oppression and idolatry.



1. *Nimrod's quasi-divine power*

The first episode relates how Ibrahim's father was a visitor at Nimrod's court. Nimrod got a dream in which he saw an omen in the stars.⁹ His magicians explained that a child would be born who would overthrow his throne and would turn the people away from worshipping Nimrod. Nimrod decides to kill all male babies, but Ibrahim hides together with his mother in a cave, under the protection of the angel Gabriel.

The young Abraham contemplating nature

The young Ibrahim contemplates sun, moon and stars. I quote from Sura 6: 74-83. Although the Quran does not specify the location of the story, later Islamic writers such as al-Tabari (839-923) and al-Thalabi (11th century) describe how at that moment the young Ibrahim leaves the cave for the first time. These sources harmonize the different accounts into a continuing story, similar to the Jewish midrash.¹⁰ Abraham contemplating sun, moon and stars turns out to be a boy who, for the first time in his life, leaves the cave in order to shake off ignorance and darkness. Platonic overtones are perhaps not lacking either here.

Lo! Ibrahim said to his father Azar: "Takest thou idols for gods? For I see thee and thy people in manifest error."

So also did We show Abraham the power and the laws of the heavens and the earth, that he might (with understanding) have certitude.

When the night covered him over, He saw a star: He said: "This is my Lord." But when it set, He said: "I love not those that set."

When he saw the moon rising in splendour, he said: "This is my Lord." But when the moon set, He said: "Unless my Lord guide me, I shall surely be among those who go astray."

When he saw the sun rising in splendour, he said: "This is my Lord; this is the greatest (of all)." But when the sun set, he said: "O my people! I am indeed free from your (guilt) of giving partners to God."

"For me, I have set my face, firmly and truly, towards Him Who created the heavens and the earth, and never shall I give partners to God."

Abraham destroys the myths of the gods. A well-known slogan of the *Humanistic Union* is: "Without humanism, man

⁹ See: A. Jellinek, *Beth Ha-midrash*, Jerusalem, I, p. 25. In another version (Ch. Horowitz, *Sammlung kleiner Midraschim*, Berlin 1881, I, p. 43; cp. Jellinek II, 118), the astrologers themselves see the dream of a brilliant star devouring other stars. Stories of the birth of Moses and of course of Jesus relate similar details.

¹⁰ Whether such a complete story really corresponds with the background of the Quranic references, remains a serious point of research.



would be delivered to the gods". With more historical justification, one might say: "without Ibrahim, mankind would be delivered to the gods". Of course, the issue of tolerance becomes essential here. This holds good both for the concept of idolatry and for the atheistic rejection of religion. What is remarkable is that Ibrahim is depicted as a searcher for truth *even before* God has revealed himself to him. It suggests that one is only capable of receiving God's revelation only after one has searched autonomously, denying all so-called gods. It even conveys the suggestion that denying the gods is tantamount to believing in the one true God.

I point out the curious fact that Abraham in his location outside the cave does not reject the gods because he has received a revelation from God, on the contrary: the rejection is the result of his own reasoning. Only after that, God manifests himself, as if whoever is steeped in idolatry is not capable of receiving God's revelation. It may even seem that Abraham's rational reasoning brings him on the brink of understanding the true God, as if revelation is not from outside but coincides with his own insight and, as such, is nearly superfluous. Undoubtedly, the autonomous reasoning of Abraham is strongly emphasized here. One is reminded of the famous story of Yaqzan by Ibn Tufail, where this Yaqzan, alone on an island, starts to contemplate the universe and out of himself reconstructs all of religious belief. It is the logical outcome of a philosophical position that claims that reason as such is sufficient to discover God.¹¹ Not upon the authority of tradition but by personal contemplation and by observation of nature, Abraham discovers how he is surrounded in ignorance and superstition. No doubt, Abraham is presented here as a searcher for truth with a philosophical attitude of observing, doubting and even of revolting against popular opinion. Although in a literal sense, nothing of such a philosophical attitude in Abraham can be found in the Bible, this is how post-Biblical Jewish and Christian tradition as well as Quranic revelation and post-Quranic stories have portrayed Abraham.

The concept of idolatry is multilayered. Erich Fromm plays with the idea that the empty place of divinity is never empty, not even when the gods have disappeared, but are always filled with surrogate gods. Hence the only means to turn the people away from idolatry is by replacing their idolatry with the veneration of the one and unique God. The risk of turning this veneration into the most serious form of idolatry is of course obvious. Hence negative theology states that it is stated that about God we only know better and

¹¹ The Christian scholastic idea of the *rusticus in silva*, children raised by wolves, stems from the same background. Of course, this high appreciation of rational reasoning as a way to knowledge of God is only one of the possible positions.



better who He is not. This negative theology is the flip side of the rejection of idolatry.

Fromm points out that according to psalm 115:

Idols have a mouth but do not speak,

Eyes but do not see.

And those who make them become as them (Psalm 115:5-8).

Hence, idolatry should not be regarded as something external but as the radical alienation of man from his freedom and responsibility.¹² The alienation of man is symbolized in that he himself becomes an idol.

According to Fromm then, even the acceptance of the one God constitutes only an intermediary stage, mystical atheism being for him the highest level. Other thinkers such as the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas rather view atheism as an intermediate but necessary stage in the process of abandoning idolatry, hereby denying any continuity between the gods of surrounding cultures and the invisible unknown God of the Bible. Before dealing with that, we will relate the story of Abraham smashing the idols.

Ibrahim smashing the idols

The second episode story relates how young Abraham smashes the idols except for the biggest one, whom he gives an axe.

So he broke them to pieces, (all) but the biggest of them, that they might turn (and address themselves) to it. (Sura 21:58).

The people object to Ibrahim that these idols cannot speak, whereupon Ibrahim says: Why do you worship them?

Then were they confounded with shame: (they said), "Thou knowest full well that these (idols) do not speak!"

(Ibrahim) said, "Do ye then worship, besides God, things that can neither be of any good to you nor do you harm?"

The essential point seems to be that the people themselves acknowledge the powerlessness of the idols, without being aware of it.

In other lines, it becomes clear that Ibrahim directly confronts his father, who, for that purpose, deals in idols:

¹² E. Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods. A Radical Humanist Interpretation of the Old Testament and its Tradition*, Ned. vert. *Gij zult zijn als goden*, Utrecht 1966, p. 37-38.



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"My father, why do you worship that what can neither hear nor see, nor even profit you in the least?" (Sura 19:42). Here

the conflict over religion is interwoven into the break between Ibrahim and his father. Again, in this respect, Ibrahim is the lonely man of faith.

"I will separate myself from you and from what you invoke instead of God" (Sura 19:48).

In more elaborate versions of this story, Abraham's father Terach owns the shop himself, so that there can be no misunderstanding about Terach's personal interest.

We should note that the story of Abraham deals with three different forms of idolatry: veneration of everything belonging to nature (sun, moon, stars, fire); veneration of man-made things (the idols in the shop) and self-idolization (Nimrod). Regarding the first: veneration of things belonging to nature, the Talmud records an interesting debate between a Greek philosopher and a rabbi. "If your God abhors idolatry, why doesn't he destroy them?", the philosopher teases. The answer: "should God destroy the whole of creation? For idolatry is not limited, but sun, moon, stars, everything can serve as an idol". Apparently, idolatry is not determined by the object but by the attitude of man towards the object.

In the second form, veneration of man made objects, it is clear that idolatry here constitutes veneration for human proprieties and creations as if they are not human.

The third manifestation of idolatry dispenses even with human manifestations of creativity and declares a human being as such divine.¹³

It is worth while to delve a bit further into the meaning of idolatry, as conveyed in the story of Abraham. For the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, the figure of Abraham constitutes the essence of monotheism. For him, the rupture with the past indicates a *discontinuity* between monotheism and all other forms of religion.

Levinas states:

When Terah came back he could not accept this incredible version, knowing that there is no idol in the world which can destroy the other idols. Monotheism marks a break with a certain conception of the Sacred. It neither unifies nor hierarchizes the numerous and numinous gods; instead it denies them. As regards the divine, which they incarnate, it is merely atheism. Here Judaism is very close to the West, by

¹³ See my article: 'The Prohibition of Idolatry: Source of Humanity or Source of Violence? Early Jewish and Christian Perspectives on the Prohibition of Images: a Hermeneutic Approach'. In . R. Burggraeve (Ed.), *Desirable God? Our Fascination with Images, Idols and New Deities* (pp. 39-60). Leuven, 2003, pp. 39-60.



which I mean philosophy. Intellectual excellence is internal and the 'miracles' it makes possible do not all wound, like thaumaturgy, the dignity of responsible being.¹⁴

For Levinas, monotheism is essentially in line with philosophy, even in its atheistic manifestations.

Monotheism surpasses and incorporates atheism, but it is impossible unless you attain the age of doubt, solitude and revolt. The difficult path of monotheism rejoins the path of the West. One wonders, in fact, whether the Western spirit, philosophy is not in the last analysis the position of a humanity that accepts the risk of atheism, if it must be held to ransom by its majority, but overcome it.¹⁵

Atheism then is not the end of the journey towards freedom, but an intermediary stage towards the relationship with the one invisible God, in which man is called to freedom and to responsibility. Here, however, a warning is appropriate, for here lurks a danger of which both Erich Fromm and Emmanuel Levinas are not sufficiently aware. The identification of idolatry with existing religions outside monotheism seems to me too hastily done. This cannot but lead to new forms of violence, of which the Taliban smashing the statues of Buddha is only one telling example. I would propose to regard the prohibition of idolatry as indispensable to monotheist religion, but mainly as an internal-self-criticism. Hence it cannot serve as a wholesale condemnation of other religions, even when their expression of faith is beyond the understanding of the monotheistic believer.

Of course the distinctive mark of the difference between monotheism and idolatry cannot be the fact that God is one: an idol does not become less an idol when there is only one of them left, as is proven by Abraham's story. The oneness of God implies a uniqueness beyond compare. The prohibition of making an image of God holds good for all realms of life, including one's imagination. The Jewish-Christian formula would be that because man himself is made in the image of God, man should not make an image of God. Although this formula is foreign to Islam because of anthropomorphic overtones, the idea behind it can be found in man being God's *calif*, God's representative on earth.

I allow myself a small re-interpretation of the story of Abraham smashing the idols. This re-interpretation seems important to me in order to avoid a wholesale apologetics of monotheist religion, which would lead to a too easy triumphalism. The story goes that Abraham left the biggest idol of them, in order to explain to the people that that one

¹⁴ See: Emmanuel Levinas, 'Une religion d'adultes', *Difficile Liberté*, Paris 1976, p. 30. English translation in: idem, *Difficult Freedom. Essays on Judaism*, translated by Seán Hand, Baltimore 1990, p. 14-15.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 16. These interpretations of atheism are positive as denial of oppression and of idolatry. See; M. Poorthuis, 'Atheïsme en Godsgeloof in het joodse denken', in: M. Poorthuis, T. de Wit, & J. Duyndam (red.), *Humanisme en religie. Controverses, bruggen, perspectieven* (pp. 177-194). Delft: Eburon 2005, pp. 177-194.



had smashed the others. Still, one may wonder what happened to that biggest idol afterwards? One might consider the possibility that together with the journey with the invisible unknown God, this idol travels along. In other words, the risk of idolatry at hand, even or especially when orthodoxy

comes to the fore. To give an example, fundamentalism is nothing else than idolatry of the divine word, in which human thoughts are considered identical with God's thought. In that respect, fundamentalism is no return to traditionalism, but may be viewed as a modern phenomenon. Fundamentalism secularizes God's revelation into mere man made opinions, while denying the essential role of interpretation.

Abrahams' confrontation with the tyrant Nimrod

In some versions, the smashing of the idols is in itself enough reason to throw Abraham in the fiery oven. Other accounts relate of a additional confrontation, between Abraham and the tyrant Nimrod.

Ibrahim said: My Lord gives life and death, but Nimrod claimed: "I give life and death". Ibrahim said: "God lets the sun rise in the East, you, raise the sun in the West!" (Sura 2:260). Ibrahim demythologizes the divine prerogatives of the tyrant Nimrod en reduces him to the human being he is. This attitude is similar to the attitude of the Greek philosophers who demythologize the gods, by assuming them to be ancient heroes. The later *Midrash ha-Gadol* XI, 28 (10th century?) is more elaborate here. Abraham admits that if Nimrod would succeed, he would really be divine:

"Then I will declare that you are God and that no one is comparable to you on earth. But don't be surprised that I consider you not a god, but the son of Kush".

Nimrod is here addressed as an ordinary human being with his family ancestry, which is enough to make any tyrant angry. The end of the debate is that Nimrod throws Abraham into the oven.¹⁶ The angels ask permission from God to rescue Abraham, but God announces that He will do that personally.

After that, Abraham leaves the country. Not all of his family follows him wholeheartedly.

Conclusions

We have detected in Abraham some traits that we may consider dangerous: violence against other persuasions, smashing of the idols, unwillingness to accept this practice next to

¹⁶ 'Ur Kasdim' interpreted as a fire oven is mentioned already in *Talmud Pesahim* 118a (approximately fourth century C.E.).



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his own convictions. Perhaps Abraham's biggest and remaining idol constitutes a constant warning against monotheist religion not to turn to idolatry under the pretext of orthodoxy. The atheistic and iconoclastic element of Abraham may serve as a warning that this father of all religions is first and foremost a critical voice from *within* the religions. Abraham cannot easily be claimed as "one of us", he is rather the constant warning not to identify the division between believer and non-believer with the division good and bad. Humanists may consider Abraham as their father as well. By doubting, contemplating and observing reality, he brushes aside convention and unproven tradition. He pleads for freedom of conviction, perhaps for the first time in human history. Whereas Abraham does not impose his convictions by force, he protests when the tyrant Nimrod does so and eventually decides to leave the country as a refugee.

Abraham considers idolatry as beneath human dignity, so indeed without Abraham, "man would be delivered to the gods". Still, his eventual discovery of the transcendent and invisible God may cause some unrest among humanists. This divine transcendence, however, does not detract from human dignity but establishes it. The prohibition of idolatry is not based upon aggression against other convictions but should serve as a safeguard for human dignity. It seems that here humanism itself is a divided house. Atheist humanism rejects all religion as an infringement upon human dignity. Religious humanists consider religion as an indispensable means to create community between people and to overcome mere self-interest. Present-day humanism seems to regard religion as an attractive spirituality as long as it has not become institutionalized and does not demand full engagement, a quite Romantic attitude, which overestimates one's own spiritual level. Be it as it may, all these directions within humanism may detect in Abraham much to ponder over.



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Islam and Radical Enlightenment

To the memory of Nasr Abu Zayd

Gerard Wiegers

I Introduction

Freedom of religion and freedom of thought are themes which were of crucial importance to Nasr Abu Zayd. The present essay will deal with these themes, but not, as the case in most of Nasr's publications and teaching, in the framework of the Eurasian world, but of debates on Islam and freedom of religion and thought in European History and the different modes of Enlightened thought in Europe that have been discussed in the recent scholarly literature. I am referring to the Radical and Moderate Enlightenment in which different attitudes to and ideas about the relation between reason and religion can be distinguished. According to the European Radicals (among whom the most important place was occupied by Spinoza and his circle) only reason counted, whereas the moderates accepted modes of reconciliation between reason and religion. This range of positions with regard to religion and reason can be found in the Muslim world as well, albeit in different modes and poster configurations. I will not attempt to position Nasr Abu Zayd's work in this connection, but let me say that it seems to me that he saw himself as a moderate enlightened thinker with sympathy for radical ideas.

II

During the last years a scholarly discussion has taken place on the use of Islamic sources by seventeenth and eighteenth European representatives of the Radical Enlightenment, viz. defenders of free-thought and of materialist, democratic, egalitarian, and anti-theological ideas. An important recent study dealing with the subject of the relations between Islam and Radical Enlightenment is undoubtedly Jonathan's Israel's *Enlightenment Contested*, published in 2006, in which he devoted considerable attention to the experience of Radical Thinkers with the Islamic World and Islam.¹ Israel shows that in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, unlike the moderate enlightened thinkers, these radical philosophers held complex ideas about Islam as a pure monotheism of a high moral caliber which was also a very revolutionary force for positive change and far more rational than Christianity and Judaism.² But in his book he devotes most of his attention to the interest in Islam of radical enlightened philosophers in the eighteenth century. The general conclusion Israel seems to reach is that the Radicals were especially focusing on ideas that were philosophically

¹ Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, chapter 24, "Rethinking Islam: Philosophy and the other"; the topic is also addressed in the same author's *Radical Enlightenment*, 751-753, on the basis of Henri de Boulainvilliers' (1658-1722) openly subversive *Vie de Mahomet* (published in 1731).

² Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 616-7.



and theologically marginal, viz.-heterodox in the Islamic World. We may think here of currents such as the philosophical ideas of Ibn Rushd (1126- 1198 CE) and the survival of his ideas in Christian Spain, for example among the Jews living there, and thinkers such as Ibn al-Rawandi (beginning 9th c.-end of the 10th c.), the author of *Kitab al-Zumurrudh*, the book of the Emerald, and the Andalusian philosopher Ibn Tufayl (early 12th c.-1185 CE), the author of *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*.³ *Hayy b. Yaqzan* had been translated into Latin in England (in 1670, by Edward Pococke)⁴ and Israel shows that the circle around Baruch Spinoza was interested in it and that very likely Johannes Bouwmeester (1630-1680), a friend of Spinoza, translated it into Dutch at the request of *Nil Volentibus Arduum*, the literary and crypto-philosophical circle in Amsterdam.⁵ J.H. Glazemaker (1620-1680), another thinker close to this circle, had translated Du Ryer's French translation of the Qur'an into Dutch, as well as the Sa'di's *Gulistan*.⁶

The general conclusion that one might draw from this evidence is on the one hand that, according to the European radicals, these movements within the Islamic world, debated and contested themselves, demonstrated that their radical ideas had a counterpart in the Muslim World (close to the origins of Christianity) and that on the other hand the earlier image of Islam in general, and the Prophet in particular, that had been influenced heavily by the hostile, orthodox Christian receptions, had to be corrected. Hence, these thinkers saw Muhammad as a rational, pragmatic and just leader.⁷ And in doing so, they relied on the fruits of Islamic, Hebrew and Arabic studies that had been pursued between the sixteenth century (Guillaume Postel and others) and the first half of the seventeenth century. Thus, around 1700 a relatively large number of Islamic sources had already been made available by European scholars of Arabic and Islam, while recent travel accounts gave a first-hand insight into life in Islamic lands.⁸ In addition, people in Islamic lands were aware of the discussions going on in Europe. Mulsow quotes one Lady Montague, who, during a visit to Belgrade had met with a learned Muslim scholar, Ahmet-Beg Effendi, who inquired with her about the ongoing religious disputes in England and asked her "how Mr. John Toland did."⁹ John Toland was a well known deist and the author of a vigorous defense of Unitarianism. Toland's *Nazarenus*, in which he set out his ideas, was published in 1718 (but circulating among heterodox circles already in 1709).¹⁰ The *Nazarenus* is a very early European reference to the so-called *Gospel of Barnabas*, which had become available to Toland through a manuscript in the possession of Prince Eugene of Savoy.¹¹ This text written in the form of a Gospel is an Islamic

³ Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 624.

⁴ Mulsow, "Socinianism," 447.

⁵ The Dutch text was published anonymously by Jan Rieuwertsz, who had published all of Spinoza's works, and it was signed S.D.B, see Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, 630.

⁶ Published in Amsterdam in 1657; see Leezenberg, "How Comparative should a Comparative History of Humanities be? The Case of the Dutch Spinoza Circle."

⁷ Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 571-3; Mulsow, "Socinianism," 550.

⁸ Champion, "I Remember", 455.

⁹ Champion, "I Remember", 455.

¹⁰ Toland, *Nazarenus*.

¹¹ Champion, "I remember", 487; Wiegers, "Muhammad as the Messiah," *passim*.



apologetic instrument, which pictures Jesus as a prophet, not as son of God, announcing the future coming of another prophet, Muhammad. Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), another well-known representative of the Radical Enlightenment, mentions in his *Pensées* a certain Mohamet Effendi in Istanbul who had been executed because of atheism.¹² We may consider the eighteenth century, then, as a period in which Enlightenment thinkers had a considerable number of Muslim sources at their disposal which they used in the way described above. Thus the general picture arising from the discussions is that these radical ideas about Islam were largely the fruit of a late-seventeenth and eighteenth-century European phenomenon. What has remained far less-known so far and unknown to Israel is that this earlier phase of the development of Radical Enlightened thinking was imbedded not only in Arabic and Oriental Studies in Europe but had also strong connections to the Islamic world: the actors were not only European thinkers, but Muslim agency played a role as well.¹³ It is on these aspects, which are emerging from recent scholarship in the field, that I will focus below.

III

Champion and Mulsow point out in their recent contribution that in the said first phase of nascent Arabic and Hebrew scholarship, Islamic sources and personal experiences with the Muslim world were used by those who can be qualified as Radicals. A very important place among them is occupied by the English physician Henry Stubbe (1632-1676), who clandestinely wrote a very positive account of the history of Islam, entitled *An Account of the Rise and Progress of Mahometism*, which was edited only in 1916, but we may also think of Spinoza and his circle and groups of Socinians, i.e. Unitarian anti-Trinitarian Christians, such as Noël Aubert de Versé, whom we will meet below and –even earlier– the Spaniard Miguel Serveto Conesa (Michel Serve, 1511?-1553), who was executed in Calvin's Geneva because of his anti-Trinitarian ideas¹⁴. Why were they interested in Islam? According to Mulsow one of the main reasons they were interested in it was because of their anti-Trinitarian ideas, which served as a matrix for anti-Christian polemics of various kinds to be read and studied, not only of Islamic but also of Jewish and Pagan background¹⁵. Hence, there was close connection in it with anti-Christian polemics written by Jewish authors. We are talking about a process that has been termed transfer of heresy (parallel to cultural transfer), viz. the orthodoxy of Islam became the heresy of Christianity and could hence be used to criticize dominant forms of religion, which were seen to be oppressive at the time. What

¹² Champion, "I remember", 458. Bayle based himself on Rycaut's *History of the Ottoman Empire*, published in 1668.

¹³ Champion, "I remember", Mulsow, "Socinianism"; Feingold, "Not quite a Radical Enlightenment: Islam and Erudite Culture in Early Modern England."

¹⁴ Marcos Andreu, "Servetus and Islam"; Mulsow, "Socinianism," 556-7.

¹⁵Mulsow, "Socinianism," 554.



these thinkers were trying to construct then, in order to to legitimize their criticism, was a theory which could explain the sequence (Paganism) Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Socinianism, ending in the Enlightenment. According to dominant orthodox forms of Christianity there was a discontinuity between these religious traditions. The Radicals, however tried to show that this was not the case. They turned to either Judaism, being in their view the oldest form of monotheism, or, if they considered themselves atheists rather than Deists or Socinians, to pagan criticism on monotheism. As we well-known, Socinianism is a Christian current which is associated with the name of Fausto Sozzini (1539-1604), a thinker who denied the truth of the Trinity and founded a form of Christianity in which rationalism was the guiding principle. It saw Jesus and a simple human being and his teachings as some kind of moral philosophy. It can be seen as an antecedent of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.¹⁶

Why follow this difficult and hard road to focus on Islam and not on ancient Latin sources? The answer to this question given in the contributions I discuss here is that there existed in this period a strong tendency to seek “cultural innovation”, in which the use of “alien sources” to criticize the legitimacy of domestic practice “became a literary device.¹⁷ The existence or reconstruction of pagan, Jewish and Islamic criticism results in what Champion qualifies as an enterprise with an eclectic character -in some sense at random but also a strong tendency to consider the use of Islamic materials as largely instrumental, i.e. mainly as a tool to fight religious oppression and promote freedom of thought. This suggests that the criticism was based on chance, viz. on those texts that by chance were within reach, and in which Muslim agency hardly played a role. This however, needs more careful study, of which I can only present a few preliminary ideas here. In it, I will survey the evidence of Muslim agency. Where do we detect it? I will mention two examples:

(1) Spinoza's Circle

Baruch de Spinoza did not develop his ideas detached from connections with the Muslim world. One of his grandfathers, a man called Henrique Garcés had been born in Oporto in 1567. He became an inhabitant of the city of Antwerp in 1610, where he was denounced by a Moroccan Jew, Isaac Pallache, to the Spanish authorities in Antwerp for being a Jew, accusing him of dealing with Moroccan Jews for the King of Barbary, and therefore stating that he was a traitor to the cause of the King of Spain.¹⁸ Garcés had married Maria Nuñez in Amsterdam on 17 June 1605. Among their

¹⁶ Mulsow, “Socinianism,” 553.

¹⁷ Champion, “I remember,” 479.

¹⁸ García-Arenal and Wieggers, *A Man of Three Worlds*, 64ff.



three children was a daughter called Hana (Deborah), who married Michael, Baruch's father. Later in his life Garcés lived in Amsterdam. He remained outside synagogue life had to be circumcised after he had died before he was allowed to be buried in the Jewish cemetery at Ouderkerk aan de Amstel.¹⁹ He had a brother called Paulo (whose Jewish name in Amsterdam was Abraham), who had accompanied as a translator to Samuel Pallache, an uncle of Isaac Pallache, the same man who had denounced him to the Spanish authorities in Antwerp, on the latter's commercial and diplomatic travels as the agent of the Moroccan sultan in the Dutch Republic.²⁰ It was in the context of the diplomatic relations between Morocco and the Dutch in which Samuel Pallache played a role that a Muslim diplomat, Ahmad b. Abdallah handed over an anti-Christian polemical treatise to the Dutch stadholder, Maurice, which was later used by Anti-Trinitarians in their polemics, and which circulated in The Netherlands as well.²¹ Through the contacts between Jews in Amsterdam and Muslim envoys and merchants Baruch de Spinoza may very have been acquainted with Muslim ideas on Christianity and Judaism.

(2) As the previous subject has indicated an important place was played by Islamic polemical texts, which were avidly studied, as well as by polemical exchanges between Muslims and Christians in person. Champion shows how a polemical text which originally written in Arabic by the well-known thirteenth-century polemicist, Shihab al-Din al-Qarafi (d. 1285) was used in Christian anti-Trinitarian polemics.²² Moreover, al-Qarafi's polemic was but one of the polemical texts used by the Anti-Trinitarians. What a number of number of them, among which a polemical work by a fourteenth-century polemicist and the author of the aforesaid Gospel of Barnabas, had in common was that they argued that Islam built on a form of Christianity that was had been continued to exist in spite of the apostle Paul. These texts explain that the early Christians had originally followed teachings that were identical to the teachings of Islam viz. that Jesus was a Prophet, not the son of God, and they had practiced circumcision and had followed dietary rules. It was Paul, who had incited them to deviate from this path, and made them venerate Jesus as God's son and had abolished circumcision and dietary rules. Thus, several currents within Christianity came into being. However, one individual remained faithful, called the Believing man (Ar. al-Mu'min). His followers and their descendants, a small group, lived a withdrawn existence, and centuries later lived to see the prophet Muhammad and converted to Islam. The story is based on an early Islamic narrative source, the work of Sayf Ibn Umar, which

¹⁹ Bodian, Portuguese Jews, 33 note 27, García-Arenal and Wiegers, A Man of Three Worlds, 64.

²⁰ On contacts between Amsterdam Jews and Morocco, especially Salé, see Israel, Enlightenment Contested, 616 (Michael de Espinosa's commercial dealings with Egypt and Morocco); Nadler, Spinoza, 32-3; Israel, Diasporas, 279, 298, 310-311.

²¹ Wiegers, The Polemical Writings of Muhammad Alguazir.

²² Lazarus Yafeh, Intertwined Worlds, 19ff.



Was transmitted to al-Qarafi and later to Islamic polemicists living in Christian Iberia and North Africa, from which it reached Europe.²³

Socinians thought that the aforesaid Muslim texts pointed to Ebionite and Arian Christianity, known from the Christian historiography. Thus Henry Stubbe wrote that “the religion of Mahomet is chiefly founded on the Doctrines of the Nazarene Christians and the Arrians”.²⁴ Aubert de Versé and other Socinians saw Muslims as a sort of Christians, who suffered from one problem only: their veneration for Muhammad and doctrinal ideas associated with him, for which they advocated as a solution the introduction of historical criticism of the Qur’an! We are dealing here with the reconstruction of a genealogy with religious and political implications, an alliance between Western Trinitarians and Western Islam sought by Anti-Trinitarians with Muslims.²⁵

An attempt to come to an agreement occurred in 1682, when a Moroccan ambassador visited England on a mission to discuss the position of Tangiers. At a certain moment, and with further talks about an association between Socinians and Muslims in mind, Aubert de Versé apparently wished to hand over a number of texts, among which, so it appeared, was a polemical Muslim anti-Christian text written by one Ahmad b. Abdallah and a letter by himself in which he explained the motives for seeking contact.²⁶

The ambassador was indeed approached, but refused to accept the bundle, when he heard that the subject was religion, for he was there for political purposes and probably did not to become involved. The attempt went wrong and the plot was discovered. On further study, it appears that the polemical text in question was identical with the text mentioned above written by the Moroccan ambassador to the Dutch Republic in about 1610, Ahmad b. Abdallah al-Hayti al-Maruni. It was this polemic, which, as I discovered some years ago, reached England and was translated into Latin, edited several times, and, as Mulsow discovered, was read and studied among Socinians and other anti-Trinitarians as well. These two examples can be extended with others. As the correspondences between European Arabists and Muslims discussed by among many others Houtsma and Schmidt have shown, networks between European scholars and Muslim commercial and scholar partners in the Middle east existed from the first half of the seventeenth century onwards.²⁷

²³ Van Koningsveld and Wiegers, *The Polemical Works of Muhammad Al-Qaysi*, 169. Wiegers, *Muhammad as the Messiah*.

²⁴ Mulsow, “Socinianism,” 568, cf. Wiegers, “Muhammad as the Messiah”; idem, “Henry Corbin.”

²⁵ Cf. Mulsow, “Socinianism,” 572.

²⁶ Mulsow, “Socinianism,” 572ff, who makes it clear that the Jews are to be blamed for corrupting the text of the Qur’an; Champion, “I remember,” 445, note 5 and the sources referred to there.

²⁷ Houtsma, “Uit de Oostersche correspondentie”; Schmidt, “An Ostrich Egg”.



IV

By way of a brief conclusion, we may say that the Muslim world and the West were far more intertwined than was hitherto known. Radical Enlightened thinkers not only used Islamic texts, but this was not a mere eclectic process nor was Muslims devoid of agency in it. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Muslims played an active role. Discussions among early radicals were influenced by this agency in various forms. At its earliest phase, Radical enlightened thinkers not only used philosophical and heretical texts and authors, but orthodox Sunni polemical traditions as well to reconstruct a counter history: what was orthodox in one tradition was heterodox in the other. A task for their researchers will be to determine the nature of interaction between the Muslims and others.

Can these discussions among European Radical thinkers be considered as a search for a humanistic Islam, the theme of our conference? To a certain extent, I think so. We are dealing with a real engagement with Muslim thought and practice, not from the outside, in an exclusivist, rejecting mode, but truly involved as part of an ongoing “monotheist” movement. The radical nature of this thought can also, and not coincidentally, be connected to the beginnings of the comparative Study of Religions in its modern meaning. As has been shown by such scholars as David Pailin and Jonathan Smith, this scholarly discipline, which came into being in the same period, marked the beginnings of the study of religions as human phenomena in an anthropological way.²⁸ It is very interesting to observe that Socinians attempted to ally with Muslims, urging them to apply a historical critical approach to the Qur’an. This is also interesting news for present-day politicians and intellectuals who criticize Islam as incompatible with Western views.²⁹

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²⁸ Pailin, *Attitudes to other Religions*; Wiegers, “De Nederlanden en de islam in de zeventiende eeuw. Wisselwerking tussen beeldvorming en cultuurcontact?”, and the sources referred to there; Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious.”

²⁹ Klever, “Angst voor de islam?”



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Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the Tradition of Religious Humanism

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One of the major methodological principles of the humanistic tradition of the study of texts, is often quoted in Latin as "*e mente auctoris*". This principle underlines the necessity to understand texts "from the mind of the author". Researchers are supposed not only to identify the author of a text, but also to study his/her biography, the society he or she was living in, in short his/her biography in order to grasp the text as fully as possible. This principle was also applied to the study of Biblical texts which for a long time, were regarded to be of Divine origin, a belief which is still shared by millions of people today. The de-sacralisation of the Divine Revelation formed an essential part of the process of secularization resulting in various forms of separation between State and Religion. This was a painful process marked by many conflicts and even wars. In view of the existing Christian fundamentalist movements and the political power they are able to mobilize until this very day, we cannot claim that this process has come to a full completion, even today. A Biblical scholar denying the resurrection of Jesus Christ, for instance, may still meet serious opposition.

In their endeavor of studying Islam, orientalists, from the 19th century onwards, many of whom had been educated initially in the tradition of Semitic and Biblical scholarship, have been trying to apply the principle of "*e mente auctoris*" and the instruments of historical criticism coming with it, also to the study of Islamic texts, including the Koran. As they used to be non-Muslims, while their society, including their students and readers, used to consist (with very rare exceptions) of non-Muslims, as well, they hardly experienced any religious or social problem in applying this principle, quite contrary to the experiences of many Biblical scholars. Accordingly, orientalists like Theodor Nöldeke who founded the scientific study of the Koran in the West during the 19th century, interpreted the Koran and other sacred Islamic texts, like the prophetic Hadith, as the product of the society and culture, as well as of the human minds of their respective authors, including Muhammad. This does not mean that they did not understand and did not recognize the importance as well as the complexity of the concept of Revelation, especially in direct relation to Muhammad's own understanding of it, as well as that of his followers. But also the concept of Revelation included the way it was understood by those who believed to be involved in it, was



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studied as part and parcel of the society and culture in which it functioned and made sense. This is the tradition that is still followed by many today. According to this approach, to mention just one example, the old versions of the Koran which were in existence before Caliph Uthman introduced his standard edition may reflect some other (earlier or even later) stages of development in the message of the Koran and may therefore be highly relevant to understand the early meaning or meanings of the text, even of the standard Uthmanic edition.

In a broader sense, we may say that the humanistic study of religious texts forms part of the comparative historical study of religion, a discipline that works on the basis of the assumption that religion is an aspect of human civilization, not only Christianity or Islam, but all the religions of mankind. Historians of Religion who follow this assumption are not per se atheists. Historians of Religion often stipulate that they make a separation between their scholarly work and their personal beliefs, using for this separation the term of “methodological agnosticism”. This position implies that a researcher of religion rejects the scientific relevance of eventual claims to the Divine origin of the objects of his research, as it is only the human nature of the Bible, the Koran, the Veda’s, the Book of Mormon, etcetera, which is accessible to the instruments of this type of scholarship. This does not mean, however, that this same researcher would reject the religious claim to a Divine origin of any text or rule in an existential sense. It only means that personal beliefs are considered to fall outside the scope of scientific research.

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, a profoundly creative and original scholar in the field of Arabic and Islamic Studies and an ornament of various universities, including the University of Leiden and now also the University for Humanistics in Utrecht, became the object of accusations of atheism and unbelief, and even of official proclamations and verdicts to that same effect. I should like to point out that, from the perspective of a historian of religion, everything written to prove or disprove these claims and accusations is of no relevance whatsoever for an impartial judgment of the work of professor Abu Zayd as a scholar.

In fact, quite apart from the profound social, cultural and even political relevance of his works, especially in relation to Islam and its believers all over the world, in his scholarly works he is drawing attention to a series of important points that have been neglected or at least remained in the shadow, also in the studies of orientalists. Let me illustrate this by discussing one of his viewpoints on the Koran.



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I am referring to Abu Zayd's view of the *oral nature* of the Koran, because the Koran, in the understanding of Muhammad and of Muslims in general, was originally transmitted to him in an oral form and was then recited by him to his Companions orally, as well. Although these orally transmitted passages were finally crystallized in written form in order to protect its integrity, the Koran continued to be an orally transmitted and orally recited and reproduced text in the first place. "Even now", says Abu Zayd, "with the Koran being a printed text, what is important for every Muslim is the memorization of the Koran by heart and the capability of reciting it according to the classical principles of recitation". Together with the aspect of the aesthetic characteristics of the Koran, especially in view of its poetic language, this elementary view of the oral nature of the Revelation, enables us to grasp the spiritual meaning of the Koran for Muslims, both individually and collectively. The Islamic practice of the recitation of the Koran was historically based, as is argued by Abu Zayd, on the first five verses of Sura 96, where Muhammad was ordered to recite, the act of recitation having been indicated to him as the channel through which God's message would have to be transmitted to mankind, or, in other words, the Word of God was to be humanized. The process of revelation understood by Muhammad to include *recitation* preceded by "*listening*" ("not merely a passive action, but rather representing the internal, intimate and heart-felt act of comprehension") became the historical prototype for the genuinely Islamic pattern of communication between man and God. It is only on the basis of this understanding of the oral nature of the Koran and of the prototypical role of the revelation process, as is demonstrated eloquently by Abu Zayd, that one can really proceed towards a correct interpretation of the nature and meaning of some of the most basic rituals of the Islamic religion, viz. as *communication channels*. Recitation of the Koran became the very heart of all kinds of prayers including the salat, as well as of the practice of *dhikr*, the repeating of God's name and of *tasbîh*, glorification.

These are views that can rarely be found in the writings of orientalists, who are usually unable to grasp the full meaning of the spiritual dimension of the Koran, while dealing with it as a written source for the history of early Islam, of Islamic theology and law, in the first place. The Western, non-Muslim understanding of the Koran and of Islam in general continues to depend, to a large extent at least, on the writings of scholars who as a rule made their first acquaintance with the *Mushaf* in the lecture hall of a university, trying to struggle with the Arabic grammar and dictio-



nary to decipher the contents of the text at least to some extent. Abu Zayd's work contains essential additions and indeed corrections that deserve to be taken into account to their fullest: they show Islam as a spiritual heritage in the first place, even before being a set of doctrines and rules.

The second point I should like to mention here is about Professor Abu Zayd's role as a modern theologian. I am referring, as an example, to his discussion, at many different occasions, of the notion of the Koran as the "the Word of God" (*kalâm Allâh*). One of the questions to be answered here, as Abu Zayd sees it, is: Are the "Word of God" and the Koran identical concepts? Abu Zayd draws the attention to various passages in the Koran where it is emphasized that the Words of Allah are infinite and non-exhaustible (18:109 and 31:27). Even if all the trees on earth were pens, and all the oceans were ink, with seven oceans to add to its supply, the Word of God could not possibly be exhausted. "Therefore", he concludes, "if the Word of God is impossible to be confined whereas the Koran as a text is limited in space, the Koran should only represent a specific manifestation of the Word of God". Another question according to him calling for attention is related to the linguistic nature of the Koran. Repeatedly, the Koran emphasizes that it is revealed in "plain Arabic", according to Abu Zayd, "simply because God always considers the language of the people to whom a messenger is sent: 'We never sent a messenger –thus the Koran- but with the language of his people, that he might make it clear for them'. It is then not likely –concludes Abu Zayd- to assume that the Koran presents literally and exclusively the word of God. According to this assumption the word of God would be limited to the Koran only, thus excluding previous scriptures from the same right of presenting the Word of God in their own original languages. This will automatically lead to hold Arabic, as has been in fact done by Arab Muslims at least, as a sacred language (...) The Koran is then one manifestation of the Word of God inspired to the prophet Muhammad (...). Thus we can safely distinguish between three aspects of the Koran, namely its content, its language and its structure. There should not be any disagreement that the divinity of the Koran is confined to its source. The content, however, is strongly correlated with the linguistic structure, which is culturally and historically determined. In other words, if the divine content of God's Word has been expressed in human language, it is the domain of language that represents the essential human dimension of all scriptures in general and the Koran in particular". What we see here, I believe, is how a Historian of Religion (of Islam in this case) who accepts the main



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assumption of religion as a fact of human civilization, attempts to introduce his scientific position into the normative circle of Islamic thought, resulting in a contribution to a modern, liberal Islamic theology in the tradition of religious humanism. Rather than being highly original in the strictest scientific sense, this is an operation with great potential impact in Islamic culture and society, it being one of the prerequisites of the harmonious development of a genuinely modern Islamic identity.

Today we honor a man combining a profound commitment to the methods and principles of modern scientific research on the one hand, with an equally profound commitment to the spiritual wealth of the Islamic tradition, on the other hand. The secret code of his ability to combine between the two, lies perhaps in the humanistic nature of both!

(The quotations are from N.H. Abu Zayd, *The Qurán: God and Man in Communication*. Inaugural Lecture, Leiden 2000).



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Man and his Fellow Creatures: Views of the Pure Brethren of Basra

Remke Kruk

The question of man's relation to his fellow creatures has a central place in philosophies all over the world. In a religious context, it is an aspect of man's relation to God and how to live in accordance with His commands. The matter comes up in a number of philosophical contexts, such as discussions about the ideal ruler, man and society, man's place within the cosmos as a whole, his relation to nature in general, and to animals in particular.

All these matters, and many others as well, are treated in the *Rasâ'il Ikhwân al-Safâ'*, the vast 'philosophical encyclopaedia' of the Pure Brethren of Basra, composed in the 10th century. The Pure Brethren, who were Muslims, but whose thought was deeply steeped in Neoplatonic philosophy, are known for their eclectic attitude and openness to all kinds of religions and philosophies, and one finds in their *Rasâ'il* ideas that stem from a variety of backgrounds. If an idea is good and noble, they take it along. In their view, wisdom may be gathered from all kinds of sources, including pre-Islamic philosophical systems and other religions than Islam, even Buddhism. Yet their writings are scattered with Qur'anic quotations, which may have served to give them a sound Islamic cover. The way they describe their Brotherhood is a good example of their openness: their Brotherhood, they say, is a ship of salvation. All are invited to board it, be they Christian, Zoroastrian, Neoplatonists or Hermetics:

"Do you not want, brother – may God support you and us with a spirit that comes from Him- to haste and board with us the ship of salvation that was built by our father Noah, peace be upon him, and save yourself from the flood of nature before the sky brings unmistakable smoke,¹ and so be safe from the waves of the sea of matter and not be among those who will drown?"²

In another passage they explain why the messages of the prophets who were sent to various communities seem to differ. This is "because they are doctors and astrologers for the souls, and when they forbid something, it is to protect the souls, and when they declare something permitted, it serves as medicines and potions. The various forms of worship are the treatment and the medicines." The illnesses which these prophets have to cure are the wrong views and

¹ One of the signs announcing the end of times

² Ikhwân al-Safâ', *Rasâ'il Ikhwân al-Safâ' wa-khillân al-wafâ'*. (Beirut: Dâr Sâdir and Dâr Beirut, 1957, 4 vols.), IV 18-19.



false opinions that exist among humankind, and since these views and opinions differ from place to place and from period to period, the treatment also has to be different.³ Ideas, as we see, very much in line with the thought of Nasr Abû Zayd, and since the ideas of the Pure Brethren or not all that widely known to non-specialists it seemed appropriate to show that Nasr had kindred spirits in Islam as far back as the 10th century. In explaining some of their core concepts, I will follow the same method that the Pure Brethren used to introduce and explain their ideas to non-initiates, namely that of allegory.

A noteworthy aspect of the Pure Brethren is namely that in their *Rasâ'il* they frequently make use of narrative means to explain their views. Allegorical tales serve to illustrate their ideas and make them easier to grasp, and we may suppose that it is exactly in these allegorical tales that their core message can be found. The goal of the Brethren, who, as said above, are deeply influenced by Neoplatonism, is the ultimate happiness of the soul, and this happiness is not something to be realized in earthly existence. It is the happiness to be reached in the spiritual world, and to this end, man has to disengage from the pursuit of material interests, and to live a life of humility and of respect for the Creator. If he does not manage to overcome his greed, gluttony and hunger for power, he will not only harm his fellow creatures, but also endanger his soul and its fate in the hereafter. This goal is hard to attain, given human nature, and that is where one of their central concepts comes in: *ta'âwun*, mutual assistance. The Brethren have to help each other to attain their ultimate goal, the return of the soul to the spiritual world where it originated from. This (in true Platonic vein) is the real world; what we see and experience here on earth are just images of a higher reality, "images of the true forms that exist in the spiritual world..."⁴

How the Brethren of Purity attempted to transmit their ideas by way of allegory may be illustrated by the following three examples.

First, the story of the Island of the Apes.⁵ This story is about an idyllic island. There is a city where a happy community lives. All the people are related to each other and they feel nothing but affection for each other. Strife and jealousy are unknown. It is, in short, a 'virtuous city', a *madîna fâdila*.⁶

One day, a group of these people are shipwrecked on the coast of another island, an island very unlike their own: it is mountainous, wild and inhospitable. The trees hardly bear any fruit and it is full of dangerous animals. It is inhabited by large apes. These apes are the favourite prey of a giant

³ Ikhwân al-Safâ', IV: 162.

⁴ Ikhwân al-Safâ', II: 276.

⁵ See for an analysis of this story also I. R. Netton, "Private Caves and Public Island: Islam, Plato and the Ikhwan al-Safa'". *Sacred Web* 15 (2005) 73-88.

⁶ The concept of the *madîna fâdila* is in Arabic philosophy associated with al-Fârâbî (d. 950) but it also occurs in the *Rasâ'il* of the Ikhwân. For instance, in vol. IV, 129-30, the twelve qualifications of an ideal ruler are given. See Carmela Baffioni, '*Al-madînah al-fâdilah* in al-Fârâbî and in the Ikhwân al-Safâ': A Comparison"



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bird that lives on yet another island and that from time to time comes and swoops down on the apes in order to carry one of them off. The castaways only manage to keep themselves alive with great effort. After a while, they establish ties with the apes, and sexual unions between men and apes occur from which in due time children are born. As time goes by, the people gradually lose all memory of their former happy life and become more and more animal-like. They start to hoard food, jealously guarding and defending their possessions. Sexual jealousy causes quarrels and fights among them. War and strife are ripe.

One day, one of them has a dream in which he returns to his former happy life and is received with great joy by his former companions. Bathed and dressed in new clothes he is guided back to his former dwelling place. When he wakes up the memory stays with him, and he decides to build a boat and to go back to his former dwelling place. Other people, whose memories of their former life he has rekindled, join in the project. Then, one day, the giant bird swoops down and carries off one of the humans instead of an ape. Discovering its mistake, it drops the man on the other island, in the city where he used to live. He is received with great joy, and when the people hear about the miserable life of their friends on the island of the apes, they all pray that the bird may bring over other companions as well. The people on the other island, however, are deeply miserable because the bird has taken away their friend, and they deeply mourn him. If only they knew what had happened to him, they certainly would have rejoiced. It is an allegorical way of stating that death is not a reason for sadness but for joy, because it implies a return to the spiritual world, the world of ultimate happiness.

The allegory, of course, is of a Platonic nature. It is about reminiscence of a higher existence, superior in all respects, and about the effort it takes to divest oneself of the low and despicable earthly existence and return to the former perfect and happy spiritual existence. In the view of the Pure Brethren, this goal can only be reached by mutual support and assistance. Only in this way man may succeed in building a boat, a 'ship of salvation', and escape from his miserable existence.

The second story is also about the vanity of the material world, but has a different approach. It is about the danger in which man may bring himself by being exclusively interested in luxury and the pleasures of the flesh, pursuing riches and material gain with total disregard for spiritual matters. The *Rasâ'il* contain several stories which carry a similar



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message, stories that belong to the so called Bi- lawhar-Bûdâsaf (or Yûdâsaf) complex, a group of Indian stories connected to the Buddhist tradition.⁷ All these stories emphasize that the riches and pleasures of this world are meaningless and endanger the fate of the soul in the world to come, and they advocate a life of asceticism.

This particular story is about a man for whom a life of luxury is the sole purpose of his existence. All his efforts are spent on increasing his physical comforts. His house is furnished in the most sumptuous manner, and he only eats the choicest foods. His bed is hung up in the air so that no vermin can bother him. Nothing is further from his mind than to think about the fate of his soul and to improve his morals.

Then God decides to wake him up from the sleep of his negligence. One night when he is asleep in his bed in the arms of one of his lovely concubines, he has a horrible dream. In this dream, he finds himself in a lonely desert, naked, hungry, thirsty, his body covered with dirt, his hair long and wild, and a heavy burden on his back. Two tall, frightening black men with flashing eyes and smoke steaming from their nostrils approach with spears in their hands and start pursuing him. He flees to the top of a mountain and drops over the ridge into in valley. He falls into a well from which smoke and fire rise. The two blacks do not give up their pursuit. He wakes up screaming and falls from his bed, totally confused. People gather around and he tells them what has happened. All kinds of suggestions are made. Some people fear that he has been struck by *jinn*, spirits, or has been bewitched by one of his enemies, or that demons have put evil thoughts into his head.

Although he denies all this, the next night his bed is surrounded by charms, amulets and all kinds of protective formulas. Fumigations have to drive away the evil spirits. The same dream, however, occurs again, in an even more frightening form. After this has happened a third time, astrologers and other scholars of the occult are consulted. Nothing they suggest, however, is of any avail, and the poor man becomes more and more miserable, afraid to go to sleep for fear of the horrible dream.

His case is widely discussed. One day, a man widely known for his piety and ascetism passes by a group of the sufferer's close friends who sit there, commiserating their friend's fate. He tells them that he knows how to cure him. It will be if no use, however, if he goes to him personally and explains

⁷ I.R. Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonism; an Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity*.(London: Allen and Unwin, 1982) 89-94.



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what has to be done: he will not accept it. Maybe, though, he will listen to his trusty friends. Then he explains to these people the meaning of every single detail of the dream, making clear that it is a premonition of the fate that awaits the man in the hereafter if he does not change his ways. They should go and explain this to him, without mentioning the pious ascetic who has told them this. They should also point the way to a pious life that may ultimately lead to happiness in the hereafter.

They listen to his advice, and do what he has suggested. They tell their friend that he should take a firm resolution to repent and alter his ways. He should give his money to the poor, put on a hairy cloak to cover his nakedness, fast every week for two days, humbly go to the mosque, and pray day and night.

Upon his question where they got this advice, they tell him that it came from “the man who is learned in matters of religion, an adviser about whose words no doubt can exist.” Then he starts asking them about matters of religion, and they tell him what is in the “books of the prophets”. Accepting their words, he completely changes his way of life, hovering between fear and hope. All his time and effort is now spent on devotion and pious deeds.

At some point sleep overcomes him while he is in the midst of his devotions. Again he has a dream. He finds himself in what at first looks like the same desert, but now it has turned into a luscious garden. There is a well where all the dirt is washed from his body. Then he is perfumed and dressed in new garments. Two figures stand before him with transparent bodies, made of light, and gesture to him to step forwards. He finds himself in a space filled with lights, full of green pastures and flowers, where rivers flow over pebbles that look like pearls and rubies. Heavenly voices sing wonderful melodies. He asks his two angelic companions what this is, and they tell him that this is the paradise that awaits him if he continues his pious behaviour.

When he wakes up, he gives all his possessions to the poor, frees all his slaves and dresses himself in sackcloth. He starts to preach in gatherings, admonishing people with parables and pointing out the way to paradise. People ask him how he has come by all this wisdom without ever having studied any books. His heart, he says, has become like a mirror in which all the higher truths are reflected, and his tongue simply puts all this into words. Thus he becomes widely known as a pillar of religion.



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One day one of his neighbours walks into a gathering, and sees the pious ascetic questioning his friend about matters of religion. Astonished, he walks up to him and says: "This is the man whose dream you interpreted and whose cure you described! And here you are asking him questions about matters of religion and the way to the hereafter!" "Yes," he answers, "for he has obtained knowledge that I have not managed to obtain ... What I described to him yesterday were human teachings, and what he described to me today are angelic teachings."

Finally, the man has another dream. In this dream he sees his spiritual body depart from his corporeal body. The latter is left behind, decays and is eaten by worms. The gates of heaven are open, awaiting the ascent of his spiritual body on the ladder stretching down from heaven. Angels descend in crowds and fill the horizons with their light. A voice is heard, calling: "O soul that is at peace, return to your Lord (...) and enter My paradise."

When he wakes up, he tells people what he has seen. He writes his testament and passes away after just a few days.⁸

Apart from the central message of the story, the exhortation to renounce the world, we should also note two other points, both central to the message of the Pure Brethren: first, that compassion and help from other people is necessary to reach true insight (personified in the story by the faithful friends who pass on the message of the ascetic), and, second, that the story does not specify which particular prophetic message offers the road to salvation. It just speaks about the 'books of the prophets,' suggesting that they are all equally valid.

Thus man has to renounce the world with a view of a higher spiritual existence, and needs the help of his brothers to reach this goal. The Pure Brethren also emphasize that, while here on earth, we have to live in a morally just manner, in accordance with God's laws. In order to lead a pious life, we have to improve our mind and bring ourselves on a higher spiritual level. This, as Carmela Baffioni, a prominent specialist on the philosophy of the Pure Brethren, expresses it: "moral and spiritual superiority is recognized in 'appropriate knowledge, dispositions, opinions and works'; moral illnesses designate 'accumulated ignorance, bad habits, corrupted opinion, and evil deeds'.⁹

This applies to every range of society, from kings and high officials to the most humble members of society. Of course the Brethren are aware of the fact that little of this takes place in actual practice, and especially in their allegorical

⁸ *Ikhwân al-Safâ*, IV 90-98. As far as I know the story is not accessible in English, and for that reason I paraphrase it in full.

⁹ Baffioni, Carmela. "The Scope of the *Rasâ'il Ikhwân al-Safâ*", in: *The Ikhwân al-Safâ' and their Rasâ'il; an introduction*, ed. Nader El-Bizri, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 101-122; 112.



tales they severely criticize the low moral behaviour which they observe, particularly of those who carry power, such as kings and caliphs. In his, they are sometimes remarkably specific, such as when they mention with disgust the practice of killing one's close male relatives in the struggle for succession, a practice widespread among caliphs, "your so-called heirs of the prophets".¹⁰

The criticism appears in what is probably the best known and most widespread story from the *Rasâ'il*, that of the *Case of the Animals against Man before the King of the Jinn*. It is very long, a hundred and ninety pages in the modern Beirut edition of the text. Basically, it is a homily against the moral depravity of man, and just like in the previous stories, its general message is criticism of worldly preoccupations and low moral behaviour. That may sound somewhat dull, but the story is anything but that. Its elegance, wittiness and wisdom makes it one of the gems of Arabic literature, and for that reason it has also circulated as a separate book. It was transmitted to Europe in 1316 by way of a Hebrew translation, made by Kalonymos ben Kalonymos. A century later, in 1417-18, Brother Anselmo Turmeda, a Catalan priest, wrote a small and amusing treatise clearly inspired by the story from the *Rasâ'il*: *The dispute of the donkey and Brother Anselmo Turmeda about the nature and nobility of the animals*. The book closely follows the Arabic story in its criticism of human vanity, but also derides the loose behaviour of monks and clerics. Brother Anselmo probably read the story in Arabic, for he knew it well: he converted to Islam and started to write in Arabic after he had moved to Tunis. Some of his works in Arabic are still extant.¹¹

The *Case of the Animals* forms part of Epistle 22, 'On the modalities of the Coming-to-Be of the Animals and their Kinds',¹² in the section of the *Rasâ'il* that deals with the natural sciences. The Brethren explain at the beginning of this epistle that they see man as God's vicegerent on earth and that man's behaviour should be accordingly. In their *Rasâ'il*, they say, they have frequently pointed out all the wonderful qualities of man. In this Epistle, they are going to speak about the qualities of the animals, and they announce that they will also use this as an opportunity to speak about the vanity of man and his injustice towards creatures of a lower nature. They will also point out man's ingratitude towards their Creator. Human beings seem to take the exalted position that God has bestowed upon them completely for granted, not feeling obliged to behave in a manner worthy of this favoured position. Indeed, while man in his most perfect form is almost an angel, man at his most debased is lit-

¹⁰ Ikhwân al-Safâ', II 361.

¹¹ The *Dispute of the donkey* was published in Barcelona in 1509, but only became more widely known through a French translation which in 1544 appeared in Lyon: *Disputation de l'asne contre frère Anselme Turmeda sur la nature et la noblesse des Animaux*. New edition: Anselme Turmeda, *Dispute de l'ane*. Ed. Armand Llinares (Paris: Vrin, 1984). See also: Asín Palacios, Miguel. *El Original Árabe de "La Disputa del Asno contra Fr. Anselmo Turmeda"*. (Madrid, 1914; Extracto de los "Estudios de filología románica"); Remke Kruk, "De mens in al zijn ijdelheid is minder dan een beest". *Madoc* 25,1 (2011) 76-84.

¹² Ikhwân al-Safâ', II 178-377.



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tle more than a demon. All this they will make clear in a story in which the animals shall act as their spokesmen.¹³

A story, in short, that is intended as a moral lesson in line with the message of the *Rasâ'il* as a whole. This story also is set on an idyllic island. On this island, the animals live there happily together with the *jinn*, the spirit creatures that form a separate class of rational beings in Islam. They have sought refuge on this island to escape man's persecution and harassment, but their happy and peaceful existence comes to an end when a ship arrives on the island. The men it brings start to follow their usual pattern of behaviour, hunting and capturing the animals, using them for their own benefit and treating them with unnecessary harshness. The animals gather together and decide to take the matter to court. The king of the *jinn*, who belongs neither to the humans nor to the animals and thus is not biased in favour of one party, will be asked to pronounce a judgement about man's claim of superiority and lordship over all other earthly creatures.

During the hearing at the king's court the spokesmen of various groups of animals and human beings are offered the opportunity to present their views. As they announced in the beginning of Epistle 22, the Brethren use this framework to vent their criticism of human behaviour. Man's boastfulness, vanity, greed, lustfulness, preoccupation with material comfort and power, cruelty and thoughtlessness are put into sharp contrast with the noble simplicity and piety of the animals. The animals, set an example to man by their ascetic life, ascetic not in the sense that they despise earthly existence, for that would be impossible: it is the only existence they have, since God has not bestowed upon them an immortal soul. But compared to man, they are ascetics in the way they live: they do not worry about the future, but go out in the morning trusting that they will find food. They do not eat more than they need for their bodily subsistence, and they do not hoard. They live their simple lives, caring for their young without expecting a reward, and constantly praise God for His bounty.

There is more than an echo here of that Biblical summary of Jesus' moral teachings, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). It again illustrates the approach of the Brethren: to gather wisdom wherever one may find it.

In the course of the proceedings, the humans, boastfully presenting arguments for their superiority, offer ample opportunity to be chastised. When they boast about their doctors, jurists and theologians, the animals point out that these only count against them: they need jurists because of

¹³. Ikhwân al-S&afâ', II: 179.



their crimes and misdemeanours, doctors because of their disgusting and unhealthy lifestyle, while their theologians only cause them harm, because their continuous discussions and debates about theological matters cause strife and discord among the community. The animals in their simplicity are free from all this, because they do not overfeed, do not infringe upon the rights of others, and do not bother about the finer points of worship. They just praise God and follow by instinct His commands.

The overall message, as may be clear, is that man's preoccupation with the material world and its physical pleasures, only leads to moral corruption. The animals, with their simple life and no wishes beyond their basic needs, are free from this. Yet in the end the judge has to rule in favour of man, for clearly God has accorded him the highest place in earthly creation by giving him an immortal soul. Man's existence, unlike that of the animals, does not end with death. If he has lived the right kind of life, eternal happiness awaits him. It has also become clear, though, that few human beings lead such virtuous lives, and the message is that although man may rightly claim to be the most superior creature on earth, he has to earn his status by behaving accordingly, leading a sober and humble life and respecting his fellow creatures.

The message of the Brethren as conveyed in their stories is clear, possibly even clearer from their allegorical tales than from their long philosophical exposés and discussions, even though the stories take up only a small part of their work. Their message is a message of soberness and humility. Do not get attached to material pleasures, for this leads to greed and moral corruption. Do not lose yourself in discussions and quarrels about the finer points of religious worship, for it leads to strife and misery. Be humble, and grateful to God for the wonderful way in which He has created the world, and treat your fellow creatures, animals as well as man, with justice and respect.¹⁴

That, too, is Islam, an Islam very different from that which brought so much misery to the life of Nasr Abu Zayd.

¹⁴ Ikhwân al-Safâ', II 203-377. The story has recently been translated into Dutch: De Zuivere Broeders van Basra, *De zaak van de dieren tegen de mensen*. Uit het Arabisch vertaald en van een nawoord voorzien door Remke Kruk. Amsterdam: Bulaaq. 2010. A critical edition with a new English translation also appeared recently: Goodman, Lenn E. en Richard McGregor, *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*.

The Case of the Animals versus Man Before the King of the Jinn. An Arabic Critical Edition and English Translation of Epistle 22. Edited and Translated by Lenn E. Goodman and Richard McGregor, with a Foreword by Nader El-Bizri. OUP, Oxford 2009



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The Monotheistic Legacy in the West: Questioning the Secular in Modern Humanism, Islam and Christianity

Welmoet Boender, Laurens ten Kate en Henk Manschot

Introduction

In this panel we have explored the following statement from a theoretical/philosophical viewpoint (Ten Kate) and from a socio-political, practice-related viewpoint (Boender):

The secular, or 'secularity' as a key feature of modern history, is not something in itself and on its own, but it interrelates in a fundamental way with religion, in particular the monotheistic religions that are intensely connected with modern history.

In our view, the task for the 21st century is to unfold and 'enact' this interrelatedness, and hence to strive for a new conceptualization and operationalization of what is called the secular. In order to succeed in this, one has to throw off what Welmoet Boender has baptized as the 'burden of secular essentialism'.

In doing so, we hope to contribute to the urgent question Nas'r Abu-Zayd has raised throughout his life and work: is a humanistic spirituality possible, and if so, how would this affect Islam?

In his brief response, Henk Manschot takes up ten Kate's and Boender's account of a reformulation of the secular condition by offering new ways of understanding the monotheistic traditions (judeo-christian and islamic), and confronts this by a radically pluralistic of world views and religions, referring among others to the work of Diana Eck.



A: The Gnostic Temptation, the Mosaic Distinction: A Reflection on Hans Blumenberg's and Jan Assmann's Views on Monotheism and Secularism¹

Laurens ten Kate

1. Preamble

'Secular' is traditionally used as one of the central features of modern history and culture. This feature then refers to a presumed development of emancipation and liberation from a previous era, dominated by religion, and in particular by the monotheistic religions that have accompanied Western views of life, of society and politics.

Recent thinkers like Hans Blumenberg, Jan Assmann, Charles Taylor or Jean-Luc Nancy have nevertheless pointed out, in different ways, that vital elements of the 'secular' can be found *within* monotheism and in its origins. In their emphasis on the responsibility and freedom of humanity and, parallel to this, on the retreat and even 'death' of God, these religious traditions question the idea of a secular breakthrough marking the beginning of modern times. In the following I will argue that in a world becoming more and more complex, it is important to reconsider the usefulness of the paradigm of secularization. Should not the relation between modern life and religion be conceived of in a radically different way, replacing the concept of the secular for new concepts and metaphors?

Firstly, I will take on this difficult question by concentrating on the work of the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg, and more in particular, his account of what he names 'the gnostic temptation' that would be active in monotheistic religion as well as in secular modernity, leading to world-negation as well as to its parallel: the installation of absolute power. Secondly, I will deepen out Blumenberg's observations by going back to the origins of the Judeo-Christian experience of God; I will introduce a concept of the German historian of religion Jan Assmann that, as I will show, renders this God quite ambiguous: the concept of the Mosaic distinction.

Since Blumenberg and Assmann limit their research to the Judeo-Christian tradition and how it relates to modern secularization, I will finish my paper with a simple question: does a similar problematization hold with regard to Islam? Has Islam known – or does it still know – a 'gnostic' temp-

¹ This paper is part of research work in progress. Elements of it have been published earlier in Dutch as 'De wereld tussen "Ja" en "Nee". Monotheïsme als modern probleem bij Assmann, Nancy en Blumenberg', in *Tijdschrift voor filosofie* 73/2011, 9-45.



tation? Does it know an equivalent of the Mosaic distinction? And if so, what consequences could this have for a rethinking of the secular, and for a 'humanistic Islam'?

2. Blumenberg's Warning...

Hans Blumenberg (1920-1996) has been one of the great minds in the previous century when a rethinking of the relation between modern secular culture and religion is at stake. Blumenberg's problem, however, is not only to rethink that relation on a historical level, but to formulate an answer to the terror of absolute and totalitarian power in the modern era. In order to do so, in his most famous work *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (written in 1966) he distinguishes two determining currents in the history of judeo-christian monotheism: (1) that of respect for and devotion to the world as it is, and (2) that of a distancing from the world, and even a complete denial of it. To the first current belong the Jewish doctrine of creation, adopted by Christianity, and the doctrine of incarnation that early Christians added to jewish messianism. Here God is involved in the world, and invites humans to relate to it, be faithful to it and take care of it. The second current was already quite influential in the early stages of Christianity, although it was always opposed and rejected by the official theology: gnosticism. Here God has never been involved in the world, as Blumenbergs states, and his Son's becoming human is just a story. Everything is focused on knowledge of and insight (gnosis) into another world of salvation and light, in order to partake in it and leave the evil and dark world of the here and now. So, affirmation and negation of the world, *Weltbejahung* and *Weltverneinung*, are the two sides of monotheism, and especially of Christianity. Both the Yes and the No to the world have launched long and strong traditions of spirituality and of politico-religious praxis within all three monotheisms: a never-ending tension determining their history.

Then Blumenberg makes one more step, and a decisive one: he criticizes gnosticism as the "temptation" monotheism has never been able to liberate itself from. This, he states, becomes apparent in the medieval history of Chisti-anity, when the intimate, present, earthly God-in Christ gradually dissolved into in an infinitely remote , abstract and radically transcendent, that is absent God. This "infinitezation" of God in medieval Christianity, which is also one of the central claims of Peter Sloterdijk's recent major work *Spheres*, is according to Blumenberg the result of the *Weltverlust* (loss of the world) which gnosticism started to advocate a millennium earlier. Blumenberg's reconstruction of late-



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medieval Christianity – one of his real fields of expertise – goes as far as to place the clerical power and its doctrinal teaching, that flourished with a hierarchical, omnipotent and distant God to be represented and mediated by pope and bishops on earth, under the sign of this gnostic infinitization. On the verge of modernity, Gnosticism had actually won the battle... Would the modern rupture with the church be able to break with this temptation too?

Unfortunately, modernity, although it is according to Blumenberg a completely new selfdetermination (*Selbstbehauptung*) of humanity and of the world, rephrasing and recreating (*umbesetzen*) the metaphorical heritage of monotheism, has also failed to conquer gnosticism. Every time when modern history lets its central project, “to strive for change of the world in favour of humanity”², evaporate into a new desired salvation that sacrifices political speaking and acting to an absolute power (whether this be religious or secular), the gnostic contamination is at work. According to Blumenberg the 20th century has more than any other epoch been a moment of this contamination, that, instead of legitimizing the modern age (title of Blumenberg’s book) has led to such terror that modernity has actually deligitimized itself as a “project”.

Hence, the monotheistic heritage still active in modern culture is, according to Blumenberg, sharply divided within itself. On the one hand, it installs absolute, transcendent power ruling the world while remaining outside – or rather: above – the world, rendering the world into an object submitted to the whims of a subject that does not belong to it. Here the gnostic God returns in the shape of absolute human power. The Ancien Régime in France as well as the dictatorial power of the French Revolutionaries by whom it was eventually destroyed are just one example of this in the 18th century. One may also mention the rise of the colonial and imperialist powers in the 19th century; and most and for all, the disastrous totalitarian experiments of the 20th century. Furthermore, the production or constitution of modern identities like the new class of the bourgeois, who do not live *in* the world but treat the world as a free market to be appropriated and exploited, mirrors, in Blumenberg’s view, the medieval constitution of religious identities, founded as they are on the truths, certitudes, norms, beliefs and rules formulated by one omnipresent authoritative institutional context: the church.

On the other hand, monotheism has set the stage for a very different type of modern politics, that in which the locus of power is left empty. Here Blumenberg joins quite an array of political thinkers of the last half century who analyze the

² H. Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1966, p. 149. My translation.



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essence of democracy as the leaving open of the place of power and the rejection of any sovereign authority: e.g. Georges Bataille, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida, Claude Lefort, Slavoj Žižek. In their works, the emphasis is not on identity, but on plurality, difference, and on the in-stability, and even the violence of political discussion and action.

However, we are not dealing here with democracy, but with religion. Blumenberg's position is so important because he presents the modern secular age neither as an age of straightforward humanism, nor as a simple continuation of the monotheistic configuration. Modernity is a completely new Yes to the world, and to a *being in the world*, a world in which neither God nor humanity occupies the centre; the centre is empty. Monotheism, insofar as it opposes the gnostic temptation within itself, has prepared the ground for this kenosis of power and of identity. Now, after the narrative and artistic structures of monotheism have receded from the public sphere, Blumenberg states, it is our task to create new stories, symbolizations, metaphors, even new myths that can articulate and 'perform' this fragile Yes to the world.

If Blumenberg is right in stating that the emptiness of the centre, of the locus of power, that legitimizes the modern world, refers us back to monotheism, then who is the monotheistic God? The Jewish God of the Creation, who leaves the earth to the humans while himself retreating into the heavens? The Christian God who is no God at all but a humble human being? What about his presence? or absence? Does he leave the centre open? Or *is* he the empty centre? Presence in the world and absence from the world may well have to be thought in parallel fashion: what if the outside, the otherworldly, would be experienced as something inside the world, what if the innerworldly consists of its being exposed to the outside? What if presence and absence would be entangled? And what if this entanglement of presence and absence, of inside and outside, would have to be called the "world": the world gnosticism refuses to accept?

Blumenberg touches upon this complex structure of the monotheistic legacy in modernity, but, in a minute or so, we shall have to continue his groundwork, go further, and investigate the ambiguities of monotheism at a more fundamental level. Here the German egyptologist and scholar in religious studies Jan Assmann – quite an influential name at the moment – is relevant to my line of thought. In the slipstream of my account of Assmann's introduction of an important feature of monotheism, some



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elements of the work of the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy will resonate as well. We will enter our dialogue with Assmann and Nancy in Section 3. But let me summarize first what we have found so far.

Intermezzo

Blumenberg claims that at the centre of the historical configuration we call the Modern Age lies a new 'turn towards the world'. This turn implies a new devotion to and a new responsibility of humans for the socio-political, the economical and cultural context they live in, which consists of another 'turn', equally necessary: the turning away from medieval absolute power structures, including the medieval God who symbolizes the top of this hierarchy. However, this historical analysis does by no means suggest that the Modern Age is a definitive farewell to religion proper. What interests us today in his diagnosis, is his insight that the persistence in modern times of absolute, transcendent power systems, leading to forms of terror that are unique in human history, demonstrates that modernity, however secular, however humanist it hopes to be, can only be grasped in its continuous interrelatedness with religion. As an example of this entanglement, some scholars, like the historian John Gray, have attempted to show that the Enlightenment and its ideal of continuous progress is still impregnated with a Christian concept of history as a linear process towards salvation.

In Blumenberg's view, the interrelatedness we are exploring here has everything to do with a double modern inheritance: the inheritance of gnosticism and its disdain of the human world, and the inheritance of other currents within the Judeo-Christian tradition, advocating love of the human world as the crucial meaning of faith, and proclaiming a resistance against a powerful God, who, – in Christianity – has to become human and vulnerable. The importance of this double and contradictory inheritance marks modernity, and as such marks the secular as a phenomenon that can never be self-evident or founded on itself. For Blumenberg, it marks modernity's fate and hope.

If he would have been here today, he would have stated that 'a humanistic Islam – and a humanistic Christianity – is possible as long as they stay close to and if needed revive their programme of *Weltbejahung* and shared, pluralistic power. But would such an Islam be possible in the West, in modern culture? And what of Christianity, what of Judaism? Let us now involve Assmann into our discussion.



3. *The Mosaic Distinction, the Mosaic Connection: Assmann, Nancy*

What is the opposite of the theological absolutism of gnosticism? In my view, it is what Assmann recently has named the “Mosaic distinction”. In this distinction, which at the same time appears to be a connection, the gnostic system of the two opposed worlds and two opposed Gods falls apart. Let me briefly follow Assmann’s historical analysis first.

Maybe the most central characteristic of monotheism, Assmann states, is not the exclusive acknowledgement of just one single God, but precisely this “Mosaic distinction”.³ This distinction is twofold.

According to Assmann, it primarily designates the discordant difference between true and false religion, and between a true and false God. Assmann demonstrates how this distinction has turned the natural and obvious presence of religion itself into a *problem*. Religion had to ask for its truth instead of simply coinciding with it – “being” its own truth –, and in this way its presence was no longer guaranteed, nor that of its God: their presence had to be claimed by man. God could equally well be absent, or even non-existent.

This monotheistic distinction is illustrated by Assmann by referring to the famous first and second commandments in Exodus 20: 3-4:

Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.

Assmann steers the definition of monotheism into a new direction, by no longer focussing on the number of Gods (one, “mono-”), but on the claim that only one God *among many* should be worshiped. But this is not the aspect of the distinction that interests me here.

A second feature of the monotheist distinction is touched upon in monotheism’s iconoclastic program. The ban on the representation of the divine by means of images intensifies the presence of God *as a problem*, which establishes itself *within* the “true” religion. This problem articulates the difference-in-distance between God and humans, and as such, monotheism breaks away from polytheism. The ban on images proclaimed in the Jewish Thora is a plea for – a hint⁴ at – distance, difference and distinction.⁵ Because the image bridges the distance by *representing* God, it must be destroyed.

³ Assmann first applied this concept in his *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1997), then again in *Of God and Gods: Egypt, Israel and the Rise of Monotheism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), e.g. 84-85.

⁴ The Hebrew word *thora* actually does not mean “law”, but rather “pointing towards”, “indication”; it has an aspect of promise in it which is covered by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig in their German translation of the Jewish bible, *Tenach*: they present the Thora as *Bücher der Weisung*. See *Die fünf Bücher der Weisung* (Heidelberg: Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1976; orig. 1925-1928).

⁵ This becomes already clear in the very first phrase of Genesis – the Thora’s first book –, where God’s initial creational act is described not as the creation of the world or the universe (as some translations have it), but of a distinction: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”. The concept of distinguishing and separating plays an important role in the ensuing story of the creation in its first version, that of Gen. 1 and 2: 1-4.



So the Mosaic distinction shows that the “truth” of the monotheistic religions *is* this problem of presence and absence. It is played out in various opposing couples of concepts: divine-human, transcendent-immanent, outside-inside, Other-self, infinite-finite, et cetera. Monotheism’s claim to give *sense* to the world and to humanity derives from this complex and contradictory truth. One can see the “deconstruction of monotheism” carried out by Jean-Luc Nancy as a rephrasing of Assmann’s distinction in these terms: the terms of a tension between presence and absence, and of a discussion of the problem of the sense of the world. The truth of monotheism is hence a very modern truth: sense is never available, never “given”, hence never stable, never a founding or grounding basis for the world. Sense is *in* the world – and not underneath it, bearing it –, and it is in the world as something that “happens” time and again, announcing, “assuring” itself and then disappearing, “withholding itself” again. So, following Nancy’s line of thought, from the monotheistic distinction, we go to its complex truth, and then to its modality of unstable sense – to modernity. That is the central movement, or rather, the “space” of the West, analyzed in the chapter “A Deconstruction of Monotheism” in his recent book *Dis-Enclosure*⁶:

I will call a “deconstruction of monotheism” that inquiry or search consisting in disassembling and analyzing the constitutive elements of monotheism, and more directly of Christianity, thus of the West, in order to go back to (or to advance toward) a resource that could form at once the buried origin and the imperceptible future of the world that calls itself “modern”. After all, “modern” signifies a world always awaiting its truth of, and as, world [*sa vérité de monde*], a world whose proper sense is not given, is not available, is, rather, in project or in promise, and perhaps beyond: a sense that consists in not being given, but only in being promised . . . In Christianity, the promise is at once already realized and yet to come. (But is this not a theme that runs through all the monotheisms?) Is such a paradoxical space not that in which the presence of sense is at once assured, acquired, and always withheld, absented in its very presence? (34-35)

Let us return to our account of the Mosaic distinction again. It does not simply divide two realms of being, but rather poses their mutual relation as a problem: as an unstable relation of tension and desire. The God who retreats from the world is at the same time the God who “presents”

⁶J.-L. Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, New York: Fordham University Press 2008 (orig. 2005).



himself as such as the “absent”. As the ungraspable distant force the monotheistic God enforces himself onto the people: that is the remarkable paradox in the “monotheistic revolution”, as Assmann calls it, expressed for instance in the well-known scene of Exodus 19 and 20, when God gives his Thora (in its concentrated form of the Ten Commandments) while remaining absent. Here, the God who distinguishes himself from the gods *and* humans, asserts himself by bringing his absence proper into presence. The distinction plays itself out by blurring itself as soon as possible, and becoming a *connection*. The scene is rephrased in Deuteronomy 4: “Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice.”⁷

The *problem* monotheism addresses and in a way enacts (“performs”) in its narrative, rituality, doctrine and art, is this impossible connection. The “living God”, as the authors of the Jewish bible often call Jahwe, is not the God of presence, but he who “lives” in the interval between absence and presence.

How can one think and experience, how can one “live” presence *as* absence and the reverse? How can the monotheistic God be outside-in/inside-out the world at the same time? How can the distinction be a connection, a relation, albeit an impossible one? How can the impossible be a possibility? The instability of the Mosaic distinction, letting religion oscillate between distinction and connection, between its own destruction (“religion without God”) and construction (“religion of the without-God”), designates monotheism’s complex character: that it is a constant process of self-deconstruction. It is this self-deconstructive drive that is, in Nancy’s view, the unthought, unheard of, unexpected aspect of monotheism; and it is this aspect of monotheism that has persisted in a radical form in modernity. Hence, the deconstruction of monotheism is a deconstruction of modernity.

The modern problem of presence-in-absence should be articulated and elucidated by applying it to the one “thing” modernity rejects: God. God should be grasped not as an identity, let alone a religious identity, nor a power; God is a *question*, that is, God contests himself, or rather, he *is* the name and the event of self-contestation.

This would imply that, although faith seems to be ‘opposed to identity’, we should present the concept of religious identity as an impossible concept, as an oxymoron. It is not only, not simply this opposition we are dealing with here, as if both realms, that of faith and that identity, would have

⁷ Deut. 4:12 (New Revised Standard Version).



nothing to do with each other; faith – at least in monotheism – should be defined *as* the contestation of identity: maybe it is nothing more than this contestation.

Let me conclude that within the monotheist faith the problem of divine AND human identity is central. Monotheism is a religious configuration that wanders, or ‘dances’ (Nietzsche) around this problem. Or, to put in Blumenberg’s words, it is a dance around the empty centre of power: the the dance of democracy.

4. Coda and Question

However modern or postmodern we are, we are still very close to Moses – to his distinction, to his connection, to the impossibility of these two. We are still close to his strange God, as described in Exodus 19 and 20, a God who passes by “in a dense cloud” (Is he present? Is he absent?) in order to give to Moses his “words” (*devarim*) as a series of winks and hints rather than commandments. I quote Ex. 19 and 20:

Then the Lord said to Moses, “I am going to come to you in a dense cloud” . . . Then God spoke all these words . . .⁸

We are still close to that “thora” that announces the retreat of religion. Retreat of religion: for it warns us time and again not to believe in God, but to direct our attention to the earth, to the humans, that is, to love our neighbours. The famous announcement, in Leviticus 19: I am JAHWE your God, means nothing in itself: it is only filled with meaning by the words preceding it: love your neighbour, in this context the stranger, as yourself So: a religion of the retreat of religion: for it does not only warn us not to believe in God. It equally warns us not to believe in ourselves, as humans, as humanity. For who are we? We are first of all strangers to ourselves. Maybe that is, in a very minimal way, our ‘religious identity’, our ‘humanist identity’...

So, as a conclusion, let me cite Leviticus 19:

But the stranger that dwells with you shall be unto you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am JAHWE your God.

My paper has circled around one and the same particular question, directed to all of you, Jews, Christians, humanists, and most and for all Muslims and Islamic scholars: if this is the Jewish and Christian claim about Jahwe, rooted in their Holy Book, or at least, if this is one of the possible claims about their God, then what about Allah? Can we retrace

⁸ Ex. 19:9 and 20:1 (New Revised Standard Version).



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Moses's distinction in the koran, can we follow a gnostic history within Islam, and if so, is that history an undercurrent, or is it dominant? And if Islam differs fundamentally from these ambiguities in the Judeo-Christian tradition, what then is its own unique entanglement with secular modernity? If any? I have shared these difficult questions with my colleague and friend of the last nine years; we have not solved them, maybe we did not intend to solve them. In not solving anything, he has taught me so much! So I now dedicate them to you Nas'r, where ever you are. I remember you with great joy, but consider all these words as an expression of deep loss.



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B: The Secular Burden in the Dutch Development Sector

Welmoet Boender

A Tribute to Nasr Abu Zayd

I feel very honored to be here today and discuss with you some of my thoughts and current work. As a student of Islamic Studies in Leiden I was one of the first Dutch students of Nasr Abu Zayd in 1995. He taught us *tafsir*. He once told me how important we were for him, as his first students he could teach here in the Netherlands. I do not think I realized at that time the scope of this remark, nor what he had been part of. I am grateful to have known him.

1. A Syllogism

The point of departure of Nasr Abu Zayd's memorial conference is the question: *How can a humanistic approach to Islam be realized?* There are many ways to approach this question. Some contributors discuss this in philosophical or theological hermeneutic ways; others deal with it related to gender and human rights. But perhaps one could also read the question as if it asks *whether a humanistic approach to Islam is possible?* If this would be the case, I think it is also useful to ask the question *in which conceptual framework does the central question of the conference become relevant?* This would be a secular discursive framework. While searching for 'humanism in Islam', it is inevitable to also consider the paradigm of the secular.

As soon as one starts to talk about humanism and Islam, a syllogism seems to pop up. In 'the West' (but also in 'the Muslim world'), a clear tendency can be noticed to regard 'Islam' and 'the secular' as two opposite forces –or at best as seemingly opposite. Whereas, at the same time, 'humanism' is easily connected to secularism. So, in a Socratic way, you would get the syllogism of:

Islam is not secular
Secular is humanist
Islam is not humanist

2. The End of the Secularization Thesis

Since the late 1960s the secularization theory, in which modernization and secularization were seen as two sides of the same coin, became rooted in development thinking. Development was expected to either accelerate or coincide with the decline of religion (Berger 1999:1-18). However, in the past decades, this secularization these has been tackled, notably by Jurgen Habermas, José Casanova, Charles Taylor



and their followers. They bring up that we now live in a 'post-secular age'. The role of religion and religious movements is difficult to ignore in the context of globalization. This is often referred to as 'the resurgence of religion' in the public sphere. Rosalind Hacket describes this as "the drive to claim recognition for, and the possibilities for implementation of religious ideas, values, practices and institutions in the governance of nation-states and the lives of citizens. ... The new discursive, performative, and participative public space is not confined to formal institutions recognized by state authorities."

Nevertheless, the remnants of the secularization thesis are still visible in Western European and Dutch public debate. Perhaps we could call this 'the burden of secular essentialism'. This does not refer to the separation between state and religion (secularization as differentiation, as Casanova calls it (1994)). It refers to the still dominant idea in public debate that religion does not fit into modern society and that it belongs to the private sphere. In this line of thinking the distinction between the secular and the religious is a value-loaded opposition, in which the secular represents the positive, and the religious the negative value (Suransky and Manschot 2010:13).¹ The Leuven based sociologist Nadia Fadil explains this in her PhD thesis (2008) as follows: "In a secular context religious and /or secular subjectivities are primarily disciplined and regulated through a liberal agency model, while non-liberal ways of relating to the religious self are problematized".

This juxtaposition has become particularly apparent in 'post 9-11' discussions about Islam, where the abovementioned syllogism has increasingly become 'salonfähig'. In these debates, Islam or Muslims are often depicted as a homogenous block. The Norwegian social scientist Christine Jacobsen frames this as follows: "The production of Muslim identities through local and global imaginaries are intimately linked and interlocking processes. Both are energized by culturalist differentialism which construct Muslims, at the local level, as external to the Norwegian imagined community [or any other Western European nation-state, WB] and, at a global level, as external to the modern, secularized West." She continues with: "A recurring question in literature on Muslims in Europe has been whether there is insurmountable antagonism between Islam and secular democracy" (Jacobsen 2007:163). Muslims are increasingly framed as 'the Other', external to the modern secularized West.² This feeling of 'otherness' is strengthened by the way young Salafi mark the boundaries between their lifestyles (like dress) and their surroundings.

¹ "The entwinement of these two meanings of the secular created not only confusion on a theoretical level, it worked out that in the nineteenth and twentieth century secularism became a world view, even the intellectually most attractive and academically dominant worldview (Taylor 2007)" (Suransky and Manschot 2009: 13).

² See for instance Amir-Moazami 2001.



In this politicized debates it is not only important to deconstruct essentialist notions of Islam. It is also important to carefully look at the notions of secularism which are used.

3. Deconstructing Normative Assumptions

How to deal with the 'burden of secular essentialism' when approaching religion in general and Islam in particular? It is an interesting case in point to look at the Dutch development sector.

Once the secularisation theory no longer appeared to apply, the topic of religion was put back on the international development agenda at the end of the last century. This is exemplified by the establishment of the World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) in 1998. The WFDD arranged for dialogues between people of various religions and with international development organizations, such as the World Bank and the IMF. The big question was how religion and development interrelate. The WFDD also wanted to know what impact this relationship had on development policy decisions and on poor communities around the world.

In the Netherlands, several development organizations are engaged in the topic of religion and development. The Dutch development sector is indeed aware of the 'resurgence of religion'. They come across it in their daily work. However, development agencies respond in different ways. One way of reacting has been the establishment of the Knowledge Centre Religion and Development in 2006. This is a cooperation of nine faith-based NGO's, both Christian, Hindu and Muslim.³ The Knowledge Centre Religion and Development (KCRD) aims to share knowledge and stimulate religious empathy, by combining practical experiences with respect to religion in development processes with academic reflection.⁴

4. A Secular cNcept of Development

The participants in the Knowledge Center want to reflect upon their own normative assumptions in their approaches at the development agenda. One of their starting points is the realization that "if you do not take into account religion and its dynamics, if you do not have a sensitivity towards religious devotion, you simply cannot understand the mechanisms and strategies of the social movements nor the motives of the people who are your partners in development" (Ter Haar et al 2006). Moreover, the participants realize that they often depart from a secular concept of development.⁵ During a conference organized by the KCRD in 2007, the importance was stressed of approaching development

³ Its current members are Cordaid, ICCO Kerk in Actie, Oikos, Seva Network Foundation, Edukans, Mensen met een Missie, Islamic Relief Nederland, Samenwerkende Moslim Hulporganisaties/Migrantenconsortium (www.religion-and-development.nl).

⁴ Parallel to the founding of the Knowledge Centre Religion and Development, the Knowledge Forum Religion and Development Policy was set up by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Minister van Ardenne) and several Dutch NGOs. Furthermore, Hivos initiated its Pluralism of Knowledge Program in cooperation with the University for Humanistics and Kosmopolis. Similar initiatives were taken in Sweden and the United Kingdom.

⁵ Ter Haar et al 2006.



as a whole instead of considering religion as a separate phenomenon in development processes. In other words, religion and spirituality should be taken into account as soon as a partnership is set up, whether it be for assessing situations or finding solutions to problems. This is particularly important when partner organizations in the South themselves draw attention to the importance of religion.

What should be the consequences of this realization? The questions are huge among these Dutch development organizations. How should development agencies deal with their own bias about development? What should you do with your secular ideals? Should you let go of your highly valued secular ideals, or would that mean an overreacted cultural relativism? What if the religious values of the partner organization do not meet the donor's expectations about the liberation of the individual towards autonomy? And what about your religious values as a faith-based organization (since, as you know, many Dutch development organizations stem from missionary work)?⁶ In order to discuss these questions, the Knowledge Center published a Practitioners' Guide. This book centers on practical experiences of development professionals, supplemented by theoretical considerations. The book does not provide cut-and-dried answers to questions, nor does it provide a ready-made approach. However, it does stimulate readers to reflect on the topic of 'religion and development'. It encourages Dutch and other development professionals to discuss the dilemmas and practical accounts contained in this book in more detail – and to raise their own dilemmas.

One of the responses of faith-inspired organizations like Cordaid and ICCO was framed in the slogan: "No outreach without inreach". 'Inreach' stands for the reflection on your own identity and that of your organization. 'Outreach' refers to the attention for religion in a certain situation, community or region. Dutch development organizations should not only reflect on the role of religion in non-Western societies where they work ('outreach'), but they should also reflect on the assumptions within their own organizations and in the Netherlands ('inreach'). Without introspection, no attention can be paid to religion in projects in the South. First find out for yourself how you think, act and react and what identity your organization has. Only then can you say something about how others think, act and react or should think, act and react.

In her book entitled *Vision of Development* Wendy Tyndale quotes sociologist Kurt Alan Ver Beek. Ver Beek suggests that many development professionals avoid the topic of religion out of respect for local culture and for fear of imposing their own views. However, Tyndale states that with-

⁶ These organizations, which operated mostly in colonies at the time, were traditionally accustomed to take religion into consideration. However, since the second half of the 20th century development cooperation has focused much less on religion. One of the factors which influenced these stances was the above mentioned 'secularization thesis'.



holding your own view might appear to be condescending: you evidently consider your view superior to those of the other (Tyndale 2006) . In the Western world many people strongly believe that religion is unscientific and ultimately cannot be sustained from a rational point of view. This opinion is constantly fed to us, either consciously or unconsciously, Tyndale contends. Whether you are religious or not, you must be aware of your own view of the world. Only then can you put it aside – in any case for just a while – and listen with a more or less open mind to what moves the other party and what that other party considers desirable.

5. How to Deal with Islam

Many professionals in the development sector do depart from the notion of pluralism. But exactly there are fields of tension. Secular notions of the autonomy of the individual and human rights are highly valued, also among the faith-inspired organizations who participate in the Knowledge Center. They are fully convinced that the implementation of the Universal Human Rights is very much worth striving for. But religions do bring in visions which can be at odds with these liberal visions. Moreover, development workers directly experience how the Western paradigm of the secular –including highly valued notions of human rights – is being openly challenged in post-colonial states. Particularly by religious actors. Some sort of confusion then might emerge: are ‘the secular’ and ‘the religious’ indeed ‘incongruent’ or are they not? The confrontation with radical forms of Islam makes this question more apparent –although this is not only the case with Islam.

Dutch development organizations fostering democracy and respect for human rights in the Middle East, North Africa and Asia, observe a growing importance of Islamic movements. They also see that it is Islamic organizations who reach grass roots level. Dutch NGO’s are exploring options of cooperation with these movements. Nevertheless, there are not many partnerships between Dutch development agencies and Islamic NGOs in Muslim countries, yet. One explanation is the fact that Muslim organizations are not the ‘natural partners’ of many Dutch organizations. Their ‘natural partners’ are mostly either secular or Christian organizations. So new partnerships must be made, and this takes time –from both sides. But it is not just a matter of time and energy. It is also about visions and shared aims. The trust given to a secular partner organization is not automatically extended to Islamic organizations in the same region. Just a quote from a Dutch development professional from IKV Pax Christi: “We have m



ore trust that secular organizations actually want all the same things that we do. With Islamic organizations, that can be the case in part, but not concerning the whole. That blind faith has not yet developed.” And someone from Hivos (a humanist development organization): “We have come to the conclusion that there is a need to cooperate, or at least to start a dialogue with Islamic organizations. Now we must look if we can meet organizations, who work under the cover of being Islamic, who nevertheless strive for the same things as we strive for: an open society, more space for the individual, democracy, transparent government, respecting human rights, respecting the position of women.”

Research of Ward Berenschot, commissioned by the Catholic development agency Mensen met een Missie, brings up that many Dutch organizations are reluctant to support Islamic liberal NGO's in India and Indonesia, whereas precisely those organizations can make a difference there. In these countries Dutch NGO's often support secular and church-related NGO's in fostering processes of democratization. Berenschot's research shows that these organizations often operate in the margin. Because secular organizations refrain from using a religious discourse, they are no actors in the neither in public or even political debate. “If you want to support the actors who can make a difference towards a just society, then you should be willing to support religious organizations, liberal Islamic organizations”, Berenschot argues.⁷

For us it is important to note that for Dutch donor organizations it is not an easy task to estimate who to support in a religiously tensed field as in Indonesia or India and to decide about cooperating with Muslim partners. To understand these difficulties, one must first point at the complex situation in the field. Second, anxieties about Islam influence the decision making process as well. But it is also noteworthy to refer to the secular framework of Dutch NGOs in which Islam –and religion- is being perceived.

6. *Secular Notions*

Thus, it is important for a development professional to carefully consider what secularism means. A development professional should reflect upon his or her notion of 'the secular'. To mention just two options: it differs quite a lot whether you use the modern paradigm 'secular' as referring to "the quality of the common, the public as an inclusive space for all citizens regardless of their religion or worldview" or as "the opposite of religion" (Manschot and Suransky 2009:13). The first could be called an *inclusive*

⁷ For more information about this research see www.mensenmeteenmissie.nl.



notion, the second an *exclusive notion*. Which notion one takes, might influence the way a development professional perceives 'the religious' and the views about the 'religious other' in the context of development cooperation.

Nadia Fadil (2009) refers to secularization as an analytical concept *and* a discursive formation (Foucault): "a regime of truth which implies the regulation and dissemination of a particular understanding of religion (understood as belief), the social (reified as 'entity') and the religious self (structured through liberal agency) through a set of discursive and non-discursive operations (see also Asad 2003)". Development professionals also act and think in this secular *discursive formation*.

While reflecting upon these conceptions, it becomes visible that 'the secular' and 'Islam' do not have to be incongruent. Secularism as a differentiation between church and state with its attached liberal values and emphasis on personal freedom and autonomy, is a virtue of modern Western society. However, secularism is not static, nor is it an ontologically neutral terrain. Influence of religion in the public sphere remains, as Casanova and others have convincingly argued. 'The secular' and 'the religious' do not necessarily exclude each other. However, if a development professional presumes a priori that the secular excludes religion, confusion occurs.

One of the aims of the Knowledge Center Religion and Development is to encourage the reflection on these notions. By looking carefully at the ways 'secularism' (and also 'Islam' or broader 'religion') are envisioned, we can try to avoid the trap of juxtaposing Islam and secularism, or Islam and humanism.

7. Concluding Remarks

In my presentation here, I do not want give you the impression of a sector which is in any way shortsighted about development, religion or Islam. But I do think it is interesting to bring it in today, as an empirical case in which the question of the conference becomes relevant. In response to Jurgen Habermas' definition of our times as a post-secular age, in which we must ask ourselves if there is something as 'a universal truth', and if the liberal-democratic model is indeed the ultimate ideology (or 'the end of history' as Francis Fukuyama put it), several Dutch development agencies ask themselves "how normative are we in our thinking about development." Faith-based organizations like Cordaid, ICCO Kerk in Actie and Mensen met een Missie are (re)con-



sidering their own identity as a faith-inspired or faith-based organization. They realize that in their work they are very much defined by notions of the secular. And parallel to that, they are in the process of reconsidering what it means to be a Catholic or a Protestant organization. It helps them to critically discuss their own normative perspectives, how they look at development, religion and Islam while departing from a (liberal) secular perspective.

It is people like Nasr Abu Zayd who can be of very much of help in these debates within the development sector.⁸ They try to show that Islam is dynamic and can be congruent with 'the secular' –as can any religion. But that it depends on the way the paradigm of the secular is defined by all actors engaged.

Of course there is much more to say about these notions than I bring up in this paper. The Knowledge Centre Religion and Development provides a platform for these discussions and for publications. I welcome you to visit our website and digital documentation centre at www.religion-and-development.nl.

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⁸ And also of someone like Abdullah An-Naim, to name someone else.



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C: Response to Welmoet Boender and Laurens ten Kate

Henk Manschot

I am certainly not able to do justice to the richness and complexity of the two presentations. Your profound philosophical and reflexive introductions evoke so many questions: questions about the modern, liberal paradigm of the secular, about the complex, often not articulated interrelatedness of the secular and the religious, questions about the West and Non-Western Traditions and behavior and so on. All these questions are related to your suggestion that we should go beyond the liberal-secular paradigm. They express your intention to rethink the relationship between the secular and the religious. So let me start from here: Rethinking the secular, re-imagining the secular.

1. Rethinking the Secular

I start by briefly recalling some of the arguments you presented in favor of rethinking the secular. These arguments are basically twofold: 1. We witness in our time – it is said – the growing presence and influence of religions worldwide – a phenomenon opposite to what was expected in the modern paradigm – And 2. with the advent of globalization and mass migrations, the multitude and diversity of religions has become an everyday experience. Diversity of religions has become a fact, a given characteristic of all societies, a precondition of our day to day coexistence. This condition forces us to rethink the dominant interpretation of the secular which ignores and even denies this new reality.

Both Welmoet and Laurens suggest that we should disengage from the idea that religions occupy only a second-class position with regard to public morality, they encourage us to disengage from this 'burden of secular essentialism'. A new concept of the secular is needed, they argue. I agree with them. How can we deal with the growing presence and the diversity of religions in our daily life in such a way that people can live together respectfully and peacefully? That's my question.

2.

Let us take the growing global presence of religions and their diversity seriously. Let me try to go deeper in this question. How does the fact that the growing presence of religions and their diversity challenge for instance the way the State has to deal with religions? And how does it challenge the religions and worldviews themselves and their faith-based civil society organizations? The Indonesian Con-



stitution offers a very interesting example of how the State could deal with the presence and diversity of religions in a positive way. Indonesia, as we all know, is a majoritarian Islamic nation. The Indonesian Constitution provides not only “all persons the right to worship according to their own religion and belief”. It also extends official status to six faith traditions which are mentioned by name: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism. These religions have official status in the public domain. The Indonesian policy of six constitutionally recognized religions is not ideal, of course. It immediately raises questions about the status of non-recognized religions and secular world views. But the positive side is that the constitution itself offers a legal basis for the existence and value of the diversity of religions in the public domain.

Another example is offered by the Constitution of India which defines the secular attitude of the State as “paying equal respect to all religions” and the principle of the State keeping ‘equal distance’ to all religions. In both constitutions religions are seen as principally valuable, as potentially positive forces within society and the public domain. Laws and regulations are based upon this interpretation of the secular.

But it is not my main intention today to focus on the State and its regulatory role in the public domain.

3.

Today I would reflect on civil society actors, in particular on the religious and the faith based institutions – the religious and the secular or humanist institutions. What kind of questions does the new historical situation, the every-day reality of the diversity of religions, impose on these institutions?

My suggestion would be the following: Each religion and worldview is challenged to articulate what it means to be one religion among others. An important question which emerges is: What are the implications for my religion or my worldview, if we would no longer define the public space as a space which is devoid of religious expression (as the modern paradigm of the secular would proclaim) but as a space where different religions and worldviews can express themselves and have to live together in a peaceful way? What are the implications for religions and other worldviews if we define the secular in an inclusive way, instead of seeing the public domain and religious spaces as opposites?

Jürgen Habermas has formulated my question as follows: In our society – which he qualified as the ‘post-secular society’



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– each Religion or life stance has to embark on a learning process and rework its tradition by confronting itself with the question: what does it mean to be one religion or worldview among others? All philosophies of life, both secular and religious, will be required to embark on such a learning process if they wish to respond adequately to current developments.

4.

Both Welmoet and Laurens were – in my view – engaged in this question in different ways. They both have indeed embarked on a learning process.

Welmoet by taking seriously the impact that our modern paradigm of the secular has on other religions and spiritual traditions. She encourages us to pay more attention to our own presuppositions in our contact with people from other religions and traditions. I would like to discuss further with her how we – in the words of Talal Asad – can “unpack – step by step – these assumptions”. That is not an easy task given the fact that many ideas and values which are central to our liberal-secular model, are part of our identity. Think of the notion of dignity of the individual, of the value of equality before the law, of the neutrality of the State etc. I fully agree that we need to articulate a careful exchange with other religions on all these fundamental values. Other religions and worldviews may have different insights. They might confront us with additional values, values of community –life for instance; they might confront us with the vagueness of our idea of equality as purely legal and not social equality, with questions about the vulnerability and suffering of people and the obligations to deal with it. But does questioning our liberal secular model imply that we abandon it entirely? I would ask Welmoet if she could give us examples of the dilemma’s that she has encountered in her learning process.

And Laurens ten Kate: was Laurens’s profound and subtle way of questioning the Christian heritage of monotheism not a fine example of how Christians could interpret their monotheism without claiming absolute truth? If I understood Laurens well, he was basically saying: Monotheism does not mean that we know who God is, because God is always partly absent in his presence. In other words: Gods presence can never be fixed. He (‘The Thing’) is always beyond our knowledge and understanding. The Christian religious interpretation of God should be such that our knowledge of God is open, constantly challenged, and is one among others. This is a very original way of dealing with the idea that my interpretation of God is one among others,



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even within my own religion. Humbleness of the believer in the face of truth. Have I understood you rightly?

So in both of you I admire your Socratic critical attitude towards yourself, toward your own tradition. I fully agree that this attitude is very important for religions in a post-secular society. In the best humanist traditions, Socratic Critical Self-understanding is the starting point of an open, meaningful and respectful life.

5.

But I would like to provoke both of you to go one step further.

Are we doing enough if we question our own ideas and convictions about monotheism, about the liberal paradigm of the secular and demonstrate a willingness to reconsider them? Or should we go a step further when challenged by the aforementioned question: 'what does it imply that I, that my religion or world view is one among others?'

Professor Diana Eck, Director of the Harvard Pluralism Program, and partner of our Kosmopolis Institute, has formulated her next step in this direction.

She says: what we need to do, is more than just acknowledge the plurality of religions. What we also need is to actively engage with the other. What we need is the courage to engage with the otherness of the other. In her words:

Pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity. Pluralism is not just tolerance but the active seeking of understanding across lines of differences. Pluralism is not relativism but the encounter of commitment and dialogue.

Practices of engagement with the other: isn't that what a new paradigm of the secular would have to encourage and make possible if we strive for a peaceful, free and open society in an inclusive way? Diana Eck focuses predominantly on differences between religions. That is certainly the most difficult aspect of these encounters. But here I would like to add: engaging with similarities and common values of religions and secular life stances is also an important aspect of an active engagement with 'the other'.

So: my final question to you and to the audience is: Would you agree with Diana Eck that – in our globalised society religions only take the diversity of religions seriously if they embark on a learning process of reciprocal engagement,



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and develop *from within* practices and models of dialogue, exchange and commitment to interact with other?



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The Teaching of Nasr Abu Zayd

Towards a Democratization of Teaching

Sabry Emam

As a student of Arabic language at the faculty of literature, Cairo University, I have attended many lectures from Prof. Nasr Abu Zayd. During 4 years, from 1989 till 1993, Nasr taught us subjects as Rhetoric, Koran sciences, Prophetic hadith and translation from English to Arabic. What I want to testify is just the way he used to teach us. I will give some examples to illustrate that. But let me begin briefly with the “traditional” way of teaching in Egypt (at least in those years).

In Egypt, the way of teaching is almost one way, not only at primary and secondary / high school, but also at the university. The teacher tells the story (sometimes reading from a book), the students write down what the teacher says, try to keep it in mind and when they have an exam. They just reproduce what they have learned. As a student you rarely have questions. Everything is clear.

Moreover, the relationship between teacher and student is very hierarchical. The teacher knows everything, determines everything and the student accepts everything and has no doubt about the truth in the words of the teacher. So there is no reason to ask questions or to have a kind of criticism. We were always thinking about the examinations and our results.

Prof. Nasr said in his first lectures: “I am not going to read from my books. And you are not going to write down every word I say.” That was a shock for us, a new phenomenon. He said: “You are going to read and ask me if you have questions.” So that way of teaching meant that we had to be active, we had to think and try to understand. “My lecture is not one way, it is an interaction, a dialogue, between me and you. How else can you learn, if you don’t have the chance to discuss and to ask questions?”

At the beginning it was hard for us to handle this new way of teaching. But prof. Nasr helped us by giving an introduction to every of his lectures; just in general lines what the subject was about. The details that we have already read, we knew or we had questions about. And because we were almost 140 students in a, not very big classroom, the time wasn’t enough for all our questions. Then a new phenomenon was born, namely walking with prof. Nasr after the lecture to his room or to another



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location if he had to give a lecture. Those moments were very important for me and some others. Those were the moments when you had a discussion face to face with a teacher who always had respect for his students. I will come later to this point.

That was not the only thing about the teaching of prof Nasr. Beside this way of teaching, there was of course the content of the topics he taught. And here I would like to give you some examples to imagine how interesting his lectures were, but also shocking for some students. One of the most important subjects was the Koran (Koranic sciences). We had read prof. Nasr's book "Mafhum an-nas" (the concept of the text, a study in Koranic sciences). In his first lecture on that subject, prof. Nasr said: "Sometimes the scientific language confronts the religious feeling. But that does not mean that this language does not respect the religion." It was important for us as students to know that there are levels of using language within the religious discourse which are sometimes shocking the reader. When Prof. Nasr said that Koran has been changed to be an icon, a kind of decoration, a tool to get some blessing. Some students, who knew that it was true because they could see that at home, were confronted by that fact.

Moreover, when we read that Koran is a linguistic text which we have to study according to the modern methods of literature, we were shocked. I remember that some of us thought that that was meaning that Koran is not divine. And that is an example I want to give you, how prof Nasr has explained that point to us. He made a comparison between Jesus and the Koran. According to the Islamic traditions, the birth of Jesus is a miracle (as part of the soul of God) but that does not deny his humanity. And his humanity does not deny the divine miracle of his birth. The same can be said about the Koran. It is the word of God but it is revealed in a human language to a human being (Mohamed). So the fact that Koran is a text does not mean that we deny its divine origin. Koran as a text has then a human side which we have to study to understand what de divine / God wants. That comparison made some of the stuff easy to follow. It is just a simple explanation but had a very big impact on us. As in the same book prof Nasr said that the concept of revelation – relationship between human beings and 'ginn' (a kind of spirit) – was a known phenomenon in the Arabic peninsula. But that does not mean that the revelation to Mohamed was not divine. It was no new phenomenon. Putting actions in their historical and cultural context does not mean that they are not divine.



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Another subject which we have had from prof Nasr was the Prophetic Hadith. Within the framework of the subject we have read his book about Imam Ash-shaf'y, It was a study to show how Ash-shaf'y gave the traditions of Mohamed a prominent place in the Islamic fiqh (jurisprudence). That was the reason that prof. Nasr chose this book for that subject. That year (our third year) was maybe the most important year concerning conceptual thinking. This is my second example to illustrate the way of prof. Nasr's teaching.

I remember that the first lectures of prof. Nasr were about concepts. He wanted to make some concepts clear before we really could go on with the book (which was not yet published). The concepts he explained were: Religion and religious discourse, text and interpretation, religion and belief etc. When we got the book, we could read it in the light of those concepts. And that is what I mean when I say that Prof. Nasr 's way of teaching was to prepare us to be independent, to read and ask and more important to (be able to) disagree with what we read.

One of the most important points in that context is the different kinds of texts. We were confronted with the fact that, to get progress, we have to get rid of the authority of texts. And again prof. Nasr explained that point to us so that we could go on with reading texts in another light. He said: "The texts I mean here are the texts of Muslim scholars who, as me, were men who were interpreting Koran and hadith. But their texts are not divine and we may and have to criticize and correct them. If I criticize As-shaf'y , it does not mean that I am better than him. I just see things different". That respect to others we have learned from him.

I will take you back to my former point, that of asking questions after lectures. As I said, we were not always able to ask questions during the lecture, so we walked very often with prof. Nasr to the room of teachers or to another location. What I liked about those discussions was the patience of prof. Nasr. He took all the time to listen to us and to answer us, and to give us tips to read more books or articles.

One of those times I asked him: what is your scientific project generally? He laughed (not sarcastic) en he said: "well, if you want to call it a project, then it is at -turath w at- ta'wil (heritage / legacy and interpretation)". I have read most of the works of prof. Nasr and in all of them these two terms are indeed the themes of his writings. Using the most modern methods, he tried to redefine and explain the heritage and tried to renew our concepts.



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Finally I want to end with some words / sentences which prof. Nasr often said:

- *The Islamic heritage is not one but more than one*
- *We have not yet studied the Islamic legacy critically*
- *If you are afraid of making mistakes, you will never get forward*
- *Any text does not give itself an authority, that is what people do*
- *I learn from my students*
- *I work in the kitchen, my books are the meal*

And the last one:

I AM A TEACHER OF YOUNG PEOPLE (ana mu'allemu sibya)



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A Humanistic Interpretation of the Qur'an?¹

Peter Derkx

The presence of great numbers of Muslims in Europe, including The Netherlands, makes it no longer appropriate to view Islam as a non-Western religion. Naturally, Muslims, too, are people who adapt their identity and culture – including their religion – to their circumstances, and simultaneously try to turn these circumstances to their advantage. The fact that Muslims have become ever more visible in The Netherlands has led to public debate on a variety of topics: on forms of cremation and burial, ritual slaughter, honour killing, headscarves, marriage migration and, at the same time, on more abstract questions in the background, for instance the separation of church and state, cultural relativism and the multicultural society.² Over the past few years – and especially since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the appearance of Pim Fortuyn and the murder of Theo van Gogh – Islam itself has become subject of discussion.³ Pim Fortuyn called Islam a backward religion; authors like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Herman Philipse, Paul Cliteur and Afshin Ellian opened a head-on attack on ‘the’ Islam. The following may serve as an example. In response to the objectionable statements by Rotterdam imam Khalil el-Moumni on homosexuality as a pathological deviation, Cliteur, former chairman of the Dutch Humanist Association, states that Muslims view the revealed will of God as the fundamental touchstone of morality. He continues: by reasoning in rigid consistency with this starting point they arrive at the most abhorrent moral points of view. Thus, Cliteur states, they resemble Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac, because God ordered him to do so. This may be consistent from El-Moumni’s point of view, but not, in my view, from the position of a humanist assessing El-Moumni’s claims. What Cliteur obviously forgets here is that a humanist adheres to the position that someone who thinks (s)he must do the will of God, is still, in fact, responsible for what (s)he decides to do. This is not just because humanists attribute personal responsibility to all human beings, whether they wish to carry that responsibility or not. It is also because it is impossible to draw practical consequences from God’s will without being responsible, as a human being, for a certain image of God, a specific theory about and interpretation of divine revelation, just to mention a few points. A humanist, therefore, does not accept El-Moumni hiding behind the will of God. El-Moumni interprets this will. He interprets ‘the’ Islam, just as Cliteur does in his turn. Referring to the views of Abdoellah

¹ The Dutch original of this chapter was published in Duyndam, Poorthuis and de Wit (eds.) 2005: 265-278. That Dutch text was in its turn a written elaboration of the contribution to the debate on Abu Zayd’s inaugural address at Utrecht on May 28, 2004. This chapter is a translation of the 2005 text, with an addition in note 20 and one correction immediately after that note. Translation: Joop Hoekstra.

² Derkx 2004.

³ Fortuyn and Haselhof 2001.



Haselhof and El-Moumni about homosexuality Cliteur writes that they are the 'real Muslims'.

'Liberal Muslims (like Professors Arkoun and Abu Zayd)' are, as Cliteur believes, 'a negligible minority ... The majority of Muslims really believes what is written in the Qur'an'.⁴ Ayaan Hirsi Ali reasons along exactly the same lines in her open letter to Amsterdam mayor Job Cohen in *Trouw* of 6 March 2004.

How do Cliteur and Hirsi Ali know who are the *real* Muslims? How do they know what the Qur'an *really* says? On important points, the disputes among Muslims about the interpretation of the Qur'an are extremely vivid.⁵ Quite haughtily, Cliteur and Hirsi Ali push problems of interpretation and hermeneutics aside. In that sense they are fundamentalists in their own right. In fact, they do not seem truly interested in a serious dialogue with Muslims, because they already know what 'true' Muslims think. They do not appear prepared to test their generalizations in relation to the views expressed by Muslims as discussion partners – or hardly so. They ignore publications, discussions and disputes in Islamic circles about the meaning of Islam. Not only do they ignore the efforts and activities of many Muslim intellectuals, but also of organizations such as Ihsan (the Islamic Institute for Social Activation), the Dutch Muslim Women's Organization Al Nisa and the Yoesuf Foundation. The developments inside the Milli Görüs organization are also worth noting.⁶ There is movement in many areas. Authors like Cliteur and Hirsi Ali, as atheists, intervene in a debate about what is the best or most correct interpretation of Islam and then choose to put down Islam in its least open form as the real Islam. As a humanist, I do wish to take the discussion about the interpretation of Islam among Muslims seriously and in this article I will do so by responding to the inaugural lecture of Nasr Abu Zayd, my colleague at the University of Humanistic Studies, held on 27 May 2004. This address was titled *Rethinking the Qur'an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics* and focuses on the human aspect of the Qur'an. Abu Zayd himself writes that this text is a follow-up to the address delivered in Leiden on 27 November 2000, in acceptance of the Cleveringa chair there. This earlier lecture was called *The Qur'an: God and Man in Communication*. In this article I will first restate some of the important points from the Leiden inaugural lecture. Next, I will similarly discuss the 2004 inaugural lecture at the University of Humanistic Studies. In my conclusion I will comment on both lectures, concentrating on the relation between humanism and Islam. In his inaugural lectures Abu Zayd does not only speak of the Qur'an, but for instance also about the *Sunnah*

⁴ Cliteur2002: 87.

⁵ Van Bommel et al. 2003: 25-48; Abu Zayd 2004.

⁶ Van Westerloo 2004.



(the normative teachings and practices of the prophet Muhammad), the *Hadith* (the stories ascribed to the prophet Muhammad), the consensus (*idjmaa*) among the *Ulama* (Islamic religious scholars) and the *qiyas* (deductive analogies). Naturally, these sources of Islam are also important for Qur'an interpretation, but here I will primarily focus on the Qur'an itself, as the source highest in authority.

The communication between God and human beings

In his Leiden address, Abu Zayd tells us that the word 'Qur'an' derives from the verb *qua'ra*, to recite, to declaim aloud and by heart. The prophet Muhammad (appr. 570-632)⁷ first received the texts of the Qur'an through communication or inspiration by the Holy Spirit, and afterwards recited them to his companions. They were not written down for a long time. Also after that, until the invention of book printing, the Qur'an was not normally considered a written text. Even in the daily life of Muslims today, it is felt that the Qur'an is first of all a text which is recited, sung or listened to. The important aesthetic and ceremonial significance of the Qur'an is primarily bound up with being heard rather than read. For Muslims the Qur'an is the word of God, as revealed to the prophet Muhammad in clear Arabic over a period of 23 years. This description, uncontested among Muslims, has three important elements in it: the word of God, the Qur'an, and *wahy*, i.e. revelation or inspiration. It may look as if these three concepts are treated as synonymous phrases in modern Islamic speech, but in classical Islamic theology they differ in meaning, as the linguistic usage in the Qur'an reflects.

Is the *word of God* the eternal and infinite content of the Qur'an, expressed in that text in human language, with its limitations and temporary nature? Or is the linguistic expression part of the word of God? To conceive of God as availing himself of human language calls up many difficult theological issues, lively debated more than a thousand years ago by the Mu'tazilites, the Hanbalites and the Ash'arites. The teachings of the Hanbalites, according to which both the contents and the language of the Qur'an are divine and eternal, have become predominant after centuries of fierce debate and political conflicts in the history of Islam.

Wahy refers to the vertical communication process by which the word of God reached mankind. According to the Qur'an itself, sura 42: verse 51, man can receive the word of God in three ways only: by inspiration (non-verbal communication); by listening in the way of Moses to God speaking from behind a partition such as a bramble bush or

⁷ In this article the Christian calendar is used.



a mountain; or via a messenger like the angel Djibril (Gabriel), who, with the consent of God, reveals what God wants through inspiration. In the latter manner the *Qur'an* was revealed to Muhammad. The *Qur'an* is the definitive confirmation of earlier revelations by God to mankind (particularly the Jewish Tanakh and the Christian New Testament). *Qur'an* and revelation thus do not coincide.

What does it mean that the *Qur'an* repeatedly emphasizes that it was revealed in *clear Arabic*? According to the *Qur'an* God chose the prophet Muhammad to communicate His message to his people. According to the *Qur'an* Islam is not a new religion communicated to Muhammad to preach to the Arabs, but it is essentially the same message preached by all prophets since the beginning of the world. In the *Qur'an* all prophets are considered to be Muslims. Islam is the absolute submission of the self to God, Lord of the universe. Repeatedly the *Qur'an* emphasizes, as in sura 2: verse 112, that: 'whoever submits his whole self to God and is a doer of good, he will get his reward with his Lord; on such shall be no fear nor shall they grieve'; see also 5: 69.⁸

Although intended for all people, the message in the *Qur'an* is expressed in the Arabic language – in a poetic variant of Muhammad's own Quraish dialect, because God always takes into account the language of the people to whom he sends a messenger (sura 14: verse 4). As a matter of fact, not only did the Arabic of Muhammad's time in part determine the meaning of the *Qur'an*, the *Qur'an* in turn also in part determined the later development of the Arabic language.

Following Abu Zayd we may conclude that the *Qur'an* is one of the manifestations of the word of God, revealed by inspiration to the prophet Muhammad through the intervention of the angel Djibril. We may thus differentiate between four aspects of the *Qur'an*, i.e. its source, its content, its language and its structure. The divine nature of the *Qur'an* is limited to its source. The content, however, is strongly tied up with the language in which the *Qur'an* was written down and that language is obviously culturally and historically determined. If the divine content of God's word is expressed in human language, then the language represents the essentially human dimension of the holy scriptures in general and the *Qur'an* in particular.

Clearly, the *structure of the Qur'an* also shows a human dimension, according to Abu Zayd. The *Qur'an* was not revealed to Muhammad all at once, but in parts. The various portions in which the *Qur'an* was disclosed, often correspond to needs and questions in the community. 'They are

⁸ Abu Zayd's references to the *Qur'an* are to the chapter's number according to the Cairo edition followed by the verse(s) number(s). The translation from the *Qur'an* into English is by Abu Zayd himself, using the A. Yusuf Ali translation as his starting point.



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asking you' is a phrase repeatedly found in the Qur'an, for instance related to wine or gambling, orphan girls, dietary regulations and the spoils of warfare. By answering questions of this kind the legalizing aspect of the Qur'an was gradually phrased, with the word of God answering questions the mind of Muhammad's contemporaries.

Abu Zayd writes that the process of canonization of the Qur'an also shows evidence of human influence on the way in which the word of God reached, and still reaches, humankind. The first act of canonization of the Qur'an was the codification of the official text of the entire Qur'an during the reign (644 – 656) of the third Caliph, Uthman. Because in early Arabic script, with only consonants used, this did not guarantee a uniform rendition by a long shot, the missing vowels were added later on and consonants of (nearly) the same form were differentiated with the help of signs. The Uthmanic canonization involved another important intervention. The numerous traditional fragments of the revelation, big and small, were not put in chronological order, but combined into 114 longer or shorter parts, called suras, and then ordered according to their size, the longer ones first. The human influence which Abu Zayd implies here, was expressed by Leemhuis as follows:

'The precise reasons why certain parts were combined into longer suras can no longer be traced. It is clear, however, that considerations of chronology, content or outward form (rhyme!) played a role. It remains unclear what ultimately determined the adoption of a certain part in a certain sura. In a number of cases it is quite probable that parts were inserted somewhere at random for lack of a better place to put them.'⁹

As Abu Zayd writes, it is clear that this art of reorganizing the text partially destroys the motivation behind and historical context of each fragment of the revelation. The semantic structure of the Qur'an will thus lose part of its relation to the original reality in which it was brought forth. The original content of the word of God in its unknown absoluteness, in other words, before it was expressed in Arabic, is divine and holy, but that does not hold true for its expression in language. The Qur'an which we read today cannot be identical to the eternal word of God.

The meeting between Muhammad and the angel Djibril in which (from a chronological perspective) the first five verses of the Qur'an (96: 1-5) were revealed, is the model of communication between man and God, a model also incorporated in various rituals. In the meeting mentioned Mu-

⁹Leemhuis 2000: 61.



hammad is ordered by Djibril to recite, but it is not clear at first what he must recite. Eventually, Muhammad understands that he must recite what the angel passes on to him. Next it becomes clear to him that recitation in the name of God is most important of all. The mysterious content which he is to recite – inspired by God through Djibril – remains implicit until he is reciting it. Only the voice of Muhammad, after he was spoken to or inspired, turns recognizable and explicit in human language. Through the human activity of the recital the word of God is humanized. In the inspired recitation Muhammad finds himself in the existential sphere between God and man. Entering this sphere and remaining there is a time-bound activity, in which the meeting of God and man has a beginning and an ending. *Wahy* thus implies a time-bound communication process between God and man in which only the voice of a human being externalizes God's word and makes it explicit.

Something similar is also true for a Muslim who recites the Qur'an in an inspired mood, speaking from the heart. One of the five religious duties of any Muslim is the ritual prayer session (*salah*), which has to be undertaken five times a day, preferably in a group. Reciting the Qur'an is the heart of the *salah*. The *salah* can be seen as a daily communication channel between the believer and God, parallel to the one between Muhammad and God through which the Qur'an was disclosed. This is the more acceptable if we take into account that the first meeting between Muhammad, Djibril and God was not just a matter of recitation but also of listening. Before reciting, Muhammad was ordered to listen with care. In Muslim prayer, the reciting of the Qur'an must be matched with careful listening to what is being recited and what is revealed in it. For this reason, the Qur'an must be recited in a voice that is neither too soft nor too loud. If too loud, this would harm the listening aspect.

Reciting and listening to the Qur'an do not only play a role in the *salah*, but also in the *Hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca), during the *Ramadan* (the yearly month of fasting), in the obligatory weekly Friday prayers and in numerous situations in daily life, such as birth, marriage and death, in greetings, in calling out the name of a deceased person, in hushing a crying child, at the beginning and end of meals, a journey or whatsoever else. In this way reciting the Qur'an represents an atmosphere of communication between God and human being for each single Muslim, each Muslim community and the whole Muslim world. Formulae and phrases from the Qur'an thus make out a natural part of the daily life and speech of Muslims throughout the world.



According to Abu Zayd, the vision of the Qur'an which is dominant in the entire Muslim world is the following – and Zayd states emphatically that by this he does not imply the views of radical Islamists, but the generally accepted views among Muslims:

'As a word from God, the Qur'an is the foundation of the Muslim life. It provides to him the way to fulfilment in the world beyond and to happiness in the present one. There is for him no situation imaginable for which it does not afford guidance, a problem for which it does not have a solution. It is the ultimate source of all truth, the final vindication of all right, the primary criterion of all values, and the original basis of all authority. Both public and private affairs, religious and secular, fall under its jurisdiction'.¹⁰

This dominant view is probably one of the most important causes of the polarized conflict which we are watching in the entire Muslim World today. Secularists, following the blueprint of Western points of view, propagate the absolute separation of Islam from the greater world, Islamists try to indoctrinate a badly informed population with slogans such as 'Islam is the solution' and 'Islam is scientifically superior'. In an ideological framework of this kind it is impossible to think rationally or act reasonably.

What the Qur'an represents for Muslims, so Abu Zayd, is neither the islamization of life as a whole, nor the absolute separation of religion from life. The separation of religion and state is essential, but that does not mean that religion only plays a secondary role in social life. The Qur'an as a mode of communication between God and human being teaches us something – so Abu Zayd – beyond 'laws' and 'politics' in the narrow sense of the words. If we interpret the Qur'an literally and canonize the Arabic words in which it was revealed, says Abu Zayd, we lock up the word of God in the historical moment in which it was announced. Such a position induces us to restrict the Qur'an to the first phase of its historical construction, whereas we should be conscious of the dynamics and the way in which the Qur'an has been able to shape the life of Muslims.¹¹ An awareness of the essentially historical character of all religious language can protect us from total immersion in that language against indoctrination and the loss of our human identity. On the other hand we need to understand that we do not hold our identity as human beings in our own, autonomous hands, or that this identity is fully detached from other forms of life on earth or in the universe. Our identity as human beings is divine, as much as the fact that

¹⁰ Abu Zayd quotes from Labib as-Said, *The Recited Koran: A History of the First Recorded Version*, translated and adapted by Bernard Weiss, M. A. Rauf and Morroe Berger (Princeton, 1975): 11.

¹¹ According to a 2004 report by the Islamic University of Europe an important question in interpreting the Qur'an is '*whether an ideal status quo had already been reached at the time of the prophet or whether the Qur'an and the practical example of the prophet only indicated a direction, as it were, on a road which must be travelled by all succeeding generations.*' (Abdellah e.a. 2004: 2) It is clear that Abu Zayd's view accords more with the latter option.



the Divine identity is made human by our observation of it. The Qur'an model outlined by Abu Zayd of the meeting between God and man is well-presented, he says, in the philo-phico-mystical system of the great Andalusian mystic Ibn al-Arabi who lived from 1165 to 1240.

The communication between human beings about the word of God

In his inaugural lecture at the University for Humanistic Studies Abu Zayd, as he himself writes, develops the human aspect of the Qur'an one step further. He now focuses in more depth on what he calls the human aspect of the horizontal dimension of the Qur'an. With 'the horizontal dimension of the Qur'an' he does not only refer to the gradual preaching of the Qur'an's message by Muhammad, the canonization of the Qur'an or the dissemination of its message by means of the corpus of interpretational literature. Abu Zayd implies here the horizontal dimension embedded in the structure of the Qur'an itself, appearing in all clarity during the process in which the Qur'an was revealed. We can only become aware of this horizontal dimension if we change the frame of reference for interpreting the Qur'an and no longer see the Qur'an as a closed written 'text' but as living 'discourse', a 'discussion'.¹² It increases the possibilities of interpretation and re-interpretation if, under the influence of a literary approach, we view the Qur'an as an autonomous text, but it also makes it possible for it to be manipulated in its meaning and structure.

Recently, Abu Zayd writes, I started to realize how the view of the Qur'an as a text reduces its status and denies the fact that the Qur'an today still functions as a 'discussion', an 'exchange of thoughts'. The Qur'an as written text has an enormous influence on Islamic views and cultures, but if we cast our eyes, not on the elite, but on the masses, it is rather the recited Qur'an, and the one listened to, the Qur'an as 'discussion' or 'discussions' which plays the determining role in culture and public life. To arrive at a democratic, humanistic hermeneutics it is not enough that intellectuals, in debate amongst themselves, place passages of the Qur'an in their historical context again and then interpret them in the context of today. Because the Qur'an is closely associated with the 'meaning of life' of millions of people, it is important to return the power over the meaning of the Qur'an to the community of believers, the Ummah. The diversity of religious meanings is part of our human diversity. To link the Qur'an once again to existential questions it is necessary to take it anew for what it is, a continuing conversation, a body of dialogues and debates, of addition, acceptance and

¹² In his lecture Abu Zayd is not too consistent in his use of the word 'discourse', which plays such an important role in his argumentation. The central element in its meaning seems to be that of '(part of an oral) discussion', between different parties and so multi-interpretable. The nature of the discussion may range from a friendly conversation to a verbal political dispute.



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rejection, not just of pre-Islamic norms, practices and cultures, but also of preliminary judgments, presuppositions, claims, etc. Islamic legal experts who rely on the hermeneutic principle that later revelations nullify earlier ones, do not understand mutually conflicting stipulations in the Qur'an can be a positive phenomenon, a diversity which must be kept open as a body of options for the community of believers confronted with an ever changing social order. Theologians and philosophers, too, with their dichotomy of clear versus ambiguous passages in the Qur'an, with the former taking priority over the latter, have no eye for democratic diversity and openness. They think that it is clear without discussion which are the transparent passages and which the opaque, but above all they assume that there can only be a single interpretation which is the right one for all times and places.

The Qur'an recited in the liturgy, in daily life, in social, political or moral disputes, brings with it a certain interpretation reflected in the way it is intoned and applied. The Qur'an is a living phenomenon, much like the music played by an orchestra. The text determined by canonization is like a silent musical score, and no more. To pretend as if this equals the music of the Qur'an is manipulation and abuse of power. The Qur'an must be brought to life. In the eyes of Abu Zayd, the hermeneutics of Ibn al-Arabi and other Sufis would appear to offer the best point of departure for an open, democratic hermeneutics in Islamic culture. The Sufis assume that the Qur'an has different levels of meaning; levels which refer to one another and are not mutually conflicting. Moreover, the Sufis' hermeneutics keeps the Qur'an accessible for all believers, regardless of their education and intellectual powers.

According to Abu Zayd large parts of the Qur'an are reflections and even fragments of discussions, negotiations and conflicts such as took place in Muhammad's time between Muslims among themselves, between Muslims and Arabic polytheists and between Muslims and other monotheists (Arabic Jews and Christians). These discussions, negotiations and conflicts are partly described in detail in the Qur'an and partly left implicit. For a good interpretation of the Qur'an it is thus not only necessary to give meaning to the text in the context of other Qur'an passages but also in the context of historical circumstances and developments which are not described in the Qur'an but which are still organically a part of the book. Furthermore, Abu Zayd states that it is self-evident in his view that recommendations or stipulations from the Qur'an, which served as input to a discussion, negotiation or conflict in the patriarchal Arab cul-



ture of the 7th century need not always be maintained in a (late) modern environment. The Qur'an in itself contains diverging clues and suggestions, which reflect the various contexts in which it came into existence. In addition, there is something else of importance. In the 7th century there were historical developments which the Qur'an responds to, but time has not stopped since then. The Qur'an, in part, provides answers to questions of people from the 7th century, but readers from the 21st century do not live out of time or context either. The Qur'an can be of much significance in modern days, in a society in which the state and organizations embodying worldviews are strictly separated but then it must be read with (late) modern people in mind¹³. For (late) modern persons reading the Qur'an it is important to solve problems of interpretation by themselves through *ijtihad* (personal efforts and independent rational judgment). This fully legitimate practice from the first centuries of Islam ought to be restored. It is disgraceful, so Abu Zayd, to claim that there was enough reflection by wise Muslims in the past, making it unnecessary to undertake this today.¹⁴ Important starting point in all of this should be, and here Abu Zayd follows Muhammad Abdu, that the Qur'an is not a history book, nor a work of science, nor a political handbook, but a book which points out a spiritual and moral direction to people.¹⁵

A humanistic hermeneutics?

Abu Zayd subtitled his inaugural lecture at the University of Humanistic Studies: *Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics*. Is it justified to call the manner of interpreting outlined here humanistic? Abu Zayd's reflection on the interpretation of the Qur'an brings the human aspect to the forefront and in that sense we have an undeniable case of humanistic hermeneutics here. When Abu Zayd points out the human aspect, he does so primarily as a scientist, as a scholar trying to achieve objectivity. If we think reasonably about the Qur'an and how it should be interpreted, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that there are a number of human aspects to it. Because the Qur'an, through centuries of Islamic tradition, attained such an unassailable, absolute and divine status for many Muslims that the idea never arises that they might critically reflect on it, it is important that these human aspects of the Qur'an are emphasized and made visible. That Abu Zayd does just that, does not make him the lesser Muslim. He uses arguments which must appeal to any right-minded person striving for the truth and in this he harks back to important Islamic thinkers. These are first of all philosophers of the first ages of Islam, before the Hanbalistic vision on the Qur'an had become the overriding tradition,

¹³ Cf. a few interesting passages in Abu Zayd & Nelson 2004: 60 and 100.

¹⁴ Abu Zayd 2004: 27, 36, 45, 47, 48, 50, 57 and 59. See also the reprint in this book. Abu Zayd finds himself in the company of predecessors like Shah Wali Allah, Refa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Abdu. Also cf. Abu Zayd 1996: 51.

¹⁵ Abu Zayd 2004: 58.



and on the other hand scholars from the Islamic reform movements which developed from the 18th century onwards. The human aspect which Abu Zayd points out converges in the insight that all meaning attached by Muslims to (passages from) the Qur'an in past and present results from human interpretation (*tafseer, ta'weel*). Interpretation is inevitable and therefore hermeneutics (the theory and practice of interpretation) cannot but be important. Muslims who claim to have direct access to the truth embedded in the Qur'an and categorically deny that they interpret the Qur'an, evidently do not feel the need for hermeneutics.¹⁶ Taken in this sense, 'humanistic hermeneutics' is a pleonasm.

There is not a single finding in the Qur'an with a unique and transparent meaning disengaged from human interpretation. For the Arabic sentences in the Qur'an, too, the insight from general linguistics holds true that no single linguistic utterance taken by itself has only one unique meaning. Context decides which interpretation is adequate. This brings us to a second important scientific insight valid for the interpretation of texts, be it *Medea*, the Bible, the Qur'an, *King Lear* or *The Pickwick Papers*. A text (passage) can only be interpreted correctly if its context is taken into account. Any text passage must be interpreted in the light of the text surrounding it and ultimately of the text as a whole. But there are many other types of context. A text can only be interpreted well if the reader or listener knows the language in which it is spoken or written (or translated). This is self-evident. But as Renaissance humanist Lorenzo Valla already emphasized, language is also liable to change. The context of a text also entails that the reader or listener has knowledge of the language as it was used at the moment that text was originally created. A correct interpretation of a text, however, does not only take into account the context of the text as it was produced at one time, but also the context in which the text is recited, read or listened to. The language of the listener or reader can be very different from the language of the original speaker or writer, even if both have a good command of what is termed 'the same' language. The language of Shakespeare (15th/16th century) is very different from the language of Jane Austen (19th century), which again differs from the English of Iris Murdoch (20th century). Interpretation not only fails if the language of the original text is not known, but also if there is insufficient command of the language of the reader or listener. Added to this is the fact that it is not enough for a proper understanding of the text just to know the linguistic context. This element again calls forth a whole series of other contexts. Language is used to communicate about mankind, society, culture and the

¹⁶ Waardenburg 2002: 116.



world and without knowledge of the extra-linguistic context of both the text itself and of the one who produced or produces the text and the one who listens to the text or reads it, interpretation often goes astray. An important claim of Abu Zayd is that the Qur'an at the time of the prophet Muhammad played its role in the midst of discussions, negotiations and conflicts as they unfolded over a period of more than 20 years and that the Qur'an, again and again, (received and) receives its meaning for listeners and readers in the context of discussions, negotiations and conflicts in which they (were and) are involved. The Qur'an is not a text in isolation but a text enclosed, then and now, in a dynamic world in which it may have great significance for humans.¹⁷

The fact that the meaning of a Qur'an passage is always a matter of human interpretation, and that knowledge of the context, in its many senses, is required for a proper interpretation, also makes it clear that Muslims and Islamic authorities who evoke the Qur'an and Allah as legitimization of their views and actions, still have to justify themselves towards their fellow human beings. The more violence is used by a group of people to keep the meaning of the Qur'an outside the realm of discussion, the more it looks as if that group wishes to appropriate the authority of Allah and to use the Qur'an for private human interests. In this light I understand Abu Zayd's remark, that the Qur'an is about the 'meaning of life' for millions of people and that it is therefore important to give the power over the meaning of the Qur'an back to the community of believers and to see the diversity of religious meanings in the Qur'an as part of our human diversity. This diversity does not pose a threat, but rather harbours a great value in an ever changing world. The position chosen – also appearing from other remarks made by Abu Zayd – can be called humanistic, because it emphasizes the unity of mankind and the solidarity of all people as equals. It can be taken as a position of resistance against elitist, undemocratic claims to power and as a stand for the human dignity of *all* people¹⁸.

Because the human character of each interpretation is argued with the help of strong and valid reasoning we can speak of a humanistic hermeneutics and a humanistic Islam here in a deeply fundamental sense. However, it is a good idea not just to look at similarities, but also at the differences between the group of people who explicitly call themselves 'humanists' and those who call themselves 'Muslims'. An important point in the Qur'an is the way in which the person of Jesus of Nazareth (Isa) is discussed. Abu Zayd focuses on this figure with some emphasis. It is quite remarkable that Ibrahim (Abraham), Musa (Moses) and Isa are

¹⁷ In the context of this article it is no more than an aside, but the central claim made by Abu Zayd in his inaugural lecture is that it is important for a good understanding of the Qur'an that it is not to be taken as 'nothing but a text' nor that it is enough to understand the text in its context. According to Abu Zayd it is essential to interpret the Qur'an as *discourse*, a discussion. In the end I do not understand this claim and so cannot agree with it. I can, however, agree to the idea – and maybe this is what he intends – that for a correct understanding it is essential to take the context seriously in all the meanings of that term. This implies that one should not lose from sight that text passages in the Qur'an were, and are, very often part of a discussion in a historical setting.

¹⁸ Cf. Waardenburg 2002: 130



important prophets according to the Qur'an, bearers of a word of God, predecessors to Muhammad. Muslims and humanists seem to be able to agree on the status of Jesus¹⁹.

Both for Muslims and for many humanists Jesus of Nazareth was an exceptionally exemplary man, but he remains a human being who must not be deified and who is thus imperfect and mortal. For both Muslims and humanists Jesus is not God nor the son of God. Of course, it is easier for Muslims than it is for Christians to reject the divine status of Jesus, but Muhammad, too, remains a human being in the Qur'an. In practice the status of Muhammad is so high and

unimpeachable that he approaches the divine status, but the Qur'an is clear in stating that Muhammad is a human being who makes mistakes (Sura 80: verses 1-10) and his mortality is certain. Different from the case of Jesus there is no mention of a rising from the dead or resurrection of Muhammad (other than the rising from the grave of all dead people on Judgment Day).

But what do humanists think of Muhammad as the 'messenger of God' and about the Qur'an as the 'word of God'? In section 4 of his inaugural lecture at the University of Humanistic Studies Abu Zayd writes that there is no discussion about the fact that the Qur'an is the 'speech of God'. I will assume that Abu Zayd, in his writings about Islam, is so used to addressing an audience of Muslims (or of religious scholars who empathize with Muslims) that this must be a 'slip of the keyboard'²⁰. There are around one billion Muslims and that is a great many, but there are even more people who are no Muslims and for whom the Qur'an is only 'the word of God' inasmuch as they put themselves in the position of a Muslim. Here we encounter a difference between many of the people in The Netherlands in 2005 who call themselves 'humanists' and those who call themselves Muslims. For humanists the main point is what is human and common to us all; particular worldviews come second place.²¹ Many humanists know that God is very important, if not the most important aspect in life for a Muslim, but they have no idea of what further to imagine with regard to God. We have seen earlier that the message of Islam is basically the same as the one preached by all prophets since the world's beginning, that the Qur'an views all prophets as Muslims, that Islam is the total submission of the self to God and that the Qur'an reads that 'whoever submits his whole self to God and is a doer of good, he will get his reward with his Lord; on such shall be no fear nor shall they grieve' (2: 112). The absolute submission of the self to good and doing what is good in the conviction that this is ultimately what is best for all people:

¹⁹ Cf. e.g. Pos 1947

²⁰ In the discussion following his inaugural address at the University of Humanistic Studies, on 28 May 2004, he confirmed this, as far as I have gathered. See also section 1. 2-1 of his Leiden inaugural lecture: 'The Qur'an is the Word of God. About this doctrine there has never been disagreement *among Muslims* throughout the centuries' (italics by PD).

²¹ Cf. e.g. Leo Polak in a radio speech of 1931: 'Wake up to the one, verily true truth and reality, valid for all – to the light of eternity *within you*, one in us all – to the universal, the truly *catholic*, that is to say *absolutely valid*, not merely roman, or jewish, or protestant, or muslim, but *human ratio and reason*, to universal, not merely roman, or jewish, or protestant, or muslim *love and justice*.' (Polak 1947: 107).



all of this is endorsed by many humanists as much as by Muslims. What is different then, if God is added? That is what many humanists fail to understand. In a dialogue on the philosophy of life between Muslims and humanists this question is one of the most important ones for many humanists.

A lot of people in The Netherlands calling themselves humanists are atheists in the sense that they do not take the existence of a 'God' into consideration in the daily practice of their lives, inasmuch as they understand what is meant by that expression (which is often not that much). But at the same time these humanists mostly attempt to strive to be good towards themselves and others, and to live morally responsible lives, for example by acting justly.

Both the words of Abu Zayd and various passages in the Qur'an make me wonder what the Qur'an means by the term 'unbelievers'. The fate held out as prospect to 'unbelievers' is dreadful, but who are the 'unbelievers'? On the one hand there are no passages in the Qur'an – as far as I know – which make clear that, by the term 'unbelievers', atheists in the modern sense are intended. They did not seem to exist in 7th century Arabia. When the Qur'an speaks of 'unbelievers', usually polytheists are meant, and sometimes monotheists of other faiths, for instance Christians who believe Jesus to be (the son of) God²². On the other hand it is quite dramatic how often 'believing' and 'doing right' are found together in the Qur'an. So often in fact that they appear to be almost the same. In Sura 5: verse 85 God's reward is mentioned for believers who do good: eternally to reside in gardens underneath which rivers flow. How then, according to the Qur'an, ought the attitude of Muslims to be versus humanists who do not understand what is meant by 'God', but who, in the practice of their daily lives, truly do their utmost to do good?

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²² Cf. Abu Zayd towards the end of his Utrecht inaugural address.



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Rethinking the Qur'ân: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics¹

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Introduction

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. The history of the world culture tells us that the wave of civilization was probably born somewhere around the basin of rivers, probably in black Africa, Egypt or Iraq, before it moved to Greece, then returned to the Middle East in the form of Hellenism. With the advent of Islam, a new culture emerged absorbing and reconstructing the Hellenistic as well as the Indian and Iranian cultural elements before it was handed to the Western New World via Spain and Sicily.

Shall I mention here the name of the Muslim philosopher Ibn Rushd, known as Averroes in the Latin environment and the importance of his writings in constructing synthesis of both the Aristotelian and the Islamic legacies, thus, transfusing new intellectual light to the European dark ages?

I would like to take the opportunity to express my gratitude to the Humanist Foundation 'Socrates', the Humanist Development Organization, HIVOS, and the Board of Governors of the University of Humanistics for the very significant initiative to establish an Academic Chair for Islam and Humanism in the Arabic name 'Ibn Rushd' instead of the Latin Averroes. I am so honored to be the first scholar to occupy the Chair, and in the vein of Ibn Rushd's thought I hope not only to present my lecture today, but more to contribute to the process of building solid bridges between Islam and Humanism.

Why is it now so vital for Muslims to rethink the Qur'ân? Besides the present context of Western Islamophobia, especially after the trauma of September 11th and the aftermath terrorism operations everywhere in the Muslim as well as the non-Muslim World, which reduced Islam to be radical, violent and exclusive, one should emphasize the importance of this invitation to 'rethink the Qur'ân' for Muslims in general, and for Muslims living in Europe in particular. I am not here claiming any missionary task to formulate a specific Islam, but rather situating my hermeneutical position. The process of 'rethinking tradition' as well as negotiating the 'meaning' of the Qur'ân in the Muslim World has been, how-

¹ This is the re-edited text of Nasr Abu Zayd's inaugural lecture, addressed 27 May 2004, on the occasion of his accepting the Ibn Rushd chair of Humanism and Islam at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, The Netherlands. This inaugural lecture was originally published with SWP-book in Amsterdam, and re-published here with the kind permission of SWPbook. The editors would like to express their gratitude to Peter Derkx and Abdelilah Ljamai for their help revising and editing this text.



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ever, an ongoing development since the eighteenth century. I would like to argue not only for the continuation of this process of rethinking but for moving it further toward a constructive method for Muslims, wherever they are, to be actively engaged in formulating the 'meaning of life' in the world in which they live.

In the year 2000 I was honored with the Cleveringa rotated Chair of Law, Freedom and Responsibility, especially Freedom of Religion and Conscience by the Chair's curatorium at the University of Leiden. In my inaugural lecture on Monday 27 November 2000, exactly three and a half years ago, I presented the concept of the Qur'ân as a space of Divine and Human Communication. Under the title 'The Qur'ân: God and Man in Communication', I attempted a rereading, and therefore re-interpretation, of some basic principal assumptions contained in the classical disciplines, known as 'the sciences of the Qur'ân', *`ulûm al-Qur'ân* in Arabic, especially those sciences which deal with the nature of the Qur'ân, its history and its structure.

In such rereading, and re-interpretation, I employed some methodological apparatus, such as semantics, semiotics as well as historical criticism and hermeneutics that are not generally applied, nor appreciated, in the traditional Qur'ânic studies in the Muslim World. I focused in my analysis on the *Vertical* dimension of revelation, *wahy* in Arabic, i.e., the communicative process between God and the Prophet Muhammad that produced the Qur'ân. As these vertical communications, which lasted for more than 20 years, produced a multiplicity of discourses (in the form of verses, passages, short chapters) these discourses had a chronological order.

In the process of canonization, from which the canonized scripture emerged as *mushaf*, this chronological order was not preserved; it was replaced by what is now known as the 'recitation order' while the chronological is known as the 'decadence order'. According to the orthodox view, the Qur'ân was perfectly preserved in oral form from the beginning and was written down during Muhammad's lifetime or shortly thereafter when it was "collected" and arranged for the first time by his Companions. The complete consonantal text is believed to have been established during the reign of the third caliph, `Uthmân (644-56), and the final vocalized text in the early 4th/10th century. It is important, even if we uncritically adapt to the Orthodox view, to realize another human dimension present in this process of canonization, which entailed the early rearrangement and the late application of signs of vocalization to the only consonantal script.



Today, I would like to develop my thesis about the human aspect of the Qur'ân one further step, moving from the vertical dimension towards the *Horizontal* dimension of the Qur'ân. By the horizontal dimension I mean something more than the canonization, or what some other scholars identify as the act of the prophet's gradual propagation of the message of the Qur'ân after receiving it, or the spread of the message through the 'interpretive corpus', according to M. Arkoun. I do mean the *horizontal* dimension that is embedded in the structure of the Qur'ân and was manifest during the process of communication itself. This horizontal dimension could only be realized if we shift our conceptual framework from the Qur'ân as a 'text' to the Qur'ân as 'discourse'.

1- *The Qur'an as 'Discourse'*

Recently, Muhammad Arkoun and others² rightly distinguish between the phenomenon of the Qur'ân, the recited discourse, and the *Mushaf*, which contains what Arkoun identifies as the 'Closed Corpus' or Scripture through the process of canonization explained above, which transformed the recited discourse into scripture or a 'text'. Today I would like to bypass this historical moment of transformation known in the history of every religion. Since that historical moment Muslim scholars of the Qur'ân, though theoretically aware of the impact of this transformation and occasionally return back to the pre-text structure of the Qur'ân, never were able to recapture the living phenomenon, the Qur'ân as a 'discourse'.

Modern scholars of the Qur'ân share the concept of the Qur'ân as a 'text' despite the different paradigm of 'meaning' each tries to grasp and deduce from the Qur'ân. Dealing with the Qur'ân as only a 'text' enhances the possibilities of interpretation and reinterpretation but allows as well the ideological manipulation not only of the meaning but also of the 'structure', following the pattern of polemic interpretation of theologians.

I was one of the propagators of the textuality of the Qur'ân under the influence of the literary approach initiated by the modern, and still appreciated, literary approach³. I recently started to realize how dealing with the Qur'ân as a text alone reduces its status and ignores the fact that it is still functioning as a 'discourse' in everyday life.⁴ The volume entitled 'The Qur'ân as Text', which presents the proceedings of the symposium held in 1993 in the Oriental Seminar of the University of Bonn, enjoyed so many reprints⁵, because it introduces the shift to which Stefan Wild refers, at least in the

² See Muhammad Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam, common questions, uncommon answers*, translated by Robert D. Lee, Westview Press, 1994, pp. 35-40; *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, Saqi books & the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London 2002, p. 99. See for the views of Hasan Hanafi my *Naqd al-Khitâb al-Dîni* (Critique of Religious Discourse), Cairo, second edition, p. 187.

³ See for example my *Mafhûm al-Nass: drâsa fî 'ulûm al-Qur'ân* (The Concept of the Text: study in the Qur'anic sciences, Beirut and Casablanca, first published 1990, fourth reprint 1998 and other later publications. For more about the literary approach see my 'The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an', in *ALIF*, Journal of Comparative Poetics, the American University Cairo (AUC), No. 23, Literature and the Sacred, 2003, pp. 8-47.

⁴ I owe this realization to the research for writing a long article about 'the Qur'ân in Everyday Life' to the Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ân, Brill Leiden (henceforth EQ), vol. 2 (2002), pp. 80-98.

⁵ Stefan Wild (ed.), *EJ*, Brill, Leiden, first print 1996.



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Western Qur'ânic scholarship, from the paradigm of the 'genesis' of the Qur'ân, whether Jewish or Christian, to the paradigm of *textus receptus*.

It is true that the Qur'ânic *textus receptus*, the Qur'ân as a text contained in the *mushaf*, shaped and shapes the religious convictions of Muslims and is, more the central cultural text in so many Islamic cultures.⁶ But this is true only when we limit our definition of 'convictions' and 'cultures' to the high level, the 'convictions, and 'cultures' of the elite. On the lower level of 'cultures' and 'convictions, on the level of the masses, it is more the recited Qur'ân, the phenomenon of the Qur'ân as discourse, that plays the most important role in shaping the public consciousness.

For Muslim scholars the Qur'ân was always a text, from the moment of its canonization till now. It is time now to pay close attention to the Qur'ân as discourse or discourses. It is no longer sufficient to re-contextualize a passage or some passages when it is only needed to fight against literalism and fundamentalism or when it is needed to wave away 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'ân, without re-invoking its living status as a 'discourse', whether in the academia or in everyday life no democratic hermeneutics can be achieved. Why it has to be democratic? Because it is about 'meaning of life' it has to be democratically open hermeneutics. If we are sincere in freeing religious thought from power manipulation, whether political, social, or religious in order to return the formulation of 'meaning' back to the community of believers, we need to construct open democratic, humanistic hermeneutics.

The empirical diversity of the religious meaning is part of our human diversity around the meaning of life in general, which is supposed to be a positive value in our modern living context. In order to re-connect the question of the meaning of the Qur'ân to the question of the meaning of life it is now imperative to indicate the fact that the Qur'ân was the outcome of dialoguing, debating, augmenting, accepting and rejecting, not only with pre-Islamic norms, practice and culture, but with its own previous assessments, presupposition, assertions etc. It might be surprising to claim that in

⁶ Ibid., p. viii in the introduction.



the early Muslim era, before the Qur'ân was fully canonized, and definitely before Islam was fully institutionalized the differentiation between the Qur'ân, the still alive discourse, and the *mushaf*, the silent text, was explicated against an invitation to politicize the Qur'ân. This moment needs to be remembered.

2- *The Qur'ân versus the Mushaf: the spoken and the silent*

I would like here to start with a statement related to the Fourth caliph, `Alî, the cousin of Muhammad and his son-in-law, in which he described the *mushaf* as silent; it does not speak, but humans speak it out. The context in which this statement emerged is important, because it could shed a lot of light on the present situation in which the political manipulation of the meaning of the Qur'ân is hardly challenged

It was in the context of `Alî, the legally chosen Caliph, fighting against Mu`âwiyya, the governor of Syria who did not recognize `Alî's authority, in the battle of Siffin in 657. Mu`âwiyya's star seemed to be sinking, when his collaborator `Amr b. al-`Âs advised him to have his soldiers hoist copies of the Qur'ân on their lances. This gesture, famous in Muslim history, did not imply surrender; by this means Mu`âwiyya invited the combatants to resolve the question by consultation of the Qur'ân. Weary of fighting the two armies laid down their arms. `Alî was forced by his partisans to submit the difference to arbitration, as proposed by Mu`âwiyya, and further to choose the arbitrator for his side from among the "neutrals". So sure were his followers that they were in the right! In these decisions the *qurrâ'*, those who memorize the whole Qur'ân by heart and are the professional reciters, played a large part. The mission of the arbitrators was to consult the Qur'ân "from the first to the last sûra" and, in default of clear indications in the sacred Book, the sunna of the Prophet, excluding what might give rise to divergences. In the absence of a clear definition of subject of consultation, certain individuals had protested against recourse to arbitration with the cry *lâ hukma illâ li'llâh*, literally "no arbitrator but God". The phrase implied that it was absolutely improper to appeal to men for a decision since, for the case in dispute, there existed a divine ordinance in the Qur'ânic verse 49:8-9: "If two parties of the Believers fight with one another, make peace between them, but if one rebels (*baghat*) against the other, then fight against that one which rebels (*allatî tabghî*), until it returns to obedience to God ...". The dissidents maintained that it was `Alî's duty to continue to fight against Mu`âwiyya, as no new fact had intervened to alter the situation.⁷

⁷ Cf. article *`Alî b. Abû Tâlib*, the Encyclopedia of Islam, E. Brill (henceforth EI), Leiden, 2ed edition, vol. 1, p. 381ff.



In response to such a cry `Alî made the differentiation between the silent *mushaf*, the text, in one hand, and the vocalized Qur`ân by the people on the other hand. This statement of `Alî, which is heavily quoted by modernist Muslim scholars merely to indicate the multiple possibilities of interpretation, as well as the possibility of political manipulation of the Qur`ânic meaning, has more implications than has been realized. The vocalization of the Qur`ân, whether in liturgy, in everyday life, in any social, political or ethical dispute, carries with it certain mode of interpretation and re-interpretation by ways of intonation and appropriation.⁸ The Qur`ân is a living phenomenon, like the music played by the orchestra, whereas the *mushaf*, the written text, is analogous to the musical note; it is silent. A humanistic hermeneutics of the Qur`ân must take seriously the living phenomenon and stop reducing the Qur`ân to the status of *solely* a text.

The modern political Islamist movements whether radical or moderate agree on God's absolute authority in determining and stipulating the regulations of the detailed behavior of the individual as well as the laws that govern the society as a whole. In modern political hermeneutics such a claim of the absolute Divine source of legislation, is based on the similar claim of the protestors against arbitration. While the protestors of the seventh century cried 'no arbitrator but God' by interpreting the Qur`ânic vocabulary *yahkum* as to judge or arbitrate the modern political protestors understand the same word as to rule by way of legislation.

This political and ideological manipulation can also be found in the classical era of Islam. Based entirely on an explicit assertion that the Qur`ân is only a text, its manipulation continued.

3- The 'Text' Reconstructed and Manipulated

When I started to examine the different methods of interpretation applied to the Qur`ân as a 'text' in traditional Islamic theology in my first book (1982),⁹ I investigated the emergence of the concept of "metaphor" that was introduced to Arabic rhetoric at the beginning of the 9th century by the rationalist school of theology, known as the Mu'tazilites, through their effort to explain the anthropomorphic images of God in the Qur`ân, on the one hand, and the verses that seem to support a doctrine of "predestination", on the other. The Mu'tazilites employed the concept of "metaphor" as a linguistic tool to interpret those types of verses of the Qur`ân that they considered "ambiguous".

This forged a powerful instrument to interpret the Qur`ânic

⁸ For examples of different ways of intonations and appropriations of the Qur`ânic verses see the article 'Everyday life, Qur`ân in' EQ, vol. 11, op cited.

⁹ *Al-Ittijâh al-`aqlî fî 'l-Tafsîr: Dirâsa fî Qadiyat al-Majâz fî 'l-Qur`ân `nd 'l-Mu'tazila* (The Rational Trend in Qur`ânic Exegesis: investigation of the concept of 'metaphor' in the Qur`ân established by the Mu'tazilites), The Arabic Cultural Center, Casablanca and Beirut, first published in 1982 and so many reprints followed.



text according to the Mu'tazilites' transcendentalist standards: where it suited their ideas, the Qur'anic text was labeled "clear" and, therefore, not in need for metaphorical interpretation; where it did not, it was considered to be "ambiguous" and need to be interpreted metaphorically.

The main conclusion I have reached, after comparing the Mu'tazilites' and the anti-Mu'tazilites' discourses, was that the Qur'ân became the site of a fierce intellectual and political battle. That battle was sited at one of the most important junctures of the structure of the Qur'anic text (Qur'ân, 3:7).¹⁰ Both the Mu'tazilites and their opponents agree on the principle that the Qur'ân includes ambiguous verses as well as clear verses, and that the "clear" should furnish the norms for disambiguating the ambiguous. However, they disagree when it comes to practical implementation; thus, the controversy does not only revolve around the meaning of the Qur'ân, it also involves its structure. What the Mu'tazilites consider as "clear" is considered as "ambiguous" by their opponents, and vice versa. Such intellectual disputes about the structure and the meaning of the Qur'ân constituted the first hermeneutical principle as the dichotomy between clarity and ambiguity.

The intellectual opponents of the Mu'tazilites were the traditionalists, who upheld the literal interpretation of all Qur'anic verses, to the extent that they affirmed the existential reality of all divine attributes, all the eschatological images, and even the idea that God can be seen by human eyes. The Mu'tazilites objected to their idea that the literal interpretation of the holy text was a religious duty, regarding it as an obstacle to the fulfillment of mankind's destiny. They believed that God himself imposed on mankind the duty to acquire real knowledge by using his rational faculties.

Later I will explain that this conjecture declaring 'clarity' and 'ambiguity' in the Qur'ân is part of the dialogue discourse of the Qur'ân, the dialogue with the Christians of Arabia, the *Nasârâ*. For the theologian to assume an establishing rule or a principle of hermeneutics required the assumption of the 'textuality' of the Qur'ân. As for the jurists, their approach is based on another structural principle that differentiates between the 'early' and the 'late' revelations. According to this principle, there should be no contradiction in any prescription or proscription, because the 'late' always abrogates the 'early'.

Though they seem to ascertain awareness concerning the Qur'ân as 'discourse', it presented them with a problem that needs to be solved. They did not understand that the different rulings of the Qur'ân could be a positive phenomenon,

¹⁰ He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book: in it are clear, well established verses; they are the backbone of the Book; others are ambiguous. Those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is ambiguous seeking discord and searching for its hidden meanings but no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: "We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord"; and none will grasp the Message except men of understanding. Reference to Qur'anic citations are indicated always in this paper by the chapter's number according to Cairo edition followed by the verse or verses' number. For translation, Yusuf 'Ali's is used as only guiding reference.



a diversity that should be kept open as options for the community of believers to be able to compete with the ever-changing social order; instead they aimed at fixing the meaning by considering the gradual process of revelation as gradual development in the content of the message. Considering the later revelation to be the final and the previous to be provisional they applied the concept of 'abrogation', thus, eliminating all the previous options in favor of the last revealed articulation. According to this concept of abrogation the Qur'ân is divided into four categories:

1-Verses and passages that are entirely deleted from the present Closed Corpus, i.e., they once belonged to the Qur'ân, but now they no longer belong to the Qur'ân.

2-Verses and passages whereby their rules and stipulations are no longer valid, but still exist in the Qur'ân to be recited; their legal power is deleted but not their divine status as God speech.

3-Verses and passages whereby their rules and stipulations are valid though they are deleted from the Qur'ân; the stoning penalty for fornication committed by married people belongs to this category.

4- Of course the verses and passages that were not subject to abrogation.¹¹

The Sufi hermeneutics might be the possible ingredient for an open democratic hermeneutics in the Islamic culture. Muhyî 'Dîn Ibn `Arabî, the great Andalusian Sufi who was born in Spain, wrote his greatest treatise in Mecca (The Meccan revelation, *Al-Futûhât Al-Makkiyya*) and died in Syria (638/1240). His hermeneutics of the Qur'ân formed the topic of my second book (1983),¹² and planted the seeds of a possible open democratic hermeneutics. Ibn `Arabî's hermeneutical project is based entirely on emphasizing the inclusive nature of the Qur'ân, meaning bringing together, versus the *Furqân*, another name of the Qur'ân meaning the separation and differentiation.¹³ By such emphasis he constituted an attempt to integrate all knowledge existing up to his time (from Plato to Averroes) in the Qur'ân; his hermeneutics opens the meaning of the Qur'ân, and the meaning of Islam, to be very conclusive meaning that integrates Christianity, Judaism, and all other religions. Ibn `Arabî's Islam is a religion of comprehensive love, as Ibn `Arabî terms it in his poetry.¹⁴

The hermeneutics of the Sufi in general, and of Ibn `Arabî, follows it in general not in details, depending basically on the notion of four semantic levels applicable to every verse:

¹¹ For more detailed explanation see art, *nashk* by J. Burton in EI, vol. V11, pp.10010ff. See also the same author's article 'abrogation' in EQ, Brill Leiden vol. 1, 2001, pp. 11ff.

¹² *Falsafat al-Ta'wîl: dirâsa fî ta'wîl 'l-Qur'ân 'in Muhiyî Dîn ibn `Arabî* (The Philosophy of Hermeneutics: study of the Ibn `Arabî's Hermeneutics of the Qur'ân The Arabic Cultural Center, Casablanca and Beirut, first published in 1983 and so many reprints followed.

¹³ See article 'tassawuf', in EI, vol. x, pp. 317ff.

¹⁴ "My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks, And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba and the tables of Torah and the book of the Koran. I follow the religion of love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith." See. Ibn Al-`Arabî's *Tarjumân Al-Ashwâq, a collection of mystical odes* (The Interpreter of Desires), trans. By Reynold A. Nicholson, London 1911, p.67



the outward (*zâhir*), the inward (*bâtin*), the limitation (*hadd*), and the upward (*matla'*). This multi-semantic structure of the Qur'ân enabled the Sufis to avoid the dichotomy of clarity and ambiguity employed by the theologians, because every level leads to the upper and contains the lower with no contradiction nor dichotomy. It also keeps the Qur'ân accessible to all the believers regardless of their education or their intellectual capacity.

Ibn Rushd critically developed the Mu'tazilite system further in order to open up the meaning of the Qur'ân to the findings of philosophy. According to him, the Qur'ân, being intended to address and reach all humans, regardless of color, ethnicity or level of knowledge, includes three modes of semantic expression. The first, and most common, is the outward poetic (*khâtabî*) form addressing the masses; the second is the argumentative (*jadali*) form intended to address the theologians; the third and most refined is the philosophical (*burhânî*) form intended for the philosophers.¹⁵ The difference between Ibn Rushd and the theologian, against whom he launches a severe attack accusing them of destroying the masses' convictions by propagating their interpretation as the only valid understanding, is that he does not consider the poetic meaning, addressing the masses, as inferior to the philosophical. He asserts the difference not the hierarchy. His being a jurist, a physicist as well as a philosopher might explain his unique position. Although he quotes the conjecture verse (3:7), always invoked by the theologian to reconstruct the Qur'ân in terms of 'clarity' and 'ambiguity', he only used it as a justification, alongside other legal principles - such as legal syllogisms, for the right of the philosophers to be engaged in hermeneutics. Ibn Rushd's hermeneutics have not yet been studied probably because his theological treatises did not go beyond these general outlines. A thorough study of his hermeneutics would need to investigate his total writings, including his commentaries; he was after all deeply involved in a heavy interpretative task.

So far the Sufi hermeneutics, which emphasizes the semantic multiplicity in accordance with the recipient engagement in producing the meaning, seems closer to recognizing the nature of the Qur'ân than are the theologians, the philosophers (except Ibn Rushd perhaps), and the jurists. They were able, according to the notion of individual engagement with the Qur'ân, to develop the concept of '*samâ*' (listening attentively) and so present the other side of the coin, the Qur'ân, meaning vocalization and recitation. Dealing with the Qur'ân as a text alone would find 'interpretation' to be the other side of the coin, in this case the *mushaf* not the

¹⁵ Cf. *On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy*, translation of Ibn Rushd's *Fasl al-Maqâl* by George Hourani, E. Brill, Leiden 1992, Chapter 3.



Qur'ân.

Now, the question is, 'could any hermeneutics ignore the fact that the Qur'ân is not *only* a text?' So far, the history of exegesis shows that the Qur'ân has been dealt with as a text that needs only a structural and philological analysis to uncover its meaning. This is obvious in the theological as well as the philosophical approach, which is built on the assumption of the 'clarity-ambiguity' dichotomy, and which survived until today. As we have seen already such a dichotomy facilitates the semantic manipulation of the Qur'ânic meaning. Dealing with the Qur'ân as 'discourse' would present a rather different paradigm that might enhance our proposed hermeneutics.

What follows will only offer some examples of the some characteristic of the Qur'ânic discourse; a comprehensive and detailed projection needs a book. I hope that the following examples will present only the skeleton of a broader project.

4- Polyphonic not Monophonic, Who Speaks and Who Listens?

Because the concept of the Qur'ân as only 'text, predominates in both east and west there is a difficulty in presenting an accurate typology of the Qur'ânic structure The Encyclopedia of Islam's categorization of the 'Literary Form' of the Qur'ân, for example, is based on a mixture of 'style'-structure and 'content' norms, thus the literary forms are numerated as: a. Oaths and related forms; b. Sign-passages; c. Say-passages; d. Narratives; e. Regulations; f. Liturgical forms and Others.¹⁶

Muhammad Arkoun, though emphasizing the structure of the Qur'ân as a discourse, following Paul Ricoeur's typology of the Bible, which is based on the oriented definition of a text, distinguishes five types of discourse utilized in the Qur'ân, 'prophetic, legislative, narrative, sapiential and hymnal (poetic)¹⁷ However, he maintains a notion of one structure of 'grammatical relations' and one 'realm of grammatical communication' defined in all Qur'ânic discourse.¹⁸ Here the diversity and the multiplicity of the grammatical relations and the grammatical communications are reduced to one singular dominating structure.

The Qur'ân is the 'speech of God'; there is no dispute about this doctrine, but the discourse structure of the Qur'ân reveals multiplicity of voices not only one. As a discourse the Qur'ân is polyphonic not monophonic; there are so many

¹⁶ See article 'Qur'ân', EI, vol. v, pp 400ff, section 7.

¹⁷ *Rethinking Islam*, op cited, p.38.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 38-39.



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voices in which the 'I' and/or 'We' speaker is not always the Divine voice. Sometimes the Divine voice is presented in the form of the third person 'He' or sometimes in the second

person 'You'. The 'He' manifestation of the Divine preceded by the imperative "say" enunciated by another, probably unknown for certain, voice addressing Muhammad is to be found, for example, in chapter 112, one of the early chapter revealed in Mecca:

Say: He is Allah the One;

Allah the Eternal Absolute;

He begets not nor is He begotten;

And there is none like Him

According to the Islamic belief this unidentified voice should be the voice of Gabriel, the mediator and messenger of the Divine to reveal His message to Muhammad. As messenger he is explicating God's speech through his own voice acting on behalf of the Divine. Afterwards the implicit Divine voice, which became explicit to Muhammad via the angel's voice, has to be announced to the people, the target group of the message, via Muhammad's human voice. With all the involved three voices the mode of discourse in the chapter is the 'informative'.

In the chronologically first revealed verses of the Qur'ân (1-5, chapter 96) where the addressee is obviously Muhammad, the voice of the speaker is the voice of the Angel who appeared to him at the cave of Hirâ'¹⁹, for first time, or may be for the second time, introducing Muhammad to the Lord. The Lord is introduced in the third person. In this first enunciated discourse the angel voice does not seem explicating the Divine Voice; it is rather providing information about Him to Muhammad; the mode of discourse is 'informative'.

Recite, in the name of your Lord who creates

Creates man from a clot.

Recite; your Lord is the Most Bounteous,

Who teaches by the pen,

Teaches man that which he knew not.

¹⁹ According to the report narrated and related to the prophet on the account of his wife `Āisha, about the first encounter between Muhammad and the Holy Spirit, Gabriel, see, *The Life of Muhammad* (translation of Ibn Ishâq's *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*) with introduction and notes by A. Guillaume, Pakistan Branch, Oxford University Press, Lahore, first published 1955, reprint 1967, p. 105



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The report in the 'biography of the Prophet' through which we learn that Muhammad was hesitant to comply with the angel's strong and repeated demand to 'recite' suggests that Muhammad might have already been involved in a certain 'recitation' in the name of certain divinity; the angel's voice demanding Muhammad to 'recite' seems to be aiming at convincing Muhammad to redress his recitation to the Lord presented. The structure of the discourse where the imperative 'recite' repeated twice supports this suggestion.

Moreover, in the hymn or/and the liturgical passages the voice of the speaker is the human voice and the addressee is the Divine being. The best example is the opening chapter of the Qur'ân to be recited in the five daily prayers which are obligatory for every Muslim.

Praise be to Allah the Lord of the Worlds.

The Compassionate, the Merciful.

Master of the Day of Judgment.

It is You whom we worship and it is You from
Whom we seek help

Guide us to the right course,

The course of those whom You blessed,

Not the course of whom provoked Your anger
neither those who got astray.

Interestingly, the recitation of this chapter is considered as invoking God's response, but while the recitation is explicit the Divine response is implicit. In other words, the recitor has to slowly recite the verses pausing to receive the answer. In other words, recitation of this chapter contains both vocalization and attentive hearing, *samâ`*. The following report is narrated as a (*qudsî*) hadith where God says:

salât is divided between Me and My servant into
equal shares

When he says, praise be to God, the Lord of the
whole world,

I say, My servant praised Me;

When he says, The Compassionate The Merciful,

I say, My servant exalted me;

When he says, the Master of the Day of Judgment,



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I say, My servant glorified me;
When he says, It is You whom we worship and it
is You from Whom we seek help
I say, this is between Me and My servant; all
what My servant asked for is guaranteed;
When he says, guide us to the right course, the
course of those whom You blessed, not the
course of whom provoked Your anger neither
those who got astray,
I say, these are for my servant and all are guar-
anteed for him.²⁰

This type of implicit dialogue between man and God, where man, although reciting God's speech, becomes the speaker, and God, the default Speaker of the 'recited' Qur'ân, becomes recipient, is very explicit in the structure of the Qur'ân. Within the polyphonic structure of the Qur'ânic discourse 'dialogue' is another characteristic to be presented.

5- Dialogue

To mention frequent examples of 'dialoging' it is sufficient to refer to what is categorized as the 'say passages' where the structure 'they say ... you say' exists. A 'dialogue' could be polemic, apologetic but it could be also inclusive or exclusive; it could be as well productive or destructive. We confine our self here to present three types of dialogue classified in terms of the addressee, the dialogue with unbelievers, that with the Jews and the Christians of Arabia and the dialogue with the believers.

The dialogue with the unbelievers, the polytheists of Mecca, started calm and soft, but gradually was hardened. When the pagan of Mecca started to negotiate with Muhammad, suggesting a way for Muhammad to show respect for their deities in exchange of recognizing his Lord, it seems in the context of the soft calm dialogue that Muhammad accepted. This brings the curious story mentioned in ancient historical sources which relates that Muhammad was reciting chapter 53 in the presence of a number of Meccan Polytheists and when he came to the names of three of their favorite deities mentioned in verses 19 and 20 two short verses were pronounced by Muhammad, 'they are the high-flying cranes (*gharâniq*) / whose intercession (with God) to be hoped for.'

When the prophet reached in his recitation the last verse of the chapter, 'so prostrate yourselves before God and serve Him' the polytheists prostrated with Muslims in a signal of reconciliation between Muhammad and the Meccans.

Muslim scholars reject the story as a later invention while most European biographers of Muhammad accept it as his-

²⁰ See *Al-Muwatta'* by Mâlik b. Anas, kitâb al-nidâ' li-'salât, no. 174; *Sahîh Muslim*, kitâb al-salât, no. 598. Sakhr CD program *Mawsû'at al-Hadîth al-Sharîf*, Copyright Sakhr Software Co. 1995.



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torical. It is not our concern here to get involved in this debate, because the Qur'ân itself alludes to the story in chapter 22, verse 52, devaluating the validity of those two verses by attributing them to a satanic intrusion on Muhammad's tongue, an intrusion to be deleted.

Never did We send an apostle or a prophet before thee, but, when he framed a desire, Satan threw some (vanity) into his desire: but God will cancel anything (vain) that Satan throws in, and God will confirm (and establish) His Signs: for God is full of Knowledge and Wisdom (verse 52).

Whether this devaluation reflects a process of negotiation or not the fact remains that there is Qur'ânic evidence of the historical existence of the event, and this devaluation might be considered the first step of absolute demarcation between 'monotheism' and 'polytheism'. But this demarcation has to be set gradually.

First step was expressed in one of the early chapters, chapter 109, where Muhammad is advised, by the unknown voice - the angel's voice - not to negotiate with the unbelievers, the polytheists any more, but in the meantime to distance his conviction from theirs.

Say: O you who reject to believe!

I worship not that which you worship

Nor will you worship that which I worship.

And I will not worship that which ye have been worshipping

Nor will you worship that which I worship.

To you be your Way and to me mine.

Repetition of the phrase 'I worship not that which you worship' twice signifies the existence of strong opposition on the side of the unbelievers, accompanied with a strong repeated counter invitation to Muhammad for an exchange of worshipping. In other words, the style structure of that short chapter reveals the existence of dialogue in which the chapter is engaged.

But when an attack is launched against Muhammad and his prophetship is questioned the Qur'ân defends Muhammad. The people of Mecca contest the issue of the authenticity of the divine source of the Qur'ân, and therefore the issue of Muhammad's sincerity, honesty, trustworthiness - his cred-



ibility - is challenged. The allegation that Muhammad forged and fabricated the Qur'ân is disputed and responded to not in the style form of 'they say', but it is understood from the refutation that it is a response. This is very characteristic of the 'discourse' structure, i.e., its involvement and engagement with another implicit, or explicit, discourse.

The Arabs tried every mean to explain the Qur'ânic unusual effect on them by explaining it in terms of all types of genres known to them, discourses like 'soothsaying', poetry and even performing witchcraft. All their explanations were mentioned and refuted. When the Arabs explain the nature of the Qur'ân as 'poetry' and accuse the prophet of composing it, the answer given to such an explanation and accusation is: "We have not taught him poetry; it is not seemly for him" (chapter 36:69). When they say that Muhammad is nothing but a soothsayer the Qur'ân replies: "By your Lord's blessing you are not a soothsayer neither possessed" (chapter 52:29). In the context of that debate the nonbelievers claimed that the Qur'ân was nothing but stories forged by Muhammad who claimed that they were revealed to him by God. They claimed that they were able to produce similar discourse. Facing such a challenge, the Qur'ân made its own counter challenge asking them to bring forth 'ten forged chapters like it' (chapter: 11: 13).

When the nonbelievers failed to respond to this strong challenge, the Qur'ân, pretending to make it easier for them, decreased the challenge from 'ten' chapters to only 'one' (chapter 10:38). The last step was to indicate the absolute failure of the Arabs in challenging the authenticity of the Qur'ân:

"And if you are in doubt concerning that We have sent down on Our servant (Muhammad), then bring a chapter like it, and call your witnesses, apart from God, if you are truthful. And if you do not-and you will not- then fear the Fire, whose fuel is men and idols, prepared to unbelievers" (chapter 2: 23-24).

This dispute and debate with the polytheist Arabs grounded the development of the doctrine of *i'jâz*, the stylistic and literary incompatibility, or supremacy of the Qur'ân.

Another common form of the dialogue is the dialogue with the believers in the form "They will ask you [Muhammad] ... you say" which is attested 15 times in the Qur'ân. These questions to which the Qur'ân responds cover different areas of interest. Questions were raised about wine and gambling (chapter 2:219), about the orphans (chapter 2:220), menstruation (chapter 2:222), dietary law (Chapter 5:4)



charity (chapter 2:215,219), prohibition of fighting during the sacred month (chapter 2:217), and spoils of war (chapter 8:1) Providing answers to such questions, much of the legal aspect of the Qur'ân was gradually articulated, thus reflecting the dialogical nature of the Qur'ân with the human interest.

Would the answers provided in the dialogical context be considered final legislation? What about different answers given to questions related to one issue? Lets take the example of intermarriage, which is one always provoked in any discussion about Human Rights in Islam. While in chapter 5:5 Muslims are allowed to marry non-Muslim females, such permission seems to be revoked in chapter 2:221. The question is which rule will prevail? The second question, which is only provoked in the modern age, is whether this permission is guaranteed only to male Muslim or should it be extended to the female as well?

Ibn Rushd tells us about two positions held by the jurists; the position of those who hold the permissibility considers 2:221 as presenting the general, the preference to marry a Muslim female, while 5:5 particularizes the general. The position of those who prohibit intermarriage is grounded on 'abrogation', i.e., that 2:221 abrogated 5:5.²¹

If we deal with the Qur'ân as discourse we can go far beyond the jurists' outlook that is motivated by law formulation that needs a certain mode of fixation. Each of the two verses is an independent discourse; while 2:221 reflects the non-negotiable stand with the polytheists, a position we earlier referred to, the verse of 5:5 is about 'togetherness' in social life. It is about 'making good things lawful'; it starts with 'food' indicating not only that 'the food of the people of the book' is lawful to Muslims but that 'the food of Muslims' is lawful to the people of the book as well.

This day are (all) things good and pure made lawful unto you. The food of the People of the Book is lawful unto you and yours is lawful unto them.

This is a discourse about, first of 'good' things being lawful'; the first example of these 'good things' is sharing food. Intermarriage is introduced here as part of parcel of 'good things' which emphasizes the implicit call for social 'togetherness'.

Lawful unto you in marriage are chaste women who are believers as well as chaste women among the People of the Book revealed before your time when you give them their due dowers and desire chastity not lewdness nor secret intrigues. If anyone rejects

²¹ "The majority (of the jurists) upheld the permissibility of marriage with the *kitâbiyyat* (women of the people of the book) who are free (not slaves) through a contract, as the principle is to construe (by exemption) the particular from the general (=one of the principles of textual deduction). The words of the Exalted ... -(giving permission to marry women of the people of the book in 5:5)- is particular, while His words -(in 2:221 not to wed idolatress till they believe)- is general. Those (jurists) who inclined toward its prohibition, which is the opinion of some of the *fuqahâ'*, jurists, considered the general meaning (in 5:5) to have abrogated the particular (in 2:221)" Ibn Rushd, *Bidâyat al-Mujtahid wa Nihayat al-Muqtasid* (A beginning for who is to be an independent jurist and a sufficient (source) for who is just seeking to learn not to be an expert), Vol. 11, p. 51.



faith fruitless is his work and in the Hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost.²²

Addressing the modern question about equality in intermarriage, it suffices here to emphasize that the addressees of the Qur'anic discourse in matters of marriage and divorce are males; it is after all a discourse which emerged in a patriarchal environment. Since the addressees are males, it is understandable that permission is voiced to men to marry, divorce, and marry off their relative females. If we recognize that, we are in a better position to express that, according to paradigm-shift of meaning where equality is essential component, equality in intermarriage is possible.²³

The justification provided by modern *'ulamâ'* to sustain the classical position could be easily negotiated. Addressing the modern question about equality in intermarriage, it suffices here to say that they still believe in the superiority of the male in the family affair, and accordingly they argue that the faith of non-Muslim women married to Muslim men will be respected. If a Muslim woman is married to non-Muslim, they fear that the non-Muslim husband will not respect the faith of his Muslim wife. They also invoked that Islam, being the last of God's revelations pays respect to both Judaism and Christianity, therefore, the faith of a non-Muslim woman married to a Muslim man is protected by the husband's faith. The reverse position is not possible, because Christianity does only recognize Judaism while Judaism recognizes neither Christianity nor Islam.

It is obvious that the *'ulamâ'* are still imprisoned in the patriarchal 'world vision' in one hand, and in the religious vision of the world on the other hand. Marriage decision is, or should be, the decision of the individual; it is her or his decision to set the condition she or he wants for the future life with spouse. The issue at stake is not so much intermarriage; it is rather the individual freedom that entails freedom of religion and belief. There is no time or space to address this issue here. It suffices to mention that there is no one single verse in the Qur'an stipulating world punishment, or legal penalty, for apostasy; freedom of religion in the form of 'no coercion' is widely quoted even by the traditional *'ulamâ'*, but in an apologetic manner.

6- Negotiation

As we have already shown the non-negotiation position with the polytheists brings about an exclusive mode of discourse; the only possible way of communication is dispute, debate and rejection. The discourse with the believers varies according to the way they handle their problem, accord-

²² Chapter 5:5, and compare with 2:221 where another mode of discourse of no-negotiation with the polytheists is obvious "Do not marry unbelieving women (idolaters) until they believe; a slave woman who believes is better than an unbelieving woman even though she allure you. Nor marry (your girls) to unbelievers until they believe: a man slave who believes is better than unbeliever even though he allure you. Unbelievers do (but) beckon you to the fire. But Allah beckons by His grace to the Garden (of Bliss) and forgiveness and makes His Signs clear to mankind: that they may celebrate His praise.
²³ The legal opinion provided by the European Council of Fatwâ to allow the continuation of the marriage for a newly converted Muslim female to her non-Muslim husband, which created a furious reaction in the Muslim World, was based on traditional early cases and justified on the wishful expectation that the guided wife will inspire the husband to convert.



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ing to their success they are praised; when they fail they are blamed and even condemned. This is also true for the Prophet himself. When he was busy preaching the rich people of Quraysh hoping that they would strengthen the newly formed community of believers, he did not pay attention to a poor blind fellow, identified as Ibn Umm Maktûm by the early exegete, who came asking for advice. The Qur'ân strongly blames Muhammad's attitude addressing him at the beginning by the third person, a sign of negligence.

He frowned and turned away

When the blind man came to him

What would make you know that he might elevate himself (if you kindly responded to him)

Or be aware and such awareness brings him benefit

But as for whom who considers himself free from any need

To him you pay much attention

No blame on you if he would not elevate himself

As for who came to you striving (for knowledge)

While in fear (from God)

You did not pay attention to him! (Chapter 80:1-10)

The Qur'ânic discourse with the people of the book, the Jews and the Christians, or the *Nasârâ*, is the negotiate discourse par excellence. It is well known that the prophet Muhammad and his wife Khadijah sought advice from a Christian Arab priest Waraqa b. Nawfal, who happened to be a cousin of Khadijah. The matter of consultation was the first encounter with the Holy Spirit during the vision Muhammad had when he was meditating on mountain *Hirâ'*.²⁴

It is also important to mention that the first Muslim migration *hijra* was to Abyssinia. In order to escape being persecuted by the people of Mecca, the Prophet ordered the Muslims to go there where, according to a statement related to the Prophet himself, "there is a Christian king who never does injustice to anyone." Muslims enjoyed his protection and hospitality till they returned back after the migration to Medina. During the period of their stay in Abyssinia, a delegation from Mecca visited the Emperor persuading him to send Muslims back to Mecca. The envoys of Mecca told the Negus that those who were enjoying his protection and gen-

²⁴ See the detailed account in *The Life of Muhammad*, op cited, pp. 106-7.



erosity were only some rebels who protested against the religion of their own people's and converted to an unknown religion rather than to Christianity. In order to turn the Negus against Muslims he was told that they (the Muslims) blasphemed against Jesus Christ. When the Emperor asked the Muslim refugees about their belief concerning Jesus they read to him this passage of the Qur'an from the chapter called 'Mary' or Maryam in Arabic (19).²⁵

'Son of Mary' is one of the commonest titles given to Jesus in the Qur'ân in order to emphasize his human nature. Nevertheless, the Qur'ân also speaks of Jesus as 'a spirit from God' and 'His word cast into Mary' by the Holy Spirit. More than that: It was Jesus, according to the Qur'ân, who prophesied 'Ahmad' -Muhammad- to be the coming prophet.

And remember Jesus the son of Mary said: "O Children of Israel! I am the apostle of Allah (sent) to you confirming the Law (which came) before me and giving glad Tidings of an Apostle to come after me whose name shall be Ahmad." But when he came to them with Clear Signs they said "This is evident sorcery!" (61.6)

It was only after migration to Medina that Muslims started actual contact with the Arab Jewish tribes who had long before come from Yemen and settled in Medina. The well known 'Medina Covenant' between the Prophet and both Jewish and pagan tribes clearly indicates an essential equality between all the peoples who lived in Medina. Liberty of religious practice was guaranteed on an equal footing as long as all the parties defended the security of the city against any outside attack or intrusion. Concerning different types of religious faith, equality was essentially guaranteed unless a war is initiated against Muslim, then the war conditions as historically practiced come into force.²⁶

In this context the Qur'ân prescribed *siyâm*, fasting, for Muslims and in this also Muslims directed their prayers in the same direction as Jewish prayers, Jerusalem. But the relationship between the Muslim community and the Jewish community didn't continue as smoothly as it had started. Polemic dispute flared, engaging the Qur'ân which started to substitute the previous 'one religion' called 'Islam', that of all the prophets since Adam till Jesus:

1- Those who believed (in Muhammad), and those who became Jewish, and the Christians and the Sabian, any who believe in God and the last day, and do righteousness, shall have their reward from their Lord (11:62, also 5:69.)

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 146-152.

²⁶ Ibid., the full text of the document pp. 231-233.



2- Those who believed (in Muhammad), and those who became Jewish, and the Sabians, Christians, Magians, and polytheists, God will judge between them on the Day of Judgment (22:17.)

3- Say (Mohammed), the truth comes down from God: Let him who will, believe, and let him who will, reject: for the wrong doers We have prepared a fire (18:29.)

4- He who will turn back from his faith, soon will God bring about (other) people whom He will love and they will love him (5:54.)

5- Those who reject faith after they accepted it, and then go in adding to their defiance of faith, never will their repentance be accepted; for they are those who have gone astray (3:90, also 4:137.)

The change of the praying direction for Muslims from Jerusalem to Mecca may indicate the first sign of demarcation between the two communities. The polemic dispute sometimes reaches the level of harsh condemnation. However, occasionally it is a type of quiet reminder of God's grace on the sons of Israel. This polemic dispute with its quiet as well as its harsh manifestation can be followed in chapter 2, called 'the Cow', because it contains certain narrative reflecting the arrogance of the sons of Israel in complying with the simple demands of their prophets. There is a remarkable frequency in the use of the imperative 'remember' (some 19 times in chapter 2 alone), addressed directly to the son of Israel preceding different narrative units of their history of reluctance and rejection to follow the right path.

Not being able to appreciate the 'discourse' structure it is likely to extend the discourse to be addressing all the Jews until the present. It is not only a question of contextualization, which is pivotal in discourse analysis, but more than that it is what the discourse tells about the context and how. Now, the question is which is historical and which is universal, a question that keeps all the modern liberal Muslim scholars of the Qur'ân busy. Being confined to the Qur'an as 'text' alone, the conservatives win at the end of the day. When the liberals, for example, emphasize 'togetherness' as the universal eliminating the 'hostility' limiting its meaning to the negative past the conservatives will apply the principal of 'abrogation' to historize 'togetherness' as abrogated and will universalize 'hostility', as the abrogat. In the present context of unsolved Palestinian-Israeli trauma, whose hermeneutics or meaning is valid? The winner is sure to be the meaning of ghetto, separation and isolation, the meaning of Mr. Sharon's wall.



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The same is true about the polemic dispute with the Christians, the *Nasârâ*, about the nature of Jesus. We have shown already that the Qur'ân rendered Jesus prophesizing the coming of a prophet named Ahmad. And we have also seen how the chapter named Mary (19) was recited in the court of the Negus and in the presence of the bishops. A quick reading of this chapter and comparison with Matthew's Gospel will easily reveal common ground. Nevertheless, there is non-negotiable issue that maintains the boundaries between Muslims and Christians to the extent that the concept of 'togetherness' is almost forgotten.

The first issue is that of the human nature of Jesus according to the Qur'ân and the divine nature according to the shared dogma of the Churches. As we confine ourselves to the second chapter projecting the Qur'ânic discourse, or the Qur'ânic disputation with the Jews, we would also be better to confine our presentation to the Qur'ânic disputation with the *Nasârâ* to chapter three, which in its very opening, verse 3, advocates the credibility of all the revealed scriptures.

It is He Who sent down to thee (step by step) in truth the Book confirming what went before it; and He sent down Law (of Moses) and the Gospel (of Jesus) before this as a guide to mankind and He sent down the Criterion (of judgment between right and wrong).

In verse four, however, it presents the possibility of misunderstanding as to keeping the shared ground as solid as possible. But we have to see the disputation context. While the Qur'ân recognizes Jesus as a 'word' from God (verse 45) and presents the Apostles as Muslims (52), it was clearly indicated in the earlier chapter of Mary, by way of relating to the child Jesus the statement 'I am the servant of God' (19:30). This seems to have caused certain confusion for the Christians of *Najrân* who came to Medina to debate with Muhammad.²⁷ The discussion became heated, probably after it was explained that the miraculous birth of Jesus, from a mother who had not had intercourse with a male, makes him no different than Adam; the two cases are alike.

This similitude of Jesus before Allah is as that of Adam: He created him from dust then said to him: "Be" and he was (3:59)

Then the Qur'ân made serious religious challenge that seems to cause fear among the delegation. Here we can realize the 'power' of discourse, or the discourse as 'authoritarian'; such a powerful discourse could not emerge in Mecca simply because Muslims were a small persecuted communi-

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 270ff.



ty. As the sources tells us the members of the Christian delegation withdrew preferring to pay annual collective amount of money *jizya* than face a possible curse as provoked by the Qur'ân.

If anyone disputes in this matter with you now after (full) knowledge has come to you say: "Come! let us gather together our sons and your sons our women and your women ourselves and yourselves: then let us earnestly pray and invoke the curse of Allah on those who lie!" (3:61)

The non-negotiable issue for the Qur'ân was the divinity of Jesus, whether God or the Son; it is absolutely unacceptable just as there was no possible negotiation with the polytheist, hence the Qur'ân sometimes calls those who believe in Jesus' divinity either polytheist or unbelievers. So the only possibility of coming to terms with Christians is for them to relinquish their claim about Jesus, this being an impossible demand. The Qur'ân further cites the Christians' false arguments about things they do not know; the final truth is revealed to Muhammad. The claim of both the Jews and the Christians of being the only heirs of Abraham is shown to be false. The evidence shows this to be false: he was neither a Jew nor a Christian because both the Torah and the Gospel were revealed after his death (see 3: 64-67).

Now, the point I would like to indicate is that the Qur'ân never repudiated the Jewish and the Christian Scriptures; they are both revealed through the same channel as the Qur'ân: *wahy*. What is always disputed is the way the people of the book understood and explained these scriptures; the issue at stake is the wrong hermeneutics, and here comes the significance of the verse 7 in the same chapter 3, which was taken by Muslim theologians as setting hermeneutical principal. It reads

He it is Who has sent down to you the Book: in it are verses that are clearly expressed; they are the foundation of the Book: others are ambiguous. For those in whose hearts is perversity they follow (literally) the ambiguous seeking discord and searching for its hidden meanings but no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: "We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord"; and none will grasp the Message except men of understanding.²⁸

My assessment here is that in the context of repudiating the

²⁸ For a detailed discussion about the way this specific verse was isolated and, therefore, manipulated whether in terms of its grammatical articulation or in the meaning of its vocabularies and further more for the theological dispute, see Leah Kinberg art. 'ambiguous' EQ, vol. 1, pp. 70-76. Also my *Al-ittijâh al-'Aqlî fi 'Tafsîr: dirâsa fi mafhûm almajâz fi al-Qur'ân ind 'l-Mu'tazila* (the Rational Trend in Exegesis: study of the Mu'tazilites' concept of metaphor), op cited, pp. 180-9; *Mafhûm al-Nass*, op cited, pp. 179ff.



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Christian misunderstanding the verses in which the Qur'ân describes Jesus as the 'word' and the 'spirit' from God were declared 'ambiguous' whereas the verses emphasizing his humanity as only a prophet and messenger were declared the 'clear', the backbone of the book.

Another disputed issue between Muslims and Christians is the doctrine of crucifixion, which Muslims believe that the Qur'ân denies. Muslims see no conflict between normal death and ascension, both are asserted in the Qur'ân. Another disputed issue between Muslims and Christians is the doctrine of crucifixion, which Muslims believe that the Qur'ân denies. Muslims see no conflict between the normal death of Jesus and his ascension; both are asserted in the Qur'ân. The context in which the issue of crucifixion is mentioned is not the context of a dispute with the Christians; it is the context of argumentation and disputation against the Jews in defense of Mary and Christ (4:153-158). In this context the Jewish blasphemous allegation of adultery against Mary is strongly repudiated and condemned by the Qur'ân. In the same context the claim of the Jews that they slew Jesus, implies a threat that they can also slay Muhammad, was also to be repudiated.

The people of the Book ask you to cause a book to descend to them from heaven: indeed they asked Moses for an even greater (miracle) for they said: "Show us Allah in public" but they were dazed for their presumption with thunder and lightning. Yet they worshipped the calf even after clear signs had come to them; even so We forgave them; and gave Moses manifest proofs of authority.

And for their Covenant We raised over them (the towering height) of Mount (Sinai); and (on another occasion) We said: "Enter the gate with humility"; and (once again) We commanded them: "Transgress not in the matter of the Sabbath." And We took from them a solemn Covenant.

(They have incurred divine displeasure): in that they broke their Covenant: that they rejected the Signs of Allah; that they slew the Messengers in defiance of right; that they said "Our hearts are the wrappings

(which preserve Allah's Word; we need no more)"; nay Allah has set the seal on their hearts for their blasphemy and little is it they believe.

That they rejected faith: that they uttered against Mary a grave false charge.



That they said "We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary the Apostle of Allah"; but they killed him not nor crucified him but so it was made to appear to them and those who differ therein are full of doubts with no (certain) knowledge but only conjecture to follow for of a surety they killed him not.

Nay Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is Exalted in Power Wise(4:153-158).

If the issue of crucifixion was as important to the Qur'ân as the issue of the nature of Jesus, it would have been brought again and again in different contexts. Since it exists only in the context of responding to the Jewish claim, the discourse structure suggests it was denying the capability of the Jews to have done this depending on their own power, and by implication telling Muhammad that their implicit threat to slay him, as they slew Jesus, is not feasible, as God will not permit it. Now, once again the question is which meaning will prevail, togetherness or isolation? This duly brings the relationship of the West and the Muslim World into our discussion. How does relationship affect the way Muslims 're-think' their own tradition so as to modernize their lives without relinquishing their spiritual power, particularly in view of America's colonizing project?

Now, let me present the possibility of real reformation in the domain of *shari`a* if the concept of the Qur'ân is accepted.

7- Deconstructing Shari`a

Would dealing with the Qur'ân as discourse, deeply involved in dialogue with the believers as well as with the non-believers, help us tackle the burning unsolved legal issues considered divine revelation by the majority of Muslims? Some radical groups may still be crying and fighting for the restoration of Caliphate, but the well-established national-state in every Muslim country in the post-colonial era has made a shift towards the question of law. The obligation to establish an Islamic state ruled entirely by *shari`a* is now the disputable issue between the two basic trends of modern Islamic discourse. That 'Islam is the official religion of the State and the principles of *shari`a* are the source of legislation' is an article in the Constitution of all Muslim states.

The conflict sometimes taking the form of a severe and violent struggle between state and radical groups is not so much about whether or not *shari`a* is to be implemented in both social and in individualistic life. It is much more about the degree of implementation and, so, if the political system



is westernized or not and hence anti-Islamic.

If it is enough for the individual to confess Islam and to perform the other four pillars, praying five times a day, fasting the month of *Ramadân*, paying the annual prescribed alms, and performing *hajj* if it can possibly be financially afforded, for the community it is not enough. If an Islamic state is not established, every individual Muslim is responsible before God for such a religious failure; so preach the representatives of the radical Islamic groups and the representatives of the so-called 'moderate' Islamic discourse.

Muslim intellectuals, who hold different view about the relationship between Islam and politics, are condemned as 'westernized'; not real Muslim thinkers. The views of the non-traditional, nor radical, Muslim thinkers are not well known beyond the boundaries of the Muslim World, especially of those who prefer to address their readers in their own regional language. As for the highly radical, provocative preachers, the Western media is very keen to present their ideas, so creating the impression in the Western mind that Islam has but one face: the face of Ben Laden.

Let me present now briefly my scholarly view concerning the concept of *shari`a*. The Qur`anic verses which seem to contain legal connotation and which are considered the basis of *shari`a* are about 500 verses according to the traditional sources. On these verses, which amount to one out of six, or 16% of the whole Qur`ân, the jurists built a system of induction and deduction called 'the principles of legislation', *`ilm usûl al-fiqh*. According to these principles, they added a second source to the Qur`ân, i.e., the Prophetic tradition, *al-sunna al-nabawiyya*. They categorized the *sunna* the second source of legislation and considered it as divine as the Qur`ân. As two divine sources were not enough to regulate the increasing political, social, economic as well as criminal problems, the jurists had to adopt a third principle based on the already agreed upon practiced legal rules called 'consensus', *ijmâ'*, of the earliest Muslim generation, the companions of the Prophet (*al-sahâbah*). A fourth principal of 'rational inquiry', *ijtihâd*, was urgently needed in order to be able to solve the problems that were not solved in the other three sources. But this principle of *ijtihâd* was practically restricted to apply the technique of 'analogy', *qiyâs*, which is to reach a solution to a certain problem by only comparing its position to a similar problem previously solved by any of the three sources.



The whole body of *shari`a* literature, as expressed in the major four sunni schools, *madhhabs*, at least, is built on the aforementioned principles, which means that *shari`a* is a man-made production; nothing is divine about it. It is neither possible to claim its validity regardless of time and space.

If we contextually examine some of the Qur`anic legal stipulations, such as the penalty of fornication, *zinâ*, robbery, *sariqah*, or causing social disorder, *hirâbah*, as well as slaying, *qatl*, which are called *hudûd*, pl. of *hadd*, the question is: are these penalties basically initiated by Islam, and, therefore, Islamic? The answer is definitely 'no'; all these penalties were generally pre-Islamic, some of them belong to the Roman law and were adopted in the Jewish tradition, while others were even older tradition. It is not likely in our modern age of Human Rights and respect of the integrity of the human being to consider amputation of the members of the human body, or execution, as obligatory religious punishments binding by divinity.

Other aspects of *shari`a*, such as those dealing with the rights of religious minorities, women`s rights, and Human Rights in general, have to be revised and reconsidered as well. Contextualization of the Qur`anic stipulation, and examining its linguistic and stylistic structure -as discourse- would reveal that the jurists` work was basically to unfold the meaning of such stipulation and to re-encode such meaning in their different social contexts. The Qur`ân is not in itself a book of law; legal stipulations are expressed, as we have already proved, in discourse style, which reveal a context of engagement with human needs in specific time, which, in turns, opens up the appropriation of the 'meaning' intended into every paradigm of meaning.

As discourse it provides multi-options, various solutions, and open gate of understanding. The conclusion is that to claim that the body of *shari`a* literature is binding for all Muslim communities regardless of time and space is simply ascribing divinity to human historical production of thought. If this is the case, there is no obligation to establish a theocratic state claimed Islamic. Such a demand is nothing but ideological call to establish a theo-political unquestionable authority; it is the recreation of the most devilish dictatorship political regime on the expense of the spiritual and ethical dimension of Islam.

8-The Challenge of Modernity: confusing context

Muslims so far have been rethinking, redefining and modifying the sources of Islamic knowledge. Traditions such as



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Sunna, consensus and legal syllogisms have been under deep and controversial discussion and debate since the eighteenth century. The meaning of the Qur'ân, and subsequently the meaning of Islam, has been the subject of investigation, research, appropriation, re-appropriation and negotiation since the late nineteenth century. This type of 're-thinking' was essentially and initially motivated by a strong commitment to develop Muslim societies in the direction of modernization on one hand, and to keep the spirit of Islam and its forces alive on the other hand; modernity was, after all, a foreign power imposed from above by the colonial European domination of the entire Muslim World after deconstructing the Ottoman Empire.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the British had successfully colonized much of India. The French, under Napoleon Bonaparte, occupied Egypt in 1798. France then went into Algeria in 1830; occupied Tunisia in 1881, and Britain marched into Egypt in 1882. The Dutch were already there long before that in Indonesia. There were many other excursions as the West's program of the colonization unfolded throughout the Muslim World.

Here one can mention at least three challenging powers that motivated and constructed the way Muslims rethought their traditions. First of all, it was the challenge of scientific discoveries and the advanced technology. The second challenging question was the question of rationality and rationalism whereas the third was the political challenge. Needless to say these three challenging questions, presented here independently, were always mixed in each one of the exegesis' trends we are going to present.

1- Modern science and technology were introduced to the Muslim world in the form of strange unknown military equipment that caused their defeat against the imperial Western powers and lead to the occupation of their land by non-Muslim invaders. When the French army reached Alexandria in 1798 the Mamlûk worriers were ready to fight in man-to-man combat. However, they were shocked to see the powerful artillery machines that killed dozens of soldiers with one shot, from a long distance. Napoleon Bonaparte brought with his army a number of natural and social scientists. Al-Jabartî in his history tells of the reaction of the Azharî *'ulamâ'* when they were invited to watch some chemical experiments performed for them in the laboratory established in Cairo. They were terrified, some of them ran away whispering the *isti'adha* formula (seeking God's protection from devil), because they perceived these experiments as witchcraft. That was the first encounter of Eryp-



tian intellectuals with modern technology courtesy of modern scientific investigation and research. Their response was to learn in order to gain the power to be able to fight back. Learning modern sciences, by sending missions of students to acquire the sciences in Europe, and importing modern technology, especially military weapons - this was the basic response by both Turkey and Egypt.

2- Within the military power there was an intellectual weapon holding Islam responsible for the weakness of the Muslim world. In this context the Muslim World was perceived, approached and addressed by the colonizer's mentality as Muslim, with no other sub-identity attached, like Indian, Indonesian or Arab. The matter became more complicated when the colonized unquestionably accepted the identity imposed on them by the colonizer, and by way of internalization reduced their identity, thus, creating an identity crisis.

It was explicitly advocated that it was necessary to neglect and even abandon Islam, if this part of the world was to make any progress toward catching up with modernity. It is enough to mention the French philosopher Ernest Renan (1832-1892) and the French politician and historian Gabriel Hanotaux (1853-1944)²⁹, who served as Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1894 to 1898. Renan posited the absolute incompatibility between Islam and both sciences and philosophy. Whatever is labeled Islamic science or Islamic philosophy is, according to Renan in his doctoral thesis, *Averroès et l'Averroïsme* (1852; "Averroës and Averroism"), mere translation from the Greek. Islam, like all religious dogmas built on revelation, is hostile to reason and freethinking. Hanotaux too held Islam responsible for the backwardness of the Muslim world. His allegation was based on the theological difference between Islam and Christianity. According to him the dogma of incarnation in Christianity has its consequence in building a bridge between man and God, thus freeing man from any dogma of determinism. Islamic pure monotheism, *tawhîd*, on the other hand, has created a non-bridged distance between man and God, leaving no space for human free will. By such theological reason Hanotoux explained the political despotism characterizing the Muslim World.³⁰

Jamâl al-Dîn al-Afghânî (1838-1897)³¹ and Muhammad Abdu (1848-1905) responded defensively, relating the backwardness of Muslims not to Islam per se, but to the contemporary Muslims' misunderstanding of Islam. They both argue, if Islam is understood properly and explained correctly, as was the case in the golden age of Islamic civilization, Mus-

²⁹ A statesman, diplomat, and historian who directed a major French colonial expansion in Africa and who championed a Franco-Russian alliance that proved important in the events leading to World War I. As a French nationalist he was committed to policies of colonial expansion. During his ministry, French domination was established in French West Africa, Madagascar, and Tunisia; inroads were made in Algeria.

³⁰ See the translation of Hanotaux article into Arabic and Muhammad `Abdu's response in *Al-A`mâl al-Kâmilah lil Imâm Muhammad `Abdu*, (the Complete Works of Imâm Muhammad `Abdu) ed. Muhammad `Amârah, 5 vols, Beirut 1972 v. 5, p. 201f

³¹ Extensive information on al-Afghani can be found in N. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani* (Berkeley, 1983); R. Matthee, 'Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and the Egyptian National Debate', *IJMES*, Vol. 21 (1989), pp. 151-169; E. Kedourie, 'Afghani and Abduh. An Essay on Religious Unbelief and Political Activism', *Modern Islam* (London, 1966).



lms would not have been easily defeated, and dominated by European power.

The basic question that confronted the early modern Muslim reformers was whether Islam is compatible with modernity or not. How could a faithful Muslim live in a modern socio-political environment, without losing her/his identity as a Muslim? Does Islam accommodate science and philosophy? Second came the question of the compatibility or otherwise of the divine law (*shari'a*) that constitutes traditional society, and the positive law that constitutes the modern nation-state. Were modern political institutions such as democracy, elections, and parliament accepted by Islam, and could they replace the traditional institutions of *shûrâ*, consultation, and the authority of the elite 'ulama (*ahl al-hall wa al-'aqd*)?

3- The discussion of such questions are embedded in the question of religion and politics. The issue of political Islam emerged under the colonial occupation of most of the Muslim countries as early as 1798 in Egypt for example, where Muslims became aware of a different lifestyle brought about in their everyday life by their colonizers. They look and dress differently, behave and speak differently. They eat *harâm* food, drink wine, interact freely with women who are not their *mahram*, even their women are dressed improperly. In brief, Muslim social and religious identity was extremely violated by the very existence of those intruders in otherwise purely Muslim territory.

Ironically, or paradoxically may be, that Bonaparte presented himself to the Egyptian '*ulamâ*' as the protector of 'faith' against both the Catholic Pope and the corrupted Ottoman Sultan. Then he advanced his claim pretending that he converted to Islam. Nothing of this worked out. The issue of politics emerged again after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire with the end of the First World War. The decision of the new national Turkish movement to abolish Caliphate raised the question whether Caliphate was an Islamic institution or was only a form of political system that could be replaced by another without losing the identity of Islam. Amidst such state of stress and uncertainty in such transitional period the Muslim world found itself suddenly stripped of its identity, namely the Caliphate. Political figures, such as King Fu'âd in Egypt and Sharief Husayn in Arabia, tried to restore Caliphate, with each seeking to be nominated as Caliph of all Muslims.

It was the Egyptian 'Alî 'Abd al-Râziq (1888-1966) who defended the abolishment of Caliphate proving that there is no



such a specific political system labeled Islamic. The response of Muhammad Rashîd Rida (1865-1935) was different. He defended Caliphate as an authentic Islamic system that should be re-established, failing which Muslims would suffer the return to paganism, *jâhiliyya*.³² As a political response the Muslim Brotherhood Society was established in Egypt in 1928. Its basic aim was to re-establish Islamic society in Egypt as an ideal example to be copied everywhere before the re-establishment of Caliphate. Hence re-islamization became thus the antonym of modernization, which was presented as westernization. The modern political islamist movements, labeled usually as fundamentalism in Western public discourse, are all off-shoots of the Muslim Brotherhood Society.

In such a historical and confusing context, the question of the 'nature' of the Qur'ân, its 'structure' as well as its historical background, was never closely dealt with. As the foundational text of Islam per excellence it was kept above any critical investigation; it was the only preserved cardinal and fundamental source of inspiration to hold on; it is, first and last of all, the verbatim speech of God. Muslims perceived the Orientalist's scholarship about the Qur'ân, its history and structure as part of the European conspiracy against Islam and Muslims.

9- Rethinking Tradition

To start with I would like to briefly present the other non-violent, more open and probably liberal face of modern Islam known only to the sincere and non-biased scholars, a face somewhat hidden and a voice quite mute in the mass Media of East and West alike. From this presentation, the question of 'rethinking the Qur'ân' will, I hope, emerge as vital if Muslims really wish to follow up the essential basic project of modernization, with more constructive participation.

In order to give a brief account of this process one has to outline the epistemological principles of Classical Islam as it reached the modern age and had to be rethought. Let me clarify that the four sources to be outlined here represent only one facet of the multi-faceted Islamic culture, i.e., the facet of jurisprudence, *sharî'a*. They present the epistemological principles called (*usûl al-fiqh*) from which the normative law, *fiqh*, is deduced. All the revivalist movements were to a great extent directed by the state of affairs in which Islam came to be fixed, that is Islam as law-oriented (*sharî'a*) faith. Scholars of Islam know *sharî'a* is one of the multi-facets of the Islamic traditions and cultures, one that

³² Meaning paganism, in reference to the pre-Islamic tribal cultural code in Arabia translated sometimes as ignorance. Rida was very much in favor of the *Wahhâbî* ideology based on the writings of Muhammed b. `Abd al-Wahhâb (d. 1135/1792) who was himself a follower of the most Orthodox Muslim thinker, Ibn Taymiyya (d.685/1328). As Rida was a traditionalist thinker he inspired Hasan al-Bannâ that it is possible to establish the Caliphate state. The successful example set by both M. b. Abdul Wahhâb and Muhammâd b. Su`ûd in establishing a theocratic state to be the kingdom of God was alive. The dream of both the ideologist and the ambitious Prince became true by embodying the ideology in militant body of tribes called *ikhwân*. Muslim Brotherhood Society was formed in order to be the embryo of the future Islamic State of Egypt.



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can be distinguished from at least other several facets, such as philosophy, theology (*'ilm al-kalâm*), Sufism, etc.

The reason behind reducing Islam to the paradigm of *shari'a* is the fact that since the fifth century of the Islamic era, i.e. the twelfth century, Islamic philosophy and Islamic theology as well as the creative philosophy of Sufism have been gradually marginalized. Philosophers and non-orthodox theologians, such as the well-known Ibn Rushd, suffered various degrees of persecution. Indeed, great sufis, such as al-Hallâj (exc. 910) and Suhrawardî (Shihâb al-Dîn Yahya, exc. 1191) to mention only two names, were executed. In terms of their hierarchal order the sources of knowledge, according to major schools of law, are arranged as follow:

First and foremost, the Qur'ân and its exegesis present the foundational treasure of knowledge; it is the Speech of God revealed in Arabic to prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. Though basically addressing the Arabs, its message is meant for all humanity regardless of time and space. This is the guidance, the light, and the final divine plan for salvation in this world as well as in the life to come.

Second to the Qur'ân are the sayings and the actions of the prophet Muhammad, including his approval or disapproval of sayings or actions of his companions. This is the prophetic tradition known in Arabic as Sunna. It came to be considered equally divine with the Qur'ân because both are revelations from God. The difference between them was explained in terms of differentiating between the 'content' and the linguistic expression or the 'form' of both. The Qur'ân is God's verbatim speech, so its content and its linguistic expression (form) are both divine. The content of the Sunna, on the other hand, is revealed, meaning divine, but its form is human; Muhammad put it into words. Nevertheless, its position is not inferior to the Qur'ân; it is equal though secondary. Muslim jurists even emphasized that the Qur'ân is in need of the Sunna more than the Sunna is in need of the Qur'ân. The Sunna is not only to explain but more to explicate what is implicit, such as how to perform prayer and fasting, or to know the conditions of purification and the amount of alms to be paid etc. Without the Sunna the Qur'ân is less clear. Even to understand the context of the passages and chapters of the Qur'ân, the historical events that surrounded the revelation - a process lasting more than twenty years - only the Sunna can provide such (historical) information.

The third epistemological principle or source of knowledge is the 'consensus' of the community of scholars, *'ulamâ'*. As there was no *consensus* among the scholars on the epistemo-



logical validity of the doctrine of 'consensus', neither could there be an agreement on its definition and the final formulation limited its scope as well as its implication. Its scope was narrowed to refer only to what was unanimously agreed upon among the first Muslim generation, the Companions of the Prophet, *sahâba*, on the assumption that such consensus should have been grounded on a certain prophetic tradition that was not transmitted to the next generation. Consequently, its implication was limited to issues not mentioned, either explicitly or implicitly, in the above two sources.³³

The fourth and last source of acquiring knowledge is the application of rational syllogisms, inferring a rule for a certain non-mentioned case in the sources above by way of making analogy with a similar established rule. The analogy is to be based either on similarity, like the similarity between consuming alcohol and smoking hash, or on the rationale of the rule mentioned. The second type of analogy requires adherence to the theological doctrine of the existence of 'rational logic' behind God's divine rules, a doctrine that was not accepted by all schools of law. Unlike 'consensus' *qiyâs*, though was not applied by all the jurists, gained more support by the majority.³⁴

10-Rethinking Consensus: the emergence of new `ulamâ`

It seems that the process of 'rethinking' tradition, which started as response to the degeneration position into which Muslim societies were falling, took its first step with the third principle, namely consensus; it was easy to break through by demanding a new type of consensus. Shâh Walî Allâh (1702-1762) is considered the godfather of the 'revivalist' Islam in India. Due to the specific orientation of the Indian Islam, his revivalist formula was a combination of 'sufism' and *shari`a* oriented thought. In contrast to the Wahabî movement in Arabia, initiated by Muhammad b. `Abd al-Wahâb (1703-1792) which took the direction of a highly Orthodox reformation, it is possible to explain the differences in line with the different historical and cultural background of Islam, in both social environments. While Islam in India was reshaped by its interaction with the pre-Islamic Indian tradition, such as Hinduism Buddhism, Islam in Arabia was to a great extent rooted in its Bedouin tradition and customs.

Shah Walî Allah, heavily influenced by the breakdown of the Mugal authority which led to the loss of Muslim power, sought to encourage the revival of a strong central authority by invoking a concept of two complementary authorities, two caliphates, one is political and the other is juridical,

³³ See, Bernard, M., article 'Ijmâ`' in EI, vol. 111, pp. 1023f.'

³⁴ See, Bernard, M., article 'qiyâs' in EI, vol. v, pp. 238.



both are responsible for the preservation of Islam. For the political authority he uses the term *zâhir*, meaning external, and to this he assigns the responsibility for maintaining administrative and political order and for applying the *Shari'a*. For the juridical he employs the term *bâtin*, internal, and its responsibility is to give guidance to the religious leaders of the community, a role that Shah Walî Allah took upon himself.³⁵

The similarity between this approach and that of Ibn `Abd al-Wahhâb is obvious, bringing together the political authority and the authority of the jurist, *faqîh*, to work toward the restoration of Islam from its state of decadence. The difference between the two approaches remains in this sufi tone that is characteristic of Indian Islam.

Within this sufi tone, and in order to establish the position of the jurist as partner in the state affair, Shah Walî Allah was able to be critical of the Classical structure of *shari'a*; he was able to reject *taqlîd*, the uncritical adherence to the opinions of the *`ulamâ'* of the Classical schools of law, and a revival of interest in the use of personal effort to decide a point of law, *ijtihâd* by employing *qiyâs*. By such a revival of the principle of personal understanding Shah Walî Allah was able to bypass the history of stagnation in the field of *shari'a* scholarship.

He emphasized the spirit of law, which is applicable in all times and places, rather than the form of law, which is shaped and formulated in accordance with conditions of time and place. Not only does he revive the concept of *maslaha*,³⁶ the community interest, from the *Mâlikî's* school of law, but he basically and initially depends on the well-established Sufi distinction between *shari'a* and *haqîqa*, where the first is considered historical and limited in time and space while the later is the Truth attained by spiritual exercise that leads to vision of Reality.

As a jurist sufi, he tried to cleanse Sunna from any theological influence, because theology presents an imposition of rational contemplation on matters that are either clearly indicated in the Scripture (the Qur'ân and the Tradition of the Prophet, Sunna) or matters that are not mentioned in any. Sunna, according to him, is, on the contrary, the agreed upon practice of the Muslim community. By such a distinction, he successfully dissociated Sunna from theology which, according to him, caused the People of the *Qibla* (Muslims) to become separate sects and destined factions beyond their following the essentials of religion.³⁷

³⁵ See Brown, Daniel, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, Cambridge Middle East Studies, Cambridge University Press, UK 1996, pp. 22-3

³⁶ *Hujjat Allâh al-Bâligha* (The Conclusive Argument from God), translated by H. Daiber and D. Pringree, EJ. Beill 1996, p.11.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 24.



While, as we shall see, early Indian revivalist discourse presented by Shah Walî Allah encouraged later development, Wahhâbism has never developed away from the basic ideas first formulated by the founder. The absolute unity between dogma and political regime offered no scope for political opposition, but advocated more radical and fundamentalist ideologies. Now, in the context of the American pressure to reshape the whole Arab world politically and intellectually, there are a lot of gatherings, conferences, etc. basically aiming to represent Wahhâbism as a liberal, open and democratic system. It is an attempt to apply some makeup to the same old face.

In Egypt a similar revivalist, but probably more liberal approach, appeared after the first encounter with Europe. Shaykh, Ref`a Râfi` al-Tahtâwî (1801-1873) was sent to act as an *imâm* for the first Egyptian military mission to France (to acquire modern military training). He was very much inspired by his teacher Hasan al-`Attâr, the rector of al-Azhar for five years (1830-1834) who tried to introduce secular sciences to the curriculum of the oldest Islamic educational institution in Egypt, al-Azhar. Paradoxically, the objection came from the French director of the school of medicine in Cairo on the grounds that al-Azhar should continue as an exclusively religious institution. Shaykh Hasan al-`Attâr, being himself well versed in secular sciences including astronomy, medicine, chemistry, and engineering, as well as literature and music, found no contradiction between religious knowledge and secular disciplines.³⁸

Inspired by such a master, Tahtâwî managed to learn French and to read some of the eighteenth century French thought and literature. Perhaps more importantly he had time to see and observe everyday life in Paris and to record his observations in a book that was published after his return to Egypt, entitled *Takhlîs al-Ibrîz fî Talkhîs Pariz* (Summary of Paris). On his return he was appointed director of the newly established School of Languages (*Madrâsat al-`Alsun*). A bureau of translation was attached to the school in 1841. Books were translated to and from various (European) languages, covering the fields of geography, history, geometry, mathematics, engineering, law, etc. In addition to all these duties, he was appointed the chief editor of the first official newspaper *al-Waqâi` al-Misriyyah*.³⁹

Al-Tahtâwî's contribution to the study of Islam and 'rethinking tradition', besides being a pioneer in the intellectual awakening process, lies in the fact that he gives a new turn to the idea of the '*ulama*'. In his view, they are not simply guardians of a fixed and established tradition. Himself well versed in the religious law, as Shâfi`î by legal rite, he

³⁸See "the Report on the Religious Condition in Egypt (*Taqrîr al-Hallah al-Diniyyah fî Misr*), al-Ahrâm Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, Cairo 1995.

³⁹ Hourani, Albert, *Arabic Thought in the liberal Age (1798-1939)*, Cambridge University Press, London 1983, reprinted 1984, p. 71).



believed it was necessary to adapt *sharî'a* to new circumstances and that it was legitimate to do so. Very much like Shah Walî Allah, he provoked the reopening of the gate of *'ijtihâd*, which had been announced closed. He even went one step further to suggest that there was not much difference, , between the principles of *sharî'a* and the principles of 'natural law' on which the codes of modern Europe were based. This suggestion implied that Islamic law could be reinterpreted in the direction of conformity with modern needs, and he suggested a principle which could be used to justify this: that it is legitimate for a believer, in certain circumstances, to accept an interpretation of the law drawn from a legal code other than his own. Taken up by later writers, this suggestion was used in the creation of a modern and uniform system of Islamic law in Egypt and elsewhere.⁴⁰

It is worth noting that the Muslim reformists were able to break through the principle of consensus by re-invoking the principle of rational reasoning, *ijtihâd*, which was quite feasible and successful, by supporting the fourth principle, i.e. legal syllogisms, *qiyâs*. By undermining the principle of 'consensus', they were able to navigate through the volumes of law, *fiqh*, without limiting themselves to following a specific school, which gave them more freedom to choose opinions and to build legal syllogisms. This type of reformation became instrumental in the field of law formulation and *sharî'a* codification in so many Muslim countries.

The process of breaking 'consensus' continued to present the major development throughout the twentieth century. A new class of intellectuals started to be engaged, challenging the hegemonic authority of the traditional class of *'ulamâ'* across the Muslim World, thanks to the age of print and the press, and the introduction of modern educational systems. All these were essential elements in the process of building the post-independence nation states. Now, with the intensive use of Internet, the traditional authority of the *'ulamâ'* and even the authority of modern intellectuals has been fragmented. If the traditional *'ulamâ'* were the ones who challenged and rethought the principle of 'consensus', thus, opening new space of rational reflection on Tradition, it was for the new emerging class of intellectuals to go a step further in the process of 'rethinking'.⁴¹

11- Rethinking Sunna, hadith criticism: the emergence of new exegesis

As explained earlier Sunna encompasses the sayings and actions of the prophet Muhammad as well as his approval and/or disapproval of his companions' sayings and actions.

⁴⁰ Hourani, op. cited. P. 75.

⁴¹ See, Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (eds.) *New Media in the Muslim World*, Indiana University Press, 1999, especially their contributions and the introduction.



Unlike the Qur'ân that was recorded down in written form early, Sunna was orally transmitted before the compellation of the collections of Tradition around the end of second/eighth century. The fact that all the reports containing tradition were orally transmitted with the possibility of fabrication for various reasons and motivations, made the early scholars of hadîth who were very aware of the possibility,–develop certain critical rules to evaluate authenticity, and hence what was to be accepted, and to avoid fabrications entering the collections.

This traditional hadîth criticism approach was re-invoked and even developed beyond its traditional critical paradigm in the modern context of 'rethinking'. Rethinking the Sunna was associated with the efforts to reopen the meaning of the Qur'ân to address modern issues by way of trying to establish a new Qur'ânic exegesis, void of the heavy classical reliance on Tradition in the classical commentaries of the Qur'ân. In other words, the criticism of Sunna was basically one of the results of the Muslim thinkers being involved in Qur'ânic exegesis in a rather different way than that of the classical exegetes. The strong demand for a new approach in dealing with the Qur'ân in order to open its meaning for the new challenging circumstances made it essential to distance modern Qur'ânic exegesis from the traditional type heavily loaded with hadith quotations.

Sir Sayyed Ahmad Khân of India (1817-1898)⁴², not a traditional *`âlim*, was the first Indian modernist to introduce new themes, hitherto unknown in this interpretation. An apologist, he tried to justify the religious dogmas presented in the Qur'ân in the light of modern scientific discoveries. The perception that the Qur'ân should occupy the central place in guiding the behavior of the Muslims, as against the dominant role of the Prophetic traditions generally accepted by the *'ulamâ'*, was apparently gaining popularity among a section of Muslim intelligentsia during late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in India. This was intended primarily to create space for the interpretation of the Qur'ân in modern terms, and also to eradicate superstitions prevalent in Muslim societies. Sayyed Ahmad was the first to have raised this issue. He points to anomalies in the interpretation of the Qur'ân and suggests that these are void of even general principles on which to base an understanding of the Holy Scripture. Most of what the classical commentators have provided only concern derivations from the Qur'ân of canon law, scholastic theology, admonitions and similar other matters. Not a few parts of the classical commentaries are "worthless and full of weak and fabricated (Prophetic) traditions" or comprise

⁴² On Sir Sayyad Ahmad Khân, see Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khân: An Interpretation of Muslim Theory* (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1978); Hafeez Malik, *Sir sayyid Ahmad Khân and Muslim Modernization in India and Pakistan* (Columbia University Press, New York, 1980).



baseless stories borrowed from Judaism.

It is imperative, therefore, for him to free the field of Qur'anic exegesis from tradition, substituting instead the principles of 'reason' and 'nature'. He proposes that the Qur'ân stands on its own, requiring only application of a dedicated and enlightened mind for its understanding. The principles of interpretation, according to Ahmad Khân, should not depend on hadîth otherwise the eternal and universal quality of the Qur'ân will be put at risk. For him, the great miracle of the Qur'ân is its universality which makes it possible for every generation to find in it the meaning relevant to its situation, despite the constant increase in human knowledge. Hadîth-based interpretation tends to limit the meaning of the Qur'ân to a particular historical situation, thus obscuring its universality.⁴³

This approach led Ahmad Khân to the critical approach to the second source of Islamic knowledge, the Sunna. Under the influence of Biblical criticism applied to the transmission of hadîth's reports by European scholars like Carl Pfander (1803-1865) and William Muir (1819-1905) on one hand, and in response to the close-minded, Wahhâbî oriented, attitude developed by Ahl-i-Hadîth, on the other hand, he "eventually came to reject almost all hadîth as unreliable".⁴⁴ But his refutation of hadîth does not mean that he rejects Sunna altogether, although hadith is considered to be the major carrier of Sunna.

Like Ahmad Khân, the Egyptian Muhammad Abdu (1848-1905) seems to have a critical, though more cautious, attitude towards the material that had been handed down in the canonized collections of Sunna. He did not theoretically elaborate on redefining the authentic Tradition; but he occasionally refutes traditions that contradict either the explicit meaning of a certain Qur'anic passages or both reason and commonsense. This is obviously shown in his rejection of the traditions related to magic or the satanic touch, as well as those mentioning the angels descending to fight the enemy alongside the Muslim warriors. As we will see, his semi-rational interpretation of the Qur'an, necessitates a critical approach to tradition.⁴⁵

The early twentieth century witnessed the emergence of Ahl-i-Qur'ân movement in India as a critical response to the emphasis laid on the authority of Sunna by Ahl-i-Hadîth group, an emphasis which resulted in leaning towards a ritualistic version of reformation. The basic challenge presented by Ahl-i-Qur'ân was not the authenticity of Sunna as transmitted through hadîth reports, but it was basically

⁴³ *Rethinking Tradition*, cited, p. 44.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.37.



whether the Sunna stands in the same position of the Qur'ân as divine revelation. The Classical position holding Sunna as a form of revelation equal to the Qur'ân in authority, though different in its form, was challenged.

Similar controversy, though less violent in tone than in India, was also happening in Egypt. Just as the Indian Ahl-i-Qur'ân were influenced by Sayyid Ahmad Khân's emphasis on the Qur'ânic universalism versus the Sunna historicity, so the Egyptian critics of Sunna developed `Abdu's cautious attitude toward hadîth literature into a more radical attitude raising the slogan 'Islam is the Qur'ân alone' in a series of articles in *al-Manâr* in 1907.⁴⁶ There was strong reaction against this claim from several Muslim countries including one from India.⁴⁷ One of the more interesting outcomes of discussion around the authenticity of hadîth has been the emergence of attempts to separate the question of the authority of sunna from the problem of the historical authenticity of hadîth criticism - to accept the results of modern hadîth criticism, at least in part, while in principle preserving the authenticity of sunna. This was the general approach to sunna promoted by the Lahore based Institute of Islamic Culture.⁴⁸ A similar but much more sophisticated attempt to separate the authority of sunna from the strict authenticity of hadîth is found in the work of the Pakistani modernist Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988), who served as director of Pakistan's Central Institute for Islamic Research in the 1960s. This institute was established by the regime of General Ayyûb Khân to help promotion of modernist interpretations of Islam compatible with the needs of the regime. Fazlur Rahman's works on sunna must be understood against the background of religious politics in Pakistan during the 1960s and, in particular, against the background of the controversy between Ghulâm Ahmad Parwêz (one of Ahli-i-Qur'ân group) and his opponents among the Pakistani `ulamâ'. Parwêz's radical rejection of sunna and his particular vision of Islamic state as true heir of Prophetic authority⁴⁹ was associated in the minds of his opponents with the efforts of the Ayyûb government to bypass the `ulamâ' in order to promote modernist Islam.

Opponents of the government suspected, quite correctly, that Ayyûb was intent on bypassing the traditional sources of religious authority in his formulation of policy. They concluded, probably incorrectly, that Parwêz's ideas were exercising an undue effect on government policy. Thus the debate over the relationship between religion and state and the relative rule of the `ulamâ' and the government in formulating policy on religious question became focused on Parwêz's ideas, and particularly on the issue of Sunna. At

⁴⁶ These articles were written by Muhammad Tawfiq Sidqî, *al-Manâr*, v. 7, pp. 515-525; v. 10, pp. 683-689; v.11, pp. 689-697 and 717-779.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, v. 11, 141-145 and 521-527

⁴⁸ *Rethinking Tradition*, op cited, pp. 100-1.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.



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attention was also focused on the regime's major voice in religious matters, the Central Institute of Islamic Research and its director.⁵⁰

The story of the institute and its role in the state structure in Pakistân is worth mentioning; it shows how instrumental the criticism of Sunna was for the process of formulating modern law. It shows also the failure of the reformation movement when it is too connected to the pragmatic policy of the political regimes. The example of Pakistân could be found in different degree in other Muslim countries where the state is able to manipulate intellectuals to serve the regime ideology.

It seems obvious that the structure of the Central Institute for Islamic Research was determined to be semi-secular. As Masud pointed out⁵¹, Fazlur Rahman, who was a graduate of Oxford University, and at the time of establishing the Institute was teaching at McGill University, Montreal, Canada, "gathered together a group of scholars who represented not only various disciplines but also different Islamic orientations. This group represented different Islamic schools of thought and ethnic and provincial diversity in Pakistan. In addition to their training in traditional Islamic learning, all had to have a degree in modern discipline, e.g. economy, sociology, political science etc. These scholars also had advanced degrees from renowned universities in the West. Several were sent to USA and Canada.

As the institute acted as an advisory think tank to assist in legislation work, it provided research material for the drafting of various laws. It assisted the Islamic Advisory Council, which would advise the National Assembly. Pakistan Family Laws, legislated in 1962, represented a liberal interpretation of the Qur'ân and Sunna.

The conservatives opposed these laws as they restricted polygamy and gave rights to women that traditional Islamic law did not allow. The institute found itself the target of hostile propaganda. Fazlur Rahman was called Abu'l Fazl, the notorious Vizir of the Mughal emperor Akbar who supposedly instituted a new religion.

Fazlur Rahman's book *Islam, a general introduction*, essentially written as a defense of Islam against Western critics, triggered controversy. A population with 25% literacy took to the streets protesting against a book that most of them could not and had not read. Political opposition to Ayyub took advantage of the situation. The *'ulamâ'* declared Rahman a heretic. Agitation started in Dacca, the constituency of Mawlana Ihtishamul Haq Thanawi who was leading this

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 102.

⁵¹ Muhammad Khalid Masud, "Islamic Research Institute", *ISIM Newsletter* 1/98, p. 43.



protest against Rahman and Ayyub Khân. Countrywide disturbances in 1969 caused Ayyub to resign. Rahman was forced to leave the country, and taught at the University of Chicago until his death in 1988.

12-Rethinking Qur'ân

We can briefly divide the orientation of modern exegesis of the Qur'ân into three basic trends, each of which essentially addresses one of the challenging questions mentioned above, i.e., science, reason and politics, that modernity brought to the mind of Muslims.

a- Islam and Science

It was the Indian Sayyid Ahmad Khân, whom we have already encountered, who looked at the question of science in his exegesis of the Qur'ân. As we have seen, both the criticism of hadîth and the consideration of the position of Sunna were meant to free the Qur'ânic exegesis from the heavy impact of tradition in order to facilitate the introduction of a rather more modern understanding of God's message.

Criticizing classical Qur'ânic commentaries in terms of their sources and their subjects of interest, Ahmad Khân accepts only those parts of the commentaries dealing with the literary aspects of the Qur'ân. He points to anomalies in the interpretation of the Qur'ân and suggests that these are void of even general principles on which to base an understanding of the Holy Scripture.

Sayyed Ahmad Khân's major interest was to bring the meaning of the Qur'ân into harmony with the modern discoveries of the natural sciences. Natural scientific discoveries, he asserts, need to be taken into account while explaining the meanings of relevant parts of the Qur'ân, since they do not contain anything against the "law of nature".

Modern scientific discoveries, explains Sayyid Ahmad Khân, are the manifestations of God's promises in reality while the Qur'ân presents God's promises in words. On the basis of this argument he suggests that Scripture has to come to terms with the law of nature, which includes scientific discoveries. He therefore rejects miracles and many Qur'ânic descriptions, which he considers "supernatural" in their literal sense, and describes them as metaphors and indirect expressions of reality.⁵²

He states that Qur'ânic words and expressions should not be understood exclusively in their direct literal meanings; the Holy Scripture often uses metaphors, allegories, and other indirect expressions. In order to give his claim an authentic

⁵² See Sayyed Ahmad Khân, "Tahrîr fî usûl al-Tafsîr" (writing on the principles of interpretation), in *Tafsîr al-Qur'ân wa huwa al-hudâ wa'l-Furqân* (Interpretation of the Qur'ân which is the Guide and the Proof) (Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library: Patna, India, 2nd ed. 1995) vol. 1, pp. 1-20.



⁵³ Ibid, p. 15.

⁵⁴ Ibid, pp. 2 and 13-15.

⁵⁵ The scientific supremacy of the Qur'ân (*al-i'jâz al-'ilmî*), according to an article published in the weekly supplement of *al-Ahrâm* newspaper, October 27, 2000, p. 2, is not meant to convince the Arabs of the authenticity and divinity of the Qur'ân. For the Arabs, the writer says, it is enough to establish the Qur'ân's inimitability on its rhetorical eloquence; for the non-Arabs this explanation is neither enough nor acceptable. As for Western culture, science is the supreme mode of knowledge. The article is basically written in response to the criticism directed to the notion of 'the scientific supremacy of the Qur'ân. It is claimed that connecting the Qur'ân to scientific theory, which is changeable and subject to challenge as human knowledge develops, does in fact cause damage to the divinity and the eternity of the Qur'ân, the word of God. Defending the validity of *al-i'jâz al-'ilmî* the writer distinguishes between scientific facts and scientific theories asserting that the Qur'ân's supremacy is built on the former not the later. If such facts are explicitly or implicitly expressed in the Qur'ân, it represents the solid and universal proof of its divinity. In this context the compatibility of Islam, specifically the Qur'ân, with modern science became one of the concerns of some non-cleric Muslim intellectual. Reference can be made to publications including:

1- Reveling the illuminating Qur'anic secrets Concerning the Celestial and Terrestrial Bodies, Animals, Plants and Metals (*Kashf al-Asrâr 'l-Nawrâniyya 'l-Qur'âniyya fimâ Yata'laqu b i'l-Ajrâm 'l-Samâwiyya wa 'l-Ardiyyah wa 'l-Haywânât wa 'l-Nabâtât wa 'l-Jawâhir 'l-Ma'daniyya*) by Mohammed b. Ahmed al-Iskandrani, Cairo 1297/1880;

2- Explaining the Divine Secrets in Plants, Metals and the Specific Characteristics of Life (*Tibyân al-Asrâr 'l-Rabbâniyya fi 'l-Nabât wa 'l-Ma'âdin wa 'l-Khawâs 'l-Haywâniyya*), Syria 1300/1883;

3- Comparing Some of the Astrological Discovery with What is mentioned in the divine texts (*Muqâranat Ba'd Mabâhith al-*

traditional support, he explains how the classical *'ulamâ'* did not always accept literal meanings of many Qur'ânic

words when such meanings contradict common sense or human intellect. The reason they recognized miracles, and, therefore, accepted supernatural Qur'ânic descriptions in their literal sense is because natural sciences were not sufficiently developed during those periods. But since very little is known about pre-Islamic Arabic literature, he concludes that it is possible that words and phrases have meanings other than those explained by lexicologists. It is therefore imperative also to apply other sources and to accept such meanings of the Qur'ân as are based on them, although these may be absent from dictionaries.⁵³

Self-evidently the explicit concept of the Qur'ân as a Text, which has been the well established concept since its canonization, is uncritically accepted by Sayyid Ahmad Khân. That explains his admiration of that part of classical exegesis emphasizing the literary aspect. Although skeptical about the quantity of the knowledge available of pre-Islamic Culture, he methodologically emphasizes its importance. He concludes that the Qur'ân should, first and foremost, be understood, explained and interpreted by the Qur'ân itself i.e., by understanding its own internal structure. He considers such principle to be derived from the Holy Book.⁵⁴ The second methodological principle is that understanding the pre-Islamic Arabic literature is a pre-requisite to understanding the Qur'ân. Methodologically speaking there is nothing new in Sayyid Ahmad Khân's presupposition. The difference between his interpretation and the classical commentaries, however, lays in the domain of meaning - the modern meaning - that considers science, especially natural science the new religion of secularism. Fascinated by the new world of science and discovery he had to find a way to integrate it into his holy scripture. I propose here that Sayyid Ahmad Khân's effort to open the meaning of the Qur'ân to accept scientific findings is the embryo of the later to be developed pair of seemingly opposite directions, namely the emphasis on the scientific inimitability of the Qur'ân⁵⁵, and that of islamization of knowledge and science.

b- Islam and Rationalism

Although Muhammad 'Abdu was neither a theologian nor a philosopher, he admired the philosophical and mystical knowledge of Jamâl al-Dîn al-Afghânî (1839-1879). But while al-Afghânî was more of an activist and provocative teacher⁵⁶ 'Abdu gave up politics and concentrated his efforts in the arena of thought, especially after he was exiled because of his participation in 'Urabi's affair which ended with the Brit-



Hay'a bi 'l-Wârid fi 'Nussûs 'Shar'iyyah) by `Abdullah Fikri, who was a Minister of Education in Egypt, Cairo 1315/1897); 4- The Precious Metals in the Interpretation of the Qur'ân (*al-Jawâhir fi Tafsîr al-Qur'ân*) by Tantawi al-Jawhari (d 1940), 26 vol., first printed unknown, 2ed., Cairo 1350/1971. It is multi-volumes *tafsîr* in which the author tries his best to find everything related to modern science, modern technology, or even discoveries in the Qur'ân. Six verses, 5:27-32 for example, is dealt with in 25 pages including many headings starting with 'linguistic explanation, *al-tafsîr al-lafzî*' and ending with 'the iron save boxes' in the Qur'ân, *al-khazâ'in al-hadîdîyah fi 'l-Qur'ân*'. (cf. `Abd al-Majîd al-Sharâfî, *al-Islam wa 'l-Hadâtha* (Islam and Modernity), Tunisia 1990, pp.69-76. ⁵⁶ See, `Amârah, Muhammad (ed.), *Al A'mâl al Kâmilah li Jamâl al-Dîn al-Afghânî ma'a Dirâsat Hayâtih wa Ââtharih* (The Complete Collection of al-Afghânî's Writings, with a Study of his Life and his Writings), Cairo 1968, p. 29.

ish occupation of Egypt in 1882. Influenced heavily by Afghânî, who had brought to Egypt the idea of a new, modern interpretation of Islam, `Abdu adopted a synthesis of classical rationalism and modern socio-political awareness. This made it possible for him to re-examine the basic sources of Islamic knowledge, the Qur'ân and the Sunna as well as the structure of Islamic theology, thus, preparing the ground for what is known as the *islâh*, reformation, movement.

When he was appointed as the religious councillor, *muftî*, of Egypt in 1899⁵⁷, he addressed so many practical social and cultural issues that needed to be dealt with from an Islamic rational perspective. He set a program for the reform of Muslim higher education and for the reform of the administration of Muslim law. He tried to carry out these practical reforms, first, when he suggested reforms of education in general and of al-Azhar in particular in 1892, and, second, when he proposed so many plans for the reform of the legal system. `Abdu's efforts to introduce some reforms to al-Azhar was partly successful, but the resistance from the traditional *'ulamâ'* was so strong that he concentrated more on intellectual reformation.

His confidence in 'reason' is manifest in all his activities, although he considers that 'religion' provides the basis to protect 'reason' from erring. The question of Islam and modern knowledge, which was fundamental to `Abdu's writings, led him to re-examine Islamic heritage, pushing more to reopen the 'door of *ijtihâd*' in all aspects of social and intellectual life. As religion is an essential part of human existence, he argued that the only avenue through which to launch real reform was through a reform of Islamic thought.

He elaborated in his *Tafsîr al-Manâr* the concept of the Qur'ân as a 'text' by, first, emphasizing implicitly its literary structure, secondly, placing its style in expressing its message in the seventh century in accordance with intellectual level of the Arabs' mentality. Whatever seems irrational or contradictory to logic and science in the Qur'ân must, accordingly, be understood as reflecting the Arabs' vision of the world at that time. All verses referring to superstitions like witchcraft and the evil eye are to be explained as expressions of what the Arabs believed in. And literary figures of speech (like 'metaphor' and 'allegory') appear in *Tafsîr al-Manâr* as the basis of a rational explanation for all miraculous events and deeds mentioned in the Qur'ân. The verses which speak about sending the angels down from heaven to fight against the *kuffâr*, infidels, are thus explained by `Abdu as an expression of encouragement; they were meant to provide comfort to the believers, to help enable them to gain a victory.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ `Abdu, Muhammad, *Al-A'mâl al-Kâmilah*, op cited, vol. 5, pp. 105f.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, vol. 5, pp. 506-11.



This was precisely the first explicit effort of the re-contextualization of the Qur'ân against the 7th century cultural background, a method that was developed by later Egyptian as well as Arab and Muslim intellectuals. This process of re-contextualization led `Abdu to de-mythologize the Qur'anic narrative as well as to come close to a demystification of the Holy Text.

While Sayyid Ahmad Khân was trying to harmonize the Qur'ân with science, by way of creating equation between them - the equation between Divine 'promise in Action' and 'promise in words' - it was quite enough for `Abdu to place the Qur'ân in the seventh century context, thus excluding any attempt of comparison between the Qur'ân and science.

His most important contribution in this area was his insistence that the Qur'ân is not meant to be a book of history neither a book of science; it is a book of guidance.

Consequently, any search of proof for any scientific theory is invalid. Qur'anic narratives, on the other hand, should not be taken as historical documents. Indeed, historical incidents mentioned in the Qur'anic narratives are presented in a literary and narrative style, to convey lessons of admonition and exhortation.⁵⁹ `Abdu was very clear about the difference between 'historiography' and the Qur'anic stories. Historiography is a scientific field of knowledge based on inquiry and critical investigation of available data (reports, testimonies, memories, and geographical or material evidences, for example). In contrast, the Qur'anic stories are intended to serve ethical, spiritual and religious purposes. They might be based on some historical incidents, but the purpose is not to provide knowledge about history. This explains why names of persons, places and dates are not mentioned in these stories. Even if the story is about a prophet, or about one of the enemies of a prophet (like Pharaoh), many details are omitted. `Abdu is clearly against the method of the classical exegetes, which attempted to clarify these *mubhamât* (unmentioned; non-explicit). He insisted that the importance of the story does not depend on such knowledge; it depends rather on the lesson of 'admonition' that can be deduced from it.⁶⁰

It is important here to emphasize the fact that `Abdu's intellectual liberal discourse presents the intellectual side of the modernizing project initiated by Muhammad `Ali (1760-1849) to establish a modern state in Egypt, a project that was carried out by his grandson Khedive Ismâ`îl (1863-1879), who explicitly wanted Egypt to be like any European state. The ideas of `Abdu were very influential during the twentieth century right across the entire Muslim World,

⁵⁹ Ibid., vol. 5, p. 30f.

⁶⁰ For a detailed account of Abdu's views concerning the Qur'anic narrative, see *Tafsîr al-Manâr*, Cairo 2ed reprint, vol. 1, pp. 19-21, 210-11, 215, 229-30, 233-4, 271; vol. 3, 47-8; vol. 4, pp. 7, 42, 92-3.



thanks to the journal of *al-Manâr* (1898-1936) established by Rashîd Rida (1865-1935), `Abdu's disciple and partner.

`Abdu's 'rational' oriented exegesis was not entirely free of the issue of modern science where it was implicit, neither was the 'science' oriented exegesis of Ahmad Khân free from rationalism. Like `Abdu, in his effort to free the field of Qur'anic exegesis from tradition Ahmad Khân placed the principles of 'reason' and 'nature' as a substitute for the classical heavy dependence on quotations from tradition. His proposal is that the Qur'ân stands on its own, requiring only application of a dedicated and enlightened mind for its understanding. The principles of interpretation, according to Ahmad Khân, should not depend on hadîth or this will hazard the eternal and universal quality of the Qur'ân. For him, the great miracle of the Qur'ân is its universality which makes it possible for every generation to find in it the meaning relevant to its situation despite the constant increase in human knowledge. Hadîth-based interpretation tends to limit the meaning of the Qur'ân to a particular historical situation, thus, obscuring its universality.⁶¹

c- Islâm and Politics

Political concern is not absent from either the exegesis of `Abdu or Ahmad Khân. Neither is it appropriate to suggest that 'political' oriented exegesis was started by the Pakistani author, journalist, interpreter of the Qur'ân, ideologue and political activist Abu 'A`lâ Mawdûdî (1903-1979). But it was Abu 'l-A`lâ al-Mawdûdî who gave the political Islamic movement its qur'anic ground that was copied by Sayyid Qutb. More than anyone else he shaped and influenced the further development of 'orthodox fundamentalism', also known as 'Islamism'.⁶² The leaders of the Shi'ite revolution in Iran in 1979 gave as their main sources of inspiration for shaping an Islamic state the publications of their Egyptian Sunni 'Brethren' Hasan al-Bannâ and Sayyid Qutb, and the Pakistani Mawdûdî.

It goes without saying that it was in the Indian context under the British occupation, where the relationship between the Muslims and the Hindus started to deteriorate. Mawdûdî started his comprehensive study of the doctrine of jihâd in the mid-1920s, in response to Hindu accusations that Islam was spread by the sword, after a Muslim assassinated a non-Muslim leader. This work, which was first serialized then published under the title *al-jihâd fi 'l-Islâm*, presented the basic elements of his later thought. In 1932, and in the monthly journal *Tarjumân al-Qur'ân*, which was to be the main vehicle of his ideas for the rest of his life, Mawdûdî

⁶¹ *Rethinking Tradition*, op, cited, p. 44.

⁶² Azia Ahmad, *Islamic Modernism in India and Pakistan 1857-1965*, Karachi, 1967, pp. 208-36. See also, Bassam Tibi, *The Challenge of Fundamentalism; Political Islam and the New World Disorder*, Updated Edition, Berkeley, 2002, p. 42; see also Tariq Ramadan, *Aux sources de renouveau musulman, d'I-Afghani à Hassan al-Banna; un siècle de réformisme islamique*, Paris, 1998. All quoted by Jan Slomp, "The 'Political Equation' in Al-Jihâd Fî Al-Islâm of Abul A`la Mawdudi ", in *A Faithful Presence, essays for Kenneth Cragg*, edited by David Thomas and Clare Amos, London 2003, p. 239.



started to formulate the ideology of political Islam. He set forth the objectives of his intellectual mission in the following lines:

The plan of action I had in mind was that I should first break the hold which Western culture and ideas had come to acquire over the Muslim intelligentsia, and to instill in them the fact that Islam has a code of life of its own, its own culture, its own political and economic systems and a philosophy and an educational system which are all superior to anything that Western civilization could offer. I wanted to rid them of the wrong notion that they needed to borrow from others in the matter of culture and civilisation.⁶³

According to this ideology, where the West and Islam stand in dichotomy, the complex human societies are categorized in only two kinds, either 'Islamic' or '*Jâhilî*'. As long as the universe, according to Mawdûdî's Islamic view, is an "organized state" and a "totalitarian system", in which all powers are vested in Allah, the only ruler, the state of Islam, or the Islamic State, should present the earthly manifestation of the cosmos.

If both `Abdu and Ahmad Khân tried, in different way, to contextualize the Qur'ân in order to open up its meaning by way of allegorization and metaphorization, Mawdûdî extended the literal meaning of the Qur'ân to address the modern world. The verses of chapter 5:42-50, for example, - now well known as the verses of *hâkimiyya*, the absolute sovereignty of God - which addressed the people who rejected Islam during the time of the Prophet, are taken by Mawdûdî to be addressing the Muslims now; its meaning is not only to apply the rules prescribed by God but to establish a theocratic state.

Studying in detail Mawdûdî's book on jihad Slomp rightly comments on his hermeneutics as a hermeneutics that turns the decisions taken in certain historical moments into eternal divine law. For its importance I better quote it in its length.

On the basis of Mawdudi's own arguments and examples the reader concludes, "that all statements on jihad in the Qur'ân, Hadith and early Islamic history were established in actual situation, and that they were formulated on the basis of decisions concerning for example slaves, spoils of war, prisoners, 'the hypocrites', traitors, treatment of enemies and

⁶³ See F C R Robinson, 'Mawdûdî', in EI, vol., iv, pp. 872ff.



minorities as part of a historical process. To declare the result of this process sacrosanct, as Mawdudi does, reveals that the Achilles heel of this Islamism is its way of dealing with history. For all the events in the life of the Prophet and his Companions are given the same authority as revelation. Added to this, Mawdudi's interpretation of this 'revelation *cum* history' is presented as authoritative for Islam in all eras.⁶⁴

It could be concluded that Sayyid Ahmad Khân, `Abdu, and Mawdûdî have furnished the ground for Muslim intellectuals, throughout the twentieth century to open up the meaning of the Qur'ân, and consequently the meaning of Islam, to cope with modernity, in different ways. As illustrated Sayyid Ahmad was basically busy with the challenge of modern science; `Abdu was busy with the issue of 'rationality' in general; Mawdûdî was responding to the challenge of Western domination, and consequently the Westernization of the Muslim world. If Khân's approach is to be considered the embryo of the late '*al-i'jâz al-'ilmî*' as well as 'the islamization of science and knowledge' trend, `Abdu's approach was carried on in what has been known as the 'literary approach'. Mawdûdî's approach stands alone as the real source of the following political and ideological interpretation of the Qur'ân. Regardless of their differences in terms of methodology and conclusions, all three of them followed the classical assumption that the Qur'ân is a text.

Now, once again the question is which meaning will prevail, togetherness or isolation? Related question to be raised is whether Muslims are ready to rethink the Qur'ân or not? Is it possible to consider the open options presented in the Qur'ânic discourse and reconsider the fixed meaning presented by the classical '*ulamâ*'? In other words, how far is the reformation of Islamic thought going to develop? This duly brings the relationship of the West and the Muslim World into our discussion. How does this relationship affect the way Muslims 'rethink' their own tradition to modernize their lives without relinquishing their spiritual power, particularly in view of America's colonizing project? I am afraid the answer is not positive, especially with the new American colonization project. Both the new imperial and colonial American project and the building of ghettos in the Middle East are likely to support the most exclusive type of discourse in contemporary Islamic thought. We have to be alert and to join our efforts to fight against that by all possible means.

⁶⁴ Jan Slomp, "The 'Political Equation' in Al-Jihâd Fî Al-Islâm of Abul A'la Mawdudi", op cited, p. 255.



Conclusion

I have argued that the Qur'ân is a living phenomenon. A humanistic hermeneutics of the Qur'ân has to take seriously the living phenomenon and stop reducing the Qur'ân to be only a text. The Qur'ân was the outcome of dialoguing, debating, augmenting, accepting and rejecting. This horizontal, communicative and humanistic dimension is in the 'structure' of the Qur'ân, not outside it. The invitation to 'rethink the Qur'ân' flows from this communicative dimension. This invitation is of vital importance for Muslims in general, and for Muslims living in Europe in particular. I have argued not only for the continuation of this process of rethinking but for moving it further toward a constructive method for Muslims, wherever they are, to be actively engaged in formulating the 'meaning of life' in the world in which they live and further develop the spiritual and ethical dimension of their tradition.

But what will prevail: togetherness or isolation? Are Muslims ready to rethink the Qur'ân or not? Is it possible to consider the open options presented in the Quranic discourse and reconsider the fixed meaning presented by the classical '*ulamâ*'? In other words, how far is the reformation of Islamic thought going to develop? This question duly brings the relationship of the West and the Muslim World into the discussion. How does this relationship affect the way Muslims 'rethink' their own tradition to modernize their lives without relinquishing their spiritual power? I am afraid the answer is not positive, particularly in view of America's new colonizing policy. Both the new imperial and colonial project of the United States of America and the building of ghettos in the Middle East are likely to support the most exclusive and isolating type of discourse in contemporary Islamic thought. We have to be alert and to join our efforts to fight against this development by all possible democratic means.



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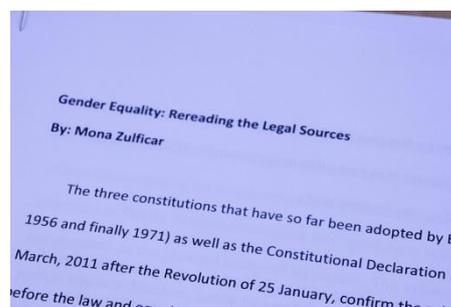
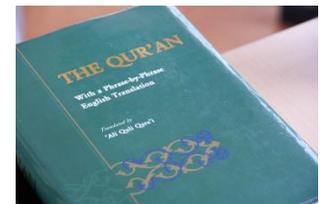
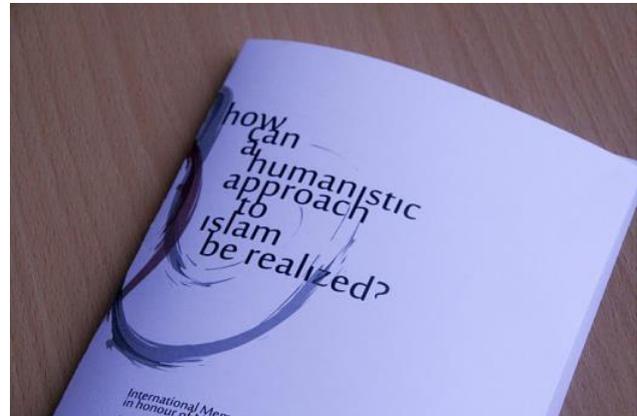
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