Fuelled by controversy and aggression, the debate that raged concerning the Egyptian literary scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd soon attracted more attention than the content of his books. The scandal provoked by Cairo University’s refusal to appoint him full professor, along with public accusations of heresy, death threats, as well as the ‘divorce’ proceedings filed against him and his wife, highlighted his case and helped rally support for him at home and abroad. The debate focused more or less on one single issue: who was it who actually violated Islamic doctrine, Abu Zayd or his adversaries? Owing to the volatile political nature of the scandal, the useful insights on how Muslim Qur’anic studies could be reformed and embedded in an international scholarly debate on Islam which were highlighted in Abu Zayd’s book ‘The Concept of the Text’ (Mafhum al-nass) were largely disregarded.

Biographical note

Nothing in Abu Zayd’s background pointed to the furore he would cause as a critic of the prevailing theology in Egypt and the Sunni world. Born on 10 July 1943 in the village of Quhafa near the lower Egyptian provincial city of Tanta, Abu Zayd was a devout student of the Qur’an from a young age, a qari‘ and hafiz, and was
able to recite it verbatim by the age of eight. When he was still a child, Abu Zayd joined the Muslim Brotherhood, and was briefly imprisoned at the age of eleven in 1954. After leaving school and up to the 1960s, he worked as a technician to provide for his family following his father’s death. Nevertheless, he still maintained his sympathies for the Muslim Brothers, and was influenced by the writings of their charismatic leader, Sayyid Qutb, who was executed in 1966. Set against this religious background, yet already distanced from the ideas of the Muslim Brothers (an organization that was to become even more influential thanks to the wave of Islamisation implemented by Anwar Sadat), Abu Zayd began to study literature at Cairo University, specialising in Islamic studies. In 1976, he received his Master’s degree from the Arabic Studies Faculty at Cairo University. He then went on to study and lecture at the American University in Cairo and at the University of Pennsylvania. By 1981, Abu Zayd had completed a doctorate at the University of Cairo, and then, from 1985 to 1989, Abu Zayd worked as a visiting lecturer at Osaka University in Japan. On returning to Egypt, he took up a position as ‘Assistant Professor in Islamic and Rhetorical Studies’ at Cairo University. However, in Spring 1993, ‘Abd al-Sabur Shahin, a professor at the Cairo Dar al-‘Ulum, publicly denounced Abu Zayd as an apostate (murtadd), effectively blocking his promotion to the post of full professor. Soon after, the mainstream, semi-state press followed with a flood of vitriolic articles accusing him of heresy. In June, a group of Islamists led by the former state official, Muhammad Samida Abu Samada, applied to the family court in Cairo to nullify the marriage between Abu Zayd and his wife, arguing that Islamic law forbids a marriage between a Muslim woman and an apostate. The couple first came to hear about the case in the tabloids. Although the charge was dismissed in the first instance and Abu Zayd was finally declared a full professor at his university, nevertheless the plaintiffs won the case on appeal: on 14 June 1995, judge ‘Abd al-‘Alim Musa proclaimed Abu Zayd a heretic and announced the dissolution of his marriage. Shortly after, a group of professors at al-Azhar University, the theological centre of Egypt, issued a joint statement calling for Abu Zayd’s execution.
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Backed by calls for his assassination by the extremist organisation, al-Jihad al-Islami. As a result of this turmoil, Abu Zayd was forced into exile with his wife and, since the winter of 1995/96, he has been professor of Islamic studies at Leiden University in Holland.

This brief outline of Abu Zayd’s education and career shows the striking combination of influences that shaped him intellectually. Firstly, he came from a small village, and proceeded through the stages of a traditional religious school system. Consequently, he was totally at ease in ‘popular Islam’, and had first-hand experience of traditional Islamic knowledge and popular piety. Secondly, he was a serious scholar of Western literature and studied and taught at international universities. Reflecting his background, his refreshing style – free from solemn rhetoric but at times quite complicated – is a blend of almost antiquated Arabic, neologisms and foreign European phrases. What is even more striking in his writings, however, is the manifestation of an abiding sense of surprise at the way in which certain of the ideas and content of traditional Islamic learning and attitudes are to be found – in different forms and with a different terminology – in Western learning, and that the latter (‘alien’) knowledge provides a possible key to understanding his ‘own’ tradition. As a consequence, the categories of ‘own’ and ‘alien’ constantly blur and sometimes vanish in Abu Zayd’s works.

The other side of the text

In Abu Zayd’s view the outstanding civilising role of the Qur’an makes Arab culture ‘a culture of the text’ (hadarat al-nass). Indeed, he goes so far as to describe it as the culture of the text par excellence. Arab culture, he argues, was spawned by ‘man’s confrontation (jadal) with reality, and his dialogue (hiwar) with the text’. But to define Arab-Islamic civilisation as a culture of the text implies that it is also a culture of interpretation (hadarat al-ta’wil); the language of the Qur’an – like any other text – is ‘not self-explanatory, since any understanding of the text and its meaning depends on the intellectual and cultural horizon of the
reader (*intaj dalalatihi*). Hence, the message of the text can only be revealed by its interpreters. If the Qur'an supposes a person who interprets, or, in linguistic terms, 'decodes' it, then text and interpretation, *nass* and *ta'wil*, are bound to be inextricably linked: as Abu Zayd puts it, the interpretation is 'the other side of the text' (*al-wajh al-akhar li al-nass*). Abu Zayd deliberately and consistently uses the term *ta'wil* instead of the more common term *tafsir* ('commentary; explanation'), in order to emphasise the share of the human intellect (*'aql*) in the act of interpretation, as opposed to a hermeneutical approach which gives priority to the narrated traditions (*naql*) in understanding the text. In the first period of Muslim theology *ta'wil* was the *terminus technicus* for the exegesis of the Qur'an, before it became restricted in the realm of religious studies to the allegorical interpretation of the ambiguous verses (*ayat mutashabihat*), or even acquired negative connotations as it became employed with regard to arbitrary readings of the Qur'an. For Abu Zayd the interpretive act goes beyond mere explanation or commentary, for without it the Qur'an would be a meaningless text, simply an 'object with intrinsic value' but devoid of any message for mankind.

The [Qur'anic] text changed from the very first moment – that is, when the Prophet recited it at the moment of its revelation – from its existence as a divine text (*nass ilahi*), and became something understandable, a human text (*nass insani*), because it changed from revelation to interpretation (*li-annahu tahawwala min al-tanzil ila al-ta'wil*). The Prophet's understanding of the text is one of the first phases of movement resulting from the text's connection with the human intellect.

Following the late Russian semioticist Jurij M. Lotman, Abu Zayd developed a theoretical communication model in which the Qur'an – like any other message (*risala*), be it signs (*ayat*) that are verbal or non-verbal – depicts 'a communicative relationship between the sender (*mursil*) and receiver (*mustaqbil*), based on a code (*shifra*) or linguistic system'. Abu Zayd, who translated two of Lotman's works into Arabic, embraced the Russian semiotician's concept of the text. Lotman contended that art was 'a special means of communication, a language organized in a particular
According to this premise, each work of art conveys information through a system of signs. This places it as a ‘text’ within a specific language system, despite the fact that works of art include both verbal and non-verbal texts. Hence each artistic text ‘behaves as a kind of living organism which has a feedback channel to the reader and thereby instructs him’. It conveys ‘different information to different readers in proportion to each one’s comprehension’.

Turning to the Qur’an, Abu Zayd points out that if the information conveyed by the text varies according to the reader’s personal as well as his cultural and social horizons, then the essence of the message conveyed by the Qur’an to a twentieth-century reader must vary from the information conveyed to a Muslim in the seventh, eighth or eleventh century. Accordingly, any interpretation based on the corpus of classical exegesis, or on the legacy of the Prophet and his companions, which is essentially based on an earlier interpretation (given that the hadith are nothing other than Muhammad’s interpretation of the divine message, that is, the Qur’an), cannot trace the specific message of the Qur’an for each age. Abu Zayd strongly condemns belief in one single, precise and valid interpretation of the Qur’an handed down by the Prophet for all times:

Such a claim [that the Prophet’s understanding is sacred] leads to a kind of polytheism, because it equates the Absolute with the relative and the constant with the transient; and, more specifically, because it equates the Divine Intent with the human understanding of this Intent, even in the case of the Messenger’s understanding. It is a claim that leads to an idolization of a conferral of sainthood upon the Prophet, by concealing the Truth that he was a human, and by failing to present clearly enough the fact that he was merely a prophet.

In Abu Zayd’s view, an individual’s interpretation is never absolute (fahm mutlaq). It is always relative (fahm nisbi), since the ‘information’ in the divine ‘message’ varies according to whoever ‘receives’ it. He vigorously contests any claim that this concept of text, which transcends literal or traditional interpretation and stresses the role of the interpreter, clashes with the Qur’an and
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Islamic theology. In fact he argues that the Qur’an itself inher­ently relies on interpretation through human reason and system­atic literary methods, and quotes both verses from the Qur’an and citations from Mu’tazili theologians; in addition, he refers to the canonical disciplines of Qur’anic Studies (‘ulum al-Qur’an), as established in the classical surveys of al-Zarkashi (d. 1392) or al­Suyuti (d. 1505) to endorse this view. He also argues that any interpretation based on the ‘authority of the elders’ (sultat al­qudama) would link the meaning of the text to the intellectual horizon and cultural milieu of the first generation of Islam, or the historical circumstances of an Islamic golden age that is long past.

This connection radically contradicts the understanding, anchored in the culture, that the meaning of the text transcends the limits of space and time. Yet limiting ourselves to the first generation’s inter­pretation, and restricting the role of modern exegetes to that of narrating from the old scholars leads in the end to an even more questionable result. Hence people either cling to the ‘literalness’ of these interpretations and turn them into a ‘professing’, which in the end results in limiting them to these ‘primally eternal’ (in the sense of ‘ultimate’) truths, and in abandoning the method of the ‘experi­ment’ in studying natural scientific and human phenomena; or else results in ‘science’ turning into ‘religion’, and religion into super­stition, tall tales, and a mere vestige from the past.

The history of interpretation

Three key themes emerge from Abu Zayd’s work: (1) to trace the various interpretations and historical settings of the single Qur’anic text from the early days of Islam up to the present; (2) to demonstrate the ‘interpretational diversity’ (al-ta’addud al­ta’wili) that exists within the Islamic tradition; and, (3) to show how this diversity has been increasingly neglected across Islamic history. These concerns date back to his Master’s thesis, which examines the rational interpretation of the Qur’an put forward by the Mu’tazila and their attempt to demythologise Qur’anic metaphors within the context of the political, economic, and
social conditions of the age. In his doctoral thesis, Abu Zayd explored another classical interpretation of the Qur'an, namely the mystical interpretation by Muhyi al-Din ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240). Ibn 'Arabi’s reflections on interpretation and his understanding of existence and the Qur'an as open systems of communication between God and man have substantially shaped Abu Zayd’s hermeneutical approach, as he himself demonstrates at length in his autobiography.

Abu Zayd’s provocative critical writings on Islamic theology encompass debates with Imam al-Shafi‘i (d. 820), and Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 1111), but also with Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) and his salafi legacy. In these works Abu Zayd demonstrates how specific historical, political or ideological motivations originally underpinned certain interpretations that have become canonised within the contemporary range of existing interpretations. Abu Zayd criticises what he describes as ‘the hold of reactionary thought over tradition’, which has often marginalised or banished critical, rational, heterodox and mystical tendencies from ‘the paradise of Islam and the Arabic language’, while reducing Islamic cultural history to politically conservative, traditional theology. The aim of this reactionary religious discourse is, according to Abu Zayd, ‘to simplify the ancient books’. It advocates pure memorising and repetition, without grasping the deeper levels of meaning in the text. Muslims, he adds, have lost ‘their free relationship to the Qur’an’, which is now shrouded with an aura of untouchability and inscrutability. Revered as a sacred icon, its actual message is ignored. Abu Zayd scathingly criticises the reduction of the Qur’an to a mere object (he calls this *tashyi’* for which the German *Verdinglichung* would be a precise translation), to ‘a trinket for women and a magic charm for children’. He also complains that it has been ‘swamped by layers (tabaqat) of interpretation, each compromised by some historical ideology, hampering all efforts to appreciate the text and its true role in present-day Arabic society’. In light of this, Abu Zayd describes the intentions of his own work thus: ‘My research and writings focus on the following problems: how to achieve a scientific understanding of the Qur’an, and how to
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brush aside layers of ideological interpretation, in order to unearth the historical reality of the text.  

Revelation and the dialectic of the Qur’an

Abu Zayd argues that it is necessary to focus on the historical context of the revelation if we hope to distinguish between its historical meaning (ma’na) and its broader, enduring significance (maghza). Since the linguistic system (nizam lughawi) of the Qur’an itself focuses on the original addressees (mukhatabun), that is, the persons initially addressed, a consciousness of the historicity of the text is especially important if we are to be able to understand its message today.

Certainly it is a message from Heaven to earth, but it is not a message independent of the rules of reality, with all the structures in which this reality is embedded, the most important of these being the cultural framework. The Absolute reveals Itself to humans by means of Its speech. It ‘lowers Itself to them’ (yatanaazzalu ilayhim), by employing their cultural and linguistic system of meaning.

Accordingly, Abu Zayd argues that the revelation adapts itself to the linguistic and intellectual horizon of the first addressees: in order to change the reality, it thus embodies it. This implies that the revelation has some connection – albeit a negative one in the dialectic sense – to reality. Abu Zayd highlights the ‘dialectic relationship’ (‘alaqa jadalyya) that exists between the Qur’an and reality in many aspects of the history of its revelation. An example arises in the way that it dealt with specific ethical, spiritual and ideological concepts of the pre-Islamic tribal era so as to embed these in a monotheistic creed and a value system based on human equality. He describes how the revelation reacted to specific historical events, in addition to the general social and political changes which were already ongoing, even before the rise of Islam. Abu Zayd also discusses at length the extent to which classical Qur’anic Studies (‘ulum al-Qur’an) – with its several disciplines such as ‘the causes of revelation’ (asbab al-nuzul) and ‘the abrogating and the abrogated’ (al-nasikh wal-mansukh) –
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proceeded from a notion of the Qur’anic text that took the historical dimension of the revelation into account. As a scholar of literary studies, his own focus, naturally, is on the language of the revelation. While he analyses the linguistic norms and metaphors of the Qur’an which were taken from the social reality and the literary canon of its place and time and then recast in a form that was hitherto unknown, he starts from a much broader assumption, inspired directly by Toshihiko Izutsu’s pioneering work. By transmitting the Qur’an in Arabic, God had adopted a human language and the culture that had produced this language. Hence the Qur’an, Abu Zayd argues, is essentially a product of (a particular) culture (muntaj thaqafi). The following passage, which appears in the introduction to Mafhum al-nass, spells this out:

When He revealed the Qur’an to the Messenger (God bless him and keep him), God, the Elevated and Praised, chose the specific linguistic system of the first recipient. The choice of a language is not the choice of an empty vessel, even if the contemporary religious discourse may assert this; for the language is the community’s most important instrument for grasping the world, and giving it order in consciousness. It is impossible to speak of a language apart from the (associated) culture and reality. It is thus also impossible to speak of a text apart from the culture and reality, because the text is something located within the linguistic and cultural framework.

God chose Arabic to communicate with man; in order to decipher His message, man must analyse His speech by using the same methods and rules which are applied to any other verbal speech, since, according to Abu Zayd, ‘the divine act (al-fîl al-ilahi) in the world takes place in space and time, that is, it takes place within the framework of the laws of this world’. He adds that the widespread reluctance to apply the methods of human reason to divine speech stems from the assumption that ‘the relationship between the Divine and the human is based on separation, even opposition and antagonism, an illusion generated by the Ash‘ari view of the world’. However,

Such a complete separation between the Divine and the human fails to recognise an important truth, confirmed by the Divine Revelation
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Itself when It designates Itself a ‘sending down’ (*tanzil*), which means a ring that binds, and a speech through which the Divine and the human are tied to each other. In other words: when the Divine Speech (which points out God’s path) by being a ‘sending down’ makes use of the means of human language, despite God’s omniscience, His perfection, power, and wisdom, then human reason, by interpreting, is tied to the Divine Speech, despite all the ignorance of man, his imperfection, weakness, and desires.47

Having established that a causal relationship exists between the text and the interpreter, even in the case of purely factual texts, Abu Zayd points out how much more complex this relationship is in the case of literary texts, which he refers to as *al-nusus al-mumtaza*,48 or ‘superior’ texts. He cites Shakespeare as an example of the extremely dense (*mukaththa*fa) linguistic structure of these texts, which makes it possible to convey a maximum and, at the same time, a variability of information. This also applies to the Qur’an, whose miraculous nature has often been traced in its literary structure.49 Abu Zayd points out that while the language of the Qur’an ‘does not deviate from the general language system, it creates its own code, reconstructing elements of the original semantic system’.50 He maintains that the particularly complex structure of the language of the Qur’an distinguishes it from natural speech. It thus fluctuates between different linguistic levels, ‘between, albeit rarely, the pure transmission of “information” (*i’lam*), and dense “literary” language, which produces its own specific mechanisms’.51 The tools of literary studies are necessary to analyse these ‘specific mechanisms’ of literary language (*lugha adabiyya*): these include hermeneutics, literary criticism, semantics, linguistics and linguistic science. Abu Zayd advocates a symbiosis of Qur’anic and literary studies, arguing that only an interpretation which takes into account its specific linguistic mechanisms is capable of analysing the Qur’an, deciphering its code, and unravelling the message that the Qur’an contains for present society. In so doing, such an interpretation transcends the historical meaning of the Qur’an for Arab society at the time of its revelation.
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Amin al-Khuli and his ‘literary exegesis’

Abu Zayd’s literary study of the Qur’an refers to a tradition of classical Muslim scholars like ‘Abd al-Jabbar (d. 1025) and, especially, ‘Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (d. 1078), who took it for granted to study the language of the Qur’an in the light of poetry and its related studies. He also sees himself as a direct successor to the late professor of Qur’an interpretation at the University of Cairo, Amin al-Khuli (d. 1967), who developed the theory of a literary exegesis of the Qur’an (al-tafsir al-adabi li al-Qur’an). This theory promoted the use of all accessible scientific methods, irrespective of religious considerations, the view being that the Qur’an’s message could only be understood after its historical, literal meaning for the first addressees – and thus the historical and linguistic context of the revelation – had been identified. This requires a precise linguistic analysis of all verses that deal with a specific subject, or contain a word that needs to be interpreted. The interpreter must also consider the sentence structure and the psychological effect that Qur’anic language has on the listener. Like Abu Zayd, Amin al-Khuli also stressed the role of the interpreter:

The person who interprets a text, especially when it is a literary text, colours it with his interpretation and his understanding. The personality of an individual who seeks to understand an expression limits the conceptual level of that expression. It is he who determines the intellectual horizon and who extends sense and intention to the expression. The interpreter does all this in accordance with his conceptual level and in the framework of his intellectual horizon, for he can never leave behind or step beyond his personality. One will not be able to understand a text without extending one’s thoughts and one’s intellect to it.

The parallels between Abu Zayd and Amin al-Khuli have to do with their aesthetic interest in the Qur’an. Amin al-Khuli described the Qur’an as ‘the greatest book and the most spectacular literary work in the Arabic language. It has immortalised this language and its essence, and has itself become immortal. It became the pride of this language and the jewel of its tradition.
Although Arabs may differ in religion or attitude, all of them sense this attribute of the Qur'an, its Arabness ('arabiyyatuhu').\(^{58}\) Arabs, he continues, should study the Qur'an 'as other nations study the literary masterpieces produced in various languages'.\(^{59}\) For the Qur'an is 'the holiest book of Arabic art, whether or not the observer considers it to have the same status in religion'.\(^{60}\)

Fifty years later, Abu Zayd reiterates the same views:

I treat the Qur'an as a text in the Arabic language that the Muslim as well as the Christian or atheist should study, because the Arab culture is united in it, and because it is still able to influence other texts in this culture. It is a text that took up the pre-Islamic texts and that all texts after it have taken up, even those that are produced today. I venerate the Qur'an more than all the salafis. The salafis limit it to the role of prescription (halal) and proscription (haram). This is in spite of the fact that it is also a text that has been productive for the arts. The visual arts thus arose from the Qur'anic text, for the most important art is the art of calligraphy. The vocal arts arose from the art of reciting the Qur'an – all classical singers in the Arab culture began with Qur'an recitation. How did this diversity of meanings and indications, this presence on all levels, become transformed? I enjoy listening to a recitation of the Qur'an. How much remains hidden because of the limitation to prescription and proscription! In reality, no one enjoys the Qur'an. We read the Qur'an and are afraid, or dream of Paradise. We transform the Qur'an into a text that provides incentives, and intimidates. Into a stick and a carrot. I want to liberate the Qur'an from this prison, so that it is productive again for the essence of the culture and of the arts, which are strangled in our society.\(^{61}\)

**Hermeneutics**

Abu Zayd highlights his relationship to Amin al-Khuli as a reference to his own Egyptian roots, but does not conceal the fact that his theories took shape through his engagement and discussion with writers from different times and contexts, including the Iranian grammarian Sibawayhi (d. c. 800), the Japanese Islamic scholar Toshihiko Izutsu, who introduced analytical linguistic methods to Islamic studies, and the German philosopher and theoretician of hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer, author of
the influential work *Wahrheit und Methode*. Some of these discussions are documented in his book *Ishkaliyyat al-qira‘a’ wa ahiyyat al-ta‘wil*, which is a compilation of his main linguistic and literary articles. The work includes an annotated introduction to European philosophical hermeneutics,\(^62\) which was first published as early as 1981, and was one of the first comprehensive surveys on this topic in the Arabic language. The emphasis on Gadamer’s hermeneutics links Abu Zayd specifically to the Iranian theologian Mohamad Mojtahed Shabestari,\(^63\) but seems to indicate at the same time a broader trend within contemporary Islamic thinking. The relevance attributed to hermeneutics for the interpretation of religious writings is partly due to the fact that, in contrast to analytical linguistic and positivistic methods, hermeneutics stresses the subjectivity of any kind of understanding of a text. In philosophical hermeneutics, initiated substantially by the theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (d. 1834), the cognitive subject generally reflects his personal circumstances. This is based on the idealistic principle that the subject is instrumental in shaping the world and that knowledge never reflects a reality which is independent of the subject. Applied to the Qur’an, this means that it has no ‘objective’ meaning which is accessible to individuals (or theologians). It also implies that, unlike logical empiricism, no strict ‘natural scientific’ distinction exists between the subject (interpreter) and the object (text). Instead, each interpretation is the result of a certain relationship between the text and its interpreter, and reflects the uniqueness of this relationship. It therefore cannot be identical to an interpretation from another era or socio-cultural context. This subject-focused approach is particularly explosive in the light of the current trend throughout the Islamic world to grasp the one and ‘true’ meaning of the Qur’an (a virtually positivistic approach), the subject’s sole task being merely to analyse this unchanging truth.\(^64\)
Critique of religious discourse

Abu Zayd’s provocative critique of the dominant Islamic discourse in Egypt, which he puts forward above all in *Naqd al-khitab al-dini* and two books on the status of women, evolves from his concept of the text: arguing for the plurality of exegesis, he rejects claims that link Islam to one, eternally valid interpretation:

This is a statement that is disproved by the history of Islam, the history that witnessed a diversity of trends, currents and groups that arose for societal, economic, and political reasons, and formed their standpoints by interpreting and trying to understand the texts. Whatever the intentions of one book or the other, this insistence on the existence of a single Islam and the rejection of the plurality that actually exists leads to two results. The first is a single, unchanging understanding of Islam, an understanding impervious to the influence of the movement of history and of the differences between societies, not to mention the influence of the diversity of groups that take form within a single society, due to the differences between their interests. The second result is that this unchanging understanding is possessed by a group of people – the theologians exclusively – and that the members of this group are considered to be free of the arrogance and the natural bias of humans.

Abu Zayd condemns the ‘creation of a priesthood’ which claims to ‘understand true Islam’ in order to confine ‘the power of interpretation and commentary to this circle’. In their view the theologian has sole right of interpretation, contrary to Islamic doctrine, which rejects a ‘sacred power or priesthood’. More inexcusable still, they present their interpretation as the absolute truth, denying any other opinion. This removes the distinction between the text and its interpretation. As Abu Zayd puts it:

Everyone talks about the one Islam, without any of them feeling any trace of uncertainty whether this is in truth his (own) understanding of Islam, or of its texts.

Furthermore, Abu Zayd points out that by claiming to recognise the divine intention in the Islamic texts, theologians venture into ‘a sensitive area, the area of “speaking in the name of God”, which
religious discourse throughout its history has avoided, except in a few cases'. Such reasoning, he maintains, ‘eventually leads to the appointment of a certain species of human being who claim to have a monopoly on comprehension, explanation, commentary and interpretation, and thus feel that they alone are entitled to speak about God’.

Above all, this monopolisation of interpretation runs parallel with the extension of its social relevance, since the texts or, more precisely, a specific, contemporary interpretation of these determined not least by political interests, are defined as a comprehensive frame of reference (marja‘iyya shamila): all social or physical phenomena are traced directly to God, and the texts are expected to explain these phenomena. Abu Zayd points out that this understanding of the Qur’an at the same time contradicts the very message of the Qur’an itself, since it negates the importance of human reason, and contradicts the tradition of understanding God’s revelation in the Islamic world.

It gives pause for thought that none of the exegetes or thinkers defends his explanation of natural or human phenomena on the grounds that this is ‘Islam’. When the Prophet’s companion ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Abbas (who bears the title of ‘the interpreter of the Qur’an’ – tarjuman al-Qur’an, and ‘scholar of the community’ – habr al-umma) explained thunder as ‘an angel who drives the clouds before him with a silver catapult’ (an explanation that can be traced back to statements of the Apostle, may God bless and keep him) in some hadith compilations, none of the Muslims grasped this as an absolute, holy, religious meaning which scientific research must not contradict. The Muslims understood that the religious texts present no explanation for physical and human phenomena, but that their explanation is left to the activity of human reason, which develops continually, in order to discover the horizons of humanity and nature. This understanding precisely is among the most important reasons for the scientific and technical achievements of Muslim scholars – those same scholars whom current religious thought never ceases proudly pointing to – on account of what they gave to Europe in the way of foundations for (and precursors of) the experimental method, at the beginning of the Renaissance.
Abu Zayd criticises the frequent contemporary calls for the Islamisation not only of law, but of literature, art and knowledge in general. According to these, in all fields of culture and science the Qur’an and Sunna should become the ‘authority for judgements and analyses’, leading ultimately to the domination of all areas of life by ‘men of religion (rijal al-din)’. He underlines the fact that although the tendency to see the Qur’an as a general frame of reference for all areas of life was not invented by contemporary Islamists and indeed stems from a long tradition whose roots go back to the Kharijis, during the Prophet’s lifetime, religious and secular affairs were kept quite separate. Thus:

From the first moments in the history of Islam – and during the period of the Revelation and the formation (tashakkul) of the texts – there was a stable awareness that the texts of the religion have a special area of validity or activity (majalat fa‘aliyyatiha), and that there are other areas subject to the activity of human reason and experience, which are not connected with the activity of the texts. It often happened that, when presented with a situation, the first Muslims asked the Prophet whether his behaviour was based on a revelation or on his personal experience and reason. And they often had a different opinion than his and suggested a different behaviour, when it had to do with an area of experience and reason.

Abu Zayd’s criticism of contemporary phenomena is not a political sub-agenda in an otherwise purely academic debate. On the contrary, the scholarly study of the past as a tool to understand and change the present is a vital aspect of his work. His criticism of leading contemporary theologians and journalists in Egypt and his challenging of their monopoly on the interpretation of the sacred texts is indeed highly political. It is part of the struggle by a number of intellectuals against the mounting influence of religious authorities in all parts of society, and the growing acceptance of Islamist ideas within the state. Abu Zayd frequently attacks government religious policy and the prevalent official religious discourse in Egypt, which is shaped by al-Azhar University, televised religious programmes and the conservative, partly state-owned press. He accuses prominent protagonists of this discourse of abusing religion for political power and, sometimes, financial gain. He also sees no essential difference between their line of
thought and that of the extremist religious opposition. In fact he claims that it was precisely the state-controlled religious media, with their immense influence on the largely illiterate Egyptian population, that paved the way for religiously-motivated violence. In his view, the struggle between ruling Islamic representatives and those who oppose the regime is not a conflict between two different ideologies: it is a raw struggle for power. Because his critique of social trends and political decisions appears in the context of an academic study of Islam, it is no surprise that those at the receiving end of his criticism, and their supporters, have reacted on a theological level, and retaliated with accusations of heresy. Abu Zayd described this mechanism in his book *Naqd al-khitab al-dini*, in the following terms: ‘We are allowed to challenge the rule of men; one can oppose it through various forms of human combat, and replace it by more just systems. But the struggle against the rule of theologians is subject to accusations of unbelief, atheism and heresy, generally depicted as disobedience and heresy against the power of God’.\textsuperscript{78} One year later, in an interview to the *Middle East Times* in the summer of 1993, he could make the ironic comment concerning himself that: ‘Every academic is happy to see his ideas become reality’.\textsuperscript{79}

A further reason for the indignation triggered by Abu Zayd is the vocabulary and methods he employs to discuss the Qur’an. A book like *Mafhum al-nass* seems from the outset to have no relation to the forms and formulations of traditional Qur’anic exegesis which have survived relatively unchanged for centuries. Abu Zayd does not balk at terms like ideology, historicity, code and dialectics, and discusses God’s revelation – influenced by Western hermeneutics and linguistics – using a theoretical communication model, whose terminology he has translated into Arabic. The fact that the contents and findings of the model are less new and spectacular than the model itself is soon overlooked. Bearing in mind the outcry that his work has provoked in Egyptian society, one is perhaps surprised to find that, while undoubtedly scholarly and informative, his writings contain large passages of rather dry explanations from traditional Qur’anic studies, or analyses of these, which neither attempt to redefine
Islam nor to challenge belief in the divine origin of the revelation. In fact, the least productive approach to Abu Zayd’s writings is to search for entirely new and, from an Islamic viewpoint, ‘heretical’ ideas. It is one of the characteristics of his writings that they make mention of religious beliefs, but largely succeed in excluding them from the academic discourse. During a long interview published by the journal *al-Qahira* in November 1993, Abu Zayd himself repeatedly stressed that he did not aim to present a completely new concept or thesis, but simply to rework themes which have already been discussed in classical Qur’anic studies. ‘I have not come with any wonder of scholarly discovery (*mu‘jiza ma‘rifiyya*)’, he said to his discussion partner. He proceeded to remark that ‘it was the environment, climate and the attempt to politically instrumentalise religion that made it so’. Whoever searches Abu Zayd’s writings looking primarily for statements aimed at shaking belief in the foundations of Islam will be disappointed. In fact he is criticised not only for writings that are too ‘un-Islamic’, but also for the opposite reason. In an article entitled ‘A Discourse which challenges Fundamentalism, but shares the same Roots’, the secular writer Ali Harb writes: ‘The truth is that Abu Zayd’s statements are progressive and secular, but his way of thinking is still fundamentalist (*usuli*)’.80

**Perspectives**81

Abu Zayd’s efforts to redefine the social role of religion, his critique of its political instrumentalisation, and his endeavour to stress the individual and the necessarily subjective experience of the believer in prayer, meditation and reading of the sacred scriptures, all link him to reformist thinkers like Mohammed Arkoun, the Algerian who lives and teaches in Paris, or the Iranian Abdolkarim Soroush, and certain other contemporary Muslim writers. Working in widely varying social and intellectual contexts, such thinkers emphasise the fact that the Qur’an provides general ethical guidelines, but does not have the answer to all human and
social issues. Earlier Islamic reformist thinkers defended democracy or respect for human rights on the grounds that such principles are supported by Islam. In contrast, such contemporary intellectuals argue that we should not resort to Islam to support such principles: we should rather uphold them on the basis of our own human reason and social will. ‘Islam’, Abu Zayd argues, ‘as a religion acts as a frame of reference, but I can’t influence human rights by simply referring to Islam. After all, many human achievements undeniably exist outside of religion.’ By rejecting the instrumentalisation of religion irrespective of motivation (including, in other words, its exploitation for politically progressive programmes), such intellectuals have overcome a basic obstacle in Muslim reformist thinking. Earlier generations felt obliged to interpret religious source texts that challenge modern notions of human rights and society to the point where they resolved any contradiction between the two. Abu Zayd and Soroush, to name only two contemporary thinkers, accept the contradiction as a matter of fact but consider it irrelevant because it does not affect the essence of religion.

To conclude, the most interesting aspect of Abu Zayd’s work appears to be his attempt – based on a profound knowledge of the traditional religious sciences – to adapt the findings of modern linguistics and the theories of philosophical hermeneutics to his analysis of the Qur’an and Islamic theology. In doing so, he has continued a promising project in literary exegesis initiated by al-Khuli, which views the Qur’an as a poetically structured text, and a literary monument, rather than a list of judgements or a merely legal text. Like al-Khuli and his direct associates (especially his widow ‘A’isha ‘Abd al-Rahman and his pupil Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah), Abu Zayd has a deep-seated knowledge of Islamic tradition. However he makes an even more pronounced effort to apply the findings of modern linguistic science and the theories of philosophical hermeneutics to the study of the Qur’an and Islamic theology. This has produced remarkable parallels to concerted efforts within contemporary Western Islamic studies to study the Qur’an as a literary text. The fact that Abu Zayd is not a lone voice but has contemporary Muslim colleagues who hold
similar views indicates that the field of Qur’anic studies in the Islamic world is becoming increasingly diverse and reflective.

NOTES

1. This article is based on Navid Kermani, Offenbarung als Kommunikation. Das Konzept wahy in Nasr Hamid Abu Zayds ‘Mafhum al-nass’ (Frankfurt am Main, 1996).
2. On Abu Zayd’s biography cf. his autobiographical Ein Leben mit dem Islam. Narr., Navid Kermani; German trans., Chérifa Magdi (Freiburg, 1999); information also available online: http://msanews.mynet.net/Scholars/NasrAbu.
5. Ibid., p. 247.
9. Ibid., p. 337.
15. Ibid.
21. Ibid., p. 250.
22. Cf. ibid., p. 252.
23. Ibid., p. 251.
24. Mafhum al-nass, p. 11.

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36. Mafhum al-nass, p. 337.
38. Abu Zayd here refers to the distinction between meaning and significance as advanced by the American linguist Eric D. Hirsch Jr. (Validity in Interpretation. Yale, 1969, pp. 1–10.). This can be traced back to the German philosopher Gottlieb Frege: ‘Über Sinn und Bedeutung’, Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik, NF 100 (1892), pp. 25–50.
39. Mafhum al-nass, p. 64.
40. Ibid., p. 28.
42. Especially his God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung (Tokyo, 1964; repr. New York, 1980).
43. Mafhum al-nass, p. 27.
44. Ibid., p. 27.
45. Ibid.
47. Ibid., p. 63.
48. Mafhum al-nass, p. 120; cf. ibid., p. 212.
51. Mafhum al-nass, p. 212.
54. Amin al-Khuli’s theories on the exegesis of the Qur’an are mainly found in his compilation Manahij tajdid fi al-nahw wal-balagha wal-tafsir
Navid Kermani


55. al-Khuli, Manahij tajdid, p. 304.


57. al-Khuli, Manahij tajdid, p. 296.

58. Ibid., p. 303.

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid., p. 304.


63. Abu Zayd himself stresses his affinity to Shabestari in a long interview to an important Iranian religious journal, which was banned shortly afterwards: Mortez Kariminiya, ‘Ta’wil, haqiqat wa nass: Goft-o-gu-ye Kiyan ba Nasr Hamed Abu Zayd’, Kiyan, 54 (2000), pp. 2–17. His emphasis on the indispensable multiplicity of interpretations connects him, of course, to another Iranian intellectual, Abdolkarim Soroush. It is interesting to note that a well-known Iranian publisher (Tarh-e nou) is planning to publish a Persian translation of Ma’hum al-nass soon.


65. al-Mar’a fi khitab al-azma (Cairo, 1995); Dawa’ir al-khawf: qira’a fi khitab al-mar’a (Casablanca, 1999).


67. Ibid., p. 31.

68. Ibid.

69. Cf. ibid., pp. 28, 37.

70. Ibid., p. 29.

71. Ibid.

72. Ibid., p. 81.

73. Ibid., p. 186 f.; cf. Ma’hum al-nass, p. 251 f.

74. Naqd al-khitab al-dini, p. 187. The call for Islamisation of knowledge has been put forward in the last decades by scholars and institutions in
different Islamic countries, but Abu Zayd refers to only one specific example, an ‘International Conference on Islamic Literature’ organised by the ‘Society of Young Muslims’ in January 1990.

75. Ibid., p. 188.
76. Cf. al-Imam al-Shafi‘i, p. 21 f.
77. Naqd al-khitab al-dini, p. 28.
78. Ibid., p. 81.
81. For a more detailed evaluation of Abu Zayd’s thought, see Kermani, Offenbarung als Kommunikation.

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The magazines *al-Qahira* (125, 1993) and *Adab wa naqd* (93, 1993) have dedicated special issues to Abu Zayd which include important articles, interviews, documents, biographical data, and the controversial university reports on Abu Zayd.

For a comprehensive bibliography including Abu Zayd’s articles, interviews, and translations, as well as Arabic articles on Abu Zayd, cf. Kermani, *Offenbarung als Kommunikation*, pp. 121–138.