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«Persecuted for 'my' Koran»

Nasr Abu Zayd talks with Giancarlo Bosetti

Talking with Nasr Abu Zayd, the Egyptian philosopher and theologian, means confronting the difficult question of fundamentalism and dogmatism of the Muslim religion. His name has become the symbol of a humanist, or simply human, interpretation of the Koran. As such, it represents a problem for those who uphold strictly the divine nature of the sacred text. This has cost him dearly because in 1994 he was declared apostate, which changed his life. Although the University of Cairo subsequently reinstated him, Egyptian law annulled his marriage by an official divorce, which forced him and his wife to move to Europe, where since the 1990s he resumed teaching first in Leiden and later at Utrecht. We take the opportunity to interview him about the work he is undertaking on a new and comprehensive exegesis of the Koran in both English and Arabic, as well as the Arabic translation of the Koran Encyclopedia (six volumes).

What is the core of your interpretative thesis?

I would like to investigate and analyze the intra and inter structure of the Qur'ân, not only as a Text but also and essentially as Discourse(s). By intra structure I mean the phenomenon of the Qur'ân as 'recitation' before it was collected, rearranged and codified in the Mus'haf. My analysis aims to reveal the multiple addressee(s) as well as the multiple speaking voices in order to progress towards the analysis of the multiple modes of discourse -- dialogical, polemical, exclusive, inclusive, etc.

This is the point for which you are reproached by supporters of the literal interpretation.

An overemphasis upon the 'divine' dimension led to the triumph of the literal interpretation. This, in turn, resulted in a situation in which certain historical decisions came to be recorded in the Qur'ânic discourse as divine injunction binding on all Muslims regardless of time and space. By uncovering the 'human' dimension embedded in the structure of the Qur'ân, a humanistic hermeneutics would be considered feasible.

What is the relation of the prevalence of either one or the other interpretation and the relation of Islam with modernity? And with democracy?

Situating the Qur'ân and the Prophet tradition in their historical context will enable Muslims to understand that the issues of modernity and democracy need to be discussed independent of any theological or legal limits.

How can your perspective be supported among Muslim scholars? Do you consider there is the possibility of creating a network of people sharing the same view?

Yes, it is quite possible and plausible. Currently, within the Liberty for all Foundation (www.libforall.org) an international network is emerging. As one of the main programs of the Foundation, both the approach and methodology of modern understanding and interpretation of the Qur'ân and the Prophet tradition will be taught, and disseminated online and by video/audio modes of communication.

What is your relation with religious authorities in Muslim countries? And with Muslim people living as immigrants, or as new citizens of Europe?

Religious authorities are advocates of traditionalism; they look down upon any effort towards paradigm change. Sometimes they have to cope with the changing situations, but they do so reluctantly. Hence, I cannot claim having a positive relation with any religious authority.

Are you still considered an apostate? What should we think about the fact that a person like you can be regarded as a kind of danger? Danger for whom?

Yes, for some people I am an apostate. But those are the minority whose authority is challenged and threatened by my approach. This is a serious threat, because it deconstructs their monopoly over knowledge and empowers individual thinking.

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