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«Problems in the Islamic world cannot be blamed exclusively on Islam»

Nasr Abu Zayd interviewed by Nina zu Fürstenberg

Within the framework of the in-depth analysis that Reset devotes to the subject of liberal Islam, we wish to present an interview with the Egyptian thinker Abu Zayd, who is one of the most respected and influential Muslim reformists. Abu Zayd explains that, contrary to widespread belief, within the Muslim world there are many reformists and organisations that spread the principles of liberalism, equality, democracy and human rights. Unfortunately, however, the West appears not to acknowledge this and instead of contributing to strengthen these tendencies, it tends to emphasise Islam's negative aspects and, in particular, its links with terrorism. The problem – continued Abu Zayd – does not lie in Islam or in the Koran, but rather in the stubbornness that characterises extremists in interpreting the Holy Book in a rigid and literal manner, without allowing for any kind of critical debate. Applying hermeneutics to the Koran would instead facilitates its understanding and a more current interpretation, opening the way to a modernisation of the text without corrupting its sacredness.

It seems that the Muslim world is still fighting to achieve balance with modernity. Many blame the Islamic religion for the economic and scientific delay and the lack of a free and independent civil society. Do you not think that such accusations end up by increasing extremism?

I absolutely agree with you. Relating all the problems of the Muslim world, be they political, economic, social or cultural, to Islam, is what I call a theologisation of secular issues, which, by implication, strengthens the fundamentalist claim that returning to Islam, the golden age of Islam, will solve all the problems. Secular intellectuals, on the contrary, specify the causes and reasons in searching for solution. This accusation of Islam is, firstly, based on a generalization as though the Muslim world were a monolithic entity. Secondly, it is based on an assumption that Islam is a well-defined system with no history and without a multiplicity of facets.

Your preferred subject is to apply to the Koran modern sciences such as linguistics, semiotics and hermeneutics, and through them to propose a different and not literal

interpretation of the Holy Book. Could you explain the “hermeneutic” approach to the Koran?

Hermeneutics teaches us that, firstly, that there is no objective or innocent interpretation of any text. It secondly shows the complexity of the process of interpretation where there are two horizons, the horizon of the text and the horizon of the interpreter. The horizon of the text comprises so many dimensions such as its history, its structure, the tradition accumulated around it creating so many layer of meaning leading to dogmatisation and orthodoxy, and lastly they way it has been received, modified and canonized. The horizon of the interpreter, on the other hand, comprises so many aspects as well, first and most of all, his personal outlook based on his social and intellectual background. Secondly, the interpreter is an individual with certain belonging or affiliation, and the question, therefore, is whether or not he is aware of his belonging and, accordingly, able or unable to watch his bias and to control it. The process of interpretation means that these two horizons, that of the text and that of the interpreter, are fused, thus the meaning produced is not entirely textual, neither entirely personal. Applying hermeneutics to the Qur'an means fighting against the monopoly of meaning authorized by the politicians or by the clerics. It is to show, on the other hand, that the meaning produced in certain historical era or for certain generation is not absolute or final; each era and each generation has the right to redress the text and to reproduce its meaning according to the changing circumstances.

At a conference held in Rome last March, you said that “when Europe was experiencing the Middle Ages, the Muslim world was experiencing its ‘Enlightenment.’ What went wrong?

Nothing, but the natural decadence of a given civilization due, first, to its internal weakness, which makes it lose its powerful energy and becomes vulnerable to be taken over by another power. This is the law of history as happened to the Greeks and the Romans. The Mongol invasion of the Muslim empire and the destruction of Baghdad was the critical historical turning point for the Islamic civilization, which had already come to Europe via Spain and Sicily in the 13th century.

The historical period of Ibn Rushd (Averroé) and the caliphate of the Mu'tazila' was a moment of great scientific and economic prosperity and saw the flourishing of a certain enlightened rationalist school of thought. In Europe it is thought that Arab influence was at the origin of the rebirth of critical philosophy and the Renaissance. Is there an understanding and a broader identification with that historical period by Muslims? Does such understanding encourage a more liberal approach to democracy within today's Muslim world?

The modern Islamic reformation movement, which started as early as the second half of the 19th century in India and Egypt, tried to revive and maintain the classical rational theology of the Mu'tazila as well as the philosophy of Ibn Sina (Avicenna), al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd (Averroé). Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh are examples of the rational revivalist movement. The twentieth century witnessed the development of this Islamic rationalism on a wide scale, in Indonesia, Iran as well as in the Arab world. Nowadays, the discussion about the

meaning of the Qur'an, the validity of tradition, Islam and the state as well as democracy, human rights and women's rights, is extending beyond the boundaries of traditional religious institution to be present in most of the new civil society organizations all over the Muslim World.

You are considered a liberal reformist. What reforms would you suggest?

I think a package of reforms are needed; we can no longer speak of priorities. I think, from my own position as a teacher and scholar that education is in vital and critical need of immediate reform to achieve a shift from a memorization-oriented system to a reflection-oriented education at all levels of schooling. At the university level an atmosphere of academic freedom is essential. One of the major steps toward attaining this freedom is to create independent universities, independent from political and religious authorities. If this academic freedom is assured, we might expect a rise in the historical and critical approach of investigating the past and analysing its complexity.

The abuse of religion and encouraging its manipulation by political power has been a temptation for many. In Islam this tendency is particularly widespread. How could it be reduced?

I believe that this is only possible if political freedom is maintained for everyone. Manipulation of Islam is only possible when there is no freedom of debate, an absence of public discussion and the oppression of the individual rights. When, due to the lack of political legitimacy, the authorities proclaim to be the sole defenders of faith, thus oppressing any political opposition on the grounds that this threatens the community, oppressed political opposition has no choice but to make similar claims. Thus Islam becomes the battleground for political warfare and its energy is absolutely consumed as political fuel. Here religion dies and monstrous terrorism flourishes.

Is the democratic ideal and the West's attempt to press the Islamic world to move towards that ideal, perceived as the expression of a colonial or imperialistic mentality?

It is not perceived as such; it is rather explained as such by the people in power in order to block the possibility of any change. Through tight control of the media in the Arab world the explanation is publicized. People are interested in exercising their freedoms in all spheres of life, though they would like to act in accordance with their religious values and norms. People in power, in order to block the way to freedom, would argue that 'freedom' might cause violations of the religious norms. Political Islamists, on the other hand, might result in an anti-Shari'a rule. But we know that when Islamists suffer persecution they always appeal to concepts of 'freedom' and 'human rights'. Critical analysts should do their best to uncover this procedure of manipulation by both the Islamists and the political authority to make the public aware of the game.

Were you most influenced by the philosopher of hermeneutics Hans Gadamer? Which other thinkers have you been influence by?

I was first influenced by the Sufis' theory of interpretation which emphasized the multiple possibilities of meaning based on the degree of the spiritual experience of the interpreter. They

were vehemently opposing the jurist's monopoly of the meaning of the Qur'an, which they considered shallow and naive. They emphasized the fact that the meaning is not solely residing in the text waiting to be uncovered; it is rather to be discovered and rediscovered by the continuous efforts of engagement and reengagement of the individual with the text. Engagement, rather than philological investigation, was the Sufi basic principle of hermeneutics. With such knowledge of Islamic heritage I was able to communicate with Gadamer, Paul Ricour and other philosophers.

Your biography tells us that, like many others, you learned the Koran by heart when you very young. What does the Koran mean to a Muslim? It appears to be more important than the Bible is in the Christian tradition. Is the word of the Koran eternal or created?

The Qur'an is the book of God, his speech revealed to Muhammad through the mediator of the archangel Gabriel. It is a guidance to live in accordance with God's ordinance in order to achieve salvation in the life after. According to the orthodox dogma, it is the eternal speech of God written from eternity in the divine preserved tablet in heaven. But we know it was not eternal for the Mu'tazila, who found it impossible to believe in any eternal existence beside God. They, accordingly, argued that it was created like everything else in this world. The importance of the Qur'an for Muslims does not depend only on its theological status, but it depends also on the way it functions in everyday life not only in liturgy and religious rites. It is recited almost in every occasion such as birth, death, several celebrations, and opening of a project.

Why did you have to leave Egypt? Is the influence of your ideas still feared?

From the very beginning the Islamists who made the case against me clearly said that their aim was to try all the efforts to dismiss me from teaching in the university, because they feared the great influence of my ideas on the students. But ironically my ideas infiltrated the religious institution of al-Azhar. As I always say, ideas never die; they have their own wings to freely fly.

Other reformists such as Hassan Hanafi, whose ideas do not seem so distant from your own, still teach in Egypt. What is the difference between your ideas and those expressed by Hanafi? Did the atmosphere change when you left or were there other reasons?

Hassan Hanafi was one of the great professors who really deeply influenced me. In terms of ideas we are very close, but, according to him, I am too outspoken, revealing subtle ideas and concepts to the public, while they should be limited to academia. He prefers to be implicit, playing with words, employing traditional idioms to carry modern meaning. According to my knowledge, this tactic does not serve the strategy, means that leads to the unintended ends. Besides, my case alarmed the whole society to the dangers of manipulating the law.

Unlike many other Arabs, Egyptians are famous for their national pride. To what extent is all this affected by the Muslim religious identity? And is the story about the desire for a pan-Arab revolution that certain extremists like to believe in just an illusion or is it real?

Certainly, the majority would identify themselves as basically Egyptians without undermining their religious identity. Some groups would more emphasize their religious identity; very few

among these groups would undermine their being Egyptian. Now, with the invasion of Iraq and the unresolved problem of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Arab nationalism has started to emerge, but not as an ideology but rather as a strong sense of solidarity reacting to the American and Israeli threat.

One question concerning a current political issue; what do you think of the promise of free elections made by President Mubarak?

It seems he is serious about that. He took the first step to change Article 76 of the constitution to allow for more than one candidate and election instead of one candidate and referendum. The Egyptian people and the political opposition are quite rightly not satisfied with this step. They are demanding a change of Article 77 which allows the president to run forever. They are demanding that presidential terms be limited to only two or four years each, no more than eight years for one person to be president. The demands of the Egyptian people go even further than just a freer society with no marshal law, free press, the freedom to form parties etc. My demand, in addition to the public demand, is to remove the article that states Islam as the religion of the state with all its amendments.

Are intellectuals committed to a more liberal interpretation of politics, society and Muslim laws and if so why do we know so little about it?

The reform movement has had its ups and downs, according to the complex relationship between the Muslim world and the West, but it is developing. Unfortunately, this developing movement is not fully covered by the media, because of the increasing interest in fundamentalism. This reform movement is now finding more and more public support. Just navigate on the Internet and you will find more liberal Muslim groups and organizations disseminating liberalism, equality, democracy, and human rights.

Translated by Francesca Simmons

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