The Classical Roots of Abu-Zayd's Thought

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Many opponents claim that Nasr Hamid Abu-Zayd's methodologies and way of thought have no roots within Islam, and instead are associated only with the circles of "notorious orientalists" and their so-called local agents, whom Muslim extremists frequently describe as "the real danger" facing Islam. That is to say, Abu-Zayd's thoughts are proclaimed to be completely divorced from, and irrelevant to, the rich classical legacy of Islam. This article seeks to refute such claims, by unveiling the classical Islamic roots of Abu-Zayd's approach to the Qur'an.

The essence of Abu-Zayd's work was to establish a kind of interactive relationship between the text (i.e., the Qur'an) and human understanding, in which the text is not positioned as an authority that subjugates or enslaves the human mind. In other words, Nasr sought to establish an arena of interactive communication between human understanding and the texts in question.

By framing the issue this way, we may quickly realize that the "interactive relationship" proposed by Abu-Zayd has extremely deep roots, which stretch all the way back to a central event in the history of Islam. I am referring to conflict between the Fourth Caliph, 'Ali bin Abi Talib, and Mu'awiyah, founder of the Umayyad dynasty – whose parents Hind and Abu Sufyan had sought to kill the Prophet Muhammad and exterminate the early Muslim community, until the Muslims' triumph led them to embrace Islam and seek power within the newly victorious community. The outcome of this bloody struggle between 'Ali and Mu'awiyah helped determine the entire subsequent political and cultural history of Islam.

A deep reading of what occurred at that historic moment of confrontation reveals that a kind of interactive relationship between the Qur'an and human understanding existed among early Muslims, but was completely vanquished, and marginalized, as a result of the political defeat of those who embraced it. This interactive relationship between the Qur'an and humanity came to be viewed as a deviation from the "true" Islam, and over the intervening centuries, anyone who tried to restore this understanding has been denounced as an unbeliever.

When the great companion of the prophet Muhammad (saw.), A'mmar bin Yasser, addressed the Umayyads during the battle of Shifeen, he declared: "We waged war upon you [i.e., your family, the polytheists of Mecca, led by Abu Sufyan] following the revelation of the Qur'an, and today we wage battle over its interpretation." With these words, A'mmar expressed a clear awareness that the current war between Muslim partisans of Mu'awiyah and 'Ali was rooted not only in the Ummadyids' poitical calculations, but also in their interpretation of the Qur'an, which differed from that of 'Ali. The question of interpretation is, in fact, an enquiry regarding the correct and appropriate way to establish human beings' relationship with a text. Thus, we may conclude that the first dramatic civil war in the history of Islam was waged, by and between Muslims, to determine how they would construct their relationships with the Qur'an.

If we analyze the public pronouncements, and practices, of the two warring parties, we may clearly identify two distinct ways of constructing relationships with the sacred texts. The first is that of the Umayyads, who insisted upon employing the Qur'an to support, and mask, their own political authority. This was dramatically illustrated when, facing defeat by the forces of 'Ali, the Umayyads lifted *masahif* (copies of the Qur'an) upon their swords and lances, and called for a truce in the name of Islam.

Binding the *mushaf* (Qur'an) to swords – which, in the Arab imagination, represent the instrument for establishing and securing political authority – reveals the fact that for the Umayyads, the *mushaf* played much the same role as the sword (namely, to serve and support their political ambitions).

When the role of the text is demoted from that of Divine communication/interaction with humanity, and Scripture harnessed to legitimize and support a specific political authority, it is logical to expect that the temporal authorities in question will tend to pronounce the text [and specifically, their interpretation of it] as authoritative, and thus beyond human questioning, interaction or debate. The political authority thus seeks to conceal its true nature – as a self-interested, unjust and oppressive tyrant, whose absolute power must not be challenged – behind its depiction of the text as a similarly unquestionable and unchallengeable authority. Which is to say, that in such an authoritarian context, the distinction between political and Scriptural authority is completely dissolved, and the two merged into one.

Needless to say, positioning the text as a rigidly defined authority constrains its ability to produce new meanings, through interaction with a constantly changing and evolving human condition, and human understanding of the text. This, in turn, relegates the text to the status of an artifact, divorced from interaction with the contemporary world, and its role in society is thus confined to a process of repetition [reciting its "authoritative" interpretation] and stagnation. This positions the text in such a way that anyone who wishes to be regarded as a true and faithful Muslim can only "adore" the Qur'an, but not engage in a fruitful process of human interaction with the text, in order to produce new knowledge, of value in a changing world. It is clear that this inflexible way of dealing with the text has dominated over the long history of Islam.

In his response to the Umayyads, 'Ali bin Abi Talib asserted the central role of human beings in dealing with the text. According to 'Ali, the *mushaf* (text, or Qur'an) has no tongue with which to speak, and thus it is inevitably humans who express their understanding of the Qur'an, and interpret its meaning. In other words, 'Ali viewed the text as an arena for interaction with human beings – through their attempts to understand the Divine Message – rather than as a tool to subjugate humanity. This view is based upon the fact that both the human mind, and objective reality, are components of the revelation, which in turn leads to the necessity of taking these into consideration when interpreting the Qur'an.

Thus, one may state with conviction that Nasr Hamid Abu-Zayd's way of dealing with the text – as an arena of interactive communication between human understanding and the texts in question, rather than positioning one particular interpretation of the Qur'an as a Divine authority – is deeply rooted in the view articulated by Sayyidina al-Imam 'Ali, which has been marginalized for over twelve hundred years, as a result of the Umayyads' political victory.

Nasr came to us – armed with various methodologies produced over the centuries, within Islam and the West – to enrich Sayyidina al-Imam 'Ali's way. 'Ali's political defeat – and eventual murder, at the hands of the Khawarij – led to the complete eclipse of his interpretive approach to the Qur'an among Sunni Muslims, and paved the road for Umayyad and Abbasid manipulation of the text, to bolster their political authority. The false deification of what is essentially a biased, human understanding of the text has dominated the history of Islam, to the extent that any attempt to restore Sayyidina 'Ali's marginalized approach to the Qur'an is harshly confronted and condemned, to this

day, not only by political authorities in the Muslim world, but also by the authority of stagnant traditions, which represent the most dangerous obstacle of all to spiritual and material progress.

Needless to say, the political defeat of Sayyidina al-Imam 'Ali and his approach to the Qur'an assured the triumph of the Umayyads' agenda, which included positioning the text as an extension of their political authority, to subjugate the human mind. To further cement their authority, they cleverly positioned any questioning or rejection of their highly politicized approach as a blasphemous rejection of the Qur'an itself, rather than as the pious refutation of a specific human relationship with the Qur'an, derived from an authoritarian mindset.

This devious trick – still recycled, fourteen centuries (*hijrah*) after the civil war between Sayyidina al-Imam 'Ali and the Umayyads – was the extremists' weapon of choice, which they employed to attack Nasr Hamid Abu-Zayd, when he proclaimed the necessity of emancipating Muslims from the false authority of a politicized understanding of the Qur'an. Rather than acknowledge and respond to Nasr's argument, his opponents have incorrectly treated his work as a call for Muslims to reject the Qur'an itself – a false and scurrilous claim, which could not be further from the truth.

Nasr did not reject the Qur'an, but merely a specific kind of human relationship with the text, which subjugates and enslaves the human mind. If we present two alternative visions of the Qur'an – the first, as an arena for humans to interact with the Divine text, derive new interpretations, and innovate; and the second, in which a highly politicized understanding of the text is posited as an unquestionable authority, to which not only the human mind, but every aspect of life on earth, must be subject – Nasr clearly adopted and embraced the first.

Further, he sought to establish an institutional framework to revive a profoundly humane and spiritual, as opposed to authoritarian, approach to Islam's sacred texts: i.e., the International Institute of Quranic Studies, or IIQS. This institute has attracted the enthusiastic support of many – such as its co-founder and patron, the former Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid – who recognize the severe crisis that afflicts Muslim communities throughout the earth, and yet, because of their profoundly spiritual and tolerant understanding of Islam, are certain of its capacity to illuminate and enrich our world.

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