

8 - 14 July 2010

## Thus spoke Nasr Abu-Zayd

The death of Nasr Abu-Zayd in a Cairo hospital this week has deprived Arab-Islamic culture of a leading voice of rationalism. His pioneering studies in Quranic exegesis caused him great trouble 15 years ago, when religious zealots accused him of being an apostate and succeeded in obtaining a court ruling to that effect, something that endangered his personal safety. For the past 15 years Abu-Zayd had been living in exile. As he was preparing to leave the country then, he spoke to **Mona Anis** and **Amira Howeidy** about the reasons behind his ordeal and how he conceived of the affair which rocked Egypt in 1995. Below is the text of the interview published in this newspaper on 22 June 1995



When Nasr Abu-Zayd and Ibtihal Younis, an associate professor of comparative Spanish and French literature, got married, they chose to live in one of Cairo's new satellite cities. Their flat used to be a quiet place with few unexpected visitors since no one would take the trouble to make the journey just to arrive unannounced. The flat is full of papers, indeed is an ivory tower of sorts, where the Abu-Zayds pursue their scholarly work on Quranic exegesis and the influence of Goya's early painting on modern Western literature. A reproduction of Goya's naked Maya is the first thing that greets the eye as you enter the Abu-Zayds flat in 6 October City.

Since last week's court ruling annulling the marriage of the Abu-Zayds, on the grounds of his apostasy, all that has changed. Though they are still technically married -- the divorce will take place only when they are served with the ruling -- life in their house has changed beyond recognition. There are policemen with radio transmitters outside the building. Throughout the day the flat is crowded with people: friends and family come in support; journalists and TV crews seek interviews; representatives of various human rights groups and organisations express solidarity and draft messages of support. The telephone rings incessantly, Ibtihal tells the callers the same thing, over and over again, in English, French, Spanish, sometimes in German, most often, of course, in Arabic.



Abu-Zaid in his Cairo home in 1995 before leaving Egypt

“It’s quite a strain,” Ibtihal says, “to have to tell the same story again and again. We have no time to think about anything else. Even if we want to forget, this mad process of telling and retelling does not allow it.”

Nasr is bemused by the fact that suddenly he has become a star, chased by international newspapers and TV channels.

**Could you tell us what, in your opinion, lies behind this situation? Is it only your writings which stirred public opinion or are there personal elements behind the campaign against you?**

A great part of what has happened happened because of the ‘personal’, though when I say personal I mean the personal in a specific context, since no individual, no matter how powerful, could precipitate everything that happened unless the social and political context was conducive to such things. Without the atmosphere of terror that prevails whenever someone talks about religion it would have been impossible to conceive of such a farce taking place. True, there have been debates surrounding the publication of some of my works, though such debate has been welcome because it was intellectual. But what we are seeing now is the terrorising of thought, a terrorism made possible by a sadly opportune context. The impact of Abdel-Sabour Shahin’s accusation of apostasy, which occurred first in an academic report, acquired an incredible force owing to Shahin’s ready access to the pulpit of a central Cairo mosque. Had the issue been restricted to academic circles or even to the realm of public opinion and not proclaimed from mosques, the danger would have been less all encompassing. But Shahin attacked me from the pulpit of the mosque on 2 April 1993, and the following Friday mosques all over the country were proclaiming Nasr Hamed Abu-Zayd an apostate, including the small mosque in my native village near Tanta. Ironically, I grew up with the preacher of that mosque. Together at the *Kuttab*, we memorised the Quran. When my brother, who was present during the Friday sermon at which I was denounced, asked the preacher how he could say such things about me and inquired whether or not he had read my books, the answered “no, but Abdel-Sabour Shahin said he was an apostate, and Shahin does not lie”.

We can point, then, to a single person who acted as the prime mover of events, though things could not have moved in the direction in which they did without a situation in which some people are treated as if they were sacred.

Such a situation could only have arisen within a context that involves the hammering home of a message by constant repetition before an illiterate audience, be that a real or cultural illiteracy. I would have liked to be treated like the ‘repentant terrorist’ who was given an opportunity to appear on the television and talk to the nation. I would have liked to be able to debate my views with whoever on television. But Egyptian television has contrived to ignore my case. Yet, of course the broadcast media open their doors wide to the discourse of all those who declared me an apostate. Such a situation allows people like Shahin to be demi-gods.

**But Abdel-Sabour Shahin said that the ruling of the court does not mean that you should be killed.**

Oh, I should be very happy with that. Glory to Shahin, we should all ask repentant from him. But I really don't know the basis upon which he reached that dispensation, as those ancestors whose views he advocates say otherwise.

**You have drawn similarities between your position and that of Taha Hussein in 1926 when he published his book *Jahili Poetry* . Could you elaborate on the similarities and differences?**

My position is worse than his in certain respects and in others better. Unfortunately, as far as the intellectual side of the issue is concerned, I feel I am in a worse position than Taha Hussein. The accusations leveled at Taha Hussein came from outside the university. Indeed the university defended Hussein to the extent that the rector of Cairo University threatened to resign. Also, the office of the prosecutor-general, then, declared Hussein innocent and acknowledged his right to conduct an academic research in the topic of his choice. In my case the accusation came from within the university, and the university deprived me from my right to promotion on the basis of the report written by Shahin. That was the spark that ignited the whole fire. It's not a matter of being promoted or not. I told the head of the university then that I didn't mind them rejecting my promotion, as long as they also rejected the report accusing me of apostasy. I have always had an idealised image of Cairo University. It was a great symbol for me, and I find it difficult to tolerate the thought that such an institution condones accusations of apostasy.

I entered the university when I was 25. I was poor and had to work since an early age but it was always my dream to enter Cairo University and the Faculty of Arts especially -- Taha Hussein's faculty. Taha Hussein had been a symbol for me: he was poor and blind, but with perseverance and knowledge he was able to overcome all odds. I still remember my first day after having finally succeeded in registering at Cairo university. I walked onto the campus with tears in my eyes. I worked very hard during my four years of undergraduate studies, combining working night shifts with studying. The university, for me, was not a vehicle for social mobility, but a symbol and a dream. Hence my battle against the report was in effect a defence of the university. The former head of the university advised me to quietly drop the case, suggesting that I could resubmit my academic production after few months when I would almost certainly be promoted. I explained to him it was not a matter of promotion. Promotion, after all, is a LE 40 increase in my salary. The issue was freedom of thought and research inside the university, the university of Taha Hussein, whose chair still exists in the department.

Unfortunately the university that defended Taha Hussein 70 years ago appears now intent on his assassination. I do not intend this as a figure of speech. One university lecturer, instrumental in the campaign against me, said in a book that he was attacking me because I represent another link in the chain of apostasy "begun by Taha Hussein, followed by Sheikh Amin El-Kholi, then Mohamed Ahmed Khalafallah and finally someone called Nasr Hamed Abu-Zayd." My battle is not a personal one: It is a battle in defence of the new generations of student we are teaching in that university. If we lie low now what is in store for the coming generations?

**Could you speak more about this chain of so-called apostates and their influence on your ideas?**

As I said Taha Hussein has operated, on many levels, as a personal symbol. My real intellectual mentor, however, is Sheikh Amin El-Kholi, who was into inter-disciplinary methods, encompassing studies in grammar, rhetoric, Quranic exegesis and psychology. One of El-Kholi's important hypothesis was that the Quran is the greatest and the most important text of the Arabs, culturally and civilisationally. In addition to being a religious text for Muslims, it is the prime text, the text from which all other Arab texts have sprung. Consequently, he considered the study of the Quran as a texts as the only comprehensive approach to dealing with the text, while any other study of it -- for religious or legal purposes -- is a branch of study. He believed that a literary reading of the Quranic text precedes any other, since only that reading is capable of revealing the centrality of the text, not only to the Arab-Islamic civilisation, but to the whole of humanity.

A reading of the Quran as a literary text presupposes that it addresses Christians, Jews, atheists, providing pleasure on an aesthetic level. This in no way precludes a reading of the Quran as the religious text of Muslims. But even the study of the Quran as a religious text should be preceded by a reading of it as a literary text. Amin El-Kholi's argument, and this should be brought to the attention of the Islamists, was presented -- following almost the same methodology -- by Sayed Qutb in *Mashahid al-Qiyama fi al-Quran* (Scenes of Doomsday in the Quran).

Of course, those who charge us with apostasy are too afraid to place Mohamed Abdou at the head of their list, though Mohamed Abdou is the founder of this school. True Mohamed Abdou fathered two trends, as divergent as that represented by Qassim Amin and that by Rashid Reda, but this does not negate the fact that he was the inspiration behind the thoughts of Qassim Amin, Ahmed Lutfi El-Sayed, and Taha Hussein. There are clearly two facets to Mohamed Abdou. I am proud to belong to the chain stigmatised by my opponents, but I would add to it the name of Mohamed Abdou whom they prefer to exclude from the chain. They dare not defame Abdou as they have Ali Abdel-Raziq and Taha Hussein. The slanderers of Taha Hussein went so far as to claim from their pulpits that he used to hold the Quran in one hand, and in the other a red pen which he used to delete the verses he deemed wrong. When some of my student repeated this talk, I said I was ashamed to be their teacher, since none of them had wondered how Taha Hussein, who was blind, could have held a pen to cross out verses from the Quran, It is really depressing to think of the silly, irrational debates into which we have been led by religious demagoguery.

### **Having talked about the important intellectual influences on your work, can we move on to situating your intellectual production?**

The date of registration of my MA thesis at Cairo University was 6 October, 1973. As you see, important shifts in my life have coincided with important dates; I entered the university in 1968 but my studies were delayed owing to the closure of the university following the demonstrations that came in the wake of the 1967 defeat. And there I was, beginning my graduate studies on the day the October War began. The title of my dissertation was *Metaphor in the Quran: A Study of the Mutazilites*. I chose the Mutazilites because they initiated the study of metaphor in the Quran, the study of which I consider the introduction to any understanding of the Quran. I spent four hard years poring over very difficult texts, texts like the encyclopedia of Abdel-Gabbar. I finished my thesis understanding that the Quranic text was the site of a fierce intellectual and

political battle. That battle occurred at one of the most important junctures of the structure of the Quranic text. Students of the Quran know that includes *ayaat muhkamah* (clear, non-metaphorical verses) -- the backbone of the text -- and *ayaat mutashabiha* (ambiguous, metaphorical verses). All Muslim theologians, whether Mutazilites or Asharites, Sunni or Shia, Sufi or otherwise, accept this distinction. But they disagree on what is what. The controversy, I discovered, does not revolve around the meaning of the text, but involves its very structure. If there is disagreement about what is clear and what is ambiguous (what is clear for some is seen as ambiguous by others, etc.), then it follows that the point of difference concerns the structure of the text.

The question I posed in my following work was that, assuming this difference involves a political component, then perhaps it would be useful to examine the issue within the context of Sufism since Sufism is supposedly void of political interest. Then, I thought, it might be possible to escape the impasse constituted by the pragmatic exegesis of the text. For this reason the title of my Ph.D. was *A Study of the Exegesis of the Quran in Ibn Arabi*. Whilst working on my thesis I came to realise that socio- political and cultural factors would always inform any process of interpretation. Ibn Arabi's project, then constituted an attempt to integrate in the Quran all knowledge -- from Plato to Ibn Tufail -- accrued up till then. He wanted to make of Islam an open-ended project, one that could reconcile itself to Christianity, Judaism and all other religions. It was to be "a religion of comprehensive love" as he termed it in his poetry.

This project, of course, was very much a product of Andalusian society, based on linguistic, cultural and ethnic pluralism -- Provençal spoken in the streets, Latin in the church, classic Arabic in the divans, and a multitude of local dialects elsewhere. It was a project of reconciliation between all these elements and groups. I concluded my dissertation by asserting that this project, ultimately, failed, since what Ibn Arabi was in the end attempting was to turn his back on the world. He was seeking to formulate a utopia of his own, a search that gained impetus from the increasing tensions and conflicts within his own society. And we all know what happened later in Andalusia.

After finishing my Ph.D., I began to be aware that, if the interpretation of the Quran was historically the site of social and political struggle, then it followed that it is also the site of contemporary struggles. My own experience encompasses divergent interpretations of Islam from the 1960s and 70s. In the 60s the dominant religious discourse was that Islam is the religion of socialism and social justice, and that it urges us to fight imperialism and Zionism. In the 70s, with the open door policy and peace with Israel, Islam became the religion that guarded private property and urged us to make peace with the Israelis.

I am not only an academic interested in scholarly matters. I am a citizen, sharing the worries and concerns of fellow citizens. As such, I found myself wanting to examine the very concept of the text and what it stands for. This resulted in the book, *The Concept of the Text: A Study in the Quranic Fields of Knowledge*. My premise was that before dealing with questions of interpretation of the text, one must first define the text, examining the laws that govern the study of that text, because we cannot leave the door open for any and every interpretation. It was at this point that I began to make use of developments in hermeneutics.

The study of hermeneutics revealed to me the dangers involved in leaving a religious text prey to interpretation by anybody. Religious texts profoundly influence social and cultural life: if we place them at the mercy of the ideology of the interpreter without defining the extent to which the text lends itself to exegesis and the limits of the meaning it offers, then we are in deep trouble. Any text is a historical phenomenon and has a specific context. It is from this premise that I proceed to examine the context in which the Quran has been studied within various schools. And I discovered that the understanding of context was always partial. It had to be expanded to include pre-Islamic society, its values and traditions, to comprehend the development of the text within society.

When I said the Quran was a historical phenomenon, those who attacked me thought that I was claiming that the Quran was a temporal phenomenon, one that could now be accorded the status of folklore. But this is a distortion, committed by some deliberately.

In this context, I am convinced that if the Mutazilites and the Sufis used the Quran to serve political ends, then this applies equally to contemporary political religious discourse. I am a man who dreams of a better future for his country, his countrymen and his students and these are the concerns that lay behind the intellectual effort which resulted in my book *Critique of Religious Discourse*.

**This is the book that triggered all your problems, isn't it?**

To some extent yes. Some of my earlier works were controversial, but the controversy was always restricted to academe. But it was sections of this book, along with parts of my book on Al-Imam Al-Shafie, and a paper on 'the distortion of context in the interpretations of the religious discourse', that provoked these accusations of apostasy, accusations that are based on a distortion of my ideas. For example when I spoke of the *Hadith* being secondary to the main text, that is the Quran, it was said that I had trivialised the value of the *Hadith*. Following Shahin's report objecting to my promotion such distortions came to be manipulated.

Before, none of my controversial views had been branded apostate. People objected to some of the things I said, but no one had ever thought of me as an apostate until Shahin wrote his report. Subsequently his disciples began to repeat his accusations in mosques. I feel that one important aim of this campaign is to silence me by dissipating my energy. My response will be to work harder. At the beginning of the case I was very angry and contemplated resigning from the university. But my wife, to whose support and love I owe a lot, objected fiercely. She said that resigning from the university would be the one thing that would make her ask for a divorce. We first met in the university, and the university is an integral part of our relationship.