

Divorcing fundamentalism

Nasr Abu Zaid was a brave and honest scholar disgracefully persecuted for his attempts to read the Quran historically



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The divorce case was what made him famous, though it wasn't the usual kind of celebrity divorce and Nasr Abu Zaid was still in love with his wife.

Abu Zaid, the liberal Muslim thinker who died yesterday, first came to the attention of Islamists while teaching Arabic literature at Cairo university in the early 1990s. They decided that his research contained "clear affronts to the Islamic faith" and accused him of apostasy.

That in turn inspired a group of Islamist lawyers to file a third-party ("hesba") case, seeking to divorce him from his wife on the grounds that a Muslim woman cannot be married to an apostate – and after a series of court hearings his marriage was declared null and void.

Such was the controversy after the verdict that Cairo university was "turned into a military fortress" to protect him the next time he made an appearance there. Realising that it was impractical to continue teaching under those conditions, and after one of his guards was heard describing him as "the infidel", Abu Zaid and his "ex-wife" left Egypt and settled in the Netherlands.

Two years ago, as part of my research for a book, I met him in the ancient University of Leiden where we talked about Islamism and his view that religious texts should be interpreted in the historical and cultural context of their time.

He started by challenging the widespread view among Islamists that the city of Madina in the time of the Prophet was a fully-fledged state – and a model for establishing Islamic states today. That, he said, is simply "a projection of the present over the past":

We cannot really think of Madina as a state in the modern sense. It was multi-communities – the community of the believers, the community of the Jews and the community of the pagans – the Arabs – so the Madina document [often referred to as a "constitution"] is some sort of an agreement for these

communities to live together. Of course, gradually the community of believers became stronger and took over the city and then took over Arabia. But I wouldn't go so far as to say this was a state ... I don't think it is a state in the proper sense.

The Islamists, in Abu Zayd's view, were chasing an impossible dream but the problem, he told me, is how to demonstrate the weakness of their case to "the people who are misled or deceived by these kinds of slogans". In Egypt, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood's semi-illegal status allows it to agitate and sloganise but without having to face the realities of everyday politics. At the same time, more secular voices are harassed and suppressed, either by the government or by Islamists themselves. What is needed, Abu Zayd said, is free space for debate and trading opinions:

Then the Muslim Brothers and the Islamic groups would have to respond to the challenge, have to speak politics, have to have a detailed plan for what they are going to do. Let them be presented in public life. Let them form a [legal] party, and when they form a party they have to present a programme and they have to acknowledge that this is a political programme – it's not the word of God, it's not shari'a. This is the real challenge. Give them the ground and say "Hey, you are free – come to the light, speak politics." They will fail.

Full exposure to public scrutiny, Abu Zayd argued, would demolish their case because of its inherent contradictions: while insisting that the Quran is their constitution, they ignore those parts of it that might be too unpalatable for popular opinion. One example of that, he said, is *jizya*, the poll tax on non-Muslims, which is clearly prescribed in the Quran (9:29):

Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the *jizya* with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.

The original idea behind *jizya* was that non-Muslims, since they did not serve in the military and were living under Muslim protection, should pay for their protection through a special tax. It has long been abandoned and is generally regarded as obsolete. However, this presents a serious difficulty for Islamists, since they regard the Quran's injunctions as binding. Strict adherence to Quranic principles, therefore, would require them to reinstate *jizya*.

The more Islamist groups are forced to address practical issues such as this, the more contortions they have to perform in order to get round the difficulties caused by their own religious doctrine. For non-Islamist Muslims, *jizya* presents no great problem: they can justify its abolition on the basis of historicity – that the circumstances in which the tax was imposed no longer exist today. For Islamists, though, this is much more difficult because the words of the Quran and the practices of the earliest Muslims form the core of their argument. "If they concede historicity," Abu Zayd said, "all the ideology will just fall down ... the entire ideology of the word of God."

Seventeen years after first upsetting the Islamists, Abu Zayd's views continued to provoke occasional jitters. Arriving in Kuwait last December with a valid visa, he was turned away at the

airport on the orders of the State Security department. He had been due to give two lectures at the Kuwaiti Tanweer (“Enlightenment”) Centre – one on religious reform, the other on women and the Quran. It is thought that the interior minister had succumbed to pressure from Islamist MPs not to allow him into the country.