

Tuesday, 6 July 2010

Farewell to Zayd, liberal Islamic theologian

Giancarlo Bosetti

Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid upheld the belief that the Koran is a book passed down through oral communication and one destined to poetic recitation. He was a believer and, as a Muslim, accusations of apostasy offended him profoundly. Should the conquering of democracy ever be achieved in the entire Muslim world, the history that will be written will have to linger at length on this small man with his frail health.

With the premature death of Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid we have lost someone who, more than any other, deserved being described a liberal Islamic intellectual. The Egyptian scholar who died yesterday in Cairo at the age of 66 of meningitis, has left a profound mark on the generations of Muslims who were taught a humanist, historical and philological interpretation of the Koran. This modest and generous man bore witness to his coherence with sacrifice and exile. During the Nineties his beliefs caused the reaction of extremists. He was denied the Chair of Professor of Islamic Studies and accused of apostasy. The Egyptian judicial system does not consider this a indictable crime, but Koranic Law regulates marriage. Forever shaming the Egyptian state and its exhibited secularism, Islamists therefore managed to legally “divorce” Abu Zayd from his wife Ibtihal Yunis, obliging them both to live in exile to avoid her being accused of concubinage, since she lived with an apostate.

They moved to Holland, where Nasr was able to continue his studies in Leiden and later in Utrecht. After joining the Reset-Dialogues Foundation, he held memorable lessons on apostasy at the Istanbul Seminars, in Milan and at the Scuola di Sant’Anna in Pisa. In recent years he was occasionally invited to Cairo. He upheld the belief that the Koran is a book passed down through oral communication and one destined to poetic recitation. He was a believer and, as a Muslim, accusations of apostasy offended him profoundly. His criticism of extremists and of their false and invented “purity” of origins was caustic and well reported in the autobiography he wrote together with Navid Kermani, also translated into Italian (*A Life with Islam*, Il Mulino). His life was filled with death threats. Should the conquering of democracy ever be achieved throughout the Muslim world, the history that will be written will have to linger at length on this small man with his frail health, who held open the gates of *ijhtihad* and the interpretation of the Koran.

Translated by Francesca Simmons