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Liberal Koran expert Nasr Abu Zayd dies in Egypt, after exile

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By Alastair Sharp and Marwa Awad



(Reuters) - Religious liberal Nasr Abu Zayd, an Egyptian Koranic scholar declared an apostate for challenging mainstream Muslim views on the holy book, died on Monday in a Cairo hospital, aged 66.

Abu Zayd held a liberal, critical approach to Islamic teachings that angered some Muslim conservatives in his homeland in the 1990s, a decade when President Hosni Mubarak's government was combating an uprising by armed Islamic militants.

Abu Zayd critiqued the use of religion to exert political power. He argued the Koran was both a literary and religious text which clashes with Islamic teaching which sees the holy book as the final revelation of God.

"I am anti-dogma," he told Reuters in 2008. "It's a meaning produced by humans, and I don't find that I am going outside the domain of religion if I challenge this dogma."

Analysts said his approach challenged Egypt's mainstream Islamic thinkers and popular sentiment in a country where conservative Islamic trends have been on the rise, reflected in part by the prevalence of the Islamic veil.

Islam should be understood in its historical, geographic and cultural background, he argued, adding that "pure Islam" did not exist and even the Koran was "a collection of discourses".

In 1995, an Egyptian sharia court declared Abu Zayd an apostate from Islam, annulled his marriage and effectively forced him and his wife into exile.

Abu Zayd and his wife moved to the Netherlands after he received death threats, notably from the Islamic Jihad group led by Ayman al-Zawahri, who has since become deputy leader of Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network.

But he had quietly returned to his homeland in recent years, first for lectures and later staying for health reasons.

"His methodological approaches towards Koranic revelation are based on Western critiques of the Bible or the application of social and historical readings to text," said Hossam Tamam, head of Islameyoon, a website about Islamist movements.

Abu Zayd's views were denounced as anti-religious by populist preachers and Islamists but would have been more effectively challenged through academic scrutiny, Tamam said.

WESTERN PRAISE

In reviewing his book, *Voice of an Exile: Reflections on Islam*, a swathe of Western academics praised the scholar.

"Nasr Abu Zayd is a heroic figure, a scholar who has risked everything to restore the traditions of intellectual inquiry and tolerance that for so long characterised Islamic culture," wrote Philip Jenkins, a professor of history and religious studies at Pennsylvania State University.

Abu Zayd compared Arab rulers unfavourably to leaders elsewhere in the Muslim world such as Iran and Turkey, where he said religious debate was comparatively free-flowing.

"Religion has been used, politicised, not only by groups but also the official institutions in every Arab country," he told Reuters in 2008, adding the distinction between "the domain of religion and secular space" had been eroded.

"I'm sure that I'm a Muslim. My worst fear is that people in Europe may consider and treat me as a critic of Islam. I'm not. I'm not a new Salman Rushdie, and don't want to be welcomed and treated as such. I'm a researcher," he told the weekly.

Egypt's official news agency MENA said he died on Monday in Sheikh Zayed Hospital in Cairo where he was being treated for an unidentified illness. He was buried the same day in his village near Tanta, in the Nile Delta, witnesses said.

Abu Zayd won various awards in the Arab world including the Ibn Rushd prize for free thinking in Berlin in November 2005.

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