

DEATH OF A HERO

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The world is a lonelier place when we lose a hero. When I learned of Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid's passing on July 5, my tears mourned the loss of a man who spent the past 14 years exiled from his beloved Egypt because his courageous work intimidated the lesser minds of fundamentalists.

My heart ached at the loss of a great Muslim scholar whose work I turned to whenever my self-identification as a liberal Muslim was considered an oxymoron. As fundamentalists and regimes across many Muslim-majority countries arm-wrestle over Islam, the most conservative interpretation has come to mean "authentic" and those of us who fight turgid and literal interpretations have had our faith questioned.

None had been more questioned than Abu Zeid himself, of course. He was the mentor who had walked through a fire that, left burning, would engulf so many others after him. He was the litmus test that Egypt failed.

In 1993, Abu Zeid was refused a full professorship at Cairo University after a committee headed by a prominent Muslim fundamentalist ruled that his doctoral thesis contained "discussions resembling atheism."

The thesis argued that Imam Shafi'i, an 8th-century scholar revered by most Muslims as one of the greatest founders of Islamic law, imposed a literal and narrow interpretation of Islam. Abu Zeid also used contemporary methodology, including linguistics, to interpret Islam's holy text, and said Islam should be understood against its historical, geographic and cultural background.

Fundamentalist lawyers raised a case to divorce him from his wife on the grounds the marriage was now illegitimate because he had renounced Islam. Instead of throwing out the case against the happily married couple, the nominally independent judiciary threw its weight behind the Islamists and ruled that Abu Zeid and Ebtihal Younis should divorce.

It was a turning point Egypt couldn't afford. Go back to that ruling on August 5, 1996, if you want to understand how Egypt became the country it is today, where 80 percent of women are now in headscarves and where dogma has trumped debate.

Abu Zeid and Younis were in the Netherlands by then. He had received death threats, including one from Ayman al-Zawahri, who at the time was head of the violent Islamic Jihad group. Zawahri is now the No. 2 in al-Qaeda.

They were not empty threats. Just a few months prior to Abu Zeid's trial, violent Islamists assassinated leading liberal intellectual Farag Fouda. Long before Danish and Swedish cartoonists became the targets of choice, violent Islamists were taking pot shots at fellow Muslims who strayed from their brand of Islam.

And where was the state?

President Hosni Mubarak's regime was at the time the target of Islamists with guns who were trying to create an Islamic state. The regime cracked down mercilessly on them. Islamists without guns were at the same time wreaking havoc on Egyptian civil society but meeting with little resistance from a state desperate to outdo the Islamists in religiosity.

As Abu Zeid's trial unfolded, violent Islamists tried to kill Nobel prize-winning author Naguib Mahfouz in 1995 for writing a novel they considered blasphemous; Islamist lawyers and clerics succeeded in banning a film by a leading director, which they said broke the taboo on the depiction of prophets; they also recommended the banning of dozens of books and they branded a philosophy professor an apostate for his work.

It didn't stop in Egypt. In 1999, after a rash of cases against writers and journalists in Kuwait and a composer in Lebanon on the grounds of either blasphemy or insulting Islam, I called Abu Zeid. He was dismayed that not enough had been learned from his experience.

"These cases are proof of the failure of the mechanisms of society. They show the contradictions in the ideology of the state, which uses religion and the religious establishment when they are suitable to its ideology," he told me. "Who pays the price? Freedom of thought... We're stuck between the rock of the state and the hard place of fundamentalists."

My last meeting with Abu Zeid was in Copenhagen in 2006 at the invitation of Democratic Muslims, a group that was launched with the aim of amplifying liberal Muslim views. A Dane in the audience, impressed by his lecture, asked Abu Zeid a question liberal Muslims get all the time: How representative were his views?

"Am I the minority? Since when has the majority brought about change? Historically, it's always the minority" was Abu Zeid's response.

The only consolation is that in the end, Abu Zeid was reunited forever with his beloved Egypt. He was buried in his village in the Nile Delta. In his English-language memoir, "Voice of an Exile:

Reflections on Islam," he writes of busy days teaching at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands.

"At night, though, I dream of Egypt. I was born in Egypt. The waters of the Nile flow through my veins. Egypt has shaped me. To this day, I remain thoroughly Egyptian. Born on July 10, 1943... to ordinary, poor, hardworking parents, I learned early on about the concept of justice. Justice lies at the heart of the Quran."

It is that unequivocal voice that I mourned when I learned that Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid had died.

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