

## Islamic Newthinking – In Honor of Nasr Abu Zayd

**Veranstalter:** Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities / Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen

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In Germany and in Europe, Islam is widely discussed in politics, public and the media. However, the critical debate regarding reformist approaches and the relation between state and religion that is taking place within the Muslim World is often neglected. The Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities (KWI, Essen) hosted the conference „Islamic Newthinking“ from 26-28 June 2011.

The aim of the conference was to bring together religious thinkers, intellectuals and theologians from various parts of the Muslim World, in honor of the late scholar and liberal theologian Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd<sup>1</sup>, who passed away on 5 July 2010 in Cairo. Together with his wife Ebtehal Younes (Cairo), the participants discussed topics such as the ongoing developments in the Arab World, Islam and democracy, feminism and a more general critique of religion. One of the central questions was how Islamic Newthinking affects the way in which is Qur'an is approached, be it as text, as discourse, or as irrational altogether.

MOHAMMAD MOJTAHED SHABESTARI's (Teheran) opening presentation focused on the relevance of the Qur'an as text, or as a „prophetic reading“ of the world, agreeing with Abu Zayd that the relation between societal, political, historical reality and Qur'anic exegesis is a problematic one. As according to the early Muslims there was a dialectical movement between heaven and earth (hence Abu Zayd's later introduction of the idea of Qur'an being discursive), the Qur'an should be seen as a product of culture. By a similar token, since the Qur'an has been created as an act of God, which reveals itself through history and cannot be located outside it, Shabestari advocated the inclusion of hermeneutical, language-philosophical and -analytical levels in the processing of

Abu Zayd's ideas. Regarding varying views between Shi'ites and Sunnis<sup>2</sup>, with a view to divine revelation, Shabestari introduced the Iranian Shi'ite philosopher Tabatabaei<sup>3</sup>, along with the idea that while communication between God and the Prophet did not take place in human language, the Prophet conveyed this communication in human language.

Younes began the following session with a reminder of what made Abu Zayd so unique: the thinker, the human being and the citizen. Similarly, three influential trends can be discerned his academic oeuvre: Ibn Rushd (Mutazila); Ibn Arabi (philosophy of hermeneutics) and Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi (rationalism) in the „religion of love“ (Ibn Arabi)<sup>4</sup>.

While Abu Zayd often claimed that the system is blocking communication, OSMAN TAŞTAN (Ankara) wished to examine how the system took shape. In the legal methodology of al-Shafi'i<sup>5</sup> (2nd-3rd century A.H.), we discern the classical axial ideology centering on the four legal sources of Qur'an, Sunnah, ijma and qiyas<sup>6</sup>, thus facilitating what Taştan

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<sup>1</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943-2010) was an Egyptian scholar dedicated to Qur'anic hermeneutics. In 1995 he became a matter of grave controversy in Egypt due to his critique of the official religious discourse. Subsequently he and his wife first migrated to Spain and later on moved to the Netherlands.

<sup>2</sup> While it is a fundamental thought that all Muslims are equal, various schools of thought, law schools (madhahib) and what many refer to more broadly as 'sects' can be discerned in the Islamic World. The two most prominent denominations are the Shi'ites and Sunnis, considering that roughly 80-90% of the world's Muslim population are Sunnis while the remainder are Shi'ites, again divided into the so-called „Twelvers“ and other groups. The Shi'a emerged at the time of the Prophet's death and the subsequent dispute regarding the Prophet's succession.

<sup>3</sup> Muhammad Husayn Tabatabaei (1892-1981) was a well-known Shi'ite philosopher, one of his main contributions to modern Shi'ite Islam being his book on Quranic exegesis (Tafsir al-Mizan).

<sup>4</sup> Ibn Rushd (12th century C.E.), or Averroes, was a defender of Aristotelian philosophy, while Ibn Arabi (13th century C.E.) was a Sufi mystic, and Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi (13th century), as one of the disciples of Ibn Arabi, was a Persian Sufi who authored an influential commentary on Ibn Arabi.

<sup>5</sup> The founder of this law school or madhab, al-Shafi'i, lived during the 7th and early 8th centuries C.E. Often referred to as the founder of Islamic jurisprudence, he systematized the Islamic law or sharia in his attempt to reconcile the revealed sources with human reason.

<sup>6</sup> As for the four legal sources of Islamic law, apart from

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referred to as the „Sacralization of Arabic“. Along with the centralization of the state, the Qur'an too was canonized (the text known as Hafsa's mushaf was officially recognized, while others were discarded).

FARID ESACK (Cape Town) offered an analysis of the marginalities in the Qur'an, i.e. of „the other others“. Looking at the description of Jews in the Qur'an, we see limitations to the universal claims of the Qur'an. Jews are depicted as the enemies of God, the offspring of monkeys, while Christians are likened to pigs. Esack argued that the image of Jews as apes has a long history in Hadith<sup>7</sup> literature, necessitating the question what the Qur'anic construction of the Jew entails, as implicitly it seems as if these animals are not worthy of any moral consideration. More generally speaking, when we talk about otherness in the Qur'an, it is theological otherness. Here, the overarching question whether the Qur'an can be saved, developed in the direction of the more general question whether religion as such can be saved.

SADIK AL-AZM (Beirut) discussed the duty of the intellectuals and the prevalent sterility in the great law schools all over the Arab World, claiming that there is no serious Newthinking. Abu Zayd also pointed out the stagnation in the established centers of Islamic learning, which al-Azm called „a failure of nerves“ that gave rise to increasingly fundamentalist positions. On the other hand, there is the emerging Euro-Islam, along with democratic Turkey as possible alternatives. By and large the Muslim intellectuals have failed their duty of being critical or publicly present. For example, if we look at the Qur'an and its meanings, such as the role of the Prophet, al-Azm pointed out that it has become impossible to discuss deviating views, thus raising the question whether the words of the interpreters of the Qur'an are clearer than the original word of God. As far as hopes for Islamic Newthinking are concerned, these appear to center on European Islam.

Younes recounted that Abu Zayd encountered young students, also from Islamic institutions such as al-Azhar in Egypt, while being in Holland and discovered new perspectives among these Muslim youths, which gave him hope. Abu Zayd too assumed that reform in

the Islamic World would not come from the Arab States, but from countries such as Indonesia, Turkey or Iran.

ASMA BARLAS (New York) agreed to the massive failure of the Arab World and asked how Islamic Newthinking is possible, precisely because of the point alluded to earlier that the intellectual undertaking of such Newthinking seems to extract itself from the particularities of context and history. Stefan Wild (Bonn), by way of a summary, stated that an „enlightened Islam“ was needed, one that would be able to admit that some aspects and positions adopted earlier may have been wrong.

In his critique of the religious discourse, AZIZ AL-AZMEH (Budapest) put forward the idea that we are witnessing an „Islamization of Islam“ (1. literalist / fundamentalist, 2. continuing hermeneutic), resulting in three readings of the text: devotional, apologetic and analytical. According to al-Azmeh, Abu Zayd adhered to a literalist hermeneutics, resulting in a „Protestant Islam“, and hence al-Azmeh stated that only a radical historicization could save the text, as the alternative would be an apologetic use of the text, which al-Azmeh likened to Abu Zayd's expression of „planting seeds in the air“. Such apologetic reformism would ultimately result in „phantom topics“, e.g. in the insistence of Islamizing politics, grounded in the untested assumption that Muslims necessarily and exclusively view the world through an Islamic lens („re-enchantment“).

Picking up the lead, ABDOLKARIM SOROUSH (Washington) voiced his critical position with regard to al-Azmeh's argument, asking which rationality was at stake here, as every discipline has its own rationality. By way of response, al-Azmeh drew the following line of demarcation: the apologetic approach to the text presupposes the

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the Quran, there is the central source of the so-called Sunnah of the Prophet, which is a recollection of the 'example' set by the Prophet, along with the secondary sources represented by the consensus of the religious scholars (ijma) and the method of analogy from the Quran and Sunnah (qiyas).

<sup>7</sup>The body of so-called Hadith (pl. Ahadith) literature comprises of sayings and acts ascribed to the Prophet, thus rendering it a valuable source for understanding the Qur'an.

need to respond to the present condition by instrumentalizing the text and making it say something that it cannot. Scriptures can be read in two different ways: historical or devotional. Soroush pointed out two trends that could be discerned prior to the Iranian Revolution (1979): 1. Shariati: Marxist / Leftist, both ideologies which could be reconciled easily with Islam, as opposed to e.g. the ideas of liberalism, freedom and human rights; 2. Bazargan, who became the first prime minister after the Revolution: while the former's publications were widely distributed, the latter was attacked later on. In the Islamic World, Marxism prevailed and Socialism was seen as a panacea, rendering Islamic discourses increasingly aggressive. Soroush concluded that God and Islamic theology had to be re-visited in order to come to a new image of God, as it influences both politics and law.

Discussing Islamic Feminism, Barlas framed her contribution as anti-anti-foundationalist, i.e. she attempted to rethink the status of religious texts and of the Qur'an in particular. Like Abu Zayd, she called for an open and democratic, modernist hermeneutics. While pointing out that it was Margot Badran who first coined her work feminist, Barlas defined Islamic feminism as a discourse of gender equality, a discourse of sexual equality (assuming an ontological view on gender equality), as in her opinion the Qur'an does not portray the two genders as unequal, nor is the biological sex associated with any particular gender role. Hence, there is no theological basis for any „homosocial heresy“, as practiced by those adhering to what she called „the obsessive Muslim fixation on interpreting the Qur'an from a patriarchal perspective“. Concerning secular Muslims, Barlas added that they too are apologetics, as secularism represents but another paradigm, which is not liberating per se, as it may subscribe to yet another ideology. In her words, one should not conflate „signifier and signified“, because human language cannot contain God, which is a conclusion that may point a way out of the dilemma whether the text is revealed directly or mediated. Barlas opined that Qur'anic epistemology is anti-patriarchic

and the Qur'an's framework can best be understood by a certain interpretation of what is „good“, i.e. she advocated reading the Qur'an in the best possible way, always keeping in mind that there is yet a surplus on top of what we perceive to be the best, thus giving space to the transcendent.

ALMÚT SH. BRUCKSTEIN ÇORUH (Berlin) summarized the ongoing discussions by urging the participants to think of possible forms of continuing this process of engaging with and giving shape to Islamic Newthinking. While reading the Qur'an does not automatically mean historicizing it, there remains a future agenda for further Newthinking; e.g. it remains to be seen how feminists take possession of the text and what an un-patriarchic view of the Qur'an may look like. There are apparently gaps of indeterminacy, and debates such as the zoological one have the potential of destroying communities, making it all the more important to insist on transparency and confusion, at times. Esack added to the above that a possible future publication should be more specifically dedicated to the ideas and trials of Abu Zayd, focusing on new directions as well as possible gaps, i.e. his contribution to bringing forth change in the Muslim World.

#### **Conference overview:**

Mohammad Mojtahed Shabestari (Teheran): Nasr Abu Zayd's legacy: Perspectives of Islamic Newthinking

Osman Taştan (Ankara): Reason and Revelation through legal methodology of al-Shafi'i

Farid Esack (Cape Town): Redeeming Islam: The other Others in the Qur'an

Sadik al-Azm (Beirut): The Duty of the Intellectuals

Aziz al-Azmeh (Budapest): The Critique of the Religious Discourse

Abdolkarim Soroush (Washington): Muslims and Secular Liberal Democracy

Asma Barlas (New York): Islamic Feminism

Almút Sh. Bruckstein Çoruh: Summary / Future Prospects

Tagungsbericht *Islamic Newthinking – In Honor*

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*of Nasr Abu Zayd*. 26.06.2011–28.06.2011, Essen, in: *H-Soz-Kult* 24.11.2011.