

OBITUARY

Georges Tamer

NASR HAMID ABU ZAYD

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was one of the most renowned Arab Muslim scholars of the last two decades. The main focal points of the scholarly work that established his brilliant reputation worldwide were a valiant hermeneutical approach to the Qur'an, a radical critique of the highly politicized religious discourse in Egypt and other Arab countries, and a penetrating view of Islamic culture.

Born on 10 July 1943, in Quhafa near the city of Tanta to a poor family, Abu Zayd was unable to continue his high school education after the death of his father. In order to take care of his family, he earned a technical school diploma in 1960 and worked as a telecommunications technician. He did not, however, give up his dream of taking up university studies; while working, he obtained his high school degree and enrolled at Cairo University, going on to earn a B.A. in Arabic studies with highest honors in 1972. Five years later, including two fellowship years at the University of Pennsylvania (1978–79), he earned his M.A. in Arabic and Islamic studies with a thesis on Mu'tazilite rationalism in Qur'anic exegesis, published in 1982. The same year, Abu Zayd began his academic career as an assistant professor at Cairo University, and he earned his PhD in 1981 with a dissertation on Ibn 'Arabi's hermeneutics of the Qur'an, which was published in 1983. From 1985 to 1989, he served as a visiting professor in Osaka University's School of Foreign Studies. During his tenure abroad in the United States and Japan, he had the opportunity to study modern theories of communication and literary analysis, the philosophical hermeneutics developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Toshihiko Isuzu's semantic studies of the Qur'an.

Abu Zayd was intrigued by the relationship between the Qur'an and its recipients, a topic he investigated during his graduate-level research, and was most interested in the conditions that enable recipients to understand this Holy Book as God's word addressing them directly, within the context of their respective historical and cultural situations. To deal with this hermeneutical issue, he combined Western strands of knowledge with the traditional Arabic-Islamic sciences of the Qur'an. In his major work, *Mafhum al-Nass*:

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Dirasa fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an (The Concept of the Text: A Study of the Qur'anic Sciences) (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misriyya al-'amma li-l-Kitab), first published in 1990, and in later publications, he developed the hypothesis that the Qur'an was God's revelation to the Prophet Muhammad in 7th-century Arabia and therefore was, at the same time, a product of Arabic culture. The Qur'anic text is a linguistic message: God made use of a human language—Arabic—so that the first receivers of this message could understand it. In considering the Qur'an as a text, Abu Zayd was able to refer to medieval exegetical authorities from within the Sunni tradition who shared this view. Adopting notions and expressions from modern theories of information and literary analysis to explain his position, he argued that God, the sender of the Qur'an, utilized the linguistic and cultural codes and images that were known to the first audience of the revelation in order to make His message understandable. Since the meanings borne in a language develop within the framework of historically specific cultural and social contexts, the contemporary recipients of the Qur'an must decode its linguistic and cultural expressions, which, belonging to the distant past, are no longer easily accessible to them. Abu Zayd asserted that understanding the divine message of the Qur'an under changing historical circumstances requires a constant hermeneutical endeavor. The goal of this endeavor is to differentiate between the text's historical and universal statements and to decipher its linguistic and cultural codes with the help of relevant religious and nonreligious sciences. The hermeneutics of the Qur'an, in awareness of its historicity, is the other side of the text.

Abu Zayd created space for a historical–critical exegesis of the Qur'an. This unique hermeneutical approach is able to recognize Qur'anic statements that correspond exclusively to the 7th-century social and cultural circumstances of Muhammad and his first audience and that can therefore no longer be applied to today's readers. In contrast to the universal teachings of the Qur'an, such statements possess merely a historical, not a normative, value. Abu Zayd remained firmly convinced that only through historicizing the Qur'an can an appropriate understanding of its contents be achieved.

Abu Zayd was also convinced that it remains the task of proper Qur'anic hermeneutics to remove the accumulated layers of aggregated meaning produced by ideological, political, and social struggles throughout the history of Islam, thus freeing the Qur'anic text from their distorting pressure. He was not tempted, however, by the illusion that there should be an absolute interpretation of the Qur'an. On the contrary, following Ibn 'Arabi, he considered human knowledge, however developed, as merely relative, which necessarily results in the acceptance of a plurality of interpretations. Similarly, Abu Zayd was committed to the legacy of Averroes; like the Andalusian philosopher, he held an open attitude toward knowledge obtained from foreign traditions and connected it in a productive synthesis with knowledge obtained from his own religion and culture. Furthermore, he shared Averroes' dedication to the immanent plurality of discourses interwoven in the Qur'anic text. In this sense, he believed a historical–critical study of the Qur'an could uncover these discourses, thereby making them accessible to modern readers, beyond dogmatic constraints.

On account of these progressive and controversial ideas, Cairo University rejected his promotion to the rank of full professor in 1992; his promotion was approved, however, three years later. Beyond that, Abu Zayd was accused of apostasy, and as a result, a *hisba* case was brought against him to have his marriage annulled according to Islamic

law. A shari'ah court judged that Abu Zayd was no longer a Muslim and therefore could not remain married to his Muslim wife, Ebtehal Younes, who is professor of French literature at the same university. Though the execution of the decision was suspended later, Abu Zayd and his wife were forced to leave Egypt for The Netherlands in 1995 after repeated death threats from militant Muslims. In The Netherlands, he worked as a visiting professor of Islamic studies at the University of Leiden; starting in 2002, he held the Ibn Rushd Chair of Islam and Humanism at the University for Humanistics in Utrecht. Abu Zayd wrote several books and numerous articles in Arabic and English and received several honors and prestigious awards in Arab countries, Europe, and the United States. In recent years, he returned to Egypt for family reasons and resumed his lecturing.

During his exile, Abu Zayd defended his scholarly position with intransigent integrity. The fact that he had to pursue his university education under extremely hard economic conditions presumably shaped him; his life circumstances led him at a young age to uphold that which he recognized as correct, against all kinds of unjust adversity. This impulse also placed him at a healthy, critical distance from the powerful and privileged. After 2001, he saw himself necessarily opposing strong tendencies, primarily in the United States and Europe, to demonize Islam and its culture. He did not hesitate to denounce those biased opinions just as vigorously as he had denounced Muslims who, in his estimation, abused the Qur'an and the Islamic tradition.

Abu Zayd's vision was not only occupied with theoretical scholarly questions; he also was an active critic of the contemporary political and social situation in Egypt and the Arab world. He condemned the ominous fusion of religious and political power and criticized the hegemonic rhetoric of religious authorities, who claimed to possess the truth as well as the right to impose it on other people. He vehemently defended the rights of women and advocated gender equality. Out of a firm conviction that divergent views should legitimately coexist and that freedom of opinion should be preserved no matter the cost, he defended some of his radical opponents as they ironically fell victim to narrow-minded fanatical attacks. Abu Zayd believed strongly that participants in intellectual discourses should be treated equally and enjoy freedom of expression.

Abu Zayd passed away on 5 July 2010 in a Cairo hospital after contracting an infection in Indonesia. He will remain sorely missed by all his friends and colleagues, who are inspired by his exemplary courage, admire his legacy of serious scholarship, and share his vision of a righteous search for a rational Islamic discourse on the Qur'an.