

**NASR HAMID ABU ZAYD AND THE LIMITS OF REFORM IN
CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC THOUGHT**

**Thesis Presented for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Oriental
Studies**

By

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Abstract

This thesis examines in depth the thought and ideas of the Egyptian intellectual Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd as a representative of modernist Islamic thought. In unpacking and analysing Abu Zayd's ideas, this thesis focuses on five major issues: *shari'a*, Islam and politics, the Arab-Islamic heritage, history, and the issue of women's rights. This thesis argues that Abu Zayd's thought suffers from some of the same weaknesses he attacked in traditional and Islamist thought. By focusing on Abu Zayd I not only contribute to understanding a major intellectual in contemporary Islamic thought but also shed light on his wider intellectual family.

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND TRANSLATION

I use the IJMES transliteration system with the modification of removing the diacritical marks. The exception to this rule is proper names of authors who already have an established spelling, such as Abdullah Laraoi.

Translations from Arabic language publications, including Abu Zayd's books, are mine alone, unless otherwise stated. The only exception is the translation for Qur'anic verses. For the latter I used the translation of Sahih International, available at Quran.com, as I found their translation the most accurate in conveying the meaning of the verses.

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INTRODUCTION

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943-2010), an Egyptian scholar of Islamic thought at the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at Cairo University and a practising Muslim, became well known in Egypt and beyond when, in 1995, the Egyptian Court of Appeal declared him an apostate.¹ Beyond earning Abu Zayd international fame, however, this declaration had serious ramifications. Since the punishment for apostasy in the Islamic tradition is the death penalty, Abu Zayd's life was in danger. Furthermore, his marriage to his wife, Ebtelhal Younes, a professor of French literature at Cairo University, was annulled by the court, as a Muslim woman cannot be married to a non-Muslim man. Younes equated this with rape.² To protect his life and that of his wife, Abu Zayd fled to the Netherlands.

Abu Zayd's predicament began during the routine process of applying for promotion to the rank of full professor at Cairo University in May 1992.³ As part of this procedure, he submitted a sample of his academic publications to a committee of three faculty members. Although the first two colleagues praised his work and recommended him for the promotion, the third, 'Abd al-Sabur Shahin, wrote a scathing critique of Abu Zayd's work and voted against his promotion.⁴ Going even further, Shahin used his position as a preacher at the 'Amr bin al-'As mosque in Cairo to accuse Abu Zayd of

¹ Fauzi M Najjar, "Islamic Fundamentalism and the Intellectuals: The Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 27, no. 2 (2000): 191.

² Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Esther R. Nelson, *Voice of an Exile: Reflections on Islam* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 128.

³ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Al-Qawl al-Mufid fi Qadiyyat Abu Zayd: Bi Qalam 'Aql Misr wa Dhamiriha* [The Truth about Abu Zayd's case: Written by Egypt's Mind and Conscience] (Cairo: Madbouly, 1996), 93.

⁴ Najjar, "Islamic Fundamentalism and the Intellectuals," 179-82.

blasphemy.⁵ To ensure that Abu Zayd was punished, some of Shahin's sympathizers decided to take matters into their own hands and brought a court case against him.

The ensuing trial not only exposed the extent of the Islamists' influence but also the delicate balance between the ruling regime and those claiming religious authority, whether from within state-sponsored and recognized religious institutions or as members of the opposition.⁶ Furthermore, it exposed the challenges that face anyone who questions the broadly accepted tenets of Islam. The case embodied the resistance, if not downright enmity, that dominant religious discourse holds towards intellectuals who aspire to subject certain taboo issues to academic scrutiny and to modernize the study of Islam.⁷

Shahin and Abu Zayd both understood that the case had significance beyond this particular incident. They both acknowledged that they embody a struggle over the role of religion in general, and Islam in particular, in the public sphere and social order.⁸ On one side stand traditionalists and Islamists of various political leanings. To clarify, by 'traditionalist' I am referring to members of institutions such as al-Azhar University in Cairo who uphold the Sunni tradition. The latter includes the four major schools of thought (*madhahib*): Shafi'ite, Malikite, Hanbalite, and Hanafite. As for Islamists, I mean those who seek "to turn Islam into a social and political force — if possible under their leadership."⁹ Despite the differences between these groups and the varieties among them, they share a commitment to preserving, and at time expanding, the visible role and influence of their reading of Islam to all spheres of life, be it social, political or even

⁵ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, "Inquisition Trial in Egypt," *Recht van de Islam* 15, no. 52 (1998): 49.

⁶ Maurits Berger, "Apostasy and Public Policy in Contemporary Egypt: An Evaluation of Recent Cases from Egypt's Highest Courts," *Human Rights Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (2003): 739.

⁷ Najjar, "Islamic Fundamentalism and the Intellectuals," 199.

⁸ *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1.

⁹ Meir Hatina, *Guardians of Faith in Modern Times: 'Ulama' in the Middle East* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 1.

economic. Islam, from their point of view, is in a zero-sum competition game with Western culture. Therefore, in the view of Shahin and like-minded conservatives, the thought of Abu Zayd serves to support Western hegemony over Muslims.

On the other side stand modernist intellectuals, such as Abu Zayd. Modernist Islamic thought is a distinct development that has taken place in the second half of the twentieth century. While also engaging from within the Islamic framework, the modernist trend is different from traditional thought, as exemplified by institutions such as al-Azhar and its *'ulama'* (religious scholars), and also distinct from political Islam as exemplified by the movement of Muslim Brotherhood. The particularities of modernist thought are summarized by Ronald Nettler as follows:

In its central preoccupation with Islam and modernity, it evinces certain features: an apolitical conception of Islam; a contextual/critical/historical exegesis of the Qur'an and *hadith* literature; a 'liberal' political and social Islamic ethos of human rights, pluralism and democracy; a religious individualism; and a rejection of the presumed authoritative status of the traditional schools of Islamic law and theology.¹⁰

Nettler also points out that modernists' call to separate Islam from politics "may well be the main feature distinguishing the modernist from all others."¹¹ Suha Taji-Farouki also noted modernists' call "for detachment of the entire public sphere from the purview of religion."¹² In practice, this means the independence and autonomy of political and legal institutions from religious influence and interference. Abu Zayd advocated for this reform throughout his work.

The call to separate religion from the public sphere is coupled in modernist thought with an effort to subject religious knowledge and institutions to modern academic

¹⁰ Ronald L Nettler, "Islam, Politics and Democracy: Mohamed Talbi and Islamic Modernism," *The Political Quarterly* 71, no. s1 (2000): 50.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹² *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, 2.

standards. This critical inquiry, they suggest, should not only include religious thought and history, but also the Qur'an itself. Believing Islam to be conducive to modern values such as academic inquiry and secularism, they see traditional readings of Islam as an obstacle to progress because they push the Arab world towards an imaginary past and, in the process, prevent it from integrating with modernity. Modernists see in their perceived understanding of modernity the means of salvation from political tyranny and religious backwardness.¹³ Contrary to their adversaries, they see in the complete adoption of modernity a prerequisite to achieving autonomy and independence from Western hegemony. They also dismiss the fear held by many of modernity's influence on Muslim-majority societies.

This thesis will hereafter use the term "modernist" to refer to intellectuals who share these aforementioned characteristics in common. However, it is important to note that scholars in the field have not yet reached consensus on the term. For example, Charles Kurzman, uses the term "liberal" to describe these intellectuals,¹⁴ while Carool Kersten chose to describe them as "cosmopolitans."¹⁵

In advocating such measures, modernists clash with traditionalists and Islamists, creating a competition among intellectuals over who speaks in Islam's name. Noting this rivalry, Taji-Farouki writes that these conflicting views "exemplify the fragmentation and diffusion of intellectual authority in contemporary Muslim societies. They reflect the expanding multiplicity of voices and unprecedented uncertainty concerning who speak for Islam, engendered by cumulative impact of modernization on traditional concepts and

¹³ Modernity as modernists perceive it will be defined in Chapter One.

¹⁴ Charles Kurzman, *Liberal Islam: A Source Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Carool Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

methods of intellectual authority.”¹⁶ The writings of Abu Zayd, Shahin and their supporters reveal the differences between the various currents seeking dominance in the forging of Arab Muslim identity. Modernist intellectuals include, in addition to Abu Zayd, the Syrian Muhammad Shahrur, the Tunisian Muhammad Talbi, and the Iranian Mohammad Soroush. While modernists come from various Muslim regions, my focus is on the Arab world.

This thesis examines the thought of Abu Zayd as a representative of modernist Islamic thought. Despite his professed effort to introduce rational inquiry and academic standards into the field by example, I argue that his work ultimately suffers from some of the same weaknesses he argued against in his adversaries’ work. Throughout his prolific writings, Abu Zayd’s critique was directed mainly at three groups of intellectuals: traditionalists, Islamists and the Islamic reformists from the nineteenth century *nahda* (awakening) which lasted until the first few decades of the twentieth century.¹⁷

When critiquing traditionalists and Islamists, he referred to both as the “religious discourse.”¹⁸ When analysing the Islamic reformist thought of the *nahda* period, Abu Zayd used the term, the “*nahda discourse*,” even though he focused only on a handful of intellectuals from that period.¹⁹ His main critique of traditionalists was that they served the interests of ruling classes more than those of Islam or Muslims. As for Islamists, Abu Zayd viewed them as aiming to monopolize political and religious powers and to replace existing regimes while maintaining equally authoritarian and hierarchal structures. When critiquing the *nahda* discourse, Abu Zayd argued that they should have been bolder in

¹⁶ *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, 3.

¹⁷ Albert Hourani, *Arab Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (Cambridge: University Press, 1983).

¹⁸ An elaborate definition of this term will be provided in chapter one.

¹⁹ As he did in his book, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta wa al-Haqiqa* [The Text, Authority and the Truth] (Beirut: Al-Markiz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi, 2000).

instituting change in Muslim societies, as the first generation to integrate modernity into their societies. While delving into Abu Zayd's critique of these groups, this thesis argues that his own thought shares many of the flaws he highlighted in their writings.

In showing how Abu Zayd made his arguments and how, I argue, he fell short of achieving his goals, I focus on five areas: *shari'a*, Islam and politics, the Arab-Islamic heritage, history, and the issue of women's rights. Abu Zayd challenged the authority of traditional, Islamist and reformist readings on these major areas by questioning their accuracy, highlighting the fallible human agency in their production, showing what he believed to be tenuous reasoning in their scholarship and by sometimes casting doubt on the motives behind their production. The one exception, as I shall demonstrate, is his approval, or rather admiration, of the stance of the Islamic reformists of the *nahda* era on the issue of women's rights.²⁰

Abu Zayd's stance on *shari'a* and the status of the Qur'an is at the heart of the controversy that surrounded him. Dismissive of the contributions of classical theologians, Abu Zayd questioned the accuracy of theological knowledge that has been passed down from one generation to the next and which forms much of the Islamic tradition. He proposed subjecting the Muslim intellectual heritage in its entirety to rational inquiry and analysis. But perhaps what set the institutions against Abu Zayd was his proposal that even the sacred text of the Qur'an be subject to a modern re-examination and re-interpretation.²¹ Abu Zayd called attention to the plurality of Qur'anic texts that existed until the time of the third caliphate, that of Uthman bin 'Affan, as well as the political

²⁰ This is most evident in Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir al-Khawf: Qira'a fi Khitab al-Mar'a* [Circles of Fear: A Reading in the Discourse on Women] (Al-Dar al-Bayda': Al-Markiz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi, 2004).

²¹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 14.

turmoil that surrounded the unification of the Qur'anic texts.²² In doing so, he insinuated that commonly accepted readings of the Qur'an may be inaccurate.²³ In the process, Abu Zayd cast doubt on what most Muslims believe to be the foundation of Islam: the Qur'an itself, as the perfect and eternal word of God. From Abu Zayd's perspective, however, subjecting theology to reason would revitalize religion and offer Muslims the chance to regain dominance and prosperity.²⁴

Politics regulating the relationship between the rulers and the ruled is another major topic in Abu Zayd's writing. For Islamists and many traditionalists, politics should also govern the relationship between people and God – i.e., there must be no separation between religion and the state, as the sacred and the profane are intrinsically linked.²⁵ Abu Zayd argued, on the other hand, that Islam is inherently a secular religion, as it preached against the establishment of institutions to mediate between man and God.²⁶ Therefore, according to Abu Zayd, separation of religion and state more accurately reflects the Islamic ethos of governance. Furthermore, given the reality of the multiplicity of interpretations, he argued, linking the two would result in the state enforcing the application of a single interpretation, leading to endless strife as no single interpretation has ever been agreed upon by all Muslims.²⁷ Furthermore, Abu Zayd wrote, when the

²² Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil* [Discourse and Interpretation] (Al-Dar al-Bayda': Al-Markiz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi 2000), 136.

²³ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Ma'fhum al-Nass: Dirasa fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an* [The Concept of the Text: A Study in the Sciences of the Qur'an.] (Al-Dar al-Bayda': Al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi, 2005), 117-34.

²⁴ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini* [Critique of Religious Discourse] (Al-Dar al-Bayda': Al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi, 2007), 33-39.

²⁵ See for example the book by Islamist Fahmi Huwaydi, Fahmi Huwaydi, *Al-Qur'an wa al-Sultan: Humum Islamiyya Mu'asira* [The Qur'an and Political Power: Current Islamic Concerns] (Beirut: Dar al-Shuruq, 1981).

²⁶ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 31-9.

state controls religious matters, religious institutions and individuals are deprived of the autonomy needed to “to produce knowledge unencumbered” by state interests.²⁸

The issues of the Arab Islamic heritage and history permeate Abu Zayd’s writings, regardless of the topic. Defining heritage as what is retained as valuable from a people’s history, Abu Zayd argued that a critical examination of the region’s history and its heritage is essential to forming an identity that accurately reflects the historical processes and the rich diversity that is all but missing from the heritage and the dominant narration of history.²⁹ In rewriting history, Abu Zayd emphasized placing the Arab Islamic history in the wider context of human history and evolution, revealing his own inclusive perspective.³⁰ However, he justified this process by presenting it as a prerequisite to draw the correct lesson from the ancestors.

The difficulty in a modern reading of Islam is most visible in the issue of women’s rights. Women’s liberation or seclusion has become in many ways a symbol of the struggle between modernity and tradition. Modernity has undermined traditional roles of women, placing them on equal terms with men. Both modernists and conservatives believe this issue to be critical in advancing their point of view.

These five issues of *shari‘a*, politics, the heritage, history, and women’s rights constitute major topics in the thought of Abu Zayd, his contemporaries and adversaries. I show in each of the chapters of this thesis how Abu Zayd formulated his arguments in favour of reforming thought around these issues. I also demonstrate how he ultimately used much of the same intellectual reasoning as his opponents. Understanding Abu Zayd’s ideas and the arguments he employed sheds light not only on the thought of an

²⁸ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*.

²⁹ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 8.

³⁰ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 185-6.

important and controversial intellectual but also on his wider intellectual family, exposing reasons for the tension – and at times, polarization – between modernists and others.

The Background to Abu Zayd's Writings and the Second wave of Modernist

Intellectuals

The strain between modernist intellectuals like Abu Zayd and his conservative adversaries is rooted in the tension many Muslims perceive between Islam and modernity as introduced by the West. Growing contact with Europe, which accelerated with the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt in 1798, made the Muslim world increasingly aware of the widening gap with the West scientifically and, more alarmingly, militarily. Europe's military superiority began to threaten various parts of the globe, including the Muslim Middle East.³¹ Modernity was thus introduced to the Arab world in part through colonialism and imperialism, engendering a debate that would last for centuries.

Realizing the necessity of catching up with Europe militarily and scientifically, the Ottoman Empire started to modernize itself in a state-led effort known as the *tanzimat*. In Egypt, under the leadership of Muhammad Ali (1769-1849), the country started to modernize by laying the foundations for Egypt's modern economy.³² Muhammad Ali sent missions to Europe to master the technical and administrative skills needed to support his reforms, which led to strengthening Egypt's position as the region's centre of learning and culture. Albert Hourani, who wrote the most comprehensive intellectual history of that period, stressed the role that translation of English and French publications into the Arabic language played in introducing modern ideas and

³¹ Hourani, *Arab Thought*, 39.

³² *Ibid.*, 53.

philosophies.³³ The vibrant intellectual era that evolved as a result of this development is often referred to as the *nahda* or awakening.

The relevance of the *nahda* era to this dissertation stems from the fact that some Islamic reformists from that period shaped not only the thought of Abu Zayd, but also a whole intellectual family of Arab modernists. Among the most prominent figures of this era were Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad ‘Abduh, and Qasim Amin. These figures are featured extensively in Abu Zayd’s work. It is important also to note the significant contribution of Christian Arab intellectuals, such as Butrus al-Bustani and Qustantin Zurayq. However, for the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on the Islamic reformists in particular, as Abu Zayd’s work concerns them exclusively. The *nahda* period incorporated an awakening that extended beyond just Islamic thought. However, Abu Zayd’s thought focuses only on what pertains to Islamic thought from that period.

Despite the shock caused by the intrusive introduction to European modernity, the overarching conclusion drawn by Islamic reformist intellectuals of the *nahda* era was that Islam is compatible with modernity. They believed Islam to be a unique and superior religion that contributes to all aspects of life in ways that other religions, such as Christianity, do not. Muhammad ‘Abduh, for example, espoused this view.³⁴ The upshot of this conclusion, however, is that Muslims who diverge from true Islam are the reason for the state of backwardness in the Muslim world. This sentiment is captured by the writing of Prince Shakib Arslan of Lebanon (1869-1946) who argued that Islam was in fact responsible for the great civilizations of the Muslim world. In his booklet, *Limadha*

³³ Ibid., 69-72.

³⁴ Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought : cultural critique in comparative perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 90.

Ta'akhhara al-Muslimun wa Limadha Taqaddama Ghayruhum? [Why Have Muslims Regressed When Others Progressed?], he wrote:

It is an undisputed fact that Islam is the reason for the rise of the Arabs and for their amazing conquests, according to the assertions of all historians from East and West. It was not the reason for their decline. Those who falsely claim so are merely motivated by their desire to spread European culture among the Muslims and have it replace Muslim culture.³⁵

Underneath Arslan's assertion and confidence in Islam's compatibility with modernity, however, one may sense in Arslan's words a feeling of unease, perhaps even fear, caused by the possibility that European culture may indeed overwhelm, even come to replace, Arab Muslim identity.

Overall, the contribution of the *nahda* Islamic reformists in addressing the challenges that modernity posed to the Muslim world laid the foundation of modern Islamic thought in the second half of the twentieth century. They formed the basis for future generations of intellectuals. Consequently, many of the contemporary trends in Islamic thought, be they modernist, Islamist or even militant, can be traced back to that period.

The second half of the twentieth century witnessed a birth of a second wave of enlightened thought and a breakthrough equal in significance to the first *nahda*. Abdullah Laroui, the prominent Moroccan intellectual, refers to this period as a second awakening.³⁶ Intellectuals like Abu Zayd were influenced by the struggle to end colonialism, the failure of the nationalist movement to realize the aspirations of the Arab people and the occupation of Arab land by Israel. The defeat of Arab armies against

³⁵ Shakib Arslan, *Limatha Ta'akhhara al-Muslimun wa Limadha Taqaddama Ghayruhum* [Why have Muslims regressed when others progressed?], 3 ed. (Cairo: 'Isa al-Babi wa Shuraka'uahu, 1939), 127.

³⁶ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 20.

Israel in 1967, in particular, is seen as a major impetus for this intellectual renaissance.³⁷ Modernist intellectuals belonging to this awakening scrutinized core religious, social, political and gender issues, offering sober analysis and bold proposals for change. This trend is increasingly acknowledged by scholars of Arab intellectual history as well as by the intellectuals of this period themselves. Ronald Nettler argues that while earlier periods may have had a ‘muted’ form of modernism, this trend “has appeared in more pronounced way in the writings of certain Muslim intellectuals from the 1960s onward.”³⁸

While informed by the contribution of the *nahda* scholars, modernists differed from the Islamic reformists in several aspects. First, while the original *nahda* intellectuals recognized the potential and important role of Arab Islamic history, their approach was eclectic, focusing mainly on flattering eras from that history. One can argue that their goal was to defend the pride of the *umma* (Muslim community) against European attacks on their land and their very identity. However, the re-examination of Arab Islamic history conducted by scholars of the second awakening seems free of the romanticized style that characterized much of the literature of the *nahda* era. They advocated and offered a new objective analysis with far-reaching ramifications for Arab identity, history and the religious heritage. Intellectuals such as Abu Zayd, the Moroccan historian Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabri,³⁹ the Syrian author George Tarabishi,⁴⁰ and the Lebanese historian Hussein

³⁷ Both Kassab and Abu Rabi’ made that point.

³⁸ Nettler, "Islam, Politics and Democracy: Mohamed Talbi and Islamic Modernism," 50.

³⁹ Muhammad ‘Abid Jabri, al, *Takwin al-‘Aql al-‘Arabi* [Formation of the Arab Mind], 6th ed. (Beirut: Markia Dirasat al-Wihda al-Arabiyya, 2006).

⁴⁰ George Tarabishi, *Al-Muthaqqafun al-‘Arab wa al-Turath: Al-Tahlil al-Nafsi li ‘Isab Jama’i* [Arab intellectuals and the heritage: A psychological analysis of collective neurosis] (London: Riad El-Rayyes, 1991).

Mruwwa⁴¹ do not hesitate to reveal the less-than-flattering episodes of Arab Islamic history, discerning that perhaps the history that Arabs have been taught is only partially true.

Their view of history includes not only the Islamic heritage but extends to ancient history. They recognize that Arab Islamic history cannot be isolated from the wider human history, which has also been an integral part of its formation, millennia before colonization. These intellectuals remind their readers of the long-thriving pre-Islamic civilizations in their regions and their integration into what came to be known as Islamic civilization. In the process, these intellectuals unearthed historical events that have all but disappeared from the collective memory of the *umma*, potentially challenging many convictions that Arabs came to hold about themselves and their history.

Second, the methodologies used by modernist intellectuals are different. While scholars of both periods were exposed to Western scholarship, intellectuals of the twentieth century were more systematic in applying specific methodological approaches developed by Western thinkers. For example, Abu Zayd complemented his traditional Egyptian education with hermeneutic theory, which he was exposed to while a visiting scholar in the United States.⁴² His time in Japan gave him yet another perspective on religious heritage.⁴³ Historical materialism and Marxism were influential in the writings of Husayn Mruwwa and the Syrian philosopher Sadiq al-Azm respectively. The North African scholars Muhammad al-Jabri, Muhammad Arkun and ‘Abdullah Laroui were influenced by deconstructivism, Michel Foucault’s Archeology of Knowledge theory and

⁴¹ Hussein Mruwwa, *Al-Naza ‘at al-Maddiyya fi al-Falsafa al-‘Arabiyya wa al-Islamiyya*, 4 vols., vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Farabi, 2008).

⁴² Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 95.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 108.

developments in fields such as sociology and anthropology.

Speaking of what he referred to as a “new kind of discourse,” Hisham Sharabi described the literature of second half of the twentieth century Arab intellectuals as

... one in which the appropriation of Western concepts and approaches—particularly those of social sciences, Marxism, structuralism, feminism, and deconstruction—has become possible. The systematic questioning of ideological, religious, and fundamentalist thought became possible with the prospect of an independent rereading of history and society. The past was no longer to be constantly celebrated as a perfect glorious heritage or utopian vision; and society was no more to be seen as embodying eternal values and unchangeable relations. Both were now projected into their specific, historical structures and rendered open to analysis and criticism.⁴⁴

In one sense, the scholars of the second awakening prioritize accuracy and objectivity above all else. They seek to anchor Arab consciousness in reality as a means to achieve the ever sought-after progress and modernity.

Third, while reformist intellectuals used to come primarily from traditional religious educational backgrounds, many of the intellectuals of the second half of the twentieth century had less conventional training. For example, the best-selling Syrian scholar Muhammad Shahrur, who wrote a modern reading of the Qur’an, was a professor of engineering at Damascus University.⁴⁵ The Sudanese intellectual Mahmud Muhammad Taha was an also an engineer, while his disciple, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na’im, has a background in law. However, the work of such scholars significantly challenges traditional religious authority, sometimes appearing to be trying to empower laymen against traditional centres of religious authority.

Fourth, the role of religion, Islam in particular, in public life continued to be a

⁴⁴ Hisham Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (New York: Oxford University Press 1988), 106.

⁴⁵ Muhammad Shahrur, *The Qur’an, Morality and Critical Reason: the Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, trans. Andreas Christmann (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2009), xx.

focal point of debate. Many Islamic reformists of the *nahda* era not only revered Islam as a personal faith, but also saw all reform as possible, if not mandatory, through an Islamic prism. Furthermore, they saw decline as a result of divergence from what some of them saw to be “true” Islam. While ‘Abduh and Afghani attempted to re-examine the religious heritage, especially hadith, for the purpose of producing an interpretation conducive to modernity, they never doubted the premise that religion was a vehicle for change.⁴⁶ Even political Islam in contemporary Egypt, one may argue, is a direct result of these early efforts to revive Islam as an agent of change.

By contrast, many modernist scholars of the second half of the twentieth century question the conviction that religion is a prerequisite to modernity and progress. In fact, the single defining characteristic of their work, as mentioned earlier, is their view of Islam as apolitical.⁴⁷ Intellectuals such as Abu Zayd saw the growing influence of a political religious discourse through Islamists and through regime co-opted institutions, such as al-Azhar, to be an obstacle and a root cause of the challenges the Arab world was facing. In advocating a separation between religion and state, these intellectuals offer modernity, rather than Islam, as the solution to the challenges of the Arab world.

In arguing for an apolitical reading of Islam, these intellectuals’ ideas also have their roots in the works of some *nahda* scholars such the Syrian ‘Abdul Rahman al-Kawakibi (1849-1902) and the Egyptian ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq (1888-1966). In his book, *Taba’i’ al-Istibdad wa Masari’ al- Isti’bad* (The Nature of Tyranny and Harm of Enslavement), first published in 1900, Kawakibi made an argument for the separation of religion and political authority concluding that a marriage between the two inevitability

⁴⁶ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 26-7.

⁴⁷ Nettler, "Islam, Politics and Democracy: Mohamed Talbi and Islamic Modernism," 50.

lead to tyranny by political power and weakening of all aspects of society.⁴⁸ ‘Abd al-Raziq, a senior scholar at al-Azhar University, relied heavily on the Qur’an and the *sunna* to negate, in his *Al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm* [Islam and the rules of governance], first published in 1925, the idea that the caliphate was an Islam-mandated style of governance. Furthermore, ‘Abd al-Raziq argued that the caliphate was a historic and political construct that had no roots in the original message of Islam. Rather, its main effect had been to support the mainly authoritarian rulers who have exploited Islam to maintain political power, causing ordinary Muslims untold grief.⁴⁹ Opposition to mixing religion with politics intensified in the second half of the twentieth century as exemplified by the writings of Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, the Egyptian Khalil ‘Abd al-Karim, and Sayyid al-Qimni.

Finally, unlike earlier periods where the state supported the modernization of society by sending scholars abroad to bring home knowledge to their countries, the state became a large oppressor of calls for progress. State-sponsored persecutions of thinkers who advocate reform has become commonplace, and governments have increasingly turned a blind eye while intolerant religious institutions or individuals silence reformers. Consequently, the path of modernist thinkers has become perilous, even fatal, for many intellectuals as Arab regimes have directed their power against their own people. The Lebanese intellectual historian Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab summarizes the developments that led to dramatic changes in intellectual life in the Arab world in general during the second half of the twentieth century:

These states prevented the democratic processes of international, political, ethnic, and religious conflict resolution. They disenfranchised people and

⁴⁸ ‘Abd al-Rahman Kawakibi, al, *Taba’i’ al-Istibdad wa Masari’ al-Isti’bad* [The Nature of Tyranny and Harms of Enslavement] (Beirut: Dar al-Nafis, 2006).

⁴⁹ Ali ‘Abd Al-Raziq, *Al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm* [Islam and the Rules of Governance] (Beirut: Al-Mu’assasa al-‘Arabiyya li al-Dirasat wa al-Nashr, 2000).

suspended political life by perpetuating emergency laws. They cracked down on all forms of independent and oppositional voices, be they secular or religious. They monopolized power and put in place an elaborate system of corruption. They instituted harsh censorship, repressing freedom of thought and freedom of speech that eventually led to a deterioration of the whole educational system.⁵⁰

Consequently, challenging the authority of the state-sponsored interpretation of Islam and its version of history has become a major way to question the legitimacy of the state itself. As a reaction, those who question traditional institutions and narratives have become a threat not only to regimes but also to traditional and regime-backed religious institutions. This is perhaps why Al-Azhar University's Council of Islamic Research bans the books of liberal writers, such as the books of judge Muhammad Sa'id 'Ashmawi, who advocated for an apolitical reading of Islam.⁵¹ Yet, despite the persecution many remain unfazed by this intimidation.

Despite its significance, however, the full impact of the second awakening has not been thoroughly investigated. Inside the Arab world, the lack of freedom of thought and expression has suffocated academia. Harsh censorship has crippled the dissemination and circulation of these ideas, internally and externally. However, the recent developments of the Arab Spring and the rise of a generation that demands freedom of thought and expression promises that the ideas of these intellectuals may still play a major role in offering a road map towards authenticity and progress. Furthermore, the rise of political Islam and the increase in polarization regarding the role of religion in the public sphere will inevitably lead to a candid discussion on this subject.⁵² Another promising indication is that despite having been banned, many modernists' books are best sellers, exposing a

⁵⁰ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 19.

⁵¹ George N Sfeir, "Basic Freedoms in a Fractured Legal Culture: Egypt and the Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," *The Middle East Journal* 52, no. 3 (1998): 408-9.

⁵² *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, 1-3.

demand for such thought.⁵³

The importance of Abu Zayd's prolific contribution to the field of Islamic thought, with more than fifteen books and dozens of articles in both Arabic and English, stems mainly from him being a representative of this modernist intellectual family, both in its contemporary evolution and in its roots. The challenges to reform that he faced as well as the strengths and weaknesses of his ideas and arguments reflect both his own scholarship and that of the larger trend in contemporary Islamic thought. Abu Zayd's own background is a reflection of the ties connecting the first generation of *nahda* Islamic reformists with the second. His adversaries, as I will show in the following chapters, point out this connection – in their writings they frequently place him in the same category as 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq and Taha Hussein.

Literature Review

While literature written on contemporary Arab modernist thought is scarce, it is important to note that the academy is slowly but surely starting to hear these modernist voices. In her book, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab introduces a wide range of these intellectuals' work, including Abu Zayd's.⁵⁴ Mainly summarizing Abu Zayd's *Naqd al-Khitab al-Dini* (Critique of Religious Discourse), Kassab noted that among Abu Zayd's main conclusions was "the ubiquitous influence of sociopolitical factors in the politics of

⁵³ The modernist readings of Muhammad Shahrur is one such best seller. See, Shahrur, *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason: the Essential Muhammad Shahrur*.

⁵⁴ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*.

interpreting the sacred text.”⁵⁵ Indeed Abu Zayd saw the majority of interpretations that have been passed down from one generation to the next as having been driven by the particular sociopolitical context at the time of their production. Therefore, these readings may not necessarily be relevant to contemporary times. While I agree with the overview of a few of Abu Zayd’s publications that Kassab provided, her account is far from exhaustive. Ibrahim Abu Rabi’s *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Intellectual History* also features an analysis of some of these intellectuals, such as ‘Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabiri and Abdullah Laroui, though not Abu Zayd.⁵⁶

Some of the ideas of modernist intellectuals are appearing in edited volumes such as Charles Kurzman’s *Liberal Islam*. Kurzman’s volume features the ideas of scholars not only in the Arab world, but also in the wider Muslim communities.⁵⁷ The scholars in his edited volume include the Pakistani Fazlur Rahman, the Tunisian Muhammad Talbi, and the Moroccan Muhammad Arkoun. In addition to showing the nuance differences that exist among intellectuals belonging to this trend, Kurzman’s volume contextualises this intellectual trend within the Islamic tradition.

Another edited volume that gives voice to some of these intellectuals is that of Cooper, Nettler and Mahmoud, *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond*.⁵⁸ This volume includes a chapter written by Abu Zayd entitled, “Divine Attributes in the Qur’an: Some Poetic Aspects.”⁵⁹ In this article, Abu Zayd stressed the fact that the

⁵⁵ Ibid., 184.

⁵⁶ Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought : Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London: Pluto Press, 2004).

⁵⁷ Kurzman, *Liberal Islam: A Source Book*.

⁵⁸ *Islam and Modernity : Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, ed. Ronald L. Nettler, Mohamed Mahmoud, and John Cooper (London: I. B. Tauris, 20009).

⁵⁹ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, "Divine Attributes in the Qur'an: Some Poetic Aspects," in *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, ed. John Cooper, Ronlad Nettler, and Mohamed Mahmoud (London: I.B.Tauris Publishers, 1998).

Qur'an was transmitted orally from God to the Prophet writing that "the Qur'an was never dealt with as a written text in the daily life of the early Muslim community." For Abu Zayd to emphasize that the Qur'an had "to wait until the print age to be considered as such [a written text]," serves his emphasis on the human agency involved in writing the holy text and interpreting it.⁶⁰ It also strengthens his argument for the importance of scrutinizing the historical and linguistic context of the Qur'an to arrive at an accurate understanding of its intentions.

Other edited volumes that feature contemporary Muslim modernists expressing their ideas directly include also Kamrava's two edited volumes, *The New Voices of Islam* and *Innovation in Islam: Traditions and Contributions*.⁶¹ The contributors include Abu Zayd, Leila Ahmed, and Muhammad Arkoun. Works that examine modernist thought include also Suha Taji-Farouki's edited volume *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Quran* featuring a collection of analytical articles on the works of various scholars including Abu Zayd, Mohamad Shahrur, and Mohamed Talbi.⁶² Kermani identifies Abu Zayd's theory on the Qur'an and the subjectivity and diversity that have accompanied the process of interpreting the Qur'an. Kermani also traces the influence on Abu Zayd's work of various scholars, such as the Japanese scholar of the Qur'an Toshihiko Izutsu and the Egyptian Amin al-Khuli.⁶³ Kermani's article constitutes an informed introduction to Abu Zayd's biography and ideas. While these volumes draw attention to some modernists' work, a comprehensive volume that includes all of the contributors to modernist Islamic

⁶⁰ Ibid., 190.

⁶¹ *Innovation in Islam: Traditions and Contributions*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), and *The new voices of Islam : rethinking politics and modernity : a reader*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

⁶² *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*.

⁶³ Navid Kermani, "From Revelation to Interpretation: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the literary study of the Qur'an," in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

thought, however, one that resembles Hourani's effort documenting the contribution of the *nahda* scholars, is yet to be compiled.

Since Abu Zayd's case gained international notoriety, many peer-reviewed articles have been written about him. However, what is available in academic publications on Abu Zayd appears to be concerned primarily with either the legal case against him or his hermeneutics theory in particular. Literature tackling his ideas in depth remains inconclusive. For example, not a single article is written on Abu Zayd's view on women's rights in Islam, even though Abu Zayd dedicated an entire book to this issue. I attribute this gap in Western scholarship to two factors. First, the majority of Abu Zayd's publications have not been translated from the original Arabic and therefore are only available to those who go through the painstaking effort of mastering the Arabic language. Abu Zayd's style of writing is particularly challenging as it is often convoluted, esoteric, and not always cohesive. Second, like the works of many modernists, his books are banned in many Arab countries and therefore are not widely available.

Ironically, however, the case against Abu Zayd helped the dissemination of his ideas beyond what would have been otherwise possible. His hermeneutics theory was the subject of an unpublished PhD thesis by Yusuf Rahman, entitled "The Hermeneutical Theory of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: An Analytical Study of his Methodology of Interpreting the Qur'an."⁶⁴ Rahman concluded that Abu Zayd's "theory of interpretation is similar to that double movement theory of Fazlur Rahman," even though no "trace of direct influence by the latter" on Abu Zayd is found.⁶⁵ The phenomenon of various members of the modernist intellectual family making similar or, at times, identical

⁶⁴ Yusuf Rahman, "The Hermeneutical Theory of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: An Analytical Study of His Method of Interpreting the Qur'an" (Unpublished thesis, McGill University, 2001).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 249.

arguments independently but simultaneously is a comparative study waiting to be written. Rahman also noted in his thesis that Abu Zayd combined Western mythologies and theories with the concept of the rational Mu‘tazilite’s “the createdness of the Qur’an,” which, he noted, “has been long buried and or forgotten by many Muslims.”⁶⁶ Therefore Abu Zayd combined modern knowledge with rational thought from the classical age. Another interesting conclusion that Rahman reached is that the enmity between Abu Zayd and Islamists “lies not so much in the novelty of Abu Zayd’s theories as it does in the theological opposition of the Islamists to the liberal Muslims.”⁶⁷ This conclusion would have been supported by Abu Zayd himself as well as other modernists.

Abu Zayd’s methodology and his concept of heritage (*turath*) constituted a chapter in another PhD thesis by Iskandar Mansour entitled, “The Unpredictability of the Past: *Turath* and Hermeneutics.”⁶⁸ Mansour’s thesis examines the works of Husayn Muruwwa, Adonis, Abu Zayd, Hasan Hanafi, and Jabiri and how they each proposed that the heritage be examined. In part, Mansour’s focus on these intellectuals is derived by the fact that they all “agree on the necessity of modernization, although they differ on the road that must be taken toward modernization.”⁶⁹ Mansour’s thesis emphasizes primarily the linguistic aspect of Abu Zayd’s concept of *turath*.

Joseph Glicksberg’s thesis entitled “The Islamist Movement and the Subversion of Secularism in Modern Egypt” also dedicates a chapter to Abu Zayd’s case and its ramification for secularism.⁷⁰ Glicksberg argues that for intellectuals like Abu Zayd to

⁶⁶ Ibid., 251.

⁶⁷ Ibid., i.

⁶⁸ Iskandar Mansour, "The Unpredictionability of the Past: Turath and Hermeneutics" (Unpublished thesis, University of California, 2000).

⁶⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁷⁰ Joseph Benjamin Glicksberg, "The Islamist Movement and the Subversion of Secularism in Modern Egypt" (University of Pennsylvania, 2003).

argue for the separation of religion and state from within the Islamic discourse serves to sabotage the end goal of achieving this disengagement. This is the case because, he wrote, “Islam’s *presence*, rather than its absence, in Egypt’s ideological field has been a key ingredient behind the ‘triumph of Islam’ that many scholars see as making contemporary Egyptian identity.”⁷¹ However, Abu Zayd’s engagement with the Islamic discourse in Egypt and the wider Arab world was coupled with consistent calls to remove religion from the public sphere and focus the debate in autonomous academic institutions. In my opinion, especially in the long run, it is too early to make a final assessment regarding whether the contributions of modernists like Abu Zayd strengthened or weakened the grip of political Islam. One obvious consequence of engaging from within the field of Islamic thought is that no one side can claim a monopoly over speaking in Islam’s name. Since each side has its own followers, no one voice can dominate over entire communities.

Peer-reviewed articles on Abu Zayd include Sukidi’s, which offers an analysis of Abu Zayd’s hermeneutics theory of the Qur’an and which concludes that his approach is a “distinctively ‘humanistic hermeneutics,’” a term Sukidi explains as follows: “The hermeneutic act is considered humanistic in so far as it signifies a human-oriented interpretation of the Qur’an,” emphasizing the human role in this process.⁷² Indeed, Abu Zayd’s take on the Qur’an and the culmination of interpretations stresses above all human agency. This, I argue, is motivated by Abu Zayd’s attempt to remove the hierarchy among scholars old and new, which would ultimately give modern interpretations equal legitimacy to traditional ones.

⁷¹ Ibid., 5.

⁷² Sukidi, "Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the Quest for a Humanistic Hermeneutics of the Qur'an," *Die Welt des Islams* 49, no. 2 (2009): 181-3.

In an article entitled, “From Revelation to Interpretation: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the Literary Study of the Qur’an,” Navid Kermani delves into Abu Zayd’s methodology as well as that of his intellectual influences.⁷³ Kermani’s article highlights the genealogy of Abu Zayd’s methodology in contemporary Arab thought. In addition, Hirschkind, in his article “Heresy or Hermeneutics: The Case of Nasir Hamid Abu Zayd,” demonstrates the ramifications of Abu Zayd’s methodology on the perception of history and religion. Significantly, Hirschkind points out, this methodology renders both fields of study “entirely suitable objects of historical analysis and determination.”⁷⁴ That religion and history should be treated as banal subjects offends many conservative Islamists and members of the religious establishment as they saw it as an attempt to disempower Islam and Muslims. This sentiment is expressed in many Islamists’ publications.⁷⁵

Abu Zayd’s case has prompted significant legal questions such as the ones addressed by Kilian Balz: “May dissolution of marriage on grounds of apostasy be brought about by a third party (i.e. virtue of a popular action)? Has a secular court the competence to declare someone an infidel? Furthermore, can apostasy be established on the basis of academic writings?”⁷⁶ These questions are significant because, as Balz points out, Abu Zayd’s case is not unique but “was only one among a large number [of cases]

⁷³ Kermani, "From Revelation to Interpretation."

⁷⁴ Charles Hirschkind, "Heresy or Hermeneutics: The Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," *Stanford Humanities Review* 5, no. 1 (1995): 471.

⁷⁵ See for example, Sayyid bin Hussein 'Affani, al, *'A'lam wa 'Aqzam fi Mizan al-Islam* [Dwarfs and Celebrities in Islam's Scale], 2 vols., vol. 1 (Jeddah Dar Majid 'Isayri li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi, 2004); Muhammad Jalal Kushk, *Qira'a fi Fikr al-Taba'iyya* [A Reading in the Thought of Subordination] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Turath al-Islami, 1994).

⁷⁶ Kilian Balz, "Submitting Faith to Judicial Scrutiny through the Family Trial: The Abu Zayd Case," *Die Welt des Islams* 37, no. 2 (1997): 136.

brought against Egyptian intellectuals, including Nobel Prize winner Naghib Mahfuz.”⁷⁷ Balz concluded that the declaration of Egypt’s highest secular court that Abu Zayd was an apostate serves to illustrate the politicization of the system. To Balz, “the courts have clearly transgressed the ordinary boundaries of legal discourse, which is normally concerned with outwardly manifested actions rather than spiritual affairs, and with legal questions rather than religious or moral considerations.”⁷⁸ Abu Zayd himself made the same conclusions on his case.⁷⁹

Articles focusing on the legal case also include that of George Sfeir’s “Basic Freedoms in a Fractured Legal Culture: Egypt and the Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd.” Sfeir examines the Islamist lawyers’ use of the medieval concept of *hisba* (prompting good and combating evil), which was revived in the seventies, to successfully accuse Abu Zayd of heresy and consequently divorce him from his wife.⁸⁰ The danger in the precedent Abu Zayd’s case presents, he points out, is that it encourages “the emergence of self-appointed guardians of public virtue and morality,” causing an increase in censorship of what such individuals or institutions may find offensive to Islam. Sfeir notes that such censorship already exists through al-Azhar University’s Council of Islamic Research, which bans from shops and book fairs books it deems disrespectful of Islam.⁸¹ Maurits Berger also notes these accusations of apostasy against liberal thinkers by the Islamic Research Institute or, occasionally, by extremists.⁸²

The legal case against Abu Zayd is an example of one kind of obstacle to reform

⁷⁷ Ibid., 141.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 155.

⁷⁹ Nasr Abu Zayd, *Al-Takfir fi Zaman al-Takfir: Didda al-Jahl wa al-Zayf wa al-Khurafa* [Thinking in the Age of Excommunication: Against Ignorance, Falsehood, and Myth] (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 1995).

⁸⁰ Sfeir, "Basic Freedoms in a Fractured Legal Culture: Egypt and the Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd."

⁸¹ Ibid., 408-9.

⁸² Berger, "Apostasy and Public Policy in Contemporary Egypt: An Evaluation of Recent Cases from Egypt's Highest Courts," 730.

that modernist intellectuals face. Fauzi Najjar argued that the “ruling’s far-reaching legal and political implications to freedom of thought, expression, and independent thinking are matched to its legitimizing the killing of the defendant.”⁸³ Abu Zayd himself saw his case as symbolic of the power struggle between those who want to control the debate using tradition and those who want to argue from a basis of reason. In his book *Al-Tafkir fi Zaman al-Takfir (Thinking in the Age of Excommunication)* Abu Zayd alluded to this predicament arguing that thinking has become grounds for excommunicating Muslims from their faith.⁸⁴ In various interviews and articles, he emphasized that his case was not related to his personal faith, but to his right to freedom of thought and his right as a researcher to conduct scientific research on topics deemed taboo by Islamists and traditionalists.

In an article entitled, “Inquisition Trial in Egypt,” Abu Zayd wrote that the ruling “provided religious and terrorist groups with a legal mechanism to practise terrorism through the court system and combat the principles of human rights, particularly, the rights to freedom of thought, freedom of expression and freedom of religion as well as the right to marry and found a family.”⁸⁵ In another interview he asserted that “silencing is at the heart of my case.”⁸⁶ Abu Zayd pointed out that laws justified in the name of punishing blasphemy and apostasy “act as a severe constraint upon the use of reason to explore and understand the contemporary significance of the Qur’an’s profound message.” He argued that such laws forcefully silence critical inquiry in the important realm of religion. Furthermore, the death penalty for apostasy is not derived from the

⁸³ Najjar, "Islamic Fundamentalism and the Intellectuals," 195.

⁸⁴ Abu Zayd, *Al-Tafkir fi Zaman al-Takfir*.

⁸⁵ Abu Zayd, "Inquisition Trial in Egypt," 53.

⁸⁶ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Ayman Bakr, and Elliott Colla, "Silencing is at the Heart of My Case," *Middle East Report* (1993): 29.

Qur'an. Rather, his own view was that numerous verses stress the importance of freedom of conscious. The punishment for apostasy is a product of historical developments, "hence their complete inappropriateness within a modern context."⁸⁷

The issue of using apostasy accusations to silence Muslim modernist intellectuals is addressed in Marshall and Shea's volume, *Silenced*, which features Abu Zayd as well as many other intellectuals who suffered from this limitation to freedom of thought and expression.⁸⁸ Talal Asad puts Abu Zayd's case in a wider global context, pointing out that, far from being strictly Islamic, "Blasphemy—a sinful act that is liable to worldly punishment—has a long history in Christianity." Contemporary secular laws in Europe arose out of the realization that "scholarly debate and discussion needed protection, even if they appeared to be 'irreligious.'" However, he points out, it took the persecution of countless intellectuals in Europe for the legal system to arrive at this conclusion.⁸⁹ What is happening to Muslim academics and intellectuals, therefore, may be seen as part of an evolution that other traditions and cultures have gone through to arrive at a more tolerant environment. Muhammad Hirsh noted another important issue in this debate. Hirsh argued that the apostasy accusations affected Abu Zayd's writing as he was aware that people believed the court's judgment.⁹⁰ Indeed, Abu Zayd expressed the concern that his readers, as they read his books, will be looking for any proof for his apostasy.⁹¹ He saw the law suit as a proof of the hostility intellectuals such as himself face in their attempts

⁸⁷ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, "Renewing Qur'anic Studies in the Contemporary World," in *Silenced* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 293-4.

⁸⁸ Paul Marshall and Nina Shea, *Silenced* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011).

⁸⁹ Talal Asad, "Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism," in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley: University of California 2009), 34-5.

⁹⁰ Muhammad Hirsh, "*Al-Qira'a al-Naqdiyya li al-Turath wa 'A'iq al-Tafkir: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd Namuthajan*," [Critical Reading of the Heritage and the Obstacle of Apostacy: The Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd] *Insaniyat Revue algérienne d'anthropologie et de sciences sociales*, no. 31 (2006): 20.

⁹¹ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir al-Khawf*, 5-7.

to modernize Islamic thought.

As for publications written to refute Abu Zayd's arguments, they share the conviction that the purpose of his thought was primarily to attack and weaken Islam. Many of his critics view him as relying excessively on reason and dismissing non-rational sources of knowledge. This approach, they believe, should place Abu Zayd outside theological debates.⁹² For example, in his book entitled, *Qissat Abu Zayd wa Inhisar al-'Ilmaniyya fi Jami'at al-Qahira* [The story of Abu Zayd and decline of secularism at Cairo University], Shahin accused Abu Zayd of advocating the rejection of the Qur'an and *sunna*, in favour of rationalism and reason.⁹³ Shahin argued that Abu Zayd's teachings are equivalent to "cultural AIDS, diluting the brains of students and destroying their immune system." He accused Abu Zayd of being a "secular Marxist working to corrupt the Muslim Egyptian society," warning that Abu Zayd is not alone but is "part of a group which practises intellectual terrorism for the purpose of subduing all the cultural institutions to its authority."⁹⁴ Shahin accused Abu Zayd of being a soldier of Marxism, an ideology that he claims is a sworn enemy to Islam. Equating Marxism with atheism, he wrote that "Islam was the sole power behind the fall of Marxism as a thought and regime," meaning the fall of the Soviet Union via Afghanistan.⁹⁵

Shahin was Abu Zayd's main critic; but he also enlisted the testimony of various religious intellectuals who shared his opinion that Abu Zayd and his work constituted an attack on Islam itself. For example, Shahin published the testimony of Muhammad Baltaji, Dean of the Faculty of Dar al-'Ulum, who posed the question, "Should Abu

⁹² Hirsh, "Al-Qira'a al-Naqdiyya," 20.

⁹³ 'Abd al-Sabur Shahin, *Qissat Abu Zayd wa Inhisar al-'Ilmaniyya fi Jami'at al-Qahira* [The Story of Abu Zayd and the Regression of Secularism at Cairo University] (Al-Ihsa': Dar al-Ma'alim al-Thaqafiyya), 13.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

Zayd's rejection of the Qur'an and *sunna* be considered freedom of thought?"⁹⁶ (Abu Zayd wrote two books in response, also enclosed with testimonies of like-minded intellectuals, significantly surpassing in number those enlisted in Shahin's.⁹⁷) Another critique of Abu Zayd's thought is that of self-professed Salafi writer Sayyid bin Hussein al-'Affani who published two volumes in which he labelled Abu Zayd, other modernists as well as Islamic reformists of the *nahda* era as "progressive terrorists and enemies of Islam" who attack religion, God and Islamic knowledge.⁹⁸

A less inflammatory criticism was published by Muhammad Salim Abu 'Asi in his *Maqalatan fi al-Ta'wil* (Two essays in interpretation). Abu 'Asi describes Abu Zayd's theory of interpretation as "Western and modern," pointing out that according to Abu Zayd's theory, interpretations change depending on the interpreter and the time of interpretation. The major issue Abu 'Asi has with this theory is that it negates the solid foundation of the sacred text and its literal interpretation.⁹⁹ What Abu 'Asi considers disconcerting is that scholars such as Abu Zayd "want to make interpretations of the text a never ending process because interpretations are reproduced in different ages, which makes the sacred text subject to endless readings, rather than having a fixed meaning." Abu 'Asi wrote that engendering such "false delusional interpretations" is a consequence of the work of the *nahda* reformists such as 'Abduh, who introduced such foreign ideas.¹⁰⁰ However, Abu 'Asi's claim to the existence of a fixed reading of the Qur'an has no historical basis; diversity of interpretations has been the norm in Islamic history.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁹⁷ Abu Zayd, *Al-Qawl al-Mufid fi Qadiyyat Abu Zayd.*, and Abu Zayd, *Al-Tafkir fi Zaman al-Takfir.*

⁹⁸ 'Affani, *'A'lam wa 'Aqzam fi Mizan al-Islam* 1, 5.

⁹⁹ Muhammad Salim Abu 'Asi, *Maqalatan fi al-Ta'wil* [Two Essays in Interpretation] (Al-Shariqa: Dar al-Farabi, 2010), 58-60.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 60.

Muhammad Jalal Kushk's book, *Qira'a fi fikr al-Taba'iyya* (A reading in the thought of subordination), takes on not only Abu Zayd's writings but those of three other modernists scholars: Ali Abd al-Raziq, Salama Musa, and Al-'Ashmawi. Kushk charged these scholars with subordination to the West. 'Abd al-Sabur Shahin, who wrote the book's introduction, called it a "rare contribution to critical contemporary Islamic thought." Shahin described Abu Zayd and the other three modernist thinkers featured in the book as "enemies of Islam." He argued that "even though they deceitfully claim to be within the faith, deep down, they refuse Islam and strive to destroy it from within. They believe in and submit only to the devil."¹⁰¹

Kushk also claimed that Abu Zayd resented the fact that the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic.¹⁰² He explained Abu Zayd's supposed hostility to Arabs by stating that "this herd of Communists holds enmity to all that is Arab. They wish they could uproot Arabism from its root so that all that remains under its sky is what is Hebrew."¹⁰³ This charge, of course, ignores Abu Zayd's call for an increase in knowledge of Arabic in its historic context so that the sacred messages encrypted in the Qur'an can be discerned for future generations.

Muhammad 'Imara also wrote on Abu Zayd's case, placing him squarely in the Marxist Communist camp. However, 'Imara disagreed with the legal action against Abu Zayd stating, "We have to fight disbelief [*kufir*], deviation and hypocrisy with the weapon of words and evidence and not by censoring thought."¹⁰⁴ That said, 'Imara still believed

¹⁰¹ Kushk, *Qira'a fi Fikr al-Taba'iyya*, 3.

¹⁰² Ibid., 203-4.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 213.

¹⁰⁴ Muhammad 'Imara, *Al-Tafsir al-Marksi li al-Islam* [The Marxist Interpretation of the Qur'an] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1996), 10.

that Abu Zayd's writings questioned the sacred and immutable foundations of Islam.¹⁰⁵

'Imara's book, as well as the other conservative books written to refute Abu Zayd's argument, share an understanding of Abu Zayd as belonging to a current of thought that they argue is mistakenly labelled as "enlightened thought" (*fikr tanwiri*), when, according to them, this thought aims at weakening Islam, not engendering an enlightenment. These authors also unite in their attack of the Islamic reformists of the *nahda* era, seeing them as the founding fathers of modernist thought. The majority of the content of such publications is not academic but rather loaded with accusations of atheism and conspiracy theories, misreading or misinterpreting the ideas of modernists such as Abu Zayd. Furthermore, these books share refusal of the notion that Western sciences, such as hermeneutics, should have a place in Islamic thought. The Qur'an and the Islamic heritage are believed to be superior to anything Westerners could produce.

The critique is two-sided, however, and both modernists and their adversaries adopt aggressive, sometimes even hostile, attitudes towards one another. For example, while Islamists and traditionalists accused Abu Zayd of being outside the faith, modernists like Abu Zayd perpetuate a generalization of Islamists and traditionalists as the cause of backwardness in the Arab world. Modernists also question the faith of Islamists and traditionalists, charging them with exploiting Islam for political purposes. As a result of these trends, the debate between modernists and conservatives remains limited and mainly inflammatory.

While the legal and methodological aspects of Abu Zayd's work are significant, what is missing from academic publications is a better understanding of his core ideas regarding the place of *shari'a* in the public sphere, the heritage, history, governance and

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 33.

the issue of women's rights in contemporary Arab societies. These issues have occupied Arab intellectuals and theologians since the first encounter with modernity. They continue to be points of contention in large part because the contributions of modernist scholars such as Abu Zayd are yet to be integrated in a candid and open intellectual debate. This thesis provides an in-depth analysis of Abu Zayd's arguments, both their strengths and weaknesses.

Abu Zayd and his adversaries form a part of the field of contemporary Islamic thought, in which they compete and argue for the legitimacy of their ideas. But just what that *field* comprises requires some unpacking. By field, then, I intend Bourdieu's concept of field, which sheds light on what was at stake for these thinkers, and helps makes sense of the methods that each party used to accomplish its end.¹⁰⁶ Within a field, Bourdieu argued, a struggle exists to gain symbolic capital, or legitimacy, and consequently dominance. The field also has adherents to or champions of orthodoxy and their challengers, whom Bourdieu called "heretics" or "heterodox." The struggle for symbolic capital between the orthodox and the heretics takes place within certain rules imposed by the field. These rules are recognized by all players, regardless of their position either as an orthodox or heterodox. As in a game, participants can be on opposite sides but part of the same game adhering to certain common rules. Their very participation in this game is a testament of its legitimacy and validity.¹⁰⁷ The overall relevance of this dissertation extends beyond both intellectual history and textual analysis to examining Abu Zayd as a

¹⁰⁶ Bourdieu's definition of a field is "a network, or a configuration, or objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.). Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 97.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

representative for a trend of thought that is competing for place not only in the field of Islamic thought, but also in the larger political and social context of the Arab Muslim World.

The Structure of the Thesis

Chapter One gives an historical overview of Abu Zayd's background, his education, and intellectual influences. It also provides definitions of terms he used in a specific manner to denote a particular meaning. His technical terms include, for example, "modernity" and "religious discourse."

Chapter Two examines Abu Zayd's view of *shari'a* and the status of the Qur'an. Abu Zayd argued against the sacred status given to the large, mainly man-made body of Islamic literature that accumulated over the centuries to form what is known today as *shari'a*. His critique was directed at the religious establishment for supporting authoritarian rule and at Islamists whom he accused of striving to establish *hakimiyya*, supposedly the rule of God using *shari'a*, rather than man-made systems such as democracy. He argued that *hakimiyya* is as also man-made; it is the tyrannical rule of men who claim to speak on God's behalf. Abu Zayd insisted that theologians who seek dominance and hegemony use religion to propagate notions such as *hakimiyya*, which falsely gives the impression of a divine, infallible style of governance.¹⁰⁸ Dismissing classical theology in favour of a modern interpretation of the Qur'an, Abu Zayd insisted that the ambiguity of the Qur'an and the multiplicity of readings it offers are the reasons why it speaks to different people at different times - hence its professed universality. This

¹⁰⁸ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 75.

chapter argues that one of the challenges of arriving at a balanced view of *shari'a* is the polarization of views between Abu Zayd, who discredits a significant historical body of literature, and those who idolize it, refusing any questioning of its accuracy.

Chapter Three presents Abu Zayd's argument for a separation between religion and state. Governance in the Arab world has undergone tumultuous developments. Abu Zayd accused Islamists of perpetuating the notion that an Islamic form of government would solve many of the challenges the Arab world is facing. However, such an argument presumes the existence of a clear definition of what that entails. Abu Zayd challenged this notion by arguing that Islam, opposing any religious institutions or states that come between man and God, is a secular religion by its very nature. He insisted that any attempt to impose a single interpretation of Islam would lead to the same religious tyranny, equivalent to the one practised by the Church in medieval times.¹⁰⁹ Abu Zayd reminded his readers that no consensus on a single interpretation was ever achieved, even among the Prophet's companions, who not only knew the Prophet but also periodically debated him on various issues. Therefore, the only kind of government that would allow for this diversity to exist is one that does not interfere in people's faith or imposes its own single and subjective reading. Abu Zayd believed that self-serving theologians are to blame for the spreading the notion that Islamic governance is even possible.

Chapter Four examines Abu Zayd's critique of the Arab Islamic heritage as constructed by the Islamic reformists during the *nahda* period. These reformists were the first to carry out this task in modern times, drawing on certain episodes from the past to justify transition into modernity. In the process, however, according to Abu Zayd, they furthered a particular historical narrative in Arab consciousness that has proven persistent

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 30-1.

despite being inaccurate.

Chapter Five presents Abu Zayd's reading of history. He argued that reform in Islamic thought and Arab societies at large cannot be accomplished without first producing an objective and inclusive narrative of history, replacing the inaccurate and mostly incomplete accounts that were produced in reaction to the first encounter with Western modernity. However, to replace one narration of history with another, even if objective and scientific, threatens the existing one on which Arab Muslim identity is constructed; hence Abu Zayd's adversaries' charge that he was attempting to weaken the foundation of Arab Muslim identity. This chapter will show how Abu Zayd built his argument for the excavation of history and why he believed this new sense of history to be a prerequisite to progress.

Chapter Six addresses the issue of women's rights as a case study for a modern interpretation that challenges the Qur'an's unambiguously patriarchal stance. Abu Zayd, like other modernists, read modernity into the text and saw a path set forth by the Qur'an towards complete equality between men and women. At the same time, consistent with his call for separation between the public sphere and religion, Abu Zayd argued that reality and current circumstances should dictate how men and women are treated, rather than relying on ancient texts revealed in a specific time, place and culture. Abu Zayd challenged the existing social order, justified and reproduced in large part by the religious establishment and the dominant political class. More than any other issue, women's rights, or lack thereof, embodies the challenges modernists face in their attempt to institute reform.

In all of these issues, Abu Zayd challenged traditional and Islamist readings of

Islamic thought. He presented his own understanding as a viable alternative. While his contribution, as he professed, is about modernizing Islamic thought, his ideas offer a more radical restructuring not only of Islamic thought but of the Arab Muslim identity, history, heritage, political system, and social structure.

I conduct my analysis of Abu Zayd's ideas primarily through critical textual analysis of his books and articles, written mainly in Arabic. I analyse his texts to explain how Abu Zayd built his ideas and made his arguments on the various aforementioned issues. While persistently advocating and claiming objectivity, Abu Zayd was nevertheless a product of his own time and place. Consequently, I contextualize his thought by situating him both within his modernist intellectual family and in opposition to his critics. Therefore, my primary sources also include his contemporaries, such as George Tarabishi, Muhammad Shahrur and Muhammad Talbi, as well as the conservative theologians he criticized, such as the popular Egyptian theologian Muhammad al-Ghazali.

Abu Zayd and other participants in the field of modern Islamic thought recognized the stakes involved in speaking in Islam's name. Abu Zayd posed as a challenger, or a heretic, against what he referred to as the "religious discourse," arguing for new methods of interpreting the Qur'an, history and the heritage. A self-declared Muslim, he never denied the legitimacy of Islam as a religion. However, like his adversaries did to him, he questioned the faith of the partisans of the religious discourse and their understanding of Islam. The polemics of who has more legitimacy to speak in Islam's name represents a critical challenge to significant reform and genuine debate in the field. At stake are not only ideas, their origins and methods, but also the motivation

and faith of their producers. In this intellectual struggle the Qur'an, medieval interpretations, history, and modernity are drawn upon to make or refute arguments.

CHAPTER ONE: ABU ZAYD'S INTELLECTUAL INFLUENCES AND DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Abu Zayd was born and raised in the Egyptian village of Quhafa in the Nile Delta area near the town of Tanta.¹¹⁰ As he recalled in his autobiography, he came from a humble family. His father started his adult life as a farmer but soon after sold his land and became a grocer.¹¹¹ He had never enjoyed good health and died when Abu Zayd was only fifteen years old.¹¹² His mother, according to Abu Zayd, came from a family that enjoyed deep roots in the village. Speaking fondly of his village, Abu Zayd wrote that it “always seemed to me like one huge family. Everybody knew everybody else—as well as their business.”¹¹³

As a child, he attended traditional Islamic schooling and, “a devout student,” memorized the Qur’an verbatim by the age of eight.¹¹⁴ His father’s aspiration was that Abu Zayd would grow up to follow in the footsteps of the great Egyptian religious reformer Muhammad ‘Abduh. Abu Zayd, however, was more fascinated with ‘Abduh’s disciple, Taha Husayn.¹¹⁵ That ‘Abduh and his disciple’s works reached Abu Zayd and his father in their remote village speaks of the *nahda* scholars’ impact. This influence would continue to exert itself in Abu Zayd’s writings throughout his academic career.

¹¹⁰ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 17.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 21-5.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹¹⁴ Kermani, "From Revelation to Interpretation," 169-70.

¹¹⁵ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 31.

The death of Abu Zayd's father interrupted his plans to attend university. Though barely fifteen years old, as the eldest male, Abu Zayd had to assume the role of a father figure. He was forced to shift his studies to a technical degree, which required less time and thus enabled him to start supporting his family sooner.¹¹⁶ However, he never lost sight of his ultimate goal of emulating Taha Husayn. While working as an electrical technician, Abu Zayd enrolled in university part-time, eventually earning a bachelor's degree in Arabic language and literature from Cairo University in 1972.¹¹⁷ Speaking of the effect of his early challenges on his future research, Abu Zayd wrote:

Through the often painful and always difficult process of caring and providing for my family, I became sensitive to the suffering that people endure as a result of social injustice. When I began my career as a scholar in Islamic Studies, academic research to me was neither an abstract concept nor just an interesting career choice. My academic research came to life as a result of my own experiences. My passion for social justice did not come out of the blue. I was looking for answers to questions—questions that sprang initially from the difficulties I experienced while trying to make ends meet for my family. At first, concern didn't go beyond the boundaries of my own family. That concern gradually stretched to Egypt, then to the Arab and Muslim world, and as I immersed myself in reading and research, my concern broadened to include the whole world.¹¹⁸

After taking his B.A., Abu Zayd had originally intended to study literary criticism. However, as he explained, the department of Arabic persuaded him to focus instead on Qur'anic and *hadith* studies in order to fill a departmental need.¹¹⁹ It was by no means clear that this was a safe option; the department had a questionable reputation vis-à-vis scholars who dealt with issues pertaining to religion. He recalled that at least one graduate student, Muhammad Ahmed Khalafallah (1916-1998), had been “dismissed on

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 25.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 31.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 26.

¹¹⁹ Abu Zayd, Bakr, and Colla, "Silencing is at the Heart of My Case," 27.

account of his dissertation” as he researched stories in the Qur’an using literary criticism.¹²⁰

Khalafallah was supervised by another intellectual influence on Abu Zayd: Amin al-Khuli (1895-1966). Abu Zayd considered al-Khuli to be his ‘grandfather,’¹²¹ and Sukidi agreed, calling Abu Zayd an “heir to the intellectual tradition” of al-Khuli, given their methodological similarities.¹²² Much as Abu Zayd would argue a generation later, Al-Khuli believed that interpreting the Qur’an must start by examining the sacred text as a literary text.¹²³ According to the doctoral thesis of Yusuf Rahman, al-Khuli was the first Muslim scholar in the twentieth century to introduce and develop theories of hermeneutics, textual and literary analysis to the study of the sacred text.¹²⁴ In Abu Zayd’s analysis, al-Khuli’s work represented not an innovation but the fulfilment of work begun by Abu Zayd’s intellectual role models. In his description, “Al-Khuli has developed a literary approach to the study of the Qur’an—a direction begun by Muhammad ‘Abduh and followed by Taha Husayn.” His work and reputation, however, were insufficient to protect him from disciplinary action on the grounds of his student’s work. When word of Khalafallah’s dissertation, which al-Khuli had supervised, reached al-Azhar, the university’s authorities decided that al-Khuli’s scholarship “casts doubts on the authenticity and divinity of Islam’s sacred text,” and he was banned from teaching Islamic Studies any further.¹²⁵

Many years later, in the introduction to the fourth edition of Khalafallah’s book,

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 53.

¹²² Sukidi, "Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the Quest for a Humanistic Hermeneutics of the Qur'an," 209.

¹²³ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 53.

¹²⁴ Rahman, "The Hermeneutical Theory of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: An Analytical Study of His Method of Interpreting the Qur'an."

¹²⁵ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 53.

which was based on his original thesis, the Egyptian intellectual Khalil ‘Abd al-Karim gave a wider perspective on the challenges that Khalafallah and his supervisor faced. He pointed out that throughout history, “advocates of renewal, enlightenment, and reason paid a heavy price in their freedoms and in their sources of livelihood.”¹²⁶ From the perspective of many modernists, including Abu Zayd and ‘Abd al-Karim, there is a struggle between those who try to modernize religion, Islam in this case, and those who want to prevent any change to the entrenched religious traditions. ‘Abd al-Kharim noted the role of al-Azhar scholars in al-Khuli’s case, writing that “the ‘*ulama*’ front stands firm against any enlightened thinkers, branding each one of them with disbelief, apostasy and excommunicating them from the faith.”¹²⁷ Keenly interested in Khallafallah’s case, Abu Zayd inquired about his fate and “discovered that Khalafallah wrote another thesis three months after his original one had been rejected—something trivial—just to get his degree.”¹²⁸ Abu Zayd’s description of the second thesis as “trivial” indicates the standards that both Abu Zayd and Khalafallah believed to be acceptable to the religious establishment.

Ultimately, the religious establishment protested the scholarship of all of al-Khuli’s disciples, including Taha Husayn’s. In his book, *Fi al-Shi’r al-Jahili* (On Pre-Islamic Poetry), Husayn argued that an examination of the language of the so-called *jahiliyya* poetry would show that much of it was actually written after Islam. Such an argument changes the image that the religious establishment projects of Islam and the early Muslim communities. Husayn also contended that many of the stories mentioned in

¹²⁶ Muhammad Ahmed Khalafallah, *Al-Fann al-Qasasi fi al-Qur'an al-Karim* [Stoytelling in the Holy Qur'an] (Beirut: Sina, 199), 8.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹²⁸ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 53.

the Qur'an are not historically factual but are instead stories that were circulated in seventh century Arabia. In his view, the Qu'ran adopted these stories so as to offer familiar examples and words of wisdom.¹²⁹ As a result of the outcry against Husayn's book, he had to rewrite it, taking out the controversial content and republishing it under the different name of *Fi al-Adab al-Jahili* (On Pre-Islamic Literature).¹³⁰

As is often the case, the religious establishment did not act independently of the political power. Abu Zayd noted that the revolution of the Free Officers forced many professors out of their posts, including al-Khuli and Taha Husayn, as the officers wanted to "remove corruption from Egyptian society and to cleanse the universities."¹³¹ Khalafallah himself saw the case as being "driven by politics, not based on either scientific or religious foundations"¹³² Despite this recognition of the important role of the ruling political class, modernists often place the blame for the current state of affairs in the Arab world primarily on the religious institutions and theologians who enact the regime's oppressive standards. The Egyptian intellectual Jabir 'Asfur, who himself headed the Arabic department at Cairo University for a few years, wrote that in total, Abu Zayd's department dismissed five professors for daring to conduct independent research that questioned traditional readings of Islam or offered new perspectives that did not meet the establishment's approval.¹³³

Given this background, Abu Zayd was reluctant to accept the department's suggestion to shift to Islamic studies. The goal for the department was that Abu Zayd would eventually fill the chair of Islamic Studies, which had been vacant since al-Khuli's

¹²⁹ Taha Husayn, *Fi al-Shi'r al-Jahili* [On Pre-Islamic Poetry] (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Masriyya, 1926).

¹³⁰ Taha Husayn, *Fi al-'Adab al-Jahili* [On Pre-Islamic Literature] (Cairo: Matba'at Faruq, 1933).

¹³¹ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 53.

¹³² Khalafallah, *Al-Fann al-Qasasi*, 18.

¹³³ Jabir 'Asfur, "Al-Dalala al-Thaqafiyya li Mihnata Nasr Abu Zayd," *Al-Hayat*, August 11 2010, 15.

forced retirement, decades earlier.¹³⁴ However, the department, Abu Zayd wrote, “exerted considerable pressure on me, insisting that the newly appointed assistant lecturer should be an Islamic Studies scholar.” Upon raising his concerns regarding the history of his predecessors, Abu Zayd was told that he would be safe from the same challenges, as long as he did not contribute something new, or attempt to apply scientific methods and critical inquiry to Islam.¹³⁵ The unspoken rule in the field, Abu Zayd wrote, was “if you work within the field of Islamic Studies, the assumption is that you will discover no new knowledge.” From the establishment’s perspective, everything pertaining to Islamic knowledge has already been discovered.¹³⁶ This conviction not only ruled out any possibility of contributing new knowledge to the field but also held as heretics those who try.

Abu Zayd succumbed to his department’s pressure to focus on Islamic Studies. The topics of Abu Zayd’s master’s and doctoral theses were based on two traditions in the Islamic heritage that are steeped in spirituality and reason. His master’s thesis was written on the medieval rational Mu‘tazilites’ reading of the Qur’an. The Mu‘tazilites, Abu Zayd pointed out, “were heavily influenced by Greek philosophy and logic, and therefore applied rational methods of investigation when interpreting the Qur’an.” Since God created man with the ability to reason, it is only expected that man use logic to further his knowledge of God.¹³⁷ The admiration Abu Zayd had for the Mu‘tazilites is rather exceptional for him, given his otherwise dismissive attitude towards classical theology.

¹³⁴ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 55.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 54-5.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

Abu Zayd wrote that studying the Mu‘tazilites taught him, among other things, “that interpretation of religious texts in the Qur’an has always been an integral part of the cognitive framework in Arabo-Islamic consciousness. Any intellectual concept had to find its legitimacy by virtue of not contradicting the Qur’an.”¹³⁸ Interpretations and counter-interpretations are therefore part of the sociopolitical history of Islam. Significantly, Abu Zayd made a distinction between the text and the commentator on the text, diverting from the presupposition that “whatever the commentator said about the text was really only a restatement of what the text said.”¹³⁹ This is in line with many modernists’ approach to the sacred text, going directly to the source.

After receiving his master’s degree in 1976,¹⁴⁰ Abu Zayd moved on to his doctorate, choosing the Sufi mystic Ibn ‘Arabi for his dissertation. Abu Zayd wrote that Ibn ‘Arabi “wanted to bring modernity (current knowledge) to bear on the Qur’an. He believed that Islamic thought should be flexible enough to absorb all of his society under Islam’s umbrella.”¹⁴¹ This description of Ibn ‘Arabi reflects more accurately Abu Zayd’s own perspective, especially pertaining to modernity and current knowledge. In drawing on Ibn ‘Arabi and the Mu‘tazilites, Abu Zayd is appropriating a past model, despite his critical stance of those who do so.

Abu Zayd’s projection of modernity on a medieval mystic who could not have known about modernity, maybe motivated by the fact that Abu Zayd saw himself as resembling Ibn ‘Arabi in being controversial and unpopular among traditionalists and Islamists. The enmity towards Ibn ‘Arabi was so strong that in 1979, the Academy of

¹³⁸ Abu Zayd, Bakr, and Colla, "Silencing is at the Heart of My Case," 27.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 28.

¹⁴⁰ Kermani, "From Revelation to Interpretation," 170.

¹⁴¹ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 58.

Islamic Research (*mujama' al-buhuth al-Islamiya*) of al-Azhar aided by the People's Assembly passed a ban not only on Ibn 'Arabi's books but also a ban on books written about him, presumable only favourable ones, because they believed Ibn 'Arabi's thought to "confuse Muslims" and spread extremism (*tatarruf*).¹⁴² Modernists, however, clearly see in Ibn 'Arabi's thoughts elements that can be used to bring Islam into modernity, which could explain resistance traditionalists have towards his thought.

Abu Zayd completed his doctoral degree in 1981.¹⁴³ His academic writings reflected these two Islamic trends, the rational and the mystical. In fact, Shahin made this very point in his report against Abu Zayd's promotion.¹⁴⁴ The historical tension between the various readings of Islam seem never to have ceased, which is part of the reason for focusing on Abu Zayd, as it permits an exploration of these same tensions in contemporary Arab thought.

Examining Abu Zayd's reflections on his early years, it appears that he was always a critical thinker. For example, even as a young boy he was interested by the influence of the political environment of a particular time in shaping the dominant interpretation of Islam. He noted how Islam was used in the fifties and sixties to support and justify the Arab nationalist and socialist movements, only for the state to shift its ideological stance to propagate "the claim that Islam teaches socialism."¹⁴⁵ When Israel defeated the Arab armies in 1967, Islam was once again a readily available tool used to justify and explain the outcome of the war.¹⁴⁶ What Abu Zayd meant was that many saw

¹⁴² Emil Homerin, "Ibn Arabi in the People's Assembly: Religion, Press, and Politics in Sadat's Egypt," *The Middle East Journal* (1986): 462-3.

¹⁴³ Kermani, "From Revelation to Interpretation," 170.

¹⁴⁴ Shahin, *Qissat Abu Zayd wa Inhisar al-'Ilmaniyya fi Jami'at al-Qahira* 32.

¹⁴⁵ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 67.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 76-7.

the defeat as resulting from lack of adherence to Islam.

When Sadat came to power, exploitation of Islam continued in another form. Abu Zayd wrote that “during the 1970’s, Sadat’s regime released Muslim Brothers from prison to offset the [influence of the] left in the universities and outside.” As a result, he argued, the Muslim Brotherhood became more aggressive, and militant Islamist groups became active.¹⁴⁷ When Sadat wanted to conclude a peace treaty with Israel, he changed the constitution to appease the Islamists.¹⁴⁸ Sadat’s constitutional changes would later be used to try Abu Zayd for heresy. Many intellectuals believe Sadat’s actions to have emboldened Islamists, leading to what one Egyptian intellectual, Jabir ‘Asfur, describes as “religious terrorism” against liberal intellectuals.¹⁴⁹

As far as his academic background is concerned, two other experiences were also formative for Abu Zayd’s academic work. The first was his period of study, supported by a scholarship, at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia from 1978 to 1980.¹⁵⁰ The second was from 1985 to 1989 when he went to the University of Osaka in Japan as a visiting lecturer.¹⁵¹ Speaking of his American experience, Abu Zayd wrote that it was during these two years that he began studying hermeneutics, as well as philosophy of religion as it applies to Christianity and Judaism and the reformations that both faiths underwent to integrate modernity. Speaking of his experience, Abu Zayd wrote, “My academic experience in the States turned out to be quite fruitful.”¹⁵² This introduction to the reformation and hermeneutics gave Abu Zayd the tools to apply the same theories to

¹⁴⁷ Abu Zayd, Bakr, and Colla, "Silencing is at the Heart of My Case," 28.

¹⁴⁸ 'Asfur, "Al-Dalala al-Thaqafiyya," 15.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 85.

¹⁵¹ Kermani, "From Revelation to Interpretation," 170.

¹⁵² Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 95.

the Qur'an, making a substantial contribution to the field of Islamic Studies.¹⁵³

In Japan, Abu Zayd experienced for the first time a culture of spirituality that had no sacred book or scripture, which gave him a new perspective on sacred texts. He went so far as to attribute Japan's success to this lack of a sacred text. He wrote, "The Japanese do not struggle between tradition and modernity in the same way as people who claim a religion with a revealed text. No perceptible tension exists between tradition and modernity in Japan. At home, tradition reigns." By contrast, he noted, "In the university setting, I could hardly find an indication that I was in Japan. Technology and all the up-to-date amenities surrounded me."¹⁵⁴ Abu Zayd aspired for such separation between tradition, the Islamic heritage in the context of Egypt, and the public sphere. These experiences and encounters with other cultures and faiths vastly different from his own gave Abu Zayd a perspective, which he may have never had otherwise. It is also likely that these experiences account, in part, for his humanistic approach. While Abu Zayd's polemic style could be motivated by his desire to establish his thought in the field, these trips may have also played a role in empowering him to voice his dissent against traditionalist and Islamist readings of Islam.

Defining Terms

Throughout his work, Abu Zayd consistently used certain terms that carried precise meanings unique to him, at times neglecting the historical definition and context. Most of these terms are defined in the chapters in which they are introduced. However, the terms listed below are used in all contexts of Abu Zayd's work and defining them

¹⁵³ Kermani, "From Revelation to Interpretation," 180-1.

¹⁵⁴ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 108.

here would better illuminate his ideas.

The Religious Discourse

Understanding the meaning of Abu Zayd's term the "religious discourse" (*al-khitab al-dini*) is critical to understanding his work, given that attacking that discourse dominates his work. As Abu Zayd employed it, the term "religious discourse" is rather derogatory, intended to question the authority and legitimacy of those who adhered to it.¹⁵⁵ Abu Zayd's religious discourse included a wide spectrum of individuals and institutions with a conservative outlook on Islam and the Islamic heritage. The main two categories, however, that Abu Zayd targeted within this discourse are traditionalists and Islamists.

The individuals and institutions that Abu Zayd included in this term not only vary drastically in their readings of Islam but that are also, at times, hostile to one another. His religious discourse includes, for example, violent extremists as well members of the religious establishment, two groups that oppose one another fundamentally. Many members of the religious establishment preach against violent Islamists while, as members of co-opted institutions they play a role in legitimizing authoritarian regimes that Islamists dedicate their lives to fighting. In some sense, then, the two groups are linked – one provides fuel for the other's fire. However, as far as Abu Zayd is concerned, these groups differ only "in degree and not in kind."¹⁵⁶ As Kassab points out, "whether designated 'extremist' or 'moderate,' members of both groups belong to the same 'religious discourse,' which is characterized by mechanisms and postulates." Essentially,

¹⁵⁵ Hirsh, "Al-Qira'a al-Naqdiyya," 23.

¹⁵⁶ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 13.

for Abu Zayd, both groups use religion for their own interests.¹⁵⁷ Abu Zayd justified their inclusion under one umbrella by arguing that they share the same ideological infrastructure and mechanisms of thought. He dissected this infrastructure in his book *Naqd al-Khitab al-Dini* (Critique of the Religious Discourse), identifying five major postulates they share.¹⁵⁸

The first of these postulates is the confusion of religious thought, including the contributions of certain historical figures, with Islam itself. Abu Zayd argued that conflating the two make it difficult for contemporary scholars to question established historical readings.¹⁵⁹ This assessment, however, may have been influenced in part by Abu Zayd's lack of reverence for most classical theologians and their work. Like other modernists, Abu Zayd, dismissed the interpretations of the earlier generations of theologians, arguing that the Qur'an can be interpreted independently of their commentary. For him, "religion consists of sacred historically fixed Texts. All else is religious thought based on human scholarship in their attempt to understand these Texts and realize their significance."¹⁶⁰ Like other modernists, he emphasized the personal and direct relationship between man and Text.¹⁶¹ Consequently, as Nettler points out, "There may be as many Islams here as there are Muslims." As a result, "The notion of authoritative person and institutions become meaningless."¹⁶² That the Qur'an can be read and understood without explanatory commentary, however, is a modernist notion, one that is impractical in practice. Given the evolution in language since the time of the

¹⁵⁷ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 188.

¹⁵⁸ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 13-114.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 29-33.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁶¹ Mohamed Talbi and Muhammad Shahrur also make similar arguments.

¹⁶² Nettler, "Islam, Politics and Democracy: Mohamed Talbi and Islamic Modernism," 53.

revelation, the average Muslim would not be able to read and understand seventh-century Arabic without commentary, at least for some verses.

The second common identifying feature of the religious discourse is the reduction of all phenomena to a single cause: “God in Islam.”¹⁶³ Abu Zayd argued that this approach denies the agency of man and the rules of science and nature. From his perspective, the partisans of the religious discourse attribute to this single factor the reasons for all phenomena and all sources of knowledge, be they scientific or social.¹⁶⁴ It is in this aspect of his critique that one most clearly sees Abu Zayd’s belief that religion should be separate from the public sphere and from all other sciences. As far as he is concerned, sciences can thrive and knowledge be sought and found independently of religious belief.

The third postulate concerns revering the old over the new and current, granting it higher authority and legitimacy. For the past to be the point of reference, from Abu Zayd’s perspective, precludes progress and evolution not only in religious thought but also in all other aspects of life.¹⁶⁵ This critique reveals the value Abu Zayd himself placed on modernity over and above the past.

The fourth mechanism that unites partisans of the religious discourse is their intellectual certainty and claim to own the truth. As a result, Abu Zayd argued, they reject any disagreement with their opinions, which they have deemed facts. This, according to Abu Zayd, is evident in their mixing of religious thought with Islam itself. He acknowledged that they might allow trivial disagreements with their views but never on

¹⁶³ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 34.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 33-39.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 39-45.

fundamental issues.¹⁶⁶ Ironically, Abu Zayd himself exhibited the same type of intellectual certainty on many topics.

The fifth postulate of the religious discourse is ignoring the historical context of the sacred Text and religious thought. This lack of appreciation for evolution and history leads to continual efforts on the part of the partisans of the religious discourse to reconstruct the past in modern times.¹⁶⁷ Abu Zayd was averse to any attempt to remodel the present after the past. However, he himself, as this thesis will argue, practised this ahistorical approach when he expected medieval theologians, for example, to adhere to modern academic standards, irrespective of their own context in history. Therefore, while those who ascribe to the religious discourse are critical of the present for not being more like the past, Abu Zayd was critical of the past for not having had modernity's values.

Another mechanism for the religious discourse that Abu Zayd added in the second edition of *Critique of the Religious Discourse*, as Muhammad Hirsh points out, is the practice of *takfir*, or excommunication from the faith, which is mandated in extremist discourse and present, though latent, in the discourse of theologians described as moderates.¹⁶⁸ An example of the latter would be Muhammad al-Ghazali. Al-Ghazali, considered a moderate by many, declared the Egyptian intellectual Faraj Fuda an apostate for criticizing the religious discourse. Shortly after, an extremist shot and killed Fuda. Ghazali then testified in the trial that the extremist who killed Fuda was fulfilling his Islamic duty of killing an unbeliever. Fuda, who espoused similar views to Abu Zayd, was a self-declared Muslim, but for opposing the religious discourse, earned himself

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 46-54.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 54-61.

¹⁶⁸ Hirsh, "Al-Qira'a al-Naqdiyya," 9.

takfir status, which ultimately lead to his death.¹⁶⁹

Beyond Abu Zayd's five major postulates, adherents to the religious discourse are also united in their resistance to subjecting the Islamic heritage to modern standards of critical academic inquiry.¹⁷⁰ Therefore, from Abu Zayd's perspective, the term can refer to those who seek to maintain traditional theology passed down for centuries, resisting transformation of the field with new and modern knowledge. Najjar captured this notion, writing that intellectuals like Abu Zayd "seek to modernize Islam" while his opponents "seek to Islamize the modern age."¹⁷¹ It is important to note that theologians who belong to a traditional religious institution such as al-Azhar but who espouse progressive views and who challenge established narratives, such as 'Ali 'Abdulraziq, would not be part of Abu Zayd's religious discourse.

Abu Zayd did not acknowledge that he shared some views with some partisans of the religious discourse. For example, like Islamists, he was critical of the role of the official religious establishment. As Navid Kermani points out, he accused "prominent protagonists of this discourse of abusing religion for political power and, sometimes, financial gain."¹⁷² Elizabeth Kassab also notes that the union between the state and religious institutions transformed the role of the latter and led to deterioration in the quality of their work.¹⁷³ According to Abu Zayd, the stagnation inside official religious institutions has been reflected in the Muslim communities at large, not only in current times but also historically, going back to classical theologians who set the foundations for

¹⁶⁹ Jacob Hoigilt, *Islamist Rhetoric: Language and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Routledge, 2010), 34.

¹⁷⁰ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 10.

¹⁷¹ Najjar, "Islamic Fundamentalism and the Intellectuals," 177.

¹⁷² Kermani, "From Revelation to Interpretation," 184.

¹⁷³ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 181-2.

the Sunni tradition.¹⁷⁴ Co-opted conservative theologians justified authoritarianism “leading to a social and political collapse” which, from Abu Zayd’s perspective, lead to deterioration in knowledge and science.¹⁷⁵

Islamists are also critical of the official establishment and classical theology for similar reasons. For example, Islamist Egyptian intellectual Fahmi Huwaydi criticized them for supporting and justifying the authoritarian rule of Arab regimes, seeing them as a threat to Islam.¹⁷⁶ Nettler notes the differences between Islamists and modernists on this issue. He wrote:

While both Islamists and modernists usually abjure the authoritative monolithic authority (*taqlid*) of the schools of Islamic law and theology, Islamists seek a revision of this notion towards a new (their own) authoritative structure and the modernists reject any such formal collective authority, leaving it to the individual Muslim to make the ultimate decision.¹⁷⁷

Thus, in this competition for political power, official institutions work to justify their existing authority while Islamists strive to usurp it for themselves.

Despite the nuanced differences between the various groups and individuals lumped under the term religious discourse, Abu Zayd was not alone in treating them as a unified front against modernists. The Egyptian intellectual Isma‘il Husni, for example, referred to “the Islamic priesthood” (*‘al-kahanut al-Islami’*),¹⁷⁸ while the Syrian intellectual Sadiq al-Azm devoted an entire book to critiquing what he referred to as

¹⁷⁴ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta‘wil*, 129-30.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁷⁶ Huwaydi, *Al-Qur‘an wa al-Sultan*, 8.

¹⁷⁷ Nettler, "Islam, Politics and Democracy: Mohamed Talbi and Islamic Modernism," 53.

¹⁷⁸ Isma‘il Muhammad Husni, *‘Ilmaniyyat al-Islam wa al-Tatarruf al-Dini: Naqd Idiulugiyyat shumuliyyat al-Islam min Manzur al-Shari‘a wa al-Tarikh wa Qiam al-Hadatha* [The secularism of Islam and Religious Extremism: Critique of the Ideology of the Comprehensiveness of Islam from the Point of View of *Shari‘a*, History, and the Values of Modernity] (Cairo: Dar Misr al-Mahrusa, 2008).

“religious thought” (*al-fikr al-dini*).¹⁷⁹ Terms aside, modernists are often met with fierce, sometimes violent, opposition by the proponents of the religious discourse. Abu Samra named four major ways in which traditionalists and Islamists react to modernists: “polemics, censorship and banning of liberal texts, judicial prosecution and the issuing of *fatwas* of *takfir* (charges of apostasy) that in some cases legitimize the physical persecution of liberal critics.”¹⁸⁰ From the perspective of modernists, what supporters of the religious discourse are doing is essentially “waging wars against renewal, innovation and progress, in the name of religion.”¹⁸¹ Therefore, they see themselves as proponents of progress.

The tension between traditionalists, Islamists and modernists is one of the consequences of modernity, given the competition over who held exclusive rights to speak in Islam’s name. This is why, Taji-Farouki wrote, “Islamic thought in the twentieth century itself became a discourse of crisis.”¹⁸² Taji-Farouki argued that this strife embodies “a struggle to define the place of the sacred and that of human reason, and the role and implications of a commitment to transcendence.”¹⁸³ With each party committed to its views and ideas, the debate is not likely to abate in the near future.

When I use the term the “religious discourse,” I am using it in congruency with Abu Zayd’s definition. Individuals or institutions I include in the term are only individuals and institutions whom Abu Zayd himself classified as part of the religious discourse.

¹⁷⁹ Sadiq Jalal 'Azm, al, *Naqd al-Fikr al-Dini* [Critique of Religious Thought] (Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a li al-Tiba'a wa al-Nashr, 1997).

¹⁸⁰ Muhammad Abu Samra, "Liberal Critics, 'Ulama' and the Debate on Islam in the Contemporary Arab world," in *Guardians of Faith in Modern Times: 'Ulama' in the Middle East*, ed. Meir Hatina (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 267.

¹⁸¹ Husni, *Ilmaniyyat al-Islam wa al-Tatarruf al-Dini*, 91.

¹⁸² *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, 1.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

Modernity

Modernity in the western context started to take hold between 1780 and 1914, according to C. A. Bayly.¹⁸⁴ “By the end of the nineteenth century,” he notes, “icons of technical modernization—the car, the aeroplane, the telephone—were all around to dramatize this sensibility” of being modern. While western modernity was mainly industrial and scientific, it also included the development of nation states and introduced concepts such as “individual political rights and secularism.”¹⁸⁵ As mentioned earlier, the Muslim world first encountered modernity through Western military humiliation. Out of necessity, the region started to acquire the industrial and scientific aspects of modernity. However, at the conceptual level, transition into adoption of individual political rights and secularism was more challenging.

The distinction between the material aspects of modernity on the one hand and conceptual and cultural ones on the other hand was made early on by the Muslim world. Hopwood articulates the difference in terms of modernity versus modernization writing:

Modernization is the introduction into society of the artefacts of contemporary life—railways, communications, industry (less often nowadays), technology, household equipment. Modernity (modernism) is a general term for the political and cultural processes set in motion by integrating new ideas, an economic system, or education into society. It is a way of thought, of living in the contemporary world and of accepting change.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 10.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ *Islam and Modernity : Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, 2.

Modernist intellectuals stand out because they often emphasize the importance of modernism while traditionalists and Islamists often consider only acquiring artefacts of modernity to be necessary for Muslims.

Another essential characteristic of modernity, that is evident in the writings of Arab modernist writers, is the universality of the values advanced by modernity.

Speaking on this global aspect, Timothy Mitchell writes:

One of the characteristics of modernity has always been its autocentric picture of itself as the expression of a universal certainty, whether the certainty of human reason freed from particular traditions, or of technological power freed from the constraints of the natural world. So its history has always claimed to be a universal one, in fact the only universal history.¹⁸⁷

Mitchell also noted that the advancement of modernity meant “assigning a different and lesser significance to things deemed purely local, non-Western, and lacking a universal expression.”¹⁸⁸ This explains why modernity was seen as a threat by those invested in preserving the local: modernists sought to replace it with the universal.

Intellectuals like Abu Zayd, in the words of Ibrahim Abu Rabi‘, believe that modernity “holds the answer to the predicaments of Arab society; modernity is the source of hope, vitality, and progress.”¹⁸⁹ In part, this is the case because Abu Zayd tended to be dismissive of much of what is traditional. Interestingly, he saw in the Qur’an modernity’s universality. Articulating his objective, he wrote: “My research in the field of Islamic Studies is all about trying to find a way of incorporating modernity and progress into Islamic thought.”¹⁹⁰ Among Abu Zayd’s intellectual peers are such figures as the

¹⁸⁷ *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xi.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ Abu-Rabi‘, *Contemporary Arab Thought* 54.

¹⁹⁰ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 185.

Moroccan intellectual Muhammad 'Abid al-Jabri, who also defined his task as “the mission of modernizing mindsets and renewing intellectual standards and emotional well-being.”¹⁹¹ These modernist intellectuals do not see a conflict between Islam and modernity. For them, as Abu Zayd articulated, “It is not Islam that is unable to accept modernization, but the contemporary Muslim.”¹⁹²

Abu Zayd, like other modernists, justified his approach to modernity by detaching it from its Western roots. He argued that modernity represents the highest ideals reached thus far by human evolution. Abu Zayd, like other modernists, as this thesis will explain, believed that while modernity made its last stop in the geographic location of the West, it is the accumulation of thousands of years of the contributions of different peoples and cultures. Thus he argued, one should use the term “modern civilization” rather than “Western civilization” in order not to neglect the contributions of other cultures and peoples, including the Muslims.¹⁹³ Therefore, for him, modernity is a human product, not a Western one. Thus he endorsed modern concepts, ideas and practices including secularism, human rights, freedom of thought and expression as well as the creation of an independent and autonomous academy. However, in his effort to detach modernity from the West, Abu Zayd all but neglected the significant contributions of the West to modernity, even if it was a cumulative effort.

This differentiation between the West and modernity was coupled in Abu Zayd’s work with his distinction between the “political West” with its colonial history and modernity with its universal human values. The former he said, violated the ideals of the

¹⁹¹ Muhammad 'Abid Jabri, al, *Al-Turath wa al-Hadatha* [The Heritage and Modernity] (Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wihda al-'Arabiyya, 1991), 17.

¹⁹² Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought: A Critical Historical Analysis* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

¹⁹³ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 238.

latter.¹⁹⁴ However, not many make that distinction as they equate modernity with Westernizing Muslim societies. Abu Zayd recognized the resistance writing that “the real obstacle to modernization is Muslim thinking, in particular, the way Muslims have been taught to think over a long period of time.” He saw in contemporary Muslims a fear “that modernization will erode their religion and identity because, in the past, identity has been exclusively linked to religion”¹⁹⁵ He acknowledged that the task of modernizing Islam encounters “heavy resistance.” Still, he considered himself able to undertake this task, writing, “I count myself among those few who have been trying to keep the Qur’an relevant to life in the modern age.”¹⁹⁶ Therefore, from his perspective, the process is one of empowering the Qur’an, not Westernizing Muslim societies.

Salafis and Salafiyya

The concept of *Salafiyya* refers to the notion of abiding by the doctrine of the early Muslim community (*al-salaf al-salih*), meaning the Prophet and his companions.¹⁹⁷ It is driven by an idealization of “the state of theological purity that existed in early Islamic history.”¹⁹⁸ Far from being uniform, however, Salafism includes “various definitions and conflicting narratives.”¹⁹⁹ At different times in history, the term was used to denote different ideological views. For example, while during the *nahda* era the term was sometimes used to describe Islamic reformists such as ‘Abduh, in the second half of the twentieth century it is often used to describe fundamentalist Islamists.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*.

¹⁹⁶ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 179.

¹⁹⁷ Henri Lauzière, "The Construction of Salafiyya: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 03 (2010): 372.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 369.

In Abu Zayd's writings, however, Salafism is used exclusively to refer to the fundamentalists of his current times. His strong opposition to any group or individuals offering the past as the ideal is perhaps why Abu Zayd neglected both the history of the term as well as the diversity of views it incorporates. He projected the actions of contemporary *salafis*, often politically conservative and extremist in particular, into the entire concept of *Salafiyya*. He used derogatory language to describe their influence as such "the Salafi thought in the age of backwardness (*'asr al-inhitat*)."²⁰⁰ He argued that "a discussion with a *salafi* is futile, as his mind can not stand any discussion."²⁰¹ For Abu Zayd, a *salafi* "refuses progress and reality. He is living outside of history."²⁰² This is the case because from Abu Zayd's perspective, *salafis* are too fixated with the past and re-enacting it.

Salafis are part of the religious discourse, along with traditionalists and Islamists. Like other supporters of the religious discourse Abu Zayd argued that *salafis* neglect "the historical aspect of the religious text insofar as it is a linguistic text and insofar as a language is a human and social product and a container of a group's culture."²⁰³ He also accused them of being too literal in their understanding of the Qur'an. So literal, in fact, that they take even the myths mentioned in the Qur'an literally, according to Abu Zayd.²⁰⁴ Abu Zayd's use of the term, however, reveals his own bias and convictions regarding not only interpreting the Qur'an but also history.

²⁰⁰ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir al-Khawf*, 169-70.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 286.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 287.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

Ijtihad

Abu Zayd defined *ijtihad* in his English autobiography as “independent reasoning” or “rational inquiry.”²⁰⁵ This understanding, however, is rather modernist, emphasizing as it does a contemporary mode of critical thinking. As such, it does not convey the theological and historical meaning of the term. Historically, *ijtihad* was used to refer to a specific legal jurisprudence function that is carried out exclusively by learned scholars, and not to be used with liberty by laymen.²⁰⁶ Changing the meaning of *ijtihad* from its historical legal framework into a new meaning that empowers laymen over classical theologians is a hallmark of modernist thinkers. Abu Zayd’s disregard for the historical use of the term is part of his overall dismissive attitude towards tradition.

Conclusion

Born, raised and educated mostly in Egypt, Abu Zayd combined his local knowledge with a universal context that he acquired through his travels in the US, Japan and Europe. The mix between the two enabled him to have the perspective of an insider and outsider at once, posing a challenge for those who strive to preserve the local from external influences. The extent to which Abu Zayd is a product of his time and place, however, is revealed in the manner in which he used terms such as *ijtihad* and *salafiyya*. While calling for investigative inquiry and academic standards in the field of Islamic thought, he neglected the historical genealogy of such terms in favour of a modernist and political reading he aspired to advance.

²⁰⁵ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*.

²⁰⁶ Shaista P Ali-Karamali and Fiona Dunne, "The *ijtihad* Controversy," *Arab Law Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1994).

CHAPTER TWO: ABU ZAYD'S VIEW ON *SHARI'A* AND THE STATUS OF THE QUR'AN

Abu Zayd's view on *shari'a*, more than any other topic, is at the heart of the controversy that surrounded his life and legacy. He argued that a clear distinction must be made between religion and religious thought.¹ In other words, he advocated separation between a divine message and man's interpretation of that message, charging that the majority of what is known as the body of *shari'a* belongs to the latter category. Even more controversially, Abu Zayd proposed that both the sacred text of the Qur'an and the religious heritage be subjected to re-examination and academic scrutiny, which he contended would result in an accurate understanding of Islam.² This chapter will unpack and analyse Abu Zayd's understanding of *shari'a*.

Shari'a, as Anderson notes, includes the Qur'an, which is the primary source of *shari'a*, the *sunna*, or the sayings and practices of the Prophet Muhammad, and to a large degree "the deductions and reasoning of generations of early jurists."³ The latter involved a specific process. Hourani wrote about the process involved in the creation of literature addressing all matters not covered by the Qur'an and hadith. He wrote that learned men equipped with certain intellect and qualifications used their skills to arrive at answers "by using their minds in accordance with the rules of the strict analogy." The process

¹ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 198.

² Abu Zayd, "Renewing Qur'anic Studies," 289-90.

³ JND Anderson, "The Shari'a Today," *J. Comp. Legis. & Int'l L.* 3d ser. 31(1949): 18.

included arriving at a consensus among the learned (*ijma'*). Importantly, as Hourani pointed out, this consensus among classical scholars “came to be regarded as conferring on precepts or laws an authority no less binding than that of the Qur’an or hadith.”⁴ However, Abu Zayd argued: “A critical historical study of the Qur’an, *hadith* and *shari‘a* would reveal the human origin of these interpretations and hence their complete inappropriateness within a modern context.”⁵ Therefore, Abu Zayd, like other modernist intellectuals, is dismissive of this consensus, long taken for granted by many adherents to Sunni Islam.

Among the changes wrought by modernity is the breaking of the *‘ulama’s* monopoly to speak in Islam’s name. Developments such as the printing press, mass education, the media and technology resulted in multiplications of claims to Islamic intellectual authority.⁶ Intellectuals such as Abu Zayd compete with traditional theologians as they “seek to submit Islamic scriptures and formative history to historical examination.” Explaining their logic Abu Samra writes: “They believe historical understanding can weaken and undermine the hegemonic ahistorical Islamic interpretations that constitute one of the causes of cultural crisis in Arab society and pose an obstacle to the creation of a broad social basis of critical religious thought.”⁷ However, such efforts meet with strong resistance by adherents to the religious discourse, thereby polarizing opinions among the broader Muslim public.

⁴ Hourani, *Arab Thought*, 2.

⁵ Abu Zayd, "Renewing Qur'anic Studies," 294.

⁶ *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, 13-5.

⁷ Abu Samra, "Liberal Critics, 'Ulama' and the Debate on Islam in the Contemporary Arab world," 266.

The Status of the Qur'an

Abu Zayd's most controversial scholarship concerns the status of the Qur'an. He believed that the sacred text has both a divine and a human aspect and argued that the holy book of Muslims is analogous to Jesus, who is believed by Christians to have been both human and divine. He wrote, "Christians believe that God revealed himself in the actual humanity (flesh and blood) of Jesus. Therefore, Jesus is both human and divine. Muslims believe that God revealed himself in the Qur'an. Therefore, the Qur'an is both human and divine."⁸ The human aspect of the Qur'an is reflected in the fact that it was revealed in human language. He elaborated that "The Word of God needed to adapt itself—become human—because God wanted to communicate to human beings. If God spoke God-language, human beings would understand nothing."⁹

The phrase "Word of God" that Abu Zayd used is inclusive, reflecting his own pluralistic outlook. He viewed the Qur'an as one medium through which God spoke to humans, but far from the only one. This is the case, he explained, because the entirety of God's Word "exists in a sphere beyond human knowledge—a metaphysical space that we can know nothing about except that which the text itself mentions."¹⁰ He elaborated that "God's Word goes beyond anything we can take in through the use of our senses and then record," as the Qur'an itself states.¹¹ Abu Zayd here is most likely referring to the verse:

Allah - there is no deity except Him, the Ever-Living, the Sustainer of [all] existence. Neither drowsiness overtakes Him nor sleep. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth. Who is it that can intercede with Him except by His permission? He knows what is [presently] before them and what will be after them, and they encompass not a thing of His knowledge except for what He wills. His Kursi extends

⁸ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 97.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

over the heavens and the earth, and their preservation tires Him not. And He is the Most High, the Most Great.¹²

Therefore, Abu Zayd argued, to limit God's Word to the Qur'an is to limit God himself.

He wrote,

A distinction must be made between the absolute Word of God and the Qur'an. The Word of God in the Qur'an can best be described as a manifestation of the Word of God. Therefore, there are other manifestations of the Word of God. God does not speak only Arabic. God speaks no specific language as we understand language. So if God has no specific language, this opens up a space for other Scriptures to be recognized as manifestations of God's Word as well.¹³

This view allows for other expressions for the Word of God, including other religions. In another context, Abu Zayd used the phrase the "Spirit of Divine Revelation" to speak of this wider spiritual context to Islam.¹⁴

Such an inclusive and rather opaque picture of Islam diverges from traditional Islamic theology, which regards the Qur'an as the uncorrupted message from God. For example, 'Imara, who wrote a book refuting Abu Zayd's ideas, argues that the Qur'an is the ultimate message of God, especially since it includes what was true in other revealed books.¹⁵ In other words, in as much as other revealed books are congruent with the Qur'an their content is correct, otherwise they have been altered. Consequently, 'Imara wrote: "The Qur'an is the best of what God has revealed of books and thus it is applicable to all times and places."¹⁶ Abu Zayd's challenge to the premise of traditional Islamic thought, in the view of his adversaries, put him outside the Islamic faith.

¹² www.Quran.com, 2:255.

¹³ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 96.

¹⁴ Ibid., 100.

¹⁵ 'Imara, *Al-Tafsir al-Marksi li al-Islam*, 47.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Textual Analysis

Abu Zayd's contribution to textual analysis of the Qur'an is seminal to the body of contemporary Qur'anic exegesis. In fact, for many, it is his most significant contribution. He translated into the Arabic language many hermetical theories.¹⁷ Kermani noted that he published "one of the first comprehensive surveys on this topic [hermeneutics] in the Arabic language."¹⁸ Abu Zayd believed that Islamic thought would benefit from the scholarship of such contemporary intellectuals as Richard Palmer, P.E. Shleider and Martin Heidegger whose work had hitherto been largely jettisoned from Islamic studies. He called attention to such thinkers in his books, especially in *Ishkaliyyat al-Qira'a wa Aliyyat al-Ta'wil* (The Problematic of Reading and the Mechanisms of Interpretation).¹⁹

As mentioned in the introduction, Abu Zayd's hermeneutical approach has already been the subject of a doctoral dissertation by Yusuf Rahman.²⁰ Rahman delved into literary theory to place in context the notion of literary interpretation of the Qur'an adopted by Abu Zayd. He explained how Abu Zayd saw the Qur'an "as a form or an act of communication, *wahy* (revelation), compromised of six factors: a message (*risala*), an addresser (*mukhatib/mursil*), and addressee (*mukhatab/mustaqbil*), a contact (*'alaqat ittisal*), a code (*shifra/nizam lughawi*) and a context (*waqi ' wa thaqafa*).²¹ Rahman then analysed each of these components as Abu Zayd saw them relevant to producing a new interpretation of the Qur'an.

¹⁷ Kermani, "From Revelation to Interpretation," 172.

¹⁸ Ibid., 181.

¹⁹ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Ishkaliyyat al-Qira'a wa Aliyyat al-Ta'wil* [The Problematic of Reading and the Mechanisms of Interpretation] (Al-Dar al-Baydha': Al-Markiz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi, 2007).

²⁰ Rahman, "The Hermeneutical Theory of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: An Analytical Study of His Method of Interpreting the Qur'an."

²¹ Ibid., 123.

Iskandar Mansour also discussed Abu Zayd's hermeneutics theory in one chapter of his thesis on *turath*, arguing that Abu Zayd approached the heritage "from a linguistic point of view."²² While I agree with Mansour's assessment that Abu Zayd's contribution "emerges from philosophical hermeneutics and the application of modern literary critical theory to the Islamic texts," I believe viewing Abu Zayd's contribution through this lens alone is incomplete.²³ In this section, I will touch on Abu Zayd's theory, albeit briefly, so as not to duplicate the work of Rahman's and Mansour's.

Abu Zayd argued that:

religion is nothing but a collection of texts whose significance or message is better determined if contextualized. The mere fact that a discourse is divine, in terms of its source, does not mean that it is not conducive to analysis. It is a divine discourse that has been communicated in a human language with all its implications and its social, cultural and historical context.²⁴

Having argued that the Qur'an is human inasmuch as it is "a linguistic text," Abu Zayd contended that it is governed by mechanisms of interpretation.²⁵ He explained:

Once it is in human form, a text becomes governed by the principles of mutability or change. The text becomes a book like any other. Religious texts are essentially linguistic texts. They belong to a specific culture and are produced within that historical setting. The Qur'an is a historical discourse—it has no fixed, intrinsic meaning.²⁶

What is controversial in Abu Zayd's stance, as Hirschkind points out, is that it makes religion and its sacred text "mundane objects" with no "epistemological privilege"

²² Ibid., 22.

²³ Mansour, "The Unpredictionability of the Past: Turath and Hermeneutics," 192.

²⁴ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 9.

²⁵ Abu Zayd, *Maqhum al-Nass*, 9.

²⁶ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 97.

and therefore subject to mundane observation and scrutiny.²⁷ Furthermore, in stressing the historical context of the text, Abu Zayd marginalized the spiritual and the metaphysical.²⁸ Instead, Abu Zayd stressed “the subjectivity of any kind of understanding of a text.”²⁹ Consequently, “each interpretation is the result of a relationship between the text and its interpreter, and reflects the uniqueness of this relationship. It therefore cannot be identical to an interpretation from another era or socio-cultural context.”³⁰ The ramifications of such conclusions would include the marginalization of traditional interpretations of the Qur’an, opening the door for new interpretations.

Abu Zayd argued that whenever there is a text, there is an interpretation or reading (*ta’wil*), regardless of the nature of the text.³¹ In other words, the Qur’an is no exception. Kermani noted the significance of Abu Zayd’s use of the word *ta’wil* (reading) rather than *tafsir* (interpretation). The latter has more weight theologically while the former stresses the subjective aspect of interpretation.³² Abu Zayd further argued that all texts and interpretations are essentially discourses to which two rules apply. The first is that all discourses are “produced in a certain cultural, civilizational and historical context and cannot be isolated or viewed independently of one another.” Consequently, even as one discourse attempts to remove another from the public awareness, negate or exclude it, the mere acknowledgement of that other text means the two discourses are connected to one another. Therefore, there is no such a thing as ‘independent’ discourse and any claim to the contrary is “simply an oversimplification aimed at falsifying knowledge.”³³

²⁷ Hirschkind, "Heresy or Hermeneutics: The Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," 471.

²⁸ Hirsh, "Al-Qira'a al-Naqdiyya."

²⁹ Kermani, "From Revelation to Interpretation," 181.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Abu Zayd, *Ma'fhum al-Nass*, 9.

³² Kermani, "From Revelation to Interpretation," 172.

³³ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 8.

Here Abu Zayd most likely had in mind intellectuals who ascribe to the religious discourse, as he was convinced of their determination to eliminate modernist discourse. Ironically, this is true of Abu Zayd's own work. While constantly attacking the religious discourse, he performed in his work the same claim to an independent, objective viewpoint.

The second rule is that "all discourses are equal in that they are just that: discourses. No single discourse can claim to own the truth because in doing so it is essentially labelling itself as false." This does not negate the fact that some discourses are more popular than others or that some are powerful enough to marginalize or silence other discourses. In the context of the Arab world, Abu Zayd argued that such transgression usually took place through political coercion and social oppression.³⁴ Abu Zayd here indirectly dismisses the value of classical interpretations over modern readings. Even as he stressed the objectivity of his own discourse, he pointed out that he "does not claim to own the truth."³⁵ Abu Zayd nevertheless consistently attacked the religious discourse as a malicious discourse inferior to his own, thereby betraying a contradictory attitude that did, in some way, claim greater access to truth than his opponents possessed. Hirsh described well the tactics used by both modernist intellectuals like Abu Zayd and their opponents: "each side uses mechanisms of exclusion and negation of the other."³⁶ At the same time, they each preach their ideal to which they expect their opponent to adhere.

To Abu Zayd's critics, Hirschkind writes, faith "in the sacred status of the Qur'an...stands as the central and ineluctable tenet of Islam, the foundation stone upon

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 9.

³⁶ Hirsh, "Al-Qira'a al-Naqdiyya," 24.

which Islamic society and civilization rest.”³⁷ Abu Zayd’s denial of its full divinity, then, struck at the very heart of their religion. In this light, Abu Zayd’s use of textual analysis appears to be an attempt to strip the Qur’an of its divinity. Sfeir points out that his labelling the Qur’an a linguistic text is one of the reasons why the judges decided to rule in favour of deeming Abu Zayd an apostate.³⁸ From Abu Zayd’s perspective, however, the lack of historical contextualization not only violates the truth but also perpetuates exploitation of these texts.³⁹ The Islamist Muhammad ‘Imara rebukes Abu Zayd for claiming to have made some sort of a revelation about the Qur’an being a linguistic text. ‘Imara writes, “I do not know where the contradiction is between the Qur’an being a linguistic text – it is written in Arabic – and its being Divinely inspired and sacred?!”⁴⁰

Some critics attacked Abu Zayd for using Western sciences on the Islamic divine heritage, contending that such an approach was not appropriate or applicable. As Sfeir points out, what Abu Zayd did to earn the wrath of Islamists and the religious establishment “was to cross beyond the sacral bounds in applying the modern principles of hermeneutics to the reading of the revealed text, thereby extricating himself from the debilitating duality in which Islamist reformers invariably found themselves in the end for fear of offending traditional values.”⁴¹ Muhammad ‘Imara is one such critic who described Abu Zayd’s methodology as Marxist materialist, which, to ‘Imara, is an atheist ideology.⁴² Consequently, in this view, Abu Zayd’s methodology negated the divine.

³⁷ Hirschkind, "Heresy or Hermeneutics: The Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," 473.

³⁸ Sfeir, "Basic Freedoms in a Fractured Legal Culture: Egypt and the Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," 412.

³⁹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 7.

⁴⁰ 'Imara, *Al-Tafsir al-Marksi li al-Islam*, 46.

⁴¹ Sfeir, "Basic Freedoms in a Fractured Legal Culture: Egypt and the Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," 413.

⁴² 'Imara, *Al-Tafsir al-Marksi li al-Islam*, 34.

Abu Zayd was aware of the sensitivity required when one sought to apply Western sciences to the religious heritage. He wrote that he opposed ‘simply importing and adopting’ Western sciences. Rather, he advocated a more balanced approach based on a ‘dialectical conversation’ with Western contributions rather than the extreme of “retreating into ourselves and isolating ourselves with the walls of ‘our glorious heritage (*turath*)’ and ‘inherited traditions.’”⁴³ For Abu Zayd, the model of a dialectical relationship offers “the basis for any knowledge;”⁴⁴ it is the epistemological foundation in which knowledge is established. He argued that the Arab Islamic heritage has yet to be thoroughly subjected to such textual analyses and diverse epistemological methods that are now available.⁴⁵ He viewed his own work as an attempt at accomplishing that task.

Saba Mahmood adds another layer to the attack on liberal intellectuals like Abu Zayd by writing that they are “natural allies to the United States.” Naming Abu Zayd as one such intellectual, she wrote that the “U.S. strategists have struck a common chord with self-identified secular liberal Muslim reformers who have been trying to refashion Islam along the lines of the Protestant Reformation.”⁴⁶ Islamists and traditionalists use this perception of modernists as allies of the West to attack their work and question their loyalty. Abu Zayd did indeed equate the actions of the religious discourse to the Church in medieval times, and he saw his work as an attempt to question their actions. However, he would have strongly objected to the notion that his work serves the strategies of the U.S. in the region. In fact, he consistently criticized Western policies in Egypt and the

⁴³ Abu Zayd, *Ishkaliyyat al-Qira'a wa Aliyyat al-Ta'wil*, 14.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Abu Zayd critiques and reviews the contributions of scholars such as Richard Palmer, Grant Robert, P.E. Shleimacher, Wilhelm Dilthey in *Ishkaliyyat al-Qira'a wa Aliyyat al-Ta'wil*.

⁴⁶ Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, hermeneutics, and empire: The politics of Islamic reformation," *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006): 329.

wider Arab world as firmly empowering dictatorships and sectarianism, a viewpoint that he shared with many other modernists such as Fatima Mernissi and Nawal Sa'dawi.

Mahmood also mischaracterizes Abu Zayd's work – and indeed that of other modernist writers – when she writes that for them, “the impenetrability of the divine means that the project itself is flawed and should be therefore discarded.”⁴⁷ Nowhere did Abu Zayd advocate discarding the Qur'an. What he did do was subvert the strictly divine nature of the Qur'an by implying that human agency might have interfered in its documentation and interpretation. Thus he consistently urged for a re-examination of traditional theology and a production of a modern interpretation that is not monopolized by any one party. Far from seeking to discard Islam as an obsolete religion, as mentioned earlier, Abu Zayd sought to modernize Islamic thought in order to maintain its relevance in contemporary times.

The Literal Versus Figurative Reading

Abu Zayd advocated a new interpretation of the Qur'an, one that would be conducive to modern developments. He questioned traditional and literal interpretations of the Qur'an because they do not take into account the historical context and the ramifications of the passage of time. He argued that the lines are blurred between that which was appropriate for the seventh century and that which is eternal. Abu Zayd criticized the presupposition of those who ascribe to the religious discourse that “the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 338.

unfolding of history has no effect on how we interpret our sacred text and apply it to our present-day lives.”⁴⁸

Tariq Ramadan echoes the same conviction, recognizing that there should be a distinction between what is historic and what is timeless in revelation. He writes:

We are here confronting the fundamental distinction that should be established between timeless principles and contingent models, a distinction that is a direct consequence of a normative reading of the sources and, as such, is in itself fundamental. So, a distinction should be made, in the case of the society of Medina, for example, between the fundamental principles on which it was established (e.g. the rule of law, equality, freedom of conscience and worship) and the form in which that society historically appeared. Faithfulness to principles cannot involve faithfulness to historical models because times change, societies and political and economic systems become more complex and in every age it is fact necessary to think of a model appropriate to each social and cultural reality.⁴⁹

This distinction between the two levels when reading and interpreting the Qur’an is the window through which many intellectuals propose reform.

Abu Zayd opposed a literal approach to reading the Qur’an because it means that “no difference exists between the letter and the spirit of divine revelation.”⁵⁰ He spoke of principles of the Qur’an as well as divine spirit of the revelation. For him, they include concepts such as justice and freedom, which Abu Zayd considered as “two essential objectives of the Qur’an.”⁵¹ The requirement for justice might have been fulfilled in seventh century by stoning, for example. However, at the current time, given the level of human rights legislation that has developed, such punishment would violate the purpose

⁴⁸ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 112-3.

⁴⁹ Tariq Ramadan, "The Way (Al-Shari'a) of Islam," in *The New Voices of Islam*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 70.

⁵⁰ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 100.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

for the punishment, which is justice.⁵²

For Abu Zayd, the issue of *hudud* (punishment laws), which are mentioned in the Qur'an and which have become synonymous with *shari'a* law in popular culture, exemplifies the violation of historical context. Many Muslims consider it an essential part of Islamic governance to enforce the same punishments mentioned in the Qur'an. Abu Zayd, on the other hand, argued that these punishments, while mentioned in the Qur'an, are not necessarily Islamic. They occur in the Qur'an in a broader context of establishing justice, but their mention does not establish these particular punishments for all places and times. He explained:

With regard to punishment for crime, the destination we are after is justice. In order to establish justice, a society needs to punish people who commit crimes against that society. But the form of punishment mentioned in the Qur'an is a historical expression of punishment carried out by a specific society in a specific time and place—it is not a divine directive. Punishment for crime is a principle that, when carried out, establishes justice. Justice is a principle reflected in the divine, universal Word of God. Punishment is part of constructing a just society, but the form punishment takes is historically determined—it is not fixed.⁵³

Therefore those who read the Qur'an literally, from Abu Zayd's perspective, focus on the means and neglect the end. The latter constitutes the higher principles of the Qur'an such as justice.

Further attempting to detach the punishments mentioned in the Qur'an from Islam, Abu Zayd stressed that these punishments were not established by Islam but “were used in pre-Islamic times—some of them come from Roman law and some from Jewish tradition. Others go further back.”⁵⁴ The Qur'an did not initiate them. What the Qur'an did establish was a set of principles. “These principles leave a wide space for human

⁵² Ibid., 89.

⁵³ Ibid., 165.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 89.

interpretation and reinterpretation.”⁵⁵ What is needed in such circumstances is to produce a methodology to “differentiate between the historical and the universal, the accidental and the essential” in the messages of Islam and its history.⁵⁶

Therefore, a more accurate reading of these verses on punishments for crimes, Abu Zayd argued, would be to focus on the importance of establishing justice. Given modern times and all the advancements that have taken place since the seventh century, he stated, “society has every right—even an obligation—to institute more humane punishment for crimes.”⁵⁷ To do so would be more consistent with Islam’s message, from Abu Zayd’s perspective, than to insist on out-dated and inhumane punishment laws.

Abu Zayd went a step further. He argued that those who insist on the literal interpretation violate the important objective of justice. Abu Zayd stated:

No matter what subject the Qur’an talks about—the universe, the cosmos, nature, God and His activities, social life, or the life hereafter—justice is at its core. Justice gives shape to all of them. In light of the Qur’an’s emphasis on justice, it is surprising to me that the principle of justice is absent from the list of agreed-upon objectives in classical Islam.⁵⁸

Therefore Abu Zayd went as far as claiming that those who read the Qur’an literally go against its messages. Reading the Qur’an from the premise that it sought to advocate a rather modernist human rights agenda helps to explain Abu Zayd’s viewpoint.

To further support his argument, Abu Zayd contended that the Prophet’s companions understood this fluid aspect of the Qur’an. He gave the example of the second caliphate of ‘Umar Bin Al-Khattab. ‘Umar did not apply the *hudud*; rather, he suspended them in favour of more humane punishments. Abu Zayd asked, then: does this

⁵⁵ Ibid., 90.

⁵⁶ Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 97.

⁵⁷ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 166.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 169.

mean that he disobeyed God and challenged him with his own man-made laws?⁵⁹ Clearly not, since Umar bin al-Khattab is viewed as one of the most pious companions of the Prophet. Instead, we are to understand ‘Umar’s actions as an indication that he read the texts as instituting social justice, rather than viewing them as commands to be obeyed blindly and literally.

Other modernists make similar arguments. Jamal al-Banna wrote that people’s interests are the primary goal in Islam. He wrote, “*shari‘a* in its essence and substance is about justice and nothing else. At times, it would go beyond justice if it was in the interest of the people to do so.”⁶⁰ Other intellectuals note that these literal and traditional interpretations have harmed the image of Islam or even deviated from its message, as one contemporary scholar puts it. Muhammad Talbi states: “Though all Muslims are bound by the Qur’an’s basic teachings, Muslim traditional theology developed in a way that, for historical reasons, does not, in my opinion, always fit in with the spirit of the Qur’an.”⁶¹ Here, Talbi, like Abu Zayd, blames the misunderstanding of the Qur’an on traditional theologians.

At the same time, the few countries in the world that strictly apply what they understand to be *shari‘a* laws (such as Afghanistan during the Taliban rule and Saudi Arabia) are countries in which personal liberties and freedoms are all but missing and the population lives under very repressive laws. Jamal al-Banna lamented this development in the image of *shari‘a* and stressed the importance of “developing an application of *shari‘a* law beyond the *salafi* interpretation.” Sharing Abu Zayd’s understanding of the

⁵⁹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Tafkir fi Zaman al-Takfir*, 142.

⁶⁰ Jamal Banna, al, *Hal Yumkin Taqbiq al-Shari'a?* [Is It Possible to Apply *Shari'a*?] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2008), 7.

⁶¹ Muhammad Taibi, "Religious Liberty: Muslim Perspective," in *The New Voices of Islam: Rethinking Politics and Modernity*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Berkeley: University of California, 2006), 112.

word *salafi* and the latter's views, al-Banna argued that *shari'a* "must be in direct alignment with the Qur'an itself and not those who interpreted the Qur'an depending on their own culture and times, sometimes reaching interpretations that are contradictory to the Qur'an."⁶² These modernists share a view of the sacred text that includes higher objectives that are violated by literal readings. Their vision of Islam is compatible with modern understandings of human rights and liberties.

Another methodology Abu Zayd used in interpretation is the theory of direction. He believed that Islam is meant to push humanity in a certain direction. Contemporary theologians, therefore, must produce interpretations that take into account the end goal of Islam. As an example of this concept Abu Zayd discussed the issue of slavery in Islam and its abrogation by degrees. Islam did not ban slavery outright but clearly pushed towards its elimination by encouraging the emancipation of slaves and stressing the equality of human beings. Abu Zayd asks: Can one consider slavery to be Qur'anic because it is mentioned in the Qur'an? Or should one acknowledge its historical occurrence as well as the evolution of humanity since?⁶³ From Abu Zayd's perspective, the Qur'an had to take into consideration the circumstances of the time and place in which it was revealed in order to not alienate people, which accounts for the absence of a clear ban on slavery. However, it compensates for this absence by pushing in the direction of emancipation. He argued that, if direction is not taken into consideration when producing interpretations, Islam could be used "as a brake to prevent the unrestricted production of knowledge."⁶⁴ Abu Zayd also applied this concept on the issue of women's rights. The *nahda* era intellectual al-Tahir al-Haddad, whom Abu Zayd

⁶² Banna, *Hal Yumkin Taqbiq al-Shari'a?*, 7.

⁶³ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 167.

⁶⁴ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 129.

praised extensively, also advocated such approach to Islam.⁶⁵ In fact, Abu Zayd reiterated al-Haddad's view.

Although rarely, if ever, mentioned in Abu Zayd's work, other modernist contemporaries of Abu Zayd make similar arguments including Muhammad Talbi and Muhammad Shahrur. However, when these intellectuals advocate literal readings, they have in common not only their modernist perspective but also their focus on specific verses and issues on which this theory of direction should apply, but not others. For example, many verses in the Qur'an, taken literally, would be in perfect compliance with universal human rights, without needing interpretations or clarification of direction, such as the verses on freedom of conscience: "And say, 'The truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills - let him believe; and whoever wills - let him disbelieve.'"⁶⁶ The same applies for the verse in which God scolds the Prophet for attempting to enforce belief on people, "And had your Lord willed, those on earth would have believed - all of them entirely. Then, [O Muhammad], would you compel the people in order that they become believers?"⁶⁷ This and many other verses, taken literally, align easily with a modernist perspective. Therefore, these modernists are essentially exercising selectivity in deciding which verses in the Qur'an should be taken literally as God's words and which should only be taken in the historical context, to be ignored by future generations. Abu Zayd was a particularly outspoken critic of the selective manner in which supporters of the religious discourse treated the religious heritage, yet here we find him practising the very same method.

⁶⁵ al-Tahir Haddad, al, *Imra'atuna fi al-Shari'a wa al-Mujtama'* [Our Woman in *Shari'a* and in Society] (Doha: The Qatari Ministry of Cultur, Arts and Heritage, 2012).

⁶⁶ www.Quran.com, 18:29.

⁶⁷ www.Quran.com, 10:99.

The major presumption in modernist thought, then, is that they know God's intention. As Nettler writes, if we pose the question, "How does one know God's aim?" a modernist like Abu Zayd or Talbi would have to answer that "God wants only the 'good and 'progressive.'" ⁶⁸ Furthermore, Abu Zayd would argue that the ambiguity in some verses, which enables diverse interpretations of the Qur'an, is deliberate in order to speak to different people in various times and places. He wrote, "The Divine discourse is open to horizons of interpretation and understanding." This ambiguity is intentional to further encourage critical thinking and inquiry. ⁶⁹ It also allows for a reading that is aligned by notions of universal human rights. Likewise, Al-'Azm wrote that Islam is universal because it is "amenable, flexible, yielding and open to being interpreted, reinterpreted and re-examined indefinitely." ⁷⁰ However, for most Muslims the Qur'an is "the eternal and exact utterance of God." It is no wonder, therefore, as he recognized, that "the notion that religious texts are historically determined and culturally constructed is not only rejected but also condemned in most of the Islamic world as atheism." ⁷¹

Hadith and Sunna

The majority of pious Muslims believe the sayings and practices of the Prophet are divinely inspired. ⁷² However, Abu Zayd argued that the earlier generations in fact made a distinction between the divine messages channelled through Muhammad, on the

⁶⁸ Ronald Nettler, "Mohamed Tabi's Commentary on Qur'an IV:34 A 'Historical Reading' of a Verse Concerning the Disciplining of Women," *The Maghreb Review* 24, no. 1-2 (1999): 28.

⁶⁹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 60.

⁷⁰ Sadiq Jalal 'Azm, al, *Al-Islam wa al-Naz'a al-Insaniyya al-'Ilmaniyya* [Islam and the Human Secular Tendency] (Beirut: Dar al-Mada, 2007), 14.

⁷¹ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 100.

⁷² Anderson, "The Shari'a Today," 18.

one hand, and the Prophet as a human being, on the other.⁷³ Again, Abu Zayd is not alone in making that argument. The Syrian scholar George Tarabishi dedicated a book to this subject, presenting ample examples of the Prophet's companions asking him whether what he was uttering was from him or God.⁷⁴ Likewise, Muhammad Shahrour, argues, "with the exception of *al-tanzil* [revelation], all Islamic texts and religious literature are but a man-made legacy, and they represent human understanding of the divine Revelation within the conditions of the time and place of production. These conditions of time and place depend also on the state and means of scientific knowledge."⁷⁵ As one might expect, then, these modernists seek to marginalize the importance of *hadith* as they highlight that of the Qur'an.

Jamal al-Banna also addressed this issue. He questioned the very accuracy of the collection of *hadiths*. He highlighted the "hundreds of years gap" between the Prophet's death and the time during which the sayings of the Prophet were recorded or what is referred to as the time of documentation (*'asr al-tadween*). Such a gap could easily result in inserting fabricated sayings. Al-Banna also noted that those who collected the Prophet's sayings "were subject to a particular political, social and cultural environment and were deeply influenced by that environment." In other words, he argued, some of these sayings were invented to address the changes that took place during the time lapse.⁷⁶ This view is in keeping with much of the modernist historicizing tendency and

⁷³ Abu Zayd named Shafi'i as responsible for the historical shift. See, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Al-Imam al-Shafi'i wa Ta'sis al-Idiulugiyya al-Wasatiyya* [Imam Shafi'i and the Establishment of the Centrist Ideology] (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 1996).

⁷⁴ George Tarabishi, *Min Islam al-Qur'an ila Islam al-Hadith: Al-Nash'a al-Musta'nafa* [From Islam of the Qur'an to Islam of hadith] (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2010).

⁷⁵ Muhammad Shahrur, "The Divine Text and Pluralism in Muslim Societies," in *The New Voices of Islam*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 147.

⁷⁶ Jamal Banna, al, *Al-Islam wa Hurriyyat al-Fikr* [Islam and Freedom of Thought] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2008), 159.

attempts to offer a plausible account for the apparent incompatibility between the harsher elements of early Islamic teaching and modern life. Modernists do not acknowledge the traditional notion that *hadiths* are rated by their reliability by *hadith* scholars.

For Abu Zayd, though, these changes occurred in large part because of a specific figure in the history of Islamic thought. He argued that the Qur'an and *ijtihad* were the primary sources for Muslims until Imam Abu 'Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Idris al-Shafi'i (150-204 AH), the eponym of the Shafi'i legal school, introduced secondary and much less verified texts as integral parts of Islam. The most damage Shafi'i caused is his attribution to the Prophet of numerous sayings that contradict the spirit of Islam.⁷⁷ He wrote that Shafi'i incorporated into *shari'a* sayings by the Prophet that must have surfaced to respond to needs that rose long after the Prophet's death and for which there was no direct mention in the Qur'an. These sayings, Abu Zayd charged, were therefore to be understood more as expressions of Shafi'i's own ideology than as authentic sayings of the Prophet.⁷⁸

Abu Zayd blamed the imam for elevating the status of *hadith* to the level of the Qur'an itself, in the process making it very difficult to question any of Shafi'i's own *ijtihad*. This is a serious charge, yet it must be noted that Abu Zayd here presupposed to know the spirit of Islam more than the classical theologian. In the least, Abu Zayd is oversimplifying history. He also liked to remind his readers that God's messenger had the status of a mortal, not a god – a point he emphasized, perhaps, because the *hadith* that Shafi'i allegedly brought to light, even those that sometimes contradicted the Qur'anic

⁷⁷ Abu Zayd, *Al-Imam al-Shafi'i*.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 83-4.

text, became as sacred as God's own word.⁷⁹ This was an unjustifiable elevation, to Abu Zayd, who wrote that Shafi'i had removed from the Prophet "all human attributes, cloaking him with divine disposition that make him a holy and sacred legislator."⁸⁰

Shafi'i's contribution to Islamic thought is indeed substantial. In his book, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, Daniel Brown writes that Shafi'i was "chiefly responsible" for making his own *ijtihad* and collection of *hadith* as elevated as the Qur'an and "effectively championing the adoption of his method as the only legitimate approach to *sunna*."⁸¹ Brown wrote that Shafi'i was responsible for the very term *sunna* being used to refer to the Prophet's sayings and actions.⁸²

Abu Zayd's attitude towards al-Shafi'i is an example of the dismissiveness with which modernists treat classical theologians. 'Abid al-Jabri for example, shared Abu Zayd's critique of Shafi'i.⁸³ The response to Abu Zayd's critique of Shafi'i was even more polemical. For example, Kushk ridiculed Abu Zayd for sounding like he "discovered a backward conspiracy" orchestrated by Shafi'i. In this conspiracy, Abu Zayd allegedly discovered that Shafi'i was in fact responsible "for reprogramming the memory of the Islamic *umma* to prevent it from thinking and reason and to limit it to blind imitation."⁸⁴ While Abu Zayd did believe that Shafi'i's contribution was a setback for Islamic thought, Kushk misread most of Abu Zayd's argument. For example, Kushk wrote that Abu Zayd condemned Shafi'i for making the Qur'an the primary source of

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 55-6.

⁸¹ Daniel W Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 7.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Jabri, *Al-Turath wa al-Hadatha*, 162.

⁸⁴ Kushk, *Qira'a fi Fikr al-Taba'iyya*, 199.

Islam, which was in fact the opposite of Abu Zayd's argument.⁸⁵ He also wrote that Abu Zayd is "an enemy for all that is Arab"⁸⁶ and suggested that Abu Zayd "be removed from the circle of intellectuals as well as university educators."⁸⁷ Such statements reveal the level of debate between modernists and their critics.

'Imara also defended the genius of Shafi'i's scholarship against what he perceived as Abu Zayd's misunderstanding of the classical theologians.⁸⁸ 'Imara charged that Abu Zayd advocates pluralism in thought while he "strives to illuminate the jurisprudence and intellectual diversity" as exemplified in the classical theologians.⁸⁹ The discourse, for and against classical theologians, is often about the present and not the past. Diverse views in the history of Islamic thought were a reality, and terms such as "backward" are a product of modernity. Therefore, the religious discourse as much as Abu Zayd appear to have been mining the medieval Islamic theological record to support their contemporary polemics without actually seeing these theologians or their contributions through the lens of their actual time and place.

Theologian's Input

Abu Zayd had little, if any, faith in most theologians. His use of the term "religious discourse" as a monolith is indicative of his disregard for diversity within the wide spectrum of '*ulama*' and intellectuals he lumped under this category. He refused to acknowledge the differences among them, seeing only one power-hungry, self-serving entity that exploits Islam for its temporal goals.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 215.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 213.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ 'Imara, *Al-Tafsir al-Marksi li al-Islam*, 90-3.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 92-3.

Looking at Abu Zayd's work, one can identify four major ways in which he saw theologians' input into *shari'a*. First, Abu Zayd argued that a close examination of the contribution of medieval theologians would reveal that much of it is ancillary to current times because it is a product of these scholars' own time and place. To him, "the understanding of the Qur'an possessed by the first and subsequent generations of Muslims should by no means be considered absolute or final."⁹⁰ Abu Zayd called attention to the human aspect of the theologians' interpretations of the Qur'an and *shari'a*, which would necessarily bind their writings to the specific context in which they lived and wrote.

Abu Zayd insisted that "to claim that the body of *shari'a* literature is binding for all Muslims communities, regardless of time and space, is to ascribe divinity to human thought as it was developed throughout history."⁹¹ In fact, a close examination of much of the religious heritage would reveal that it consists mostly of "ideas" and not of Islamic creed.⁹² He emphasized, instead, current and more relevant understandings of the Qur'an. Only inasmuch as it contributes to the present should the historical heritage be considered relevant.⁹³ Here Abu Zayd is consistent with his conviction that the present holds the most importance. Modernist intellectuals adhering to this position are united in their belief that "all interpretation of Islamic sources [are] humanly interpreted, and therefore fallible, and therefore unworthy of imposing upon others."⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Abu Zayd, "Renewing Qur'anic Studies," 292.

⁹¹ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 90.

⁹² Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 19.

⁹³ Abu Zayd, "Renewing Qur'anic Studies," 292.

⁹⁴ Kamrava Quotes Charles Kurzman in *The new voices of Islam : rethinking politics and modernity : a reader*, 17.

Abu Zayd also emphasized the extent to which much of classical theology is out of date. He wrote:

Classical Islam reached its final expression in the thirteenth century. All the books today on *shari'a* law repeat the understanding our forbears had reached by the thirteenth century. There has been no development in *shari'a* law since that time. The conclusions our forbears came to were on the cutting edge of work, yet Islamic thought in all its aspects remains static, having come to a screeching halt centuries ago.⁹⁵

From this perspective, much of *shari'a* is out-dated.

Therefore, Abu Zayd argued against limiting the regulations of *ijtihad* “to what science has achieved in this realm in the fifth and sixth centuries and ignore all the significant advancements that have been realized since” because such an action would harm Islam.⁹⁶ He wrote that “survival of any religion depends on the ability of the community of believers to produce updated religious discourse, reinterpreting texts according to present needs. Without this on-going process, religion dies.”⁹⁷ Here again, Abu Zayd is in line with many of his contemporary modernists. Al-Banna, for example, believed that Muslim scholars could only work to the advantage of Islam by renewing Islamic thought.⁹⁸ Likewise, Shahrur wrote that Muslims should interpret the Qur'an as though it was revealed yesterday.⁹⁹ These modernists advocate the removal of any barriers on the production of new and scientific knowledge to replace the old that they view as having been rendered obsolete by the passage of time.

Secondly, Abu Zayd cast doubt on the intentions of theologians throughout history, questioning their integrity and portraying them as hired pens or as opportunistic

⁹⁵ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 90.

⁹⁶ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir al-Khawf*, 8.

⁹⁷ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 114.

⁹⁸ Banna, *Hal Yumkin Taqbiq al-Shari'a?*, 61.

⁹⁹ Shahrur, *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason: the Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, xvii.

individuals seeking power. Here Abu Zayd saw the past through the prism of his contemporary reality, which was a turbulent and oppressive time in the Arab world. He also charged that theologians' deliberate confusion of religion and religious thought permitted them to appropriate the holiness of religion for themselves.¹⁰⁰ Blurring the lines between the past and the present, Abu Zayd argued that illegitimate rulers, starting with the Umayyads, recruited theologians to bestow legitimacy on themselves. Any faith in these theologians, then, is surely misplaced.¹⁰¹ It was the *'ulama'* Abu Zayd wrote, "who turned it [i.e. Islam] into jurisprudence for the purpose of eliminating challenges to the ruler's authority who usurped political power by force and used religion to avoid civil strife."¹⁰² What this means for present day, Abu Zayd argued, is that "specific historical, political or ideological motivations originally underpinned certain interpretations that have become canonized within the contemporary range of existing interpretations."¹⁰³ With these arguments, Abu Zayd questioned the high status granted to classical theology.

In addition to Imam Shafi'i, Abu Zayd criticized the medieval theologians Abu Hamid Muhammad Ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (450-505 AH) and Abu Hasan al-Ash'ari (260-324 AH).¹⁰⁴ He charged that their work served primarily to support the dominant political power of their time and to "justify its dictatorial and ideological hegemony" with their reading of Islam.¹⁰⁵ Abu Zayd wrote that the effort of these scholars was aimed primarily at preaching conformity. Ascendancy of their thought marked the beginning of the end of a thriving Islamic civilization, as it limited critical thinking and reason.¹⁰⁶ For

¹⁰⁰ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 29-30.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰² Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 22.

¹⁰³ Kermani, "From Revelation to Interpretation," 175.

¹⁰⁴ Abu Zayd, *Al-Imam al-Shafi'i*.

¹⁰⁵ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 28.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

example, Abu Zayd accused Ghazali of initiating the movement against philosophy, culminating in a ban against it. As Abu Zayd wrote, because of Ghazali, “Philosophy and logic became banned sciences and their education was prohibited.” What was instituted in its place was “blind obedience to the past and submission to the sayings of the old people (*al-qudama*’) without examination or discussion.” As a result, lamented Abu Zayd, obedience became the only measurement for a man’s worth.¹⁰⁷ Abu Zayd’s use of the word “old” (*qudama*’), which also means outdated and warned out, reflects Abu Zayd’s stance on this issue.

What happens when obedience becomes the cornerstone of faith? According to Abu Zayd, “It is natural in this legal framework that the concept of obedience of men is most stressed. The legislature enjoys a higher sacred authority that all earthly authorities lack.”¹⁰⁸ In a society governed by such a legal framework, not only does obedience determine the value of people, Abu Zayd argued, their very humanity becomes contingent upon it. Since theologians have confounded that which is strictly religious and that which is purely social, everything has fallen under the umbrella of religion. Consequently, discrimination against people based on their religion became the norm, a norm that began with marginalization of the non-Muslim but easily extended to disobedient Muslims as well.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, from Abu Zayd’s point of view, classical theology was a critical component to creating authoritarianism throughout Muslim history.

Continuing his attack on classical theology, Abu Zayd argued that this alliance between rulers and theologians who worked with them held mutual benefit for both. To ensure mechanisms of control, the political powers allocated status, including such titles

¹⁰⁷ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir al-Khawf*, 168-9.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 165-6.

as *'alim*, or religious scholar, as well as financial rewards to individuals who provided readings of sacred texts that supported their rule. These so-called *'ulama'*, Abu Zayd contended, accused the rulers' opponents of apostasy in order to eliminate or silence adversaries. He lamented the fact that some of the most prominent thinkers in Islamic history, such as Ibn Rushd, were persecuted using this intimidation method.¹¹⁰ Fast-forwarding to the present, he charged that many who claim to speak in the name of Islam "rely in their discourse on all that is narrow-minded and which has been handed down to us from a period in which rulers and princes controlled the production of texts to ensure their hegemony and justify their rule."¹¹¹ Contemporary religious discourse, in Abu Zayd's reading, thus has its roots in historical periods that were marked by political oppression.

Abu Zayd regretted that the influence of scholars such as the medievalist al-Ghazali continues to be dominant in Arab culture while that of the rational Ibn Rushd is marginalized.¹¹² He attributed this dominance to authoritarian rule and political oppression that were active in falsifying awareness regarding history.¹¹³ As far as Abu Zayd was concerned, rational thought would have been more dominant and popular were it not for political tyranny that supported its opposite. This argument is based in Abu Zayd's presupposition that reason and rational thought have an inherently superior appeal.

Abu Zayd's approach is ahistorical in several respects. He made no distinction between classical theologians and contemporary Islamists and co-opted *'ulama'*.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 137.

¹¹² Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 24-7.

¹¹³ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 9.

Hirschkind noted that “the polemical and often disparaging tone which Abu Zayd addresses the work of earlier respected scholars, as well as his contemporaries, was seen as unfitting for one supposedly working within the same tradition of moral inquiry.”¹¹⁴ A product of his own time and place, he projects modern circumstances into different historic eras and conditions. For example, he neglected to appreciate the sophistication of medieval theology, which is largely absent from modern Islamic thought. He failed to appreciate facts about the pre-nation state world, such as the lack of borders, which enabled scholars to travel in search of knowledge from one area to another, as did the famous Tunisian scholar Ibn Khaldun. Furthermore, in his generalizations, Abu Zayd claimed to know what is in many of these scholars’ hearts and what really motivated them to produce their scholarship. For him, theologians were necessarily only appeasing their patrons and furthering authoritarianism.

Kamrava addresses the dominance of traditional views in the Muslim world with more insight. For example, he drew attention to the assumption that Islam “created the perfect social order, and along with it established all the institutions that society needs.” This conviction, Kamrava argues, leads to “denial of legitimacy of innovation” and consequently to institutional fixity.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, Kamrava names the lack of institutional context as a major causal factor, emphasizing the absence and urgent need for institutions that allow for more innovative study of Islam. Kamrava notes “the absence of a mechanism in Islam whereby bodies of jurisprudential, theological, and philosophical knowledge can each be systematically collected, compiled, and, most

¹¹⁴ Hirschkind, "Heresy or Hermeneutics: The Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," 473.

¹¹⁵ *Innovation in Islam: Traditions and Contributions*, 7.

importantly, built upon.”¹¹⁶ Kamrava’s nuanced analysis exposes Abu Zayd’s fixation with political and theological tyranny, which seem to be rooted in specific modern political context, as simplistic.

Another accusation Abu Zayd articulated against the theologians is establishing hierarchy, in terms of who has the right to interpret the sacred text. He argued that the right to interpretation should be “democratic and open,”¹¹⁷ meaning that no individual or establishment can claim a monopoly to understanding the sacred messages of God. Abu Zayd wrote:

If we are serious about freeing religious thought from power manipulation, whether political, social, or religious, and want to empower the community of believers to formulate ‘meaning’, we need to construct open democratic hermeneutics. The empirical diversity of religious meaning is part of human diversity around the meaning of life in general, which is supposed to be a positive value in the context of modern life.¹¹⁸

Abu Zayd here revealed his ideal for a modern relationship between the sacred text and individuals.

Hoigilt observes in Abu Zayd’s scholarship a concern for making the Qur’an “an object of interpretation for the laity” as opposed to “an object of worship.”¹¹⁹ He wrote that the underlying presumption in the religious establishment’s argument is that “only the elite could really understand God’s word,” a claim which Abu Zayd strongly refuted.¹²⁰ Hoigilt also notes the disparity between speech and action of supporters the religious discourse. He notes that modern theologians emphasize that “there is no clergy

¹¹⁶ For more detailed discussion see, *ibid.*, 7-9.

¹¹⁷ Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 99.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Hoigilt, *Islamist Rhetoric: Language and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*, 155.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

in Islam,” yet they insist on the superiority of themselves as Islamic clerics.¹²¹ He gives the example of Qaradawi who insists that only “specialized, contemporary ‘*ulama*’” have the authority to determine matters of interpretations and Islamic opinions.¹²² Building on Hoigilt’s observation, we may note that this right and authority to interpret the texts does not appear to extend to scholars of Islam when they espouse views that differ from those of the members of the religious establishment. Consequently, to advocate the individual’s right to interpret the Qur’an has ramifications not only in disempowering established institutions and independent theologians but also in empowering individual rights to independent reasoning.

Abu Zayd saw the current construction of a religious hierarchy as a violation of a major Islamic principle: equality. While religious establishments and Islamists alike rhetorically stress the importance of equality in Islam, in practice they insist on a hierarchy that gives them authority to demand obedience. He wrote that for the state or any group to claim to have the exclusive understanding of Islam “violates the basic premise of faith, that it is for all people, regardless of their background.”¹²³ Intellectuals ascribing to the religious discourse, Abu Zayd argued, need to remember that one of Islam’s first messages undermined the hierarchy of the tribes and instituted equality among all people, regardless of their race, ethnicity and background.¹²⁴ Jamal al-Banna, echoing Abu Zayd, argued that Islam, like other religions, came to empower the weak against the tyrant (Moses against the Pharaohs, Jesus against the Romans and Muhammad against the tyranny of tribalism). He claimed that it came to institute

¹²¹ Ibid., 155-6.

¹²² Ibid., 61.

¹²³ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta’wil*, 60.

¹²⁴ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 170-1.

equality, not hierarchy.¹²⁵

Other modernists echo Abu Zayd's belief that the religious establishment has strayed from true Islam in its attempt to secure for itself higher status than the people. Muhammad Shahrour condemns "the formal religious establishment's attempts to preserve the status quo in order to defend its accumulated privileges," adding that, furthermore, "extremist fundamentalists try to reclaim for themselves the authority of religion and to pry it away from the state."¹²⁶ Husni also argued that Islam has developed its own *kahanut* (priesthood), as people and institutions that speak in Islam's name attempt to interfere in every aspect of people's lives and to limit their sources of knowledge to one, namely, themselves. At the same time, a different hierarchy is put in place by the religious establishment, which is always aligned with and controlled by the political authority.¹²⁷ As Husni wrote, religious oppression and political tyranny are united in their strife to dominate.¹²⁸

In his argument against hierarchy, Abu Zayd sought to advance a modern concept of equality. He did not fully acknowledge the ramifications of such equality as far as the right to interpret the Qur'an goes. Is it possible or even necessary to eliminate hierarchy in knowledge entirely? Many would not want to exercise this entitlement to a personal interpretation but rather take comfort in the opinions of the learned. Abu Zayd did not address these questions in his works, leaving a significant lacuna in his theory. He did not contemplate the possibility that many Muslims appreciate the contributions of theologians and place them on higher grounds precisely because of their learning.

¹²⁵ Banna, *Hal Yumkin Taqbiq al-Shari'a?*, 62.

¹²⁶ Muhammad Shahrour, "The Divine Text and Pluralism in Muslim Societies," in *The New Voices of Islam*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 146.

¹²⁷ Husni, *Ilmaniyyat al-Islam*, 23-4.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

Finally, Abu Zayd saw adherents to the religious discourse in the contemporary period not only attempting to monopolize knowledge of religion but actively trying to prohibit others from seeking knowledge outside their approval by using the weapon of excommunication (*takfir*).¹²⁹ Abu Zayd wrote: “Today, to think something different from the conclusions our ancestors made is blasphemy, heresy and apostasy.”¹³⁰ Hirsh noted that, especially in his book *Thinking in the Age of Excommunication*, Abu Zayd was so aware of the excommunication phenomenon that he treated it as the norm while exercising the act of thinking the exception.¹³¹

Other scholars also note that the twentieth century marked a shift in the intellectual arena in Egypt and the wider Arab world, with erosion of a space to safely debate and exchange ideas safely. This change is marked by increased threat of religious violence or excommunication, as in the case of Nasr Abu Zayd. In his dissertation on the Islamist-secularist discourses, Glicksber notes the “non-accommodating, dialogue-shunning stance that many Islamists took towards Abu Zayd and his defenders.” He also stresses the undeniable “shift from an accommodating to a non-accommodating stance on the part of Egypt’s Islamists” that has taken place over the twentieth century.¹³²

Hoigilt also noted that theologians are implicated in inciting violence against intellectuals. He cited the example of Faraj Fuda who was assassinated by an extremist after he pronounced an apostate by the prominent shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali. Al-Ghazali “stated shortly before the assassination that it was a duty for any Muslim to

¹²⁹ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 19.

¹³⁰ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 152.

¹³¹ Hirsh, "Al-Qira'a al-Naqdiyya," 18.

¹³² Glicksberg, "The Islamist Movement and the Subversion of Secularism in Modern Egypt," x-xi.

punish an apostate if the state apparatus did not do it.”¹³³ Fuda had criticized al-Ghazali’s views and, like Abu Zayd, saw himself as a Muslim defending Islam from the manipulations of theologians.¹³⁴ Similarly, the stabbing of Nagib Mahfouz followed a condemnation by the official religious establishment in Egypt banning his novel, *Awlad Haratina*.¹³⁵

Abu Zayd saw the supporters of the religious discourse as violently attempting to limit the role of rationalism, which he saw as contradicting Islam’s values. To Abu Zayd, Islam encourages, if not requires, the use of reason.¹³⁶ He wrote that adherents to the religious discourse, despite paying lip service to the contrary, “hold latent enmity towards science because the later is taking its place slowly but surely.”¹³⁷ In another context Abu Zayd wrote that those who ascribe to the religious discourse are hostile to any science that does not make their discourse the sole authority for knowledge. They, he charged, “negate natural and social laws and negate any knowledge that does not have support from the religious discourse or the authority of theologians.”¹³⁸

Elizabeth Kassab notes the emphasis Abu Zayd places on reason as a Qur’anic principle and his assertion that “an Islam [that is] sure of itself can and should afford free discussions and open debates.” The problem, she points out, “is that Islam in this politically, militarily, economically, and culturally tormented Arab region is far from being sure and comfortable with itself.”¹³⁹ Abu Zayd would have agreed with this assessment, as he recognized the insecurity and fear in his contemporary religious

¹³³ Hoigilt, *Islamist Rhetoric: Language and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*, 34.

¹³⁴ Faraj Fuda, *Al-Haqiqa al-Gha’iba* [The absent truth] (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr, 1988).

¹³⁵ Hoigilt, *Islamist Rhetoric: Language and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*, 34.

¹³⁶ Abu Zayd, *Dawa’ir al-Khawf*, 5-7.

¹³⁷ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 146.

¹³⁸ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 34.

¹³⁹ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 194.

environment. He argued that in the estimation of the supporters of the religious discourse, “complete indulgence in science would lead to annulment of the revelation and the divine message.”¹⁴⁰ Therefore, they perceived science as posing a threat to religion.

The challenge, Abu Zayd wrote, between modernists and advocates of the religious discourse is that the former are at a disadvantage at the current time. He argued that there is a war between liberal thinkers and those who want to impose their view of *shari’a* on others. He wrote, “it is a war in the literal and not the figurative sense that Islamists are waging using the weapons of excommunicating (*takfir*), apostasy (*ridda*) and secularism (*ilmaniyya*)—which they have made equivalent to atheism—against any rational inquiry (*ijtihad*) that contradicts their own. Such accusations of atheism are often followed by the actual shooting of bullets by militant wings of various Islamist groups.”¹⁴¹ On the other hand, secular intellectuals who oppose Islamists, Abu Zayd pointed out, do not have militant wings like those of the Islamists or the security apparatus of the state; they are thus left to fight the war with words alone.¹⁴² In fact, even at the level of words secularists are at a disadvantage, given the censorship on their works.

Refuting Hakimiyya

Abu Zayd wrote that the application of *shari’a* law “is a primary demand in contemporary religious thought.”¹⁴³ He argued that for many Muslims, *hakimiyya*, or God’s governance, is divinely ordained and therefore should be the ultimate form of

¹⁴⁰ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta’wil*, 115.

¹⁴¹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Takfir fi Zaman al-Takfir*, 33.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Abu Zayd, *Maqhum al-Nass*, 14.

government for the Muslim world.¹⁴⁴ However, believing that *shari‘a* is mostly man-made theology, Abu Zayd rejected *hakimiyya* and argued that enforcing it would result not in the fulfillment of God’s rule but in the imposition of human thought on Muslims under divine pretense.¹⁴⁵ This section will examine Abu Zayd’s reasoning behind his rejection of *hakimiyya*.

The use of the word *hakimiyya* started in the second half of the twentieth century with Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian intellectual and a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Qutb declared that “the whole world today lives in *jahiliyya*,” a term used to describe the pre-Islamic era. Conventionally, as Shepard points out, the word has been translated as “the age of ignorance.”¹⁴⁶ For Qutb, however, *jahiliyya* means “attacking God’s sovereignty over the earth and violating God’s most intimate attributes: *hakimiyya*,” which he defined as God’s right to be the sole sovereign on earth.¹⁴⁷ To Qutb, the extent to which God’s rule is absent in contemporary times rivals the pre-Islamic state of ignorance, thus returning us to a new era of *jahiliyya*. Qutb lamented the fact that “humans are ruled by humans as opposed to being ruled by God,”¹⁴⁸ believing that because man’s sole purpose on earth is to worship God, he has no right to legislate for himself.¹⁴⁹ He recalled the Qur’anic verse: “And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me”¹⁵⁰ Thus, for Qutb, men must live under *hakimiyya*, God’s rule.

Qutb’s thought is significant because it marked a shift in Islamist political discourse. It provided contemporary ideological reasoning not only for establishing an

¹⁴⁴ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 62-80.

¹⁴⁵ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 90.

¹⁴⁶ William E. Shepard, "Sayyid Qutb's Doctrine of 'Jāhiliyya'," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 35, no. 4 (2003): 522.

¹⁴⁷ Sayyid Qutb, *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* [Milestones] (Beirut: Dar al-Shuruq, 1979), 8.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 47-8.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁵⁰ www.Quran.com, 51:56.

Islamic state but also for committing violence against fellow Muslims to achieve that end. Nettler refers to Qutb as “perhaps the most important Islamist thinkers of the 20th century.”¹⁵¹ In developing his ideology, Qutb was influenced by the Pakistani theologian Abu Al-‘Ala’ al-Maududi. Maududi argued that “if someone claimed to be the ruler of a country, his claim would be equivalent to a claim to be God in the metaphysical realm.”¹⁵² Abu Zayd wrote that for Maududi, *jahiliyya* combines three forms of disbelief: atheism, polytheism, and Sufism¹⁵³. According to Maududi, *jahiliyya* started to infiltrate Islam right after the era of the four rightly guided caliphs. This infiltration led to an adulteration of true Islam with the adoption of philosophy, literature and sciences from other civilizations, such as the Greek and Persian. According to Abu Zayd, Maududi believed that it was this intrusion of diversity within Islam that was to blame for such developments as the varied schools of thought, including the rationalist Mu‘tazilites, as well as the deviant arts of music, painting, and dancing.¹⁵⁴ Abu Zayd argued that such an “attack on rational thinking and refusal to accept disagreements and pluralism, old and new, is one of the principles on which the concept of *hakimiyya* is founded.”¹⁵⁵ Therefore, for Abu Zayd, *hakimiyya*, as in the sense articulated by both Maududi and Qutb, is not pure Islamic governance but pure authoritarianism.

Not surprisingly, intellectuals ascribing to the religious discourse disagreed with Abu Zayd’s judgment. Qaradawi praised both Qutb and Maududi as distinguished

¹⁵¹ Nettler, "Islam, Politics and Democracy: Mohamed Talbi and Islamic Modernism," 52.

¹⁵² Irfan Ahmad, "Genealogy of the Islamic State: Reflections on Maududi's Political Thought and Islamism," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. s1 (2009): 155.

¹⁵³ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 65-6.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 66.

“*imamas of da‘wa* (Islamic Call) in our times.”¹⁵⁶ ‘Imara accused Abu Zayd of “distorting the concept of *hakimiyya* only to attack it harshly.”¹⁵⁷ He argued that neither Maududi nor Qutb suggested a contradiction between *hakimiyya* of humans and that of God. Puzzled, ‘Imara wrote: “We do not know where he [Abu Zayd] perceived this contradiction.”¹⁵⁸ He concluded that Abu Zayd, in violation of the rules of scientific inquiry, clearly did not read either Maududi or Qutb but selectively quoted some of their writings out of context.¹⁵⁹ According to ‘Imara, Qutb, as well as Maududi, “advocated *hakimiyya* of humans and the populace.”¹⁶⁰ Therefore, in diversion from the modernist perspective, ‘Imara understood the teachings of Qutb and Maududi to advocate simultaneously God’s governance and human legislation. However, that Qutb advocated that man does not legislate for himself, as marked earlier, is stated in Qutb’s own words.

The concept of *hakimiyya* has become widely known in the Arab world since Sayyid Qutb coined it. Establishing Islamic governance in accordance with God’s sovereignty, as opposed to such man-made systems as democracy, is a notion espoused by many Islamists, especially after the 1967 Arab defeat by Israel. To Abu Zayd, all advocates of the slogan “Islam is the solution” are in favour of some form of *hakimiyya*.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ Yusuf Qaradawi, al, *Bayanat al-Hal al-Islami wa Shubuhāt al-‘Ilmaniyyin wa al-Mutagharribin* [Evidence for the Islamic Solution and the Dubious Arguments of Secularists and Westernizers] (Cairo: Al-Matba‘a al-Fanniyya, 1993).

¹⁵⁷ ‘Imara, *Al-Tafsir al-Marksi li al-Islam*, 108.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 109.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 110.

¹⁶¹ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 82-3.

Defining Hakimiyya

Abu Zayd argued that the concept of *hakimiyya* is ideological, rather than Islamic, because it is based on a misapplication of the original meaning of the word.¹⁶² Abu Zayd pointed out that *hakimiyya* is derived from the root word *hakama*, which, at the time of the revelation, meant to arbitrate among quarrelling parties, and not, as it is currently the case, to rule or govern. This latter meaning, Abu Zayd wrote, “is a modern political concept associated with the birth of the modern nation state.”¹⁶³ In other words, Qutb imposed his own modern political ideology on a Qur’anic concept that carried a different connotation. However, Abu Zayd himself imposed modern political meaning on old terms, such as *ijtihad*.

To support his claim regarding the original meaning of the word, Abu Zayd pointed out that in all the Qur’anic verses in which this word, or one of its derivatives, is mentioned, it is used solely to denote the meaning of arbitrating disputes.¹⁶⁴ Reaching the same conclusion, Husni points out that at the time of the Prophet, the word *hakama* carried the meaning of adjudicating disputes. More specifically, it appears in the context of the Prophet’s intervention in resolving disputes among various parties.¹⁶⁵ Qaradawi, however, defined *hakimiyya* in the same manner as Qutb, defending Qutb in what Qaradawi saw as a right desire to reserve governance to God alone. He wrote, *hakimiyya* means “God alone is the legislator. He orders and prohibits. He decides what is allowed

¹⁶² Ibid., 67.

¹⁶³ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 127.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Husni, *Ilmaniyyat al-Islam*, 365.

and what is not.”¹⁶⁶ Qaradawi’s use of the word exemplifies the manner in which the new definition of the word has become accepted in Islamic circles.

However, that the word had different connotations in classical times than it does now does not constitute a contradiction. Words often evolve in meaning and assume different meanings with the passage of time. For Abu Zayd, however, the original meaning is significant because if one is to understand the Qur’an and its messages accurately, one must know what words meant in that specific linguistic and historical context. By imposing modern meaning on the ancient text, Abu Zayd charged, supporters of the religious discourse are manipulating the Qur’an to justify its political goal of establishing a theological state. He gave the example of the Qur’anic verse often quoted by proponents of *hakimiyya* as evidence of the legitimacy of their claim, “And whoever does not judge [*yahkum*] by what Allah has revealed - then it is those who are the disbelievers [*kuffar*]”¹⁶⁷ Abu Zayd argued that those who quote the verse often impose on it the modern meaning of governance and ruling, rather than arbitration of daily disputes, taking it out of its specific context. To quote the verse only partially further obscures that context.¹⁶⁸ The complete verse reads:

Indeed, We sent down the Torah, in which was guidance and light. The prophets who submitted [to Allah] judged by it for the Jews, as did the rabbis and scholars by that with which they were entrusted of the Scripture of Allah , and they were witnesses thereto. So do not fear the people but fear Me, and do not exchange My verses for a small price. And whoever does not judge by what Allah has revealed - then it is those who are the disbelievers.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ Qaradawi, *Bayanat al-Hal al-Islami wa Shubihat al-'Ilmaniyyn wa al-Mutagharrabin*, 163-5.

¹⁶⁷ www.Quran.com, 5:44.

¹⁶⁸ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 127.

¹⁶⁹ www.Quran.com, 5:44.

Referring to al-Tabari's *tafsir* (interpretation) of the verse, Abu Zayd pointed out that the verse concerns the Jews who have their own holy book of Torah and whose judges would arbitrate in favour of whoever bribes the judge. Al-Tabari explained that *kufir*, in the case of those who do not arbitrate or judge justly, means falsehood for the purpose of accomplishing worldly material gain. Thus, neither *hukm* nor *kufir* in this context carries the modern day meanings of the imposition of political rule and disbelief in Islam, respectively.¹⁷⁰

Intellectuals who adhere to religious discourse, according to Abu Zayd, ignore the occasions of the revelation of these verses (*asbab al-nuzul*). Abu Zayd pointed out that in the fourteen verses in which the word *hakama* or one of its variations is mentioned in the Qur'an, the word is used in the dialectic debates between the Prophet and the People of the Book, mostly the Jews of Medina, giving Muhammad the choice to arbitrate the disputes of non-Muslims because they already have their own holy doctrine.¹⁷¹ For Abu Zayd, neglecting this specific context constitutes manipulation of the sacred text to justify political ideology.

Zayd argued that the misleading manner in which this Qur'anic verse is quoted would be equivalent to saying that God forbade prayer because the Qur'an says so, reciting the Qur'anic verse: "O you who have believed, do not approach prayer."¹⁷² However, an examination of the whole verse would reveal that the ban is contingent upon the state of mind.¹⁷³ The verse reads: "O you who have believed, do not approach prayer while you

¹⁷⁰ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 127-9.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 127-30.

¹⁷² www.Quran.com, 4:43.

¹⁷³ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 127.

are intoxicated until you know what you are saying [...].”¹⁷⁴ The moral of the story, for Abu Zayd, is that quoting the Qur’an should not automatically end a debate on an issue, for taking a verse out of its context or imposing a modern meaning on it can drastically change its original message.

The lack of consideration for these components – evolution in meaning and context – calls into question the accuracy of arguments of proponents of *hakimiyya*, as far as modernists like Abu Zayd are concerned. Abu Zayd stated that Islamists of all backgrounds and political agendas “seek to impose their domination and hegemony on the mind and culture of the *umma*. They want to be the authoritative reference in our lives, but they are ideological. They practise manipulation by pretending to represent the authority of the [sacred] text. The text appears to read only according to their own interpretation.”¹⁷⁵ In his insistence on knowing the malicious, politically motivated intent of his opponents, Abu Zayd practised the very intellectual certainty of which he accused his opponents. He did not consider the possibility that they did in fact believe that such a course would not only serve Islam but is in fact an integral part of it. To him, Islam simply was not political, and it was this very denial of the political aspect of Islam that, according to Hirsh, helped lead to his charges of apostasy.¹⁷⁶ Here the difference between modernists and advocates of the religious discourse over the existence of a polity in Islam is most apparent. As Nettler points out, what distinguishes modernists from other thinkers is their “rejection of a political nature for Islam.”¹⁷⁷ However, for their opponents, as the following chapter argues, Islam is political by its very nature.

¹⁷⁴ www.Quran.com, 4:43.

¹⁷⁵ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 131.

¹⁷⁶ Hirsh, "Al-Qira'a al-Naqdiyya," 23.

¹⁷⁷ Nettler, "Islam, Politics and Democracy: Mohamed Talbi and Islamic Modernism," 53.

Jahiliyya and 'Ubudiyya

Abu Zayd launched his critique against *hakimiyya* also on the grounds of the two other main concepts used to define *hakimiyya* ideology, namely, *jahiliyya* (ignorance) and *'ubudiyya* (worship or slavery). He argued that Qutb and his Islamist followers imposed their own ideological meaning on these words as well. Basing his own analysis on the use of “*jahiliyya*” in pre-Islamic poetry, Abu Zayd argued that in pre-Islamic Arabic, the word meant “succumbing to one’s emotions and passion without regard to the equilibrium of rationality or the force of logic.”¹⁷⁸ Poetry from the time of the revelation, Abu Zayd argued, reveals that *jahiliyya* should be understood to be the opposite of reason and logic.¹⁷⁹ Not surprising, this understanding carries quite different implications than that of the adherents to religious discourse.

Providing another meaning for the term, Abu Zayd recalled that pre-Islamic *jahiliyya* was littered with tribal raids and struggles for dominance.¹⁸⁰ Taking his argument on the link between *jahiliyya* and tribalism further, he contended that *jahiliyya* also means tribal norms, or “Bedouin tribal code.”¹⁸¹ He wrote: “The Qur’an espouses a set of values and rules that is in direct contradiction to the Bedouin tribal code; therefore, the Qur’an considered the Bedouin tribal code *jahiliyyah*.”¹⁸² Abu Zayd wrote that the Qur’an aimed at establishing a community in place of the tribal system. Freedom, he argued, was an essential part of this transformation. He wrote: “Qur’anic values are built on the concepts of freedom and justice—freedom of thought in order to bring about a just

¹⁷⁸ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 56.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 56-7.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 170.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

society.”¹⁸³ Here, as he did consistently elsewhere, Abu Zayd highlighted modern concepts such as freedom of thought as being inherently part of Islam.

In associating the original, anti-*jahiliyya* message of Islam with modern concepts such as critical thinking and reasoning, Abu Zayd argued: “The essence of Islam’s call is to establish reason (*‘aql*).”¹⁸⁴ This connection between reason and Islam is at the heart of the success story of Islam, he insisted. Abu Zayd wrote that “the Arab Islamic culture remained alive and robust as long as it was predominantly preoccupied with establishing reason (*‘aql*), pluralism and freedom of thought.”¹⁸⁵ But here he betrays his own call to read history in its contexts, reading into the definition of *jahiliyya* as much modern ideology as the definition provided by the religious discourse. By contrast, Khattab argues, *jahiliyya*, in its own historical context, is a sophisticated linguistic and cultural system.¹⁸⁶ Therefore, to reduce an era into one aspect of it, be it polytheism, tribalism or man’s sovereignty, would be a gross simplification. Nettler writes that “modernists represent a highly particular intellectual reconsideration of traditional thought with the construction of a ‘New Islam’. To their minds, their ‘New Islam’ is not only consonant with the modern world, but embodies the original essence or core of the tradition.”¹⁸⁷ Therefore, ironically, modernists share with many Islamists the desire to revive what they perceive as Islam’s original values.

As for the word *ubudiyya*, the word *‘abd* can mean a human being, a servant or a slave.¹⁸⁸ Abu Zayd argued that proponents of the religious discourse stress the meaning of

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 62.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 63.

¹⁸⁶ Sayed Khatab, *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb: The Theory of Jahiliyyah* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 10-43.

¹⁸⁷ Nettler, "Islam, Politics and Democracy: Mohamed Talbi and Islamic Modernism," 50.

¹⁸⁸ *Qamus al-Alfaz al-Islamiyya*, [Dictionary of Islamic Terms] (Damascus: Al-Yamama, 1995), 273.

slavery, rather than worship, to advocate *hakimiyya*. He accused the proponents of the religious discourse of seeing the relationship between man and God exclusively through the paradigm of slave-master as opposed to a loving creator and his creation.¹⁸⁹ Abu Zayd stated:

[Supporters of] the religious discourse, in establishing the concept of *hakimiyya* on the basis of slavery [*ubudiyya*], resorts to two contradictory mechanisms. They insist on the literal historic meaning of slavery of man to God and, at the same time, they stretch the meaning of *hukm* [to arbitrate or judge] to renders the meaning of comprehensive governance. In both instances the real meaning is absent, the historical context is denied, and the present and reality are skipped to the time during which the text was produced.¹⁹⁰

Abu Zayd explained that at the time of the Prophet, slavery was common. He argued that '*ubudiyya* was mentioned in the Qur'an figuratively in a society where slavery meant possessing a human being, body and soul. However, humanity has evolved since and slavery is no longer acceptable. Yet, he protested, supporters of the religious discourse insist on the literal meaning of slavery.¹⁹¹ Abu Zayd contested that the "Qur'anic text does not construct the relationship between humans and God on the basis of slavery but rather on the basis of worship."¹⁹²

In imposing the literal meaning of slavery on '*ubudiyya*, Abu Zayd wrote, the artisans of the religious discourse are attempting to "negate the relationship of love, closeness and loyalty that exist between humans and God."¹⁹³ The foundational master-slave relationship between God and humans, Abu Zayd pointed out, denies man's reason, the very mechanism of accepting God's revelation. But perhaps this is precisely the goal,

¹⁸⁹ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 84.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 222-3.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 226.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 110.

to Abu Zayd, as it makes man inconsequential and docile enough to accept tyrannical rule without questioning, thereby serving the political end goal of establishing an Islamic state.¹⁹⁴ Therefore, Abu Zayd saw the reading of his opponents as furthering their political agenda.

Notably, in their argument for and against *hakimiyya*, both Qutb and Abu Zayd insisted that Islam came to liberate man from slavery. Qutb emphasized that Islam is unique in liberating men from being enslaved to one another to being all equally slaves to God.¹⁹⁵ To Abu Zayd, while *hakimiyya* claims to end the enslavement of humans of one another, it in fact enslaves them to individuals who claim to speak in God's name.¹⁹⁶ For him, *hakimiyya* makes people enslaved to religious texts that say what certain theologians want them to say.¹⁹⁷ Notably, neither Abu Zayd nor Qutb dwell on the fact the Islam did not ban slavery outright but simply encouraged the freeing of slaves. The actual language and context are marginalized as each party projected into Islam a reading that advanced its contemporary political vision.

Another shortcoming in Abu Zayd's argument is that even in the midst of his preoccupation with reason, he is clearly selective. He did not, for example, discuss the Islamic concept of surrender. The Islamic faith itself derives its name from the concept of surrendering to God. Yet, for Abu Zayd, its meaning is based solely on concepts such as reason, human rights and freedom of thought, entirely modern concepts in the way he used them. For supporters of the religious discourse, submission is the cornerstone of Islam. For example, Qaradawi wrote that "as long as we are Muslims, we must surrender

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 86.

¹⁹⁵ Qutb, *Ma'alim*, 8, 24, 37, 46.

¹⁹⁶ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 85.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

our daily matters to Islamic rule. The truth about Islam is that you abdicate leadership to God. You share nothing with him.”¹⁹⁸ Consequently, the gap between modernists and proponents of the religious discourse appears unbridgeable as each party insists on its exclusive interpretation.

Politics of Hakimiyya

Yvonne Haddad pointed out that for Qutb, “To be effective, Islam must be able to supervise the lives of the believers to ensure that they obey the laws of God.”¹⁹⁹ Abu Zayd saw in such a system authoritarian rule that gives itself “monopoly over truth and consequently monopoly over decision-making.”²⁰⁰ The faulty premise in Qutb’s ideology of *hakimiyya*, Abu Zayd argued, is its premise of “permanent infallibility,” with the presupposition that no mistakes will take place in a divinely ordained system.²⁰¹ Qutb assumes without justification that the sacred text offers a clear vision for an Islamic state, one that is perfect in every way. As he wrote, “God’s regime is good in its very nature because it is from God. No legislation from slaves will ever be like God’s.”²⁰² Qutb did not address how he would compel people to act according to this vision of God’s governance. It is not clear if he assumed that they would willingly adhere to the new system or if he thought they would be disciplined into being perfect citizens.

Abu Zayd also noted two faulty presuppositions in Qutb’s vision. First, it presupposes the existence of one clear interpretation for the Qur’an when, far from

¹⁹⁸ Yusuf Qaradawi, al, *Al-Islam wa al-Ilmaniyya Wajhan li Wajh* [Islam and Secularism Face-to-Face] (Cairo: Matba’at Al-Madani 1997), 16.

¹⁹⁹ Yvonne Y Haddad, *Contemporary Islam and the Challenge of History* (New York: SUNY Press, 1982), 93.

²⁰⁰ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 83.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Qutb, *Ma’alim*, 37.

having clear and definitive instructions, the Qur'an is open to interpretations and reinterpretation, as the historical reality of Islamic thought has shown.²⁰³ Second, it assumes that the sacred text has tackled all issues of daily life, which is not the case, especially given the developments in Muslim communities since the seventh century. Abu Zayd argued that the texts do not reflect the complex and convoluted social reality of human relations.²⁰⁴ Therefore, he pointed out, *hakimiyya*, while rhetorically offering a road map to a utopian liberation of humans, in application, it ends up enslaving them to theologians who place themselves above others and grant themselves exclusive rights to speak in God's name.²⁰⁵

Hakimiyya, as Qutb articulated it, is averse to political diversity. He asserted, "There is only one party for God and all other parties are for the devil."²⁰⁶ This assertion, Abu Zayd argued, reveals the hostility Qutb and his followers have towards diversity and dissent.²⁰⁷ Consequently, Abu Zayd pointed out, *hakimiyya* is so contrary to diversity that even theologians and religious scholars who disagree with a singular perspective would be subject to persecution.²⁰⁸ As a political project, it is therefore the rule of the minority who possess exclusive monopoly to interpret and legislate – a problem evident in the Arab world, which has caused stagnation and paralysis.

Abu Zayd concluded that the promise of *hakimiyya* is modelled after the existing Arab dictatorships but with religious overtones. The only difference is that whereas in secular dictatorships the struggle is between people and government, in religious

²⁰³ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 62-3.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁰⁶ Qutb, *Ma'alim*, 136.

²⁰⁷ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 75.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 74-5.

authoritarianism, “The battlefield moves from the realm of people against people to people against God.”²⁰⁹ Consequently, while it may appear on the surface that the struggle between the Islamists and political regimes concerns the application of *shari’a* law versus man-made laws, Abu Zayd insisted that in fact, “It is a struggle between political powers that are closely connected in their understanding of power, authority and control.”²¹⁰

Other modernists who espouse similar views to Abu Zayd include Jamal al-Banna and Muhammad Talbi. Al-Banna pointed out that even if the state were to enforce *shari’a* law, that would not make it truly Islamic, as the state cannot control people’s conscience. Like Abu Zayd, he asserted that “having a religious state was never part of Islam. Islam did not come to form a state.” Rather, Islam came to guide and enlighten people.²¹¹ Therefore, imposing *hakimiyya* serves no purpose but political hegemony. Likewise Talbi argues that Islam does not mandate a political system. He points out that “the Qur’an is not a constitution.”²¹² For these modernists, Islamists are working to replace one political tyranny with another.

Conclusion

The issue of *hakimiyya* exposes a central point of contention between modernists like Abu Zayd and those who see in Islam a political project. Nettler noted that “modernists usually downplay the political and social dimension, rigorously and in quite

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 85-6.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 84.

²¹¹ Banna, *Hal Yumkin Taqbiq al-Shari'a?*, 18.

²¹² Nettler, "Islam, Politics and Democracy: Mohamed Talbi and Islamic Modernism," 54.

a thoroughgoing way.”²¹³ Likewise, Hatina also argues that the purpose of using the mechanisms of historicizing the Qur’an, emphasizing its ethical purpose, and applying reason to its interpretation is to “depoliticize Islam.”²¹⁴ Indeed, Abu Zayd believed that including religion in the political system would only result in “political oppression, social subjugation and false consciousness.”²¹⁵ Even more critically, such a state would compromise “the spiritual and ethical dimension of Islam.”²¹⁶

However, it is important to note that Abu Zayd exhibited respect for people’s choice if they willingly vote for such an experience. He wrote that “If the masses, due to their lack of awareness, chose the Islamic solution, then it is their right to go through the experience they chose. They must pay the price necessary to achieve their historic and social awareness.”²¹⁷ In other words, if it is the only way people would discern the meaning of a religious dictatorship then they should try it. He supported democracy, wherever it leads. For him personally, however, as the following chapter will argue, secularism is the most appropriate form of government. Not only did he see secularism as more conducive to sound government and fair societies, but he also believed it would protect Islam.

²¹³ Ibid., 53.

²¹⁴ Meir Hatina, "Arab Liberal Discourse: Old Dilemmas, New Visions," *Middle East Critique* 20, no. 01 (2011): 10.

²¹⁵ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 34.

²¹⁶ Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 95.

²¹⁷ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 65.

CHAPTER THREE: SECULARISM IS THE SOLUTION

The nineteenth-century modernization process begun in the newly-formed nation states created a dichotomy in the legal and political system of Egypt. The result was a mix of new laws and regulations adopted from Europe alongside old religious and traditional norms that have been passed down from one generation to the next.¹ Political authority in Egypt, while largely secular, exerted influence over religious institutions and consequently influenced the masses. Abu Zayd believed that this marriage between religion and the state is detrimental not only to society but also to Islam itself. He advocated for the state to adopt secularism, completely removing what is religious from the political equation. This chapter will examine and analyse Abu Zayd's argument, demonstrating his philosophical reasoning and the religious tenets undergirding his position.

Before delving into Abu Zayd's definition of secularism, it is helpful to shed light on the political atmosphere that shaped Abu Zayd's thought. At the turn of the twentieth century, Arabs throughout the Muslim world were longing for independence from colonial rule. The independence that eventually came, however, failed to effect actual liberation as the indigenous regimes that rose to power proved to be just as, if not more, oppressive than their colonial predecessors. During the decades that followed, dictators ruled with brute force, silencing dissent and suppressing liberties. Economic and social stagnation has become the hallmark of Arab regimes and a source of discontent among

¹ Sfeir, "Basic Freedoms in a Fractured Legal Culture: Egypt and the Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," 402.

the Arab masses.²

Opposition to these oppressive regimes took many forms, including dissent on religious grounds. Islamic faith, intertwined with commitment to customs and traditions, has defined the Arab world since the spread of Islam. In modern times, however, a highly politicized brand of Islam emerged. The Egyptian case is an example. There, the Muslim Brotherhood is believed to be the largest political Islamist party. The Brotherhood's influence, in fact, is so deep that, as Munson points out, it has "spawned many of the militant Islamic groups that exist today, including organizations such as Hamas, the Islamic Jihad, and Gamaat Islamiyah."³

For decades, the government attempted to silence opposition from Islamist groups by intimidating, jailing and, at times, executing some of their members. Nevertheless, these means failed to eliminate Islamist opposition, especially as the entrenched dictatorships became more oppressive and corrupt. Islamist opposition, by contrast, soon became associated with increased legitimacy and moral superiority among some Arab citizens. Similarly attempting to harness the extraordinary power of religion, regimes throughout the Arab world nationalized mainstream religious institutions, turning them into mouthpieces for the ruling class. Official religious institutions, such as al-Azhar University, conferred legitimacy on regimes with tenuous foundations of authority. Consequently, rulers and religious political opposition alike used religious symbols to gain legitimacy.⁴

It was as a result of this competition over Islam that religion emerged as the

² Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 19.

³ Ziad Munson, "Islamic Mobilization: Social Movement Theory and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood," *The Sociological Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2001): 487.

⁴ Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 46-80.

arbiter of authenticity and legitimacy throughout the Arab world. In fact, the exploitation of religion has reached even the financial sector with various companies employing religious scholars to bless their transactions as Islamic.⁵ Abu Zayd pointed out that it was through such marketing of religion that “the largest swindle operation in modern history [took place] at the expense of hundreds of thousands of Egyptians who trusted the opinions of those representatives and believed the religious emblems they used.”⁶ This reality evoked criticism by many Arab intellectuals, especially modernists.

Abu Zayd spoke vociferously against the political exploitation of Islam and advocated a secular state and a complete separation between religion and politics. In doing so, he was highly influenced by Ali ‘Abdul-Raziq and his book *Al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm* (Islam and the Foundations of Governance).⁷ An al-Azhar-educated judge and ‘*alim* (senior scholar), ‘Abd al-Raziq used traditional sources to make the case against the marriage of politics and religion.

In his book, ‘Abd al-Raziq developed a theological argument contending that the caliphate, as a type of rule, is not strictly an Islamic practice. In fact, he argued that the Qur’an does not specify *any* particular form of government. The caliphate was developed after the death of Prophet Muhammad, which explains why the Qur’an does not have a single verse in which it is mentioned, let alone advocated, as an Islamic duty. ‘Abd al-Raziq claimed that scholars who were sponsored by rulers, i.e. beneficiaries of the powers of a caliphate, were the ones who propagated the notion that the caliphate is part

⁵ Abu Zayd believed that it was his criticism of this phenomenon that led to his persecution. In his book, *Naqd al-Khitab al-Dini*, 11, Abu Zayd criticized members of the mainstream religious institutions, including Shahin himself, who worked for the company that costs hundreds of thousands of Egyptians their savings. See also, Abu Zayd, Bakr, and Colla, "Silencing is at the Heart of My Case," 29.

⁶ Abu Zayd, "Inquisition Trial in Egypt," 47.

⁷ ‘Abd Al-Raziq, *Al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm*.

of Islam.⁸ He further argued that the Prophet's action of not naming a successor signified his intention that the Muslim *umma* has the right to choose whomever they believe to be most fit to rule them.⁹

'Abd al-Raziq argued that the '*ulama*' have been influenced by ties with the government for centuries and therefore are responsible for the backward state of Muslim world.¹⁰ This is the case because most rulers exploited the authority of Islam to suppress liberties and stifle intellectual progress of science in order to maintain their grip on power. In short, not only is the caliphate not required by Islam, it is in fact responsible for the weakness of Muslims in all aspects of life, including science.¹¹

That such a strong argument came from a judge and al-Azhar scholar was significant. For challenging the religious establishment, like Abu Zayd, 'Abd al-Raziq was subjected to legal persecution and his very faith as a Muslim was publicly questioned, despite his seniority as a religious scholar and position as a judge. Abd al-Raziq was tried in 1925 by *Hay'at Kibar al-'Ulama*' (the Council of Senior Scholars) and his '*alim* (scholar) title was stripped from him.¹² In keeping with the council's decree, he was fired from his position as a judge and forbidden from ever taking another job.¹³

There is good reason to believe that this harsh treatment of a religious scholar was politically motivated. 'Abd al-Raziq's book was perceived as an attack against King Fu'ad's monopoly of power and his aspirations to re-establish the caliphate in Egypt,

⁸ Ibid., 12-20.

⁹ Ibid., 87.

¹⁰ For many examples of this alliances see, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

¹¹ 'Abd Al-Raziq, *Al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm*, 20-31.

¹² *Al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm li 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq* [Islam and the Rules of Governance for Ali 'Abd al-Raziq] (Cairo: Al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li al-Dirasat wa al-Nashr, 2000).

¹³ This decree was annulled by al-Azhar many years later.

with himself as the new caliph.¹⁴ The king mobilized al-Azhar, financially supported by the palace, to silence ‘Abd al-Raziq. The political nature of this case is further evinced by the fact that the justice minister at the time was fired when he questioned the legality of the decree, given that it violated several articles in the Egyptian constitution. The palace quickly appointed a temporary delegate to replace the justice minister, and then the council’s decree against ‘Abd al-Raziq was ratified.¹⁵ Tellingly, the book which was published to attack ‘Abd al-Raziq and question his faith was dedicated to the Treasury of the King.¹⁶

Another of Abu Zayd’s influences was a renowned Islamic scholar who challenged the marriage between religion and politics from within the Islamic tradition named ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi. In his book *‘Taba’i’ al-Istibdad wa Masari’ al-Isti’bad* (The Nature of Tyranny and Harm of Enslavement), Kawakibi argued that the union between the religious and the political realms could only lead to tyranny.¹⁷ Kawakibi stated that jurists who placed rulers above accountability, urging Muslims to obey them by manipulating religious texts have turned Islam into a different religion.¹⁸

‘Abd al-Raziq and Kawakibi, as well as many modernists who followed in their footsteps, profess no influence by the Western enlightenment notion of separation of Church and state. However, their literature indicates that they might have been affected by Western enlightenment. Secularism is credited by many *nahda* scholars with enabling the West’s advancement. They acknowledged the regressive role of Christianity,

¹⁴ Imara, *Al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm li ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq*, 8-9.

¹⁵ Ibid., 103.

¹⁶ Ibid., 19.

¹⁷ Kawakibi, *Taba’i’ al-Istibdad wa Masari’ al-Isti’bad*.

¹⁸ Ibid., 54.

asserting that Islam plays a more favourable role in society.¹⁹ As Kassab points out: “Muslims’ backwardness could only be a transient phenomenon that resulted from misunderstanding Islam,” which the Islamic reformists of the *nahda* era perceived as a religion of reason. However, as ‘Abduh noted: “Christian societies, in contrast, progressed because they had moved away from their religious beliefs.”²⁰ In other words, for Islamic reformists of the *nahda* era, Christianity hindered Christian societies from progressing, where as Islam held within itself a seed of both modernism and progress. Modernists of the second half of the twentieth century are different from the Islamic reformists in that they advocate complete removal of religion from the public sphere.

Defining Secularism in Abu Zayd’s Work

Abu Zayd’s argument that secularism and Islam are compatible was at once an exemplar of the modernist scholars’ work and a uniquely nuanced expression of it. Secularism, broadly understood as the separation between religion and politics, has a particular meaning in the thought of Abu Zayd, though it is one that he shared with many other Arab modernist intellectuals.²¹ Advocating a non-religious worldview, Abu Zayd argued that “at its core, secularism is the genuine and scientific understanding of religion. It is not atheism as the religious discourse proposes it to be.”²² Abu Zayd, like other modernists, appropriated the term and detached it from its Western roots, as he did with modernity. In his view, secularism empowers religion because it frees it from monopoly

¹⁹ This argument is made by ‘Abduh. See, Muhammad ‘Abduh, *Al-Islam bayna al-‘Ilm wa al-Madaniyya* [Islam between Science and Urbanism] (Cairo: Kalimat ‘Arabiyya li al-Targama al-Nashr, 2011).

²⁰ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 90.

²¹ Given the scope of this thesis, I will not delve into Western definitions and argumentations on secularism, especially given the extent to which Muslims scholars localized the term.

²² Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 11.

and, in the process, enables its interpretation to proceed “in a scientific manner that purifies it from myths and at the same time utilizes its inherent momentum to achieve progress, justice and liberty.”²³ Consequently, for Abu Zayd, “a secular state—one that gives no official sanction to any particular religion—gives religion the space it needs to meet the needs of the people. Otherwise, religion easily becomes a weapon in the hands of those in power.”²⁴ Therefore, only in a secular state are people’s spiritual needs met, according to Abu Zayd.

In asserting that secularism “offers genuine protection for religion, creed, freedom of thought and freedom of creativity,”²⁵ one may conclude that for Abu Zayd secularism is the freedom to conduct research on religious matters without persecution from the state or those claiming monopoly on religious thought. A major presumption in Abu Zayd’s understanding of secularism is that it would liberate religious thought from its rigidity and conservatism. Consequently, he assumed that state authority superimposes or protects conservatism in religious thought. Therefore, separation of the powers would result in freedom for religion to evolve and remain relevant to modern times. He did not provide reasons for his preconception, presenting it as a self-evident fact.

Here, Abu Zayd demonstrated what he referred to as “intellectual certainty,” a mechanism he accused the religious discourse of using. The only example he provided was Europe and the Church. Abu Zayd wrote that the separation between politics and religion is responsible for delivering Europe from the Dark Ages “into the space of scientific advancements and liberties.”²⁶ He saw similarities between the historic

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 183.

²⁵ Abu Zayd, *Al-Takfir fi Zaman al-Takfir*, 9-12.

²⁶ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 11-12.

circumstances that brought secularism to Europe and contemporary conditions that have emerged in the Arab world. Equating the religious discourse with the medieval Church, Abu Zayd believed the intellectuals who ascribe to the religious discourse to be trying to control every aspect of people's lives in a manner that echoes what the Church did in Europe.²⁷

Abu Zayd noted that secularism is often confused with atheism and accused of alienating spirituality from society. Such a task, he argued, would be impossible, as one cannot separate faith from society and life.²⁸ He wrote:

Secularism is not hostile to religion. It is only hostile to the Church's literal and ideological interpretation of it. Secularism opposes the Church's imposing its own interpretation and consequently its hegemony and authority. Secularism is a way of thought that rejects absolutism and exclusivity of the Church, meaning the clerics' control of people's minds and all aspects of their lives, including science and social life. Secularism opposed the exclusive right to own the absolute truth, in favour of relativism, historicity, pluralism and the right to be different and to be wrong. Under secularism, religions thrived and people were liberated from persecution, oppression and censorship.²⁹

Abu Zayd attributed the misleading definition of secularism as atheism to artisans of the religious discourse, which he equated with the Church. Maintaining the marriage between politics and religion is critical for their political relevance, he argued.³⁰

Abu Zayd envisioned that secularism would bring about a rather progressive religiosity. His definition applies, then, to Saba Mahmood's understanding of a type of secularism that tolerates only "certain kinds of religious subjectivities [...] so as to render

²⁷ Ibid., 28-33.

²⁸ Ibid., 11.

²⁹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Takfir fi Zaman al-Takfir*, 81-2.

³⁰ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 11-12.

them compliant with liberal political rule.”³¹ Abu Zayd’s definition also falls under what Talal Asad describes as the simple definition of secularism as “separation of religious from secular institutions in government,” which, he wrote, is not accurate. Such separation already existed, he noted, in medieval times in both Christianity and Islam. Rather, he argued, “what is distinctive about ‘secularism’ is that it presupposes new concepts of ‘religion,’ ‘ethics,’ and ‘politics,’ and new imperatives associated with them.”³² These presuppositions, Asad adds, are what motivate the opponents of secularism to reject it, claiming that it is applicable only in the West, “while its advocates have insisted that its particular origin does not detract from its contemporary global relevance.”³³ Abu Zayd’s works as well as the work of his opponents exemplify these dynamics described by Asad.

Abu Zayd is not unique in his perception of secularism. Another modernist scholar, An-Na‘im, defines a secular state as one that “does not claim or pretend to enforce Shari‘a—the religious law of Islam” and therefore one that “facilitates the possibility of religious piety out of honest conviction.”³⁴ Likewise, Isma‘il Muhammad Husni, another contemporary modernist, defines secularism as “the process of modernizing society in a manner that places the human being, regardless of his race, ethnicity, religion, or colour, at the centre of society. Secularism considers the temporal happiness of man as the primary goal. Consequently, it organizes society on the basis of human values such as liberty, justice, rationalism and equality.” To this end, Husni adds, secularism “puts in place legal guarantees to enable man to practise his rights and

³¹ Mahmood, "Secularism, hermeneutics, and empire: The politics of Islamic reformation," 328.

³² Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 1-2.

³³ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁴ An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State*, 1.

maintain his independence.”³⁵ Husni sees secularism as a combination of modernity and a civil state based on human rights, equality, egalitarianism and civil law. Religion is absent altogether from his definition.

As Husni distanced secularism from its relation to religion, Abu Zayd distanced it from the West. He portrayed it as a human development not specific to any culture, but then argued that “principles of modern life” such as human rights and freedom are “deeply embedded in the message of the Qur’an itself.”³⁶ By imposing distinctly modern concepts like human rights onto an ancient text of a different culture, time and place, Abu Zayd fell prey to offences of which he accused his opponents, namely, ahistorical analysis and imposing on the text a modern reading.

The modernist intellectuals’ perception of secularism reveals most visibly their aspirations for a Muslim Arab secular state. But many in the Arab world, particularly the proponents of the religious discourse, have a different vision of secularism entirely. They believe that secularism is already practised in the Middle East by authoritarian national Arab regimes. Therefore, as Hashemi points out, the concept of secularism is highly politicized “due to the modern encounter between Europe and the Middle East in the form of colonialism and imperialism and subsequently to the behaviour and failure of post-colonial regimes whose reigning ethos has been decidedly secular.”³⁷ In addition, the policies adopted by Western liberal democracies towards Arab Muslim societies “have served to delegitimize the concept of secularism in Muslim societies.”³⁸

³⁵ Husni, *Ilmaniyyat al-Islam*, 20.

³⁶ Abu Zayd, "Renewing Qur'anic Studies," 293.

³⁷ Nader Hashemi, *Islam, Secularism, and Liberal Democracy: Toward a Democratic Theory for Muslim Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 141.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

A stronger argument might have resembled that of An-Na'im, who wrote that "the fact that the state is a political and not a religious institution is the historical experience and current reality of Islamic societies."³⁹ An-Na'im argues that when the Ottomans, influenced by the colonial powers' notion of the state, "decided to codify some Hanafi principles, by the mid-nineteenth century, that marked the first time in Islamic history in which *shari'a* principles interpreted by a single school were codified and enacted as the uniform official law of the land."⁴⁰ Another intellectual of Islamic thought, Jamal al-Banna (whose brother, Hasan al-Banna, established the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt) reiterated this point, writing that while some rulers and caliphs toyed with the idea of imposing a single interpretation of *shari'a*, no such attempt was ever fruitful, because Muslim scholars and laymen alike recognized the limitation such enforcement would place on freedom of faith and on the diversity in interpretations and intellectual inquiry that existed at the time.⁴¹ Aziz al-Azmeh argued, likewise, that the historic experience of Muslims does not support the existence of one enforced Islamic state and that such a notion is "utopian presumption."⁴² In other words, an Islamic state in the sense envisioned by supporters of the religious discourse has never existed in Muslim history.

Opposition to calls for secularism does not come only from the adherents to religious discourse, however. Some believe that the very arguments of intellectuals such as Abu Zayd for the compatibility of Islam and secularism are in fact detrimental to the effort to bring about secularism. Joseph Glickserg argued that such efforts in fact create a setback to secularism. He wrote:

³⁹ An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State*, 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴¹ Banna, *Hal Yumkin Taqbiq al-Shari'a?*, 9-11.

⁴² Aziz zme, al, *Islam and modernities*, Phronesis (London ; New York: Verso, 1993), 11-12.

Secularists thus ‘translated’ secularism in such a way that it ‘worked’ for Islam, which was increasingly becoming Egypt’s expanding ideological center. In the midst of these ‘translations,’ Islam emerged stronger than secularism. This is because secularists borrowed too much from Islam in working to legitimize secularism. In short, secularists were unsuccessful in engaging in what might be termed ‘hegemonic adaptation’, whereby they tried to legitimate secularism by using Islamic discourse. The result was that secularism was increasingly diluted and became an ideology that did not have a legitimate base independent of Islamic discourse. As this occurred, secularists helped construct and preserve Islam’s status as the preeminent yardstick by which the legitimacy of all other ideologies in Egypt were measured.⁴³

While proponents of secularism tend to draw a rather positive picture of it, opponents go to the other extreme, emphasizing its Western origins and equating it with atheism enforced by state institutions. Tarabishi argued that the word secularism has become synonymous with disbelief and therefore also punishable by death.⁴⁴ ‘Abd al-Sabur Shahin wrote that Abu Zayd’s definition of secularism as merely the separation between religion and politics is a ploy to hide its real meaning: atheism.⁴⁵ Qaradawi defines secularism as “separating religion from the state as well as society.” He believes secularism to be a foreign concept introduced to Muslim communities by “the enemies of Islam”⁴⁶ To Qaradawi, “If secularism is imposed upon a Muslim, a complete divorce from faith is imposed upon him because he cannot have loyalties and enmities according to creed. This is the case because secularism refuses creed as the bases of loyalty and

⁴³ Glicksberg, "The Islamist Movement and the Subversion of Secularism in Modern Egypt," 21.

⁴⁴ George Tarabishi, *Hartaqat: 'An al-Dimuqratiyya wa al-'Ilmaniyya wa al-Hadatha wa al-Mumana'a al-'Arabiyya* [Heresies: On democracy, secularism and the Arab evasiveness], vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi), 19.

⁴⁵ Shahin, *Qissat Abu Zayd wa Inhisar al-'Ilmaniyya fi Jami'at al-Qahira* 14.

⁴⁶ Yusuf Qaradawi, al, "Al-'Ilmaniyya: Hal Hiya al-Hal Aw Hiya al-Mushkila," <http://www.qaradawi.net/library/77/3906.html>.

belonging.”⁴⁷ Therefore, secularism would replace Islam altogether, from Qaradawi’s perspective.

Al-‘Affani, who compiled a book on those whom he perceived as the “enemies of Islam,” from Muhammad ‘Abduh to Abu Zayd, named Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha, founder of modern Egypt, as the first ruler to establish secularism in Egypt and to “dare to replace Islamic *shari‘a* with European rule.”⁴⁸ Al-‘Affani condemned Muhammad ‘Abduh for praising the accomplishment of Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha in modernizing Egypt, which he held up as evidence of ‘Abduh’s own secularism.⁴⁹ In his dissertation arguing against secularism and its advocates, Al-‘Anzi wrote that “the attempt of secularists in the Muslim world to have a revolution against the authority of religion is nothing but a failed attempt at imitating Europe.” For him secularism is a seed that might have been fit to grow in Europe but not in the Muslim world.⁵⁰ Likewise, Qaradawi wrote: “Secularism is a Western product that did not originate in our land and does not agree with our creed or our intellectual tenets.”⁵¹

The religious establishment, represented by Al-Azhar University, also rejects secularism for Muslim societies. In his book *Al-‘Ilmaniyya wa al-‘Awlama wa al-Azhar* (Secularism, Globalism and al-Azhar), Kamal al-Din Mursi, a professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Alexandria, details al-Azhar’s position on this issue.⁵² According to al-Mursi, al-Azhar views secularism not only as a strictly and exclusively

⁴⁷ Quoted in, Sayyid Qimni, al, *Ahl al-Din wa al-Dimuqratiyya* [People of Religion and Democracy] (Cairo: Dar Misr al-Mahrusa, 2006), 91.

⁴⁸ ‘Affani, *‘A‘lam wa ‘Aqzam fi Mizan al-Islam* 1, 8.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ ‘Awwad Bard Ja‘id ‘Anzi, al, "Al-Ma‘ad al-Akhrabi wa Shubuh al-‘Ilmaniyyin" (Um al-Qura University, 2000), 64.

⁵¹ Qaradawi, *Al-Islam wa al-‘Ilmaniyya*, 46.

⁵² Kamal al-Din ‘Abd al-Ghani Mursi, al, *Al-‘Ilmaniyya wa al-‘Awlama wa al-Azhar* [Secularism, Globalism and al-Azhar] (Alexandria: Dar al-Ma‘arifa al-Jami‘iyya, 1999).

Western ideology, but also as a dangerous one. He wrote that the position of many scholars of al-Azhar is that if secularism were allowed to infiltrate Muslim societies, it would lead to an erosion of faith and consequently harm Muslim culture fundamentally.⁵³

This negative impression is widely spread in popular Arab culture, due, in part, to the fact that many of those who reject the separation between mosque and state enjoy the benefits of the relationship between mosque and state, such as state-endorsed access to the masses. For example, Qaradawi has the platform of the widely viewed al-Jazeera satellite channel, owned by the Qatari government, to propagate his views. Through his program, *al-Shari'a wa al-Hayat* (*Shari'a and Life*), he addresses millions of Muslims on what constitutes an Islamically-sound practice and what does not.⁵⁴ The Egyptian government funding of institutions such as al-Azhar is another example. Modernists such as Abu Zayd do not enjoy such access or funding to disseminate their ideas. Abu Zayd lamented that Arab masses are susceptible to adverse impressions of secularism due to the negative feelings they have towards the West, as an aggressive occupier.⁵⁵ Surely his exile from the platforms enjoyed by artisans of the religious discourse did not assuage his worries in this regard.

Diversity Versus Uniformity

Abu Zayd argued that secularism is compatible with the diversity of interpretations that has been the historical reality of Islam. The geographic vastness of the areas in which Muslims reside as well as their diverse backgrounds render impossible any

⁵³ These views are expressed throughout Mursi's book.

⁵⁴ This program still airs on al-Jazeera Arabic network. Al-Qaradawi remains one of the main scholars of the programme. See, <http://www.aljazeera.net/>

⁵⁵ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 14.

attempt to agree on, let alone impose, a single interpretation of Islam on all Muslims. Abu Zayd noted that the development of different sects and denominations in Islam “are due in large part to the pre-Islamic history of every territory. The local cultures allowed Islam in various regions to develop into what we find today.”⁵⁶ Therefore, Abu Zayd wrote, to promote the notion of a single and unified Muslim community is to “ignore the enormous social, cultural and theological diversity that exists both within and between the world’s Muslim-majority states.”⁵⁷

Islam’s malleable nature is not necessarily a negative attribute, since it is Islam’s adaptive and yielding nature, Abu Zayd asserted, that has enabled it to attract such an expansive following. The sacred text speaks to all.⁵⁸ Given this inherent diversity, if the state identifies and sanctions one particular interpretation, Abu Zayd wrote, people who belong to other religions or other doctrines of Islam, or even those “who belong to the religion officially sanctioned by the state but do not hold orthodox views (the right way to think about religion, according to those who have the power to say so), become subject to persecution on the grounds of apostasy or heresy.”⁵⁹ The lack of agreement is not a sign of lack of faith. Abu Zayd reminded his readers that the Prophet’s companions quarrelled upon his death and each attempted to use the sacred text to justify his claim to political leadership.⁶⁰ Consequently, it is unreasonable to expect modern citizens to agree on a particular interpretation, given the accumulated knowledge of Islamic thought, when even the Prophet’s companions could not agree. Abu Zayd concluded from this that

⁵⁶ Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, "The ‘others’ in the Qur’an A hermeneutical approach," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 36, no. 3-4 (2010): 283.

⁵⁷ Abu Zayd, "Renewing Qur'anic Studies," 289.

⁵⁸ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 60.

⁵⁹ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 183.

⁶⁰ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 165.

secularism would actually protect the diversity of doctrine.⁶¹ If, on the other hand, religion were mixed with politics, endless strife would follow as each insisted on the righteousness of their reading.⁶²

Intellectuals who ascribe to the religious discourse countered this argument on multiple versions of Islam by insisting on a unified, monolithic Islam. The Muslim Brotherhood's banner, "Islam is the solution," for example, presupposes that Islam is a singular and coherent entity. Muhammad 'Imara, who adheres to the sentiment of this slogan, defends it by saying that God himself "introduced the saying that Islam is the way."⁶³ Fahmi Huwaydi, another Islamist, denied the existence of multiple Islams. He wrote:

There is not a progressive Islam and a regressive Islam; there is not a revolutionary Islam and a subdued one, there is not a political Islam and another social, or an Islam for the rulers and another for the masses. There is only one Islam and one book.⁶⁴

Such statements cast doubt on the belief of those who do not belong to the Islam that the speaker has in mind.

In his book *Al-Islam wa al'Ilmaniyya Wajhan li Wajh* (Islam and Secularism Face-to-Face), Yusuf al-Qaradawi also responds to secularists who employ the diversity argument. He wrote that "Islam is not a mysterious call" that can be open to interpretation by anyone as they please. It is "not like other religions whose theologians or religious institutions can add, omit, or alter to it as they see fit." Rather, it has a fixed foundation,

⁶¹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Tafkir fi Zaman al-Takfir*, 91-2.

⁶² Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 130.

⁶³ Quoted from, Hoigilt, *Islamist Rhetoric: Language and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*, 113.

⁶⁴ Huwaydi, *Al-Qur'an wa al-Sultan*, 7.

and any differences of opinions among Muslim scholars are minor, he asserted.⁶⁵

Abu Zayd responded to claims of a unified, single Islam by arguing that if such a notion were true, this inevitability would mean two things:

The first is that Islam is always static, regardless of the progress of history. It has neither been influenced by the diversity of the communities that believed in it, nor the diversity of the groups within each community. The second is that there is only one fixed meaning that one particular group of people possess—without a doubt the religious scholars—and the members of this group are infallible and unaffected by human nature and its biases.⁶⁶

Here, the historical reality of Islam supports Abu Zayd's argument.

Other modernist Muslim scholars share Abu Zayd's viewpoints on this matter. An-Na'im for example, also views the notion of a monolithic Islam as analogous to political authoritarianism. He argues that any imposition of religion is, by its very nature, political. As An-Na'im states: "Consider what happens when a single ruling party takes complete control over the state as in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union and many states in Africa and the Arab world," viz., instability and violence.⁶⁷ Likewise, any authoritarian attempt to impose one interpretation would deprive not only non-Muslim citizens of their rights, but also prevent Muslims from practising their faith freely.⁶⁸ An-Na'im, like Abu Zayd saw diversity and liberty of faith as closely related.

⁶⁵ Qaradawi, *Al-Islam wa al-'Ilmaniyya*, 18-20.

⁶⁶ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 31.

⁶⁷ An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State*, 5-7.

⁶⁸ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 183.

Freedom of Doctrinal Choice Versus Coercion

The right to choose faith or disbelieve freely, Abu Zayd argued, is mandated by Islam and is evident in the lack of a penalty for apostasy in the Qur'an.⁶⁹ Indeed, while there are many versus sanctioning freedom of conscience, there is none to establish a penalty for apostasy, as Abu Zayd pointed out. He believed that when the state is prevented from interfering in religious matters, religion is less likely to be used as a political tool. Free from political scrutiny or manipulation, the religious institutions can focus on the people's genuine spiritual needs. Otherwise, if the state forces religion on people, those "who belong to the religion officially sanctioned by the state, but don't hold orthodox views (the right way to think about religion, according to those who have the power to say so), become subject to persecution on the grounds of apostasy or heresy."⁷⁰ The attacks on Abu Zayd exemplify such persecution. Fahmi Huwaydi, for example, wrote that "Abu Zayd's way of approaching the Qur'an amounted to an attack on the constitution and public order in an Islamic country like Egypt." Thus, as Hoigilt writes, "he implicitly suggested that Abu Zayd's works be regarded as high treason against the state."⁷¹ Thus the lines between the political and religious are blurred and the death sentence is suggested readily for those perceived to be apostates.

Other modernists who stress this point include Jamal al-Banna, who wrote several books to highlight the absurdity, from an Islamic point of view, of enforcing a version of *shari'a* by the state or religious groups.⁷² He wrote that the religious establishment and

⁶⁹ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir al-Khawf*, 173-4.

⁷⁰ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 183.

⁷¹ Hoigilt, *Islamist Rhetoric: Language and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*, 35.

⁷² See for example, Banna, *Hal Yumkin Taqbiq al-Shari'a*; Jamal Banna, al, *Al-Mar'a al-Muslima: Bayna Tahrir al-Qur'an wa Taqyid al-Fuqaha'* [Muslim Women between the Liberation of the Qur'an and the Restriction of Jurists] (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-Islami, 1998).

the Islamists do not seem to be aware of the danger, to *shari'a* itself, of imposing it on a people. He stated that when *shari'a* is imposed, people's perception of it changes and its spirituality and sacredness diminish. It becomes a thing for the state, not God."⁷³

Similarly, An-Na'im wrote, "In order to be a Muslim by conviction and free choice, which is the only way one can be a Muslim, I need a secular state."⁷⁴ These modernists unite in seeing secularism as a safeguard for Islam.

Muhammad Talbi, the Tunisian scholar, pointed out that "among all the revealed texts, only the Qur'an stresses religious liberty in such a precise and unambiguous way. Faith, to be true and reliable faith, absolutely needs to be a free and voluntary act."⁷⁵ The importance that the Qur'an places on the freedom of faith extends even to the Prophet's own prohibition against imposing Islam. God's messenger himself "is clearly and firmly warned to respect human freedom and God's mystery. 'If it had been thy Lord's will, all who are on the earth would have believed, all of them. Wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe?' (10:99)."⁷⁶ The absence of religious freedom in Arab societies, Abu Zayd asserted, is thus not an inevitable result of Qur'anic doctrine but is perhaps instead due to the fact that the Arab world has never known peaceful and meritocratic rotation of power.⁷⁷ Consequently, coercion in all matters of life, including faith, became customary or even expected when the political system dictates that.

For the advocates of the religious discourse, concerns over the use of coercion are replaced by emphasis on the critical need to protect Islam from erosion and attacks orchestrated by Western powers and their allies (i.e. modernists). These intended attacks

⁷³ Banna, *Hal Yumkin Taqbiq al-Shari'a?*, 13.

⁷⁴ An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State*, 1.

⁷⁵ Taibi, "Religious Liberty: Muslim Perspective," 109.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁷⁷ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 20.

are, for the supporters of the religious discourse, concealed by calls for freedom. In his book on al-Azhar University, al-Mursi argues that using phrases such as ‘freedom of thought’ and ‘conscience’ is only a ploy “to demolish religion, creed and values. It appears, in terms of its timing, goals and style, to be in line with the protocols of Zion. Zionism has used the call for freedom as a weapon to destroy all the creeds and values that the revealed religions advocated.”⁷⁸

Al-Mursi also wrote that the West’s ultimate goal is to “create an Arab culture that is based on Western values and that is divorced of Islamic thought, values and *shari‘a*. It is a prelude to merging with Western thought and abandoning the Arab Islamic character.”⁷⁹ Likewise, in his doctoral thesis written to condemn Arab secularists (including Abu Zayd), Al-‘Anzi asserts: “It is impossible for Islam and secularism to meet because secularism aims to make irrelevant from earth God’s *shari‘a* and to eliminate it from the reality of life.”⁸⁰ Similarly, Kushk wrote that calls for secularism are in reality aimed at “nothing less than removing Islam,” to duplicate what Kamal Attaturk did in Turkey.⁸¹

Abu Zayd, however, believed that secularism could not marginalize Islam, arguing that Muslims societies continued to have strong attachments to Islam, even when the state did not enforce *shari‘a* principles⁸² Similarly, Mehran Kamrava gives the example of Turkey, which, despite all of its efforts to enforce radical secularism, failed to uproot Islam from public life.⁸³ Kyai Hajji Wahid, likewise, ridiculed the

⁷⁸ Mursi, *Al-‘Ilmaniyya wa al-‘Awlama wa al-Azhar* 22-3.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁸⁰ ‘Anzi, "Al-Ma'ad al-Akhrawi " 65.

⁸¹ Kushk, *Qira'a fi Fikr al-Taba'iyya*, 15.

⁸² For more examples, see Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*.

⁸³ "Introduction: Reformist Islam in Comparative Perspective," in *New Voices of Islam: Rethinking Politics and Modernity*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 24-5.

fundamentalists' claim that they are defenders of faith. He wrote, "those who claim to defend God, Islam, or the Prophet are thus either deluding themselves or manipulating religion for their own mundane and political purposes."⁸⁴ Emphasizing the futility of their self-appointed missions to protect Islam from secularism, he wrote, "Nothing could possibly threaten God who is Omnipotent and existing as absolute and eternal Truth."⁸⁵

Therefore, modernists do not find convincing the fear of the supporters of the religious discourse's over the wellbeing of Islam, and their distrust of the Islamists—a distrust that is mutual—has served as an obstacle to reforming Islamic thought in the contemporary Arab world, with each side seeing an existential threat in the other. It appears that the writings of each of these currents, supporters of the religious discourse and modernists, are primarily intended for their own followers as they portray the other side as the ultimate enemy of Islam. Engaging in an objective and constructive debate does not present itself as a possibility in their writings.

In arguing for the modern concept of liberty, and in asserting that it is one of the principles of the Qur'an, Abu Zayd did not consult classical exegesis. Some exegetical literature argues that the verse advocating no coercion in religion was in fact abrogated by other verses.⁸⁶ Abu Zayd never addressed this claim, an oversight that could be due to Abu Zayd's aversion to classical theology that has ramifications for his own insistence on attending to historical context. However, it is consistent with the selectivity often practised both by Abu Zayd as well as supporters of the religious discourse. It is

⁸⁴ Kyai Haji Abdurrahman Wahid, "God Needs No Defense," in *Silenced*, ed. Paul Marshall and Nina Shea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xvii.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ For details on exegetical literature on this verse see, Patricia Crone, "'No Compulsion in Religion' Q. 2:256 in Medieval and Modern Interpretation," 132.

surprising that Abu Zayd did not rely on the many other Qur’anic verses mentioning freedom of conscience unambiguously, as Ali ‘Abd al-Raziq did.⁸⁷

These scholars who argue so strongly for secularism do not contemplate the possibility that a state that does not enforce Islam, or some aspects of it, may not necessarily lead to more piety or religious sincerity among the population. They do not acknowledge the fear by many who value the Islamic identity of the Arab world that secularism may lead to marginalization or erosion of religion, as it has in many Western countries. However, if this Islamic identity is contingent upon coercion, its survival is indeed dependent on intimidation by the religious and political authorities.

Piety Versus Politics

Abu Zayd wrote that he wanted religion “to be freed from the monopoly of those in power.”⁸⁸ As mentioned in the previous chapter, he saw the relationship between the proponents of the religious discourse and political authorities as one in which they exploit one another for political authority. He wrote, “When I am critical of conventional religious discourse—a discourse that claims to speak on God’s behalf—my goal is to show how that discourse uses religion as a political tool.” On the other side, political powers “use religion as a way to boost their agenda and fortify their power.”⁸⁹ However, he asserted that the mere fact that rulers successfully exploit religion with the aid of theologians “to sanctify their power” does not mean their rule is indeed Islamic.⁹⁰ Abu

⁸⁷ ‘Abd Al-Raziq, *Al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm*.

⁸⁸ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 137.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁹⁰ Abu Zayd, *Al-Taḥkīr fī Zaman al-Taḥkīr*, 36.

Zayd saw his work as threatening “some of those who wield that power.”⁹¹ Even his apostasy conviction, he argued, was politically motivated. He wrote, “Challenging the monopoly of power and knowledge is what shakes up the political establishment. And my writing did just that—it touched the sacred cow of established power.”⁹² Therefore, to Abu Zayd, it is political influence, rather than piety, that motivates supporters of the religious discourse.

The inability of the religious establishment and theologians to separate themselves from the quest for power is one reason, according to Abu Zayd, for the stagnation of knowledge in the Arab world. This is true for religious as well as secular knowledge. Elaborating on this point, Abu Zayd wrote, “when intellectuals engage in thinking while keeping an eye on political authority, they become complacent with that authority, justifying its actions,” rather than allowing for the natural growth of knowledge.⁹³ Furthermore, if politics and religion are aligned, “interpretation of the sacred text becomes permanently a state matter” and the religious scholar a mere employee in the state.”⁹⁴ As a result, state interests dictate the religious agenda, and the spiritual role of the religious establishment is dwarfed in favour of the political role of justifying state actions and silencing both political and religious dissent.

The independence that secularism offers the religious establishment would, in Abu Zayd’s words, “allow the religious establishment to fulfil their role without practising politics.”⁹⁵ Abu Zayd here saw politics as distracting the religious

⁹¹ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 11.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 137.

⁹³ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 131.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁹⁵ Written by Abu Zayd in introduction to 'Atif Ahmad, *Al-Islam wa al-'Almana: Qira'at Naqdiyya fi al-Fikr al-Mu'asir* [Islam and secularism: Critical reading of contemporary thought] (Cairo: Dar Misr al-Mahrusa, 2003), 9.

establishment from its role, which he saw as inherently apolitical. In another context, Abu Zayd argued that secularism deprives the proponents of the religious discourse of political power as a mechanism of influence and belies its proclaimed ‘sacred authority’ and exclusive access to the absolute truth.⁹⁶ Here, Abu Zayd insinuated that secularism removes the temptations and ensuing corruption to religion that results from engaging with politics.

Abu Zayd gave the example of al-Azhar which was nationalized in 1961 under the regime of Jamal ‘Abd al-Nasir.⁹⁷ Abu Zayd criticized the institution for acting as thought-police on all productions of arts and sciences. He believed that such action should be outside their boundaries and areas of expertise. He pondered, “Surely the expertise of the religious clerics and scholars do not extend to the realm of arts. Yet, they appoint themselves defensive guards of creed against dangers that are manufactured by their imagination.” He then wondered, “Even if one supposes a contradiction between their interpretation and their understanding of creed and some literary and artistic works, does that mean that creed is necessarily the weaker and more vulnerable component, so susceptible to being broken?”⁹⁸ Therefore, for Abu Zayd, religion does not need the protection of theologians.

Abu Zayd also criticized the project to “Islamize” knowledge, science, arts and all aspects of life. He asserted that such an effort is “fundamentally political,” rather than religious.⁹⁹ In striving to dominate, Abu Zayd charged, the supporters of the religious discourse are not able to see that “Islam has become an instrument in the hands of

⁹⁶ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 34.

⁹⁷ Hoigilt, *Islamist Rhetoric: Language and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*, 32.

⁹⁸ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 25.

⁹⁹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Takfir fi Zaman al-Takfir*, 139-40.

political pundits.” This marriage with politics has consequences, he pointed out, such as erosion in the application of critical scholarship to Islam. The Islamization project creates an environment in which Muslims are held hostage.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, Abu Zayd wanted the pursuit of knowledge to be unrestricted and independent of the interference of religious authority.

Supporters of the religious discourse, however, deny that the politicization of religion is motivated by anything other than a desire for piety and the protection of Islam. Indeed, to them, state protection of religion is not only beneficial for Islam; it is essential. Muhammad Kushk, for example, wrote, “What distinguishes Islam is the issue of governance, without which no religion or earthly matters can be sound.” This is the case, he explained, because “in Islam, the state is the only institution that has the right to defend Islam and Muslims.”¹⁰¹ For Kushk, this very realization is what motivates Western occupation to want to disarm Muslims of “their most potent weapon: religion,” which explains their calls for secularism.¹⁰² Likewise, Qaradawi removed the barriers between religion and politics by drawing a distinction between a “religious state” and an “Islamic state.” He defined an Islamic state as a civil state in which Islam and *shari‘a* dictate all, even to the ruler himself.¹⁰³ For him, Islam is different from other religions and therefore does not need a secular state. Qaradawi, therefore, puts Islam at a different category than all other religions. Abu Zayd responded to such arguments by arguing that “The Qur’an, in the original text, gives us no political theory—it espouses no political

¹⁰⁰ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 190-1.

¹⁰¹ Kushk, *Qira'a fi Fikr al-Taba'iyya*, 16.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Qaradawi, *Bayanat al-Hal al-Islami wa Shubuhāt al-'Ilmaniyyn wa al-Mutagharribin*, 159.

principles.”¹⁰⁴ He insisted, “The Qur’an does not mandate any particular form of government. This is open to Muslims to choose for themselves.”¹⁰⁵

Abu Zayd, like many other modernists, did not consider that piety, even if misplaced, could be a motivation behind the conservatives’ desire to curtail liberal arts and sciences. As far as Abu Zayd is concerned, only the desire to dominate could lie behind the alliance of politics and religion. For Abu Zayd to assert emphatically that that he knew the inner intentions of those who ascribe to religious discourse is matched by the latter’s certainty in concluding that intellectuals like Abu Zayd are motivated by the sole desire to destroy Islam. Furthermore, Abu Zayd took lightly the concern, if not fear, by many religious thinkers and institutions that the expression of an artist or the fictional words of a novelist might erode religious values. After all, culture is a powerful tool of disseminating ideas, and the possibility of a secular culture affecting religiosity is not unrealistic, as Western enlightenment has proven.

Abu Zayd also argued against the possibility, in the past or present, that an alliance between knowledge, secular or religious, and politics could be beneficial. However, one can argue that the generous investment of many rulers in the production of knowledge has been rather substantial. For example, it was under the orders of the caliphates of the Abbasids, as the historian Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabri explained, that the works of the Greeks, Persians and other civilizations were translated into Arabic, resulting in the preservation of countless ancient philosophical works and the building of the Islamic civilization.¹⁰⁶ Just as supporters of the religious discourse attempt to impose ancient history on modernity, Abu Zayd appears equally ahistorical in imposing modern

¹⁰⁴ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 183.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Jabri, *Takwin al-'Aql al-'Arabi*, 68-9.

standards of the autonomous academy on historic norms, dismissing their own time and place. In his judgment on the proximity between the religious and political he failed to acknowledge the historic reality that mosques, as well as convents and churches, were places of learning and that many rulers gravitated towards learned men, supporting them financially as these scholars dedicated themselves exclusively to pursuing knowledge. Abu Zayd failed to see that not all ruling elites are like current Arab regimes nor are theologians like contemporary ones.

Secularism as Prerequisite to Modernity

The final component of Abu Zayd's argument in favour of secularism is that he saw it as a prerequisite for progress and modernity. The Arab world, he acknowledged, is wary of modernity. He explained, "The real obstacle to modernization is Muslim thinking, in particular the way Muslims have been taught to think over a long period of time. They are frightened. They think that modernization will erode their religion and identity because, in the past, identity has been linked exclusively to religion."¹⁰⁷ This fear of modernity is in part due to the fact that the Muslim world played little, if any, role in its creation and therefore cannot claim it as its own. While the Arab world has had a much easier time adopting the material products of modernity, such as industrial and technological products, the conceptual products of modernity, such as secularism, are still viewed with suspicion.

Abu Zayd regretted the inability of the supporters of the religious discourse to see the connection between secularism and the advancement of Europe. He pointed out that

¹⁰⁷ Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 97.

while they criticize the dependence on the West (*taba'iyya*), they do not realize their own sizeable role in institutionalizing this dependence. Abu Zayd wrote: “Confronting *taba'iyya* (dependence) and resisting Western attempts of hegemony and control can only take place according to the principle that no one owns the truth. This is fundamentally and primarily the principle of secularism. This is not to mention all else that can be accomplished in our intellectual, social and political life, if this principle is to prevail.”¹⁰⁸

Making a similar argument to Abu Zayd, Husni argued that secularism is the natural development in human evolution alongside modernity. He states:

It is a reality that secularism, as a scientific principle in modernizing societies, has proven itself, as have many principles of modernity such as using machinery in industry, using the computer in storing data and using modern means of communication among people. To even question the futility of secularism is a waste of time. It is equivalent to a primitive person in the middle of the vast desert wondering about the futility of going to a specialized doctor to conduct a heart surgery.¹⁰⁹

Believing that nothing less than adopting secularism and modernity could offer fundamental solutions to the Arab world's stagnation, Abu Zayd attacked solutions offered by the supporters of the religious discourse. He argued that they are based on solutions adopted from the past to address problems that existed in the past. He observed: “Conservative Islamic discourse merely spreads itself like a veneer over problems that emerge from the changes we experience in the ebb and flow of a world that is in constant flux.”¹¹⁰ In other words, Abu Zayd denied the premise that past solutions are in fact timeless in their effectiveness.

¹⁰⁸ Abu Zayd, *Al-Tafkir fi Zaman al-Takfir*, 82.

¹⁰⁹ Husni, *Ilmaniyyat al-Islam*, 11.

¹¹⁰ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 200.

Abu Zayd did not appreciate the difficulty of accepting secularism in the Arab world, given the close relationship religion had with all aspects of life and the decades of authoritarian rule in the region. He is here like many other modernists who “insist on modifying or rejecting those cultural traditions that, in their view, are contradictory to modern international human rights standards. Cultural traditions are seen as socially constructed and thus subject to change.”¹¹¹

Going even further, Abu Zayd argued that this aversion to adopting secularism has no historical precedent in Islam. He recalled that early Muslims “rubbed shoulders with a variety of other cultures—Indian, Egyptian, and Greek. Muslims incorporated knowledge obtained from neighbouring cultures and integrated that knowledge into the structure of Islam, producing new knowledge that reconfigured Muslim theology, philosophy, language, and even jurisprudence.”¹¹² Other modernists documented similar convergences of cultures, such as Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabri¹¹³ and Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, the latter of whom noted that Islamic civilizations embraced and absorbed the cultural and scientific heritage of many other civilizations that did not share the same religion or culture.¹¹⁴ Therefore, they view adoption of current knowledge, secularism in this case, as analogous to what the Muslims did in the classical age.

The irreconcilable difference between contemporary religious discourse and modernist thinkers such as Abu Zayd comes perhaps from the fact that the former places value on the past with its glory, aspiring to reinstate that period. By contrast, Abu Zayd and other modernist thinkers see in the present and the future as the focal point, realizing

¹¹¹ Mahmood Monshipouri, "Islam and Human Rights in the Age of Globalization," in *Islam Encountering Globalization*, ed. Ali Mohammadi (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002), 103.

¹¹² Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 113.

¹¹³ Jabri, *Takwin al-'Aql al-'Arabi*, 48.

¹¹⁴ Sadiq Jalal 'Azm, al, *Dhihniyat al-Tahrim* [Mentality of Prohibition] (Beirut: Al-Mada, 2007).

that the past can never be reinstated. Ultimately, however, as Kamrava points out, “neither religion nor modernity can be ignored or eradicated, and the striking of a synthesis between the two, while often resisted or greatly resented, is inevitable.”¹¹⁵ This reconciliation between religion and modernity, one may argue, can be achieved if real dialogue were to take place. However, a prerequisite for a constructive debate would be to create an environment where intimidation, physical, legal or religious is not part of the conversation.

The Response of the Religious Discourse and Its Ramifications

The reaction of the religious discourse to modernists’ calls for secularism tended to be accusatory and sometimes violent. Conservative theologians usually doubt the modernists’ loyalty to Islam and dismiss the perspective of those who espouse liberal beliefs. For example, Qaradawi steadfastly “excludes liberal Islamic thinkers and casts serious doubt on the credibility of other Islamic scholars who oppose him.”¹¹⁶ In his view, liberal scholars work to achieve “fame, satisfy some hidden desire, support corrupt authorities, or justify deviant practices and imported thoughts.”¹¹⁷ Many modernist intellectuals were subjected to intimidation or violence for criticizing the authoritarianism of conservative Islamist thinkers, including Faraj Fuda, Nagib Mahfuz and Sayyid al-Qimani.

Hoigilt points out that while it is usually extremists who perpetrate these acts of violence, the traditional theologians play an important role in justifying or encouraging

¹¹⁵ "Introduction: Reformist Islam in Comparative Perspective," 24-5.

¹¹⁶ Hoigilt, *Islamist Rhetoric: Language and Culture in Contemporary Egypt*, 77.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 155-6.

these acts against modernist thinkers by labelling them atheist. Sometimes such condemnation by a theologian suffices for an extremist to justify his action, and radical followers may understand the label “atheist” to sanction killing.¹¹⁸ Hoigilt notes, “Most likely none of the activists had read the words of the people they attacked. This is where the Islamist intellectuals and shaykhs from al-Azhar enter the picture—or, more accurately, this is where the force of their words becomes relevant.”¹¹⁹ This is the reason why, Hoigilt argued, many thinkers, like Abu Zayd “want greater freedom for the individual believers to understand and interpret religion on their own terms. They are proponents of various theological opinions.” Hoigilt elaborates, “When the religious experts effectively deny other than those educated in Islamic centres of learning, the possibility of interpreting Islam, the potential for interpretive freedom is severely restricted and, in addition, the religious field becomes more vulnerable to political manipulation.”¹²⁰ This is the reality Abu Zayd criticized.

These religious intellectuals must be aware of the consequences of equating calls for secularism with atheism. Hoigilt states, “While such examples are proofs of leading Islamists’ attempts at making liberal propositions anathema, they also serve as cues for less moderate people.” He elaborates: “Among the Islamist constituencies, supporters have proven they will gladly join protest marches against books they have never heard of, as long as a spiritual authority says that it is anti-Islamic. As for more extremist organizations, they have shown that they are capable of drawing on their own more drastic conclusions from the statements of religious leaders.”¹²¹ Consequently, the use of

¹¹⁸ For detailed examples, see *ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 154-55.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 34-5.

labels such as ‘atheist’ is far from innocent as a tool to silence critiques against certain interpretations of Islam.

The supporters of the religious discourse are not alone in resisting calls by modernists to adopt modern concepts such as secularism. Arab regimes are also threatened by such calls. Kamrava points out that “accountability, pluralism, and democracy, even if based on the Qur’an, are very much unwelcome in non-democracies.” This is the case, Kamrava writes, because “authoritarianism breeds suspicion and mistrust”.¹²² Consequently, modernist scholars are subjects of attack from many sides all at once: the state, mainstream religious institutions, Islamists and extremists. Elaborating on this equation combining violence, politics, and religion, Elizabeth Kassab explains:

Consecutive governments have practised various forms of intimidation, imprisonment, torture, and killing; instrumentalized religion whenever expedient; and co-opted mainstream religious establishments to cover governmental policies and outbid Islamist opposition claims. This opposition, in turn, has ironically not been less intolerant and authoritarian in its own methods and proposals, which it presents as an alternative to the current governments’ unjust and impious rule. It too has not hesitated to use intimidation and violence. Together, governments and militant Islamists have silenced the secular and democratic forces.¹²³

Therefore, regimes use their courts to silence calls for reform with apostasy prosecutions.

The changes in politics and in religion, Kassab argues, are very much interconnected.¹²⁴

Husni understands why the religious discourse is merciless in its fight against those who argue for separating religion and political power. His argument is worth citing at length. He states,

The issue of politicizing religion is a matter of life or death for the three friends: the oppressive regimes, the religious institutions, and the groups

¹²² "Introduction: Reformist Islam in Comparative Perspective," 23.

¹²³ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 191.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 218.

belonging to political Islam. Regimes use religion to manage the masses' feelings of anger towards their policies and the masses' desire to revolt against them. They direct the masses' focus away from the reality and the unjust policies towards metaphysical matters and, every once in a while, towards issues such as covering women and supernatural beings (genies), etc. The religious institutions, when they provide this service to the political authorities, enjoy their patronage as well as many privileges given by the political authority. They become the forefront of society, totally avoiding marginalization and poverty. As for the political Islamists, they are like parasitic plants. They grow in the swamps of the relationship of the other two. They do not want leftovers thrown their way. They are constantly demanding more of the fortunes and privileges by threatening to turn the table and ceasing authority in the name of religion.¹²⁵

Consequently, the inability to wave the flag of Islam would disturb the existing power paradigm that is in the service of these special interests. The changes that modernists advocate for in their communities would cause radical changes to the political and religious structures, disempowering segments of the population that held monopoly thus far. The stakes are therefore too high for the latter to allow modernists to have a platform.

Conclusion

The issue of secularism and the space of religion in the public sphere is a very complex one that most contemporary societies, Western ones included, continue to struggle with—and sometimes against. As Agrama points out, the tensions that have risen as a result of modernity between various modalities of power “are not peculiar to Egypt; they are also characteristic of many states considered to be paradigms of modern secularity such as France, Germany and Britain.”¹²⁶ Therefore, far from having settled

¹²⁵ Husni, *Ilmaniyyat al-Islam*, 73.

¹²⁶ Hussein Ali Agrama, "Secularism, Sovereignty, Indeterminacy: Is Egypt a Secular or a Religious State?," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 52, no. 03 (2010): 499.

this issue, Abu Zayd's thought represents part of the conversation as it is taking place in the Arab world in general, and Egypt in particular.

The environment of intolerance and, sometimes violent, intimidation is a major obstacle to arriving at common grounds among competing voices. Supporters of the religious discourse are quick to exclude modernists from the circle of Islamic faith when they advocate for secularism while intellectuals like Abu Zayd refuse to be treated as outsiders, insisting that their thought is as authentic to Islam as the voices of traditional theology.¹²⁷ Regardless of the resistance that Abu Zayd and scholars like him may face, his arguments articulating the need for reform in politics and religion have proven prescient, given the Arab Spring and the demand by a segment of the protesters for liberty and civil rights, rather than theocracies.

Abu Zayd, as mentioned earlier, understood that once the process of reform is initiated in one field, it is difficult to stop it from reaching other connected areas. The topic of the Arab Islamic heritage is one such related subject to both politics and religion. It is not surprising, therefore, that Abu Zayd also tackled it in depth.

¹²⁷ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 9.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE HERITAGE OF THE NAHDA

Abu Zayd devoted a great deal of effort to investigating the *nahda* period and its influence on contemporary intellectual trends because one of his main objectives was to provide an “analytic and deconstructed reading” of history (*qira’ a tahliliyya tafkikiyya*).¹ This chapter details his thought on the work of the Islamic reformists, such as Muhammad ‘Abduh. The scholarship of the *nahda* period is relevant to studying Arab thought because it remains a point of reference for contemporary Arab intellectuals, both modernist and conservative. The *nahda* era was born when the Arab world first came face-to-face with modernity and it became clear that change was imminent. Islamic reformists who sought to explain the reasons behind the stagnation of the Muslim world, found it necessary to justify their chosen means of modernization—especially because they borrowed these means from colonial powers. Their effort, Abu Zayd believed, engendered, among other things, many of the systemic and structural problems in the way Arabs read their history and form their identity.

When Abu Zayd analysed the “the *nahda* discourse,” his discussion was limited to *nahda* Islamic reformists—and a handful of them at that—so his critique took aim at their contributions to Islamic thought.² The *nahda* era, however, refers to much wider changes than just the intellectual contribution of the Islamic reformists. Therefore, his use of the term does not include its wider standard meaning as detailed, for example, by

¹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 7.

² Mainly ‘Abduh, Afghani, Tahtawi, Ahmad Najib Zaki, al-Tahir al-Haddad and Qasim Amin.

Albert Hourani.³ Rather, Abu Zayd saw the *nahda* through the narrow prism of a few intellectuals.

From the outset, Abu Zayd realized, the *nahda* scholars were pulled in opposite directions: first, they aimed to promote a “strong commitment to develop Muslim societies in the direction of modernization.” But at the same time, they strove “to keep alive the spirit of Islam and its forces.”⁴ The *nahda* generation had to redefine its “relationship to the Islamic past”—not an easy task if one believes that “at the heart of modernity is a principle of development which itself rejects the past.”⁵ As they embarked on the effort to reconstruct their heritage, they had to address such critical questions as, in Kassab’s formulation, “How can one re-create a living relationship with one’s history and heritage after one has been estranged from them by colonial alienation? Which history? Which heritage? Who is to decide and on what basis?”⁶ The *nahda* Islamic reformists addressed these questions.

The historian Husayn Mruwwa noted that the way in which a people write their past has just as much to say about their present as it does about the past. This is the case because any interpretation or examination into that history “reflects considerations from the present, regardless of when that present is, because that particular past is constructed as a result of that particular present.”⁷ The Muslim reformists’ mode of discussing the past reveals a present in which the shock of modernity’s eruption led to a sudden awareness of “a sharp discontinuity with pre-modern history.”⁸ It is not surprising, then,

³ Hourani, *Arab Thought*.

⁴ Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 22.

⁵ *Islam and Modernity : Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, 3.

⁶ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 5.

⁷ Mruwwa, *Al-Naza‘at al-Maddiyya fi al-Falsafa al-'Arabiyya wa al-Islamiyya*, 1, 28-9.

⁸ *Islam and Modernity : Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, 3-4.

that the familiar past was a more comfortable place to cling to than the unknown future or the quickly changing present. The *nahda* scholars reconstructed their heritage (*turath*) to carry a particular meaning—one that would endure until contemporary times.

Defining Turath

If “history” (*tarikh*) refers to all events that have taken place in the past, “heritage” (*turath*), Abu Zayd wrote, refers to the “precious parts of the past in our current awareness.” More importantly, he argued, “It is one of the pillars of our existence and a very effective component of our consciousness.”⁹ Tracing the semantic evolution of the word, Abu Zayd wrote that the linguistic root, *wa-ra-tha*, means to inherit. “It only refers to what a deceased person leaves as a monetary inheritance to be passed on,” he pointed out, adding that this understanding is the one used in the Qur’an.¹⁰ Similarly, the Moroccan historian Muhammad ‘Abid Jabri pointed out that old dictionaries limit the meaning of the word to what one inherits from family in money and pedigree.¹¹

The meaning of *turath*, however, has evolved from its historical definition. It can now be used in a broader sense of “inheritance,” referring to “all the predecessors’ traditions including their concepts, values, beliefs, customs, codes of behaviour, norms, etc.”¹² But Al-Jabri contended that there is a specific meaning and significance in the Arabic word *turath* that translations do not convey. He wrote that the word *turath* is “charged with sentimental and ideological connotations that are not transferable to other

⁹ Abu Zayd, *Ishkaliyyat al-Qira'a wa Aliyyat al-Ta'wil*, 51.

¹⁰ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 16.

¹¹ Jabri, *Al-Turath wa al-Hadatha*, 21-2.

¹² Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 16.

contemporary languages.”¹³ Even in Arabic, these connotations are a relatively recent development, beginning with the *nahda* scholars’ usage, which added to its historical meaning the ideological significance it has today.¹⁴ This shift is important, Jabri noted, for while inheritance in the older sense emphasizes the dominance of the present over the past, in the newer meaning of the word the emphasis is reversed to stress the importance of the past over the present. An inheritance occurs, for example, when a father dies and the son inherits. The focus is on the son who just came into the inheritance. With *turath*, however, the emphasis is on the father. The son is marginalized, even disregarded.¹⁵ The meaning thus takes on a normative content: like Abu Zayd, Jabri observed that in contemporary discourse, *turath* refers not only to what was, or what should be valued. Rather, it represents what should be replacing the present.

Redefining *turath* in this way shifts the focus away from the present and the ongoing evolution of life to the past—an attitude that contradicts directly the Qur’an’s acknowledgement of change and development.¹⁶ In other words, the heritage came to be understood normatively rather than descriptively; it lost its narrative capacity and the past came to be understood as an ideal more valuable than the present. So powerful is *turath* in the Arab imagination that for many, the goal of the present has become the restoration of the past.

Therefore, this significant shift in consciousness and in meaning took place in large part because of the manner in which the *nahda* scholars used the term, according to many modernist scholars. For example, *turath*, Abu Zayd contended, has been reduced to

¹³ Jabri, *Al-Turath wa al-Hadatha*, 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁶ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 16.

refer only to specific episodes of Islamic history that are removed from their context and that support conservative interpretations. It thus becomes an instrument for neglecting the richness and diversity of the history of the Arab world, both prior to and during Islamic rule.¹⁷ To Abu Zayd, therefore, rather than enriching contemporary Arab identity, the concept of the heritage serves to limit and confine it.

The Wrong Question and Answer

Abu Zayd explored the various reasons that led the effort of the *nahda* reformists to go astray, beginning with the Arab world's encounter with Europe. The exposure to European progress made the Arab world aware of the extent it had fallen behind in science, technology and other aspects of civilization. Abu Zayd argued that the *nahda* scholars, rather than focusing on the factors contributing to Europe's progress, almost immediately shifted their attention to the past, glorifying the achievements of the golden age of the Islamic civilization. Associating this success with a more devout period of Islamic practice, the *nahda* scholars hastily attributed modern Muslim backwardness to a lack of adherence to 'true' Islam. This move cemented Islam as the cornerstone of *turath* and the only lens through which to see a nation's success.¹⁸

To Abu Zayd, this causal reasoning was flawed and irresponsible. For example, 'Abduh, in Abu Zayd's opinion, was unable to "realize that the progress, advancement and modernity of Europe are due to the liberation of man and the unleashing of reason," rather than to Islamic values.¹⁹ He berated the *nahda* scholars for their efforts to

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 14.

¹⁹ Ibid., 24.

“beautify” all that is related to the religious heritage in order to “absolve our cultural and intellectual history from the responsibility for the crisis.”²⁰ In other words, rather than investigating where responsibility can be shouldered for the backwardness that took place, the emphasis was diverted to glorifying and ameliorating the past.

Abu Zayd was not alone in his assessment. Hisham Sharabi also observed that “At heart, reformism was tradition-bound.”²¹ Nor is this idea unique to the Arabs. In his book *The Birth of the Modern World 1780-1914*, Bayly notes that the shock of meeting a new culture can have the effect of strengthening attachment to the past. Such interactions between different cultures as those that took place in the nineteenth century, Bayly writes:

heighten the sense of difference, and even antagonism, between people in different societies, and especially between their elites. Increasingly, Japanese, Indians, and Americans, for instance, found strength in their own inherited sense of national, religious, or cultural identity when confronted with the severe challenges that arose from the new global economy, especially from European imperialism.²²

Therefore, the reaction to look for episodes of success in one’s own history when confronted with imperialism was not unique to the Muslim world.

Still, to Abu Zayd, the *nahda* reformists did more than merely galvanize Islamic identity. What he found irrational was that Islam was used not only to explain the stagnation of Muslims but also the progress of Europe. The extent to which the *nahda* reformists saw Islamic values as the sole explanation is evident in ‘Abduh’s reaction to Europe, captured in his famous phrase, “I saw Islam without Muslims.” That is, for these

²⁰ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 7.

²¹ Hisham Sharabi, *Arab intellectuals and the West : the formative years, 1875-1914* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1970), 32.

²² Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780-1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* 1-2.

scholars, the achievements of Islam were evident not, as one might expect, in the actual *Dar al-Islam*, which was suffering from underdevelopment because of its neglect of “true” Islam but were to be seen in the flourishing civilizations of Europe.²³ That non-Muslim Europe is the place where true Islamic values reside reveals the extent to which Islam was the singular prism through which these scholars saw the world.

This approach to *turath* carried with it profound implications for the *nahda* scholars’ attitude toward change. When it became clear that changes were necessary for the Arab world, ‘Abduh justified them, according to Hourani, “by showing that the changes which were taking place were not only permitted by Islam, but were indeed its necessary implications if it was rightly understood.”²⁴ In this way, when *nahda* Islamic reformists looked at Europe, rather than attempting to emulate any of her ideas on their own merits, they had to be justified as an extension of Islam. The underlying understanding is, therefore, unless a change is mandated by or allowed in Islam, it was not permissible. The notion of examining or adopting novel practices for their independent value was not developed.

Inasmuch as they promulgated the notion that Islam is the sole acceptable explanatory framework, Abu Zayd argued, the *nahda* reformists provided the intellectual infrastructure for the contemporary religious discourse. The same ideology is visible today, according to Abu Zayd, in the slogan “Islam is the solution” and the Islamists’ desire to start a religious state in order to achieve hegemony and dominance.²⁵ Abu Zayd pointed out that despite the attachment to Islam, no “scientific understanding of religion” was ever conducted. Therefore, generations later, the regressive conservative forces

²³ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 23-4.

²⁴ Hourani, *Arab Thought*, 193.

²⁵ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 25.

found the “same old Islam intact. It was not even touched.”²⁶ Even in their own field, Abu Zayd lamented, the *nahda* scholars failed to make a tangible difference. Gibb also made the same conclusion, writing that after the nineteenth century effort, Islamic thought “decayed rather than progressed.”²⁷ This is the case, in part, because for most traditional ‘*ulama*’, “there was nothing new to be said. All energy was directed at reiterating in traditional terms the old tested truths.”²⁸ Therefore, as far as Islamic theology was concerned, the Islamic reformists conducted no critical examination or inquiry.

In generalizing about the *nahda* discourse, Abu Zayd neglected entirely the contributions of Christian Arab intellectuals whose work consisted of “nonreligious, though not antireligious (but sometimes anticlerical) and certainly not anti-Islamic, views of progress and identity.”²⁹ His focus, as mentioned earlier, was entirely on a handful of Islamic reformists. Sharabi noted the difference in the contribution of the Christian intellectuals. “The mental and psychological outlook of these Christians was sharply different from the established and firmly rooted Muslims of the day.” One major difference between a Muslim intellectual and his Christian counterpart was precisely the respective attitudes toward the past: as Sharabi wrote, it “was somewhat easier for the unattached Christian intellectuals to abandon traditional conceptions and to adopt modern views than it was for the young educated Muslims.”³⁰ Whereas Christian intellectuals were able to hold in tandem their Christian heritage and the development of modernity, Muslim intellectuals were told that Islam must remain their sole source of identity.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ H.A.R Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam* (Chicago: Univeristy of Chicago Press, 1945), 1.

²⁸ Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West*, 13.

²⁹ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 31.

³⁰ Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West*.

Abu Zayd's critique of the *nahda* scholars is poignant. He accused them of 'tawatu' fikri wa 'aqli' (ideological and intellectual complicity). Their effort, he wrote, focused on "looking for compromises to all the contradictions that abound in our social reality."³¹ For Abu Zayd, they not only ultimately failed to face the challenges imposed by modernity but also put in place serious obstacles to the Arab world's adoption of modernity. Foremost among these obstacles was the centralization of religion.³² To Abu Zayd, to emphasize the importance of religion, rather than modernity, is a major failing in the approach of the *nahda* reformists.

This analysis, however, does not take into consideration the Islamic reformists background. Subjecting Islam or the Islamic heritage to scrutiny was never their primary intention. Sharabi pointed out that

the movement of religious rejuvenation spearheaded by Afghani and 'Abdu did not question doctrine. The primary impulse of reform had its source in the challenge that the West posed to Muslim society. Its aim was to protect Muslim society by responding to the Western challenge in a 'positive' way. It strove to reinstitute and strengthen Islamic truth, but not to expose it to free criticism.³³

In other words, the *nahda* Islamic reformists saw themselves as custodians of, not liberators, from religion and tradition. Inasmuch as preserving that tradition was their mission, they were successful in accomplishing it. As far as modernizing their own field of Islamic thought, these 'ulama' believed that "there was nothing new to be said. All energy was directed toward reiterating in traditional terms the old tested truths."³⁴ Abu Zayd thus appears to take their intention to modernize at face value. In particular, he

³¹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 46.

³² *Ibid.*, 5.

³³ Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West*, 24-5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

expected them to follow a strictly modernist approach, which includes furthering the notion of separation between the state and religion.

Historicist though he was, Abu Zayd did not appreciate the historical context of the *nahda* period. He focused, like other modernists, exclusively on their shortcomings. For example, he did not appreciate the modernizing effort that included mass secular education for boys and girls, which took place during the time of the *nahda*. While it may have proven ultimately unsatisfactory for Abu Zayd's aims, it was nevertheless a period of great intellectual activity among Muslim thinkers. Sharabi writes that "not since the high Middle Ages had an educated elite arisen in the Arab world that was distinctly separate from the closed religious stratum of the *ulema*, who for generations had monopolized learning and intellectual activity."³⁵ This is particularly interesting given that those who advocated for such reforms as mixed mass education were a product of religious education, including 'Abduh and Tahtawi.³⁶ Their writings in support of liberating women are another area in which they challenged the tradition. On this topic, however, as will be discussed in the final chapter, Abu Zayd was more appreciative of their effort.

While Abu Zayd argued that the *nahda* scholars did too little to question religion and institute modernity, the supporters of the religious discourse consider the *nahda* scholars to have done too much to damage Islam. Kushk wrote that the *nahda* reformists, in their "striving to have a constitution, liberate women and open up to Europe and its traditions, opened wide the door to European occupation and to losing independence."³⁷

³⁵ Ibid., 3.

³⁶ This is evident, for example, in, Muhammad 'Abduh, *Muhammad 'Abduh: Al-A'mal al-Kamila* [Muhammad 'Abduh: The Complete Works], vol. 1 (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1993).

³⁷ Kushk, *Qira'a fi Fikr al-Taba'iyya*, 9.

Al-‘Affani described the *nahda* modernists as “intellectual charlatans and elements of corruption and wrongful injustice who attacked God, Islam and *shari‘a* from within the Muslim society.”³⁸ He argued that ‘Abduh was part of the effort to replace Islam with secularism, which he equated with atheism.³⁹ This was evident for ‘Affani in ‘Abduh’s attack on al-Azhar and Islamic traditions. The British colonizers, not the Muslim faithful, were the primary beneficiary of ‘Abduh’s effort, he asserted.⁴⁰ As for Rifa‘a al-Tahtawi, to ‘al-Affani he was a champion of Westernization, working to bring to Arab society traditions such as Western dancing and mixing between men and women.⁴¹

The effort of the Muslim *nahda* scholars failed to meet the expectations of future generations of both modernist intellectuals, such as Abu Zayd, or those espousing conservative beliefs. Both sides acknowledge the importance of the historical moment of that first encounter with modernity yet both distanced themselves from the Islamic reformists. Armed with the benefit of hindsight, they failed to see the *nahda* scholars in their own historical context. To Abu Zayd, they did not go far enough in instituting reform. In presenting them as having fallen short of their aspirations, he was indirectly positioning himself to be the authority determining the appropriate degree of reform. Presumably, he considered his own scholarship to have addressed the gaps they left unfilled.

³⁸ ‘Affani, *‘A‘lam wa ‘Aqzam fi Mizan al-Islam* 1, 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8-10.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 58.

Europe's Influence

Abu Zayd argued that a primary shortcoming in the *nahda* discourse was caused by the *nahda* intellectuals allowing the European 'other' to dictate the terms for much of their discourse.⁴² Abu Zayd observed that the colonizers "possessed the intellectual weapon of holding Islam responsible for the weakness of the Muslim World. They saw and approached the Muslim World as solely Muslim, lacking any other sub-identity like Indian, Indonesian, or Arab." Alarming, according to Abu Zayd, the Arabs "unquestionably accepted this identity imposed upon them."⁴³ He argued that Islam became the nationality, the ethnicity, and the 'self' in facing the European other.⁴⁴ This single framework of approaching modernity was therefore not entirely the fault of the *nahda* scholars but also due to European influence. Abu Zayd wrote:

The Muslim consciousness swallowed the bait of the European discourse regarding the reason behind the backwardness of the Muslim world. Regression and progress became so firmly connected to religion. It became impossible to disentangle religion from other issues, be they social, economic, political, cultural or intellectual. Religion is always invoked. Thus, one element among many in the formation of a cultural identity—i.e., religion—became the sole identity, while all other elements were marginalized to oblivion.⁴⁵

Here Abu Zayd appeared to blame Europe for the Muslim Arabs' perception of themselves as primarily Muslims. This argument presupposes that had Europe, with its secular norms, dictated a different discourse, the outcome of the *nahda* era would have been different. In this light, the Arab world is an amicable entity passively accepting what identity Europe deems appropriate for it. There is an underlying assumption as well that

⁴² Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 5.

⁴³ Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 22-3.

⁴⁴ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 206.

⁴⁵ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 189.

Abu Zayd expected Europe to act as a saviour of the Arab world when it clearly had a different agenda, that of a colonizer.

In reality, the *nahda* scholars were defensive, for they had to deal with the pressure of defending their culture and religion against the European onslaught. For example, ‘Abduh, while reviving the Islamic heritage, was also responding to the anti-Islamic writings of such intellectuals as the French philosopher Ernest Renan.⁴⁶ The *nahda* scholars were clearly engaged in a debate with Western scholars of their time. It is possible that Abu Zayd criticized the *nahda* scholars only to highlight the independence of his own thought from Western influences.

Excessive Simplification

Abu Zayd accused the *nahda* discourse of an ahistorical approach, oversimplifying both their own history and that of Europe.⁴⁷ To their already myopic view of Islam as the sole possible referent for all civilizational developments was added a failure to discern, even within their own Islamic heritage, the complexity and diversity that existed through the ages, according to Abu Zayd.⁴⁸ Sharabi noted: “The idea of evolution was generally only obscurely perceived, and its significance for a historical vision of reality was never fully appreciated. Probably sensing evolution’s adverse philosophical implications for religious dogma, the reformists kept away from it.”⁴⁹ Abu Zayd gave the example of ‘Abduh who cherry-picked from the *turath*, favouring Mu‘tazilite’s thought here and the Ash‘ari school there, without discerning the reasons

⁴⁶ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 38.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 31-2.

⁴⁸ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 186.

⁴⁹ Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West*, 48.

for the diverse philosophical reasoning behind each.⁵⁰ The result, according to Abu Zayd, was that the *nahda* failed to build a real scientific awareness through academic investigation of the heritage, especially its religious aspect.⁵¹

This simplistic view of history lives on in the educational system in the Arab world. Qustantin Zurayq observed that the history that Arabs are taught generally begins with *jahiliyya* (pre-Islamic Arabia) Arabs and proceeds through the caliphs' rule in the various regions that came under their control. The Mongol invasion of Baghdad and the loss of Spain are covered, but curricula generally then leap entire centuries and move immediately to modern history. This reading of history, Zurayq argued, omits two important historical facts: that substantial civilizations existed in many regions before they came under Islamic rule, and that Arab Islamic history was not isolated from outside influences but rather incorporated significant contributions of non-Arabs and non-Muslims.⁵² The *nahda* narrative reinforced the perception that Islam was the sole progenitor of its civilization.

In a version of history in which one jumps from the desert of Arabia, with tribes fighting one another for survival, to thriving urban civilizational centres in the Levant, Mesopotamia, North Africa to Spain, Islam does appear to be the common denominator. However, this narrative misses the fact that many of these same urban centres had been thriving civilizational centres for thousands of years prior to Islam's arrival. The ethnic diversity of these regions is also brushed over, giving the erroneous impression that only Arab Muslims populated these regions and produced Islamic civilization, whereas, as

⁵⁰ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 31.

⁵¹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 71.

⁵² Qunstantin Zurayq, *Nahnu wa al-Tarikh* [We and History] (Beirut: Dar al-'Ilm li al-Malayin, 1959), 36.

Abu Zayd recalled, the *umma* had a long civilizational life before the arrival of Islam.⁵³

According to Abu Zayd, this oversimplification infected not only Arab Islamic history but also the study of Europe. Europe's history and various contributions in philosophy, science, and politics were reduced to science and technology, portraying both as wholly independent of all other disciplines and inquiry. The result, he wrote, is that "a false awareness of both the *turath* as well as the European civilization is manufactured. This false awareness contributes to an almost complete absence of a historical or a contemporary perspective. Abu Zayd argued that Arabs are living a history that is not their own, whether this history is a historic moment in the European past or a one that took place in their *turath*."⁵⁴ For Abu Zayd, this exemplified the failure of the *nahda* scholars to establish an academic methodology, which "is what distinguishes a critical mind from a subdued mind"—and also distinguishes a mind that contributes to knowledge from a mind that is subdued.⁵⁵ A truly enlightened discourse, he argued, would have addressed the forbidden questions with audacity and fearlessness, "removing the mask of prohibition and shining on them the light of reason."⁵⁶ This, one may argue, is how Abu Zayd differentiated himself and his thought from the contribution of the *nahda* scholars.

However, while the history rewritten by *nahda* scholars may not have been accurate, it served a purpose at the time. Mruwwa believed that a conscious revival of a glorified, albeit inaccurate, past was necessary at the time to mobilize the masses towards

⁵³ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 8.

⁵⁴ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 26.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

independence, first from Ottoman rule and then from Western colonization.⁵⁷ But in his own simplification of the historical nuances of *nahda* era, Abu Zayd failed to see the complicity of these thinkers in the rewriting of the past for political ends.

It is rather surprising that Abu Zayd should use the same polemic tone against the Islamic reformists that he used against supporters of the religious discourse. In his critique, it is evident that Abu Zayd expected the *nahda* scholars to have conducted a Western-style academic investigation of the past, in the process instituting a methodology of critical thinking for generations to come. However, the *nahda* reformists themselves had only traditional religious training. As Sharabi noted, “reformism as a coherent outlook possessed no clear epistemological consciousness. Whatever awareness the reforming *ulema* had of the problem of knowledge, they articulated it in a most imprecise manner.”⁵⁸ It is unclear how Abu Zayd expected theologians of such an educational background to conduct their task with standards significantly beyond their skillset or even beyond their time. He might instead have directed his attention to the Christian Arab intellectuals, whose contribution is missing from Abu Zayd’s writing, as they tended to be more rational in their approach. As Kassab pointed out, Christian intellectuals had the distinct advantage of “early exposure to Western modernity through contact with Europe and through missionary schools and Christian sociocultural background.”⁵⁹ The absence of any discussion of these intellectuals who shared his methods is consistent with Abu Zayd’s almost exclusive focus on those who failed to meet his level of academic inquiry.

The conditions of the Muslim scholars of *nahda*, on the other hand, is best articulated by Sharabi’s statement: “Nietzsche once urged his fellow Europeans to carry

⁵⁷ Mruwwa, *Al-Naza‘at al-Maddiyya fi al-Falsafa al-‘Arabiyya wa al-Islamiyya*, 1, 10-11.

⁵⁸ Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West*, 30.

⁵⁹ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 31.

out an ‘autopsy’ of Christianity in order to free Europe from its clutches. Such an autopsy of Islam, which only the Muslim secularist could have performed, was unthinkable.”⁶⁰ Had the *nahda* scholars attempted to conduct such an autopsy of Islam, as Abu Zayd suggested, given the tumultuous context at the time, it is not clear that the Arab world would have retained its much-valued Islamic identity to the extent that it has.

Science without Thought

Another setback to modernity caused by the *nahda* scholars, according to Abu Zayd, is the manner in which they justified adopting European science. Abu Zayd pointed out that the *nahda* Islamic reformists viewed Europe’s scientific knowledge as “our goods returning to us,” meaning, according to them, that because Europe had benefited significantly from the contributions of Muslim scholars in the Middle Ages, the fruits of their later scientific work was also Muslim property.⁶¹ These scholars, he charged, settled on a justification that spared them the effort of critical examination of Europe’s achievements or even those of the Arab world. Europe did, it is true, acquire a great deal from the Muslims scholars, but it added to this corpus its own colossal contributions. While criticizing the *nahda* scholars for not delving into Western contributions to understand and emulate them, he himself disregarded these same scientific additions when he argued that modernity is a human, rather than a Western, development.

Continuing his critique of the *nahda* intellectuals, Abu Zayd argued that most of Arab culture is ignorant of the very Muslim contributions that the *nahda* scholars claim for Islam. For example, the rationalist philosophy of Averroes (Ibn Rushd), which

⁶⁰ Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West*, 23.

⁶¹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 22.

scholars of the European enlightenment greatly appreciated, is marginalized in the cultural heritage of the Arabs and Muslims.⁶² That Muslim intellectuals attribute Europe's success to historical figures marginalized in the Muslim heritage continues in contemporary Arab thought. For example, according to the Egyptian intellectual Hasan Hanafi, many Muslims believe that "it would be more appropriate to consider the European Renaissance as an extension and perfection of Islam's preceding intellectual domination."⁶³ This simplistic viewpoint, Abu Zayd argued, neglects the fact that no single civilization, Islam's included, can claim to have produced itself from naught. Rather, each successful civilization arises by absorbing its predecessors' achievements, collectively developing further the existing human civilization.⁶⁴ This argument reveals Abu Zayd's own humanistic and inclusive approach.

To this critique Abu Zayd added his charge that the *nahda* scholars, represented by 'Abduh and Afghani, were not genuinely interested in the scientific achievements of European modernity in the first place. Rather, they sought to import Europe's technology for the sole purpose of achieving military might.⁶⁵ As Sharabi noted, the *nahda* scholars persistently made the case for acquiring *'ilm* (scientific knowledge) because, in their view, it was the one element that "could transform the entire relationship between Islam and the West."⁶⁶ To some extent, they were right—Europe was, in fact, threatening the Arab world because of its military might.⁶⁷ But the transformation they had in mind was not one of scientific enlightenment but rather one of military might. Both their intent and

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, 145.

⁶⁴ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 13-4.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 27-9.

⁶⁶ Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West*, 44.

⁶⁷ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 28.

their urgency are revealed in Afghani's comment that "the very existence of the East depends on acquiring scientific knowledge; it is the instrument with which it can crush the power of the West."⁶⁸ In other words, knowledge and science were desirable only as instruments of destroying Western power, not as ends in themselves. The very notion that simply importing Europe's military and scientific equipment could lead the Arab world to over power Europe reveals the extent to which the *nahda* scholars viewed their relationship with Europe through an outdated, if not simplistic, prism.

Moreover, as Abu Zayd understood, to the *nahda* Islamic reformists, Europe's technological advancement was considered to be morally neutral; importing it represented no threat to the Islamic heritage.⁶⁹ The Muslim world was therefore free to take as much of this aspect of European civilization as it could reach, all the while ignoring the scientific and civilizational milieu that gave rise to such technology. In this vein, Sharabi observed that Afghani saw Europe as having nothing to offer the Arab world but "new weapons and military organization and technique."⁷⁰

Even conservative and anti-colonial activists, such as Hasan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, advocated acquiring Western science and technology.⁷¹ Significantly, Sharabi wrote, Europe was not viewed as "the seat of civilization, but as a civilization that possessed the secret of power and domination."⁷² The Islamic reformists, impressed with Europe's military might, appear to have missed everything else Europe has to offer.

⁶⁸ Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West*, 44.

⁶⁹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 27.

⁷⁰ Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West*, 47.

⁷¹ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 150.

⁷² Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West*, 47.

The damage wrought on the Arab world by such a mentality, from Abu Zayd's perspective, is that the original question "How did Europe arrive at its colossal transformation from the dark ages?" remained suppressed, perpetuating the misunderstanding of Europe's experiences and the inability to learn from them. The Arabs, Abu Zayd lamented, still insist that a simple mathematical application of Western technology will lead to equal progress. The need for critical thinking and scrutinizing all forms of creed and heritage was never acknowledged. The *nahda* reformists saw Europe as having simply acquired the science of the Muslims, concluding that they needed merely to acquire the same.⁷³ As Ajami puts it: "The Arab world wants to acquire the glamorous products of progress without following "the path that the West took to get it," which for Ajami requires a society to open itself to new ideas and "dwell on thought and dissent."⁷⁴ The latter was not welcome in the Arab world.

Abu Zayd implicated Europe itself in perpetuating this paradigm. It had an interest in maintaining Arab backwardness because doing so facilitated European domination and increased exports of technological products.⁷⁵ He recalled the fierce imperial opposition to Egypt's modernization and educational reforms.⁷⁶ Far from being a benevolent force, Western imperialism in the Arab world "was a force of social repression and economic manipulation."⁷⁷ Sharabi, as well, emphasized that the Western powers "contributed to retarding modernization by its repressive social policies." Instead, they "backed the conservative and reactionary social groups and cemented class and

⁷³ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 43-4.

⁷⁴ Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice since 1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 196-7.

⁷⁵ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 30.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West*, 133.

economic distinctions.”⁷⁸ Given the odds against them, it is not surprising that the *nahda* scholars fell short of achieving complete transformation into Western-style modernity.

However, from Abu Zayd’s perspective, in their attempt to create what he referred to as ‘*tawfiq*’ (conciliation), or a link where one did not exist, the *nahda* scholars ended up creating ‘*talfiq*’ (fabrications).⁷⁹ Not appreciating the challenges they faced, Abu Zayd charged that, rather than laying the foundation for modernity in the Islamic world, the *nahda* intellectuals further suppressed rational, scientific inquiry into their own history and that of Europe. In cases where science clearly contradicted the religious teachings of Islam or other religions, as in the case of Darwin’s theory of evolution, it was assumed that science made a mistake.⁸⁰ In effect, he argued, the Arab world chose to “limit itself to importing technology while at the same time damning its scientific foundations,” Abu Zayd wrote⁸¹ He noted that the act of importing machines and guns “protects us from the consequences of dealing with the ‘other’ in a manner other than the usual utilitarian/opportunistic approach which distinguishes between technology and the scientific thought which produces technology.”⁸² Abu Zayd did not articulate, however, the reasons why the *nahda* scholars did not engage with Europe culturally and intellectually to the extent he would have deemed appropriate for achieving a transformation in the Arab world. In his focus on where they fell short, he neglected the colossal and historical changes that did take place during that period, including the birth of the modern nation states, adoption of constitutions and the establishment of secular mass education, all of which a direct result of European influence.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 135.

⁷⁹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 35.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 45.

⁸¹ Ibid., 14.

⁸² Ibid.

Lack of Courage

In addition to the aforementioned challenges that the Islamic reformists faced, more conservative voices existed alongside them, demanding a different approach to tackling the issues of the day. The conservative *'ulama'* who viewed modernity with suspicion considered all that came from Europe—except the technology involved in daily life—as “threatening to annihilate the Arab Islamic self and violate its authenticity.”⁸³ Perhaps to avoid appearing less religious or authentic than their conservative counterparts, the *nahda* reformist chose to avoid controversy by succumbing to pressure and quickly retreating. This was particularly evident, Abu Zayd noted, when the topic was related in any way to the religious heritage. In his words, “the quick withdrawal which reaches the level of submission and admitting defeat is a recurring theme in the discourse of the *nahda*.” By caving in so quickly, Abu Zayd added, they “turned the *turath* into a prohibited area that is above the mechanisms of scientific analysis.”⁸⁴

Abu Zayd gave the example of Muhammad ‘Abduh who adopted the rationalist Mu‘tazilites’ stance on the creation of the Qur’an in the first edition of his book *Risalat al-Tawhid* (The Message of Monotheism). However, upon being ‘advised’ by one of the conservative *'ulama'* to follow the traditional, more literal stances on the issue, ‘Abduh hastily removed that section, replacing it with the traditional Ash‘ari position that met the approval of his conservative critics.⁸⁵ To Kassab, despite being “the most important Nahda reformist,” ‘Abduh “gave up his historicizing approach under pressure from the

⁸³ Ibid., 38.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 42.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 29.

conservatives.”⁸⁶ The underlying criticism is that the Islamic reformists should have challenged conservative theologians.

Abduh was not the only progressive *nahda* scholar who gave in to opposition. As Abu Zayd pointed out, ‘Ali ‘Abdulraziq, whose book *Al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukm* (Islam and the Rules of Governance) was banned, refused to reprint it even after the circumstances that led to its censorship and to his trial were addressed. Likewise, author Naguib Mahfuz not only refused to re-print his banned book *’Awwal Haratina* (The Children of Our Neighbourhood) but also threatened with legal action the newspaper that wanted to publish it, should they go through with publication.⁸⁷ Similarly, Taha Husayn only reprinted his book *Fi al-Shi’r al-Jahili* (On Pre-Islamic Poetry)—the title of which he changed to *Fi al-’Adab al-Jahili* (On Arab Literature)—after removing the most seminal but controversial content, even though the subject was poetry. These examples do not give due credit, however, to these scholars for courageously making the initial attempt and publishing views that challenged the establishment, perhaps for the first time in centuries. The intimidation these scholars must have faced to suppress their views is neglected in Abu Zayd’s work. It is possible that he indirectly sought to highlight his own courage in standing up to the establishment, despite the consequences.

From Abu Zayd’s perspective, however, the appeasement of the reformists has symbolic significance because it means that the *nahda* scholars failed to cement a place for open debate over controversial issues unhindered by intimidation by the state or the religious establishment.⁸⁸ Again, Abu Zayd presupposed that had these scholars continued to challenge the establishment, their defiance would have led to freedom of

⁸⁶ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 190.

⁸⁷ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 35.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 41-2.

thought being rooted in the Arab world. An alternate outcome, however, had they indeed persisted in their challenge, could have been a stronger backlash against them.

Neglecting the historic context, Abu Zayd did not appreciate that many in the Arab world were feeling so exposed, vulnerable and humiliated by Europe's superiority that no subject was safe for vigorous academic inquiry. Hisham Sharabi observed that the *nahda* scholars felt this vulnerability keenly, believing that "controversy would only arouse further disunity and thus increase Muslim weakness."⁸⁹ However, they clearly did not shy away from all that was controversial, altering their course only when intimidated. This fear, as Abu Zayd noted, far from a recent phenomenon, is itself rooted in historical patterns. Since the death of Prophet Muhammad, he argued, most disputes have been resolved by violently silencing dissenting voices. Due to this, the Arab world rarely witnesses peaceful transitions of power.⁹⁰ Therefore, unless tolerance of dissenting voices becomes part of the public sphere in the Arab world, it is likely that many scholars would continue to tread carefully when approaching controversy.

CONCLUSION

Abu Zayd viewed his own work as a continuation of the *nahda* scholars' work as well as the more historical writings of Mu'atazilites and Averroes (Ibn Rushd).⁹¹ He stressed, however, that "it is an extension that does not repeat and reiterate" but rather carries the questions to their natural conclusions, attempting to glean from them a

⁸⁹ Sharabi, *Arab Intellectuals and the West*, 36.

⁹⁰ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 20-1.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

methodology for deeper analysis of the issues. His goal was to “deduce what is substantial and human and epistemological, removing from the historic all that is interim, racial or ideological.”⁹² One may argue, therefore, that in his criticism of the Islamic reformists’ work, Abu Zayd indirectly sought to highlight his own contribution.

By conceding to conservatives even in matters of art and science, Abu Zayd charged, the *nahda* scholars ultimately thwarted the effort to transform the Arab citizen “from the stage of ‘mythical transcendental religious awareness’ to the stage of ‘scientific awareness’ of human, natural and social phenomenon alike.”⁹³ All aspects of life would continue to be bound to the religious establishment, awaiting the independence to establish such scientific awareness. Abu Zayd lamented that in their focus on finding a compromise and a middle ground to the challenges they faced, they missed out on the richness in both their own history and that of Europe.⁹⁴ The *nahda* reformists, albeit unconsciously, from Abu Zayd’s perspective, furthered familiar albeit outdated norms.

Only on the issue of women’s liberation did Abu Zayd acknowledge the contributions of the Islamic reformists.⁹⁵ Otherwise, he laid a disproportionate amount of blame on them, honing in on their weaknesses, especially their lack of academic and scientific approach to modernity. Perhaps because he himself did so, he expected the *nahda* intellectuals to challenge the tremendous power that authoritarianism, in both its imperial and Arab national versions, held—and continues to hold—over Muslim citizens and their identity.

⁹² Ibid., 12.

⁹³ Ibid., 41.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 46.

⁹⁵ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir al-Khawf*, 62.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE WEIGHT OF HISTORY

Abu Zayd contended that the efforts of the *nahda* scholars to arrive at a workable relationship between the Islamic heritage and modernity, as the previous chapter argued, served to obfuscate rather than illuminate the study of history. Since then, according to Abu Zayd, the perception of the heritage has crippled the Arab world's progress.¹ For him, reform in contemporary Arab thought as well as Arab societies at large could only start to take place if the Arab Islamic history and heritage were subjected to vigorous scientific inquiry. In this chapter, I explore how Abu Zayd made his argument regarding the weight of history in Arab consciousness.

A relevant note to this analysis is the difference between heritage (*turath*) and history (*tarikh*). *Turath*, as noted in the previous chapter, is constructed from certain historical episodes to represent identity and, as Abu Zayd put it, the valued segments of history.² History therefore is the whole from which certain segments are taken to form the heritage. Some Arab intellectuals use *turath*, mainly the one constructed during the *nahda* era, interchangeably with history. This reveals, as this chapter argues, the strong hold *turath* has in contemporary Arab Islamic thought, as Abu Zayd himself noted.³

In the context of the Arab world, the issue of history and its relationship to the present is neither esoteric nor exclusive to the intelligentsia. Rather, it affects Arab citizens at the mundane level of their daily lives. Many laws and regulations shaping the

¹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 13.

² Abu Zayd, *Ishkaliyyat al-Qira'a wa Aliyyat al-Ta'wil*, 51.

³ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 13.

lives of Arab men and women are enforced in the name of loyalty to the Arab Islamic heritage and history. It was, after all, using the medieval *hisba* practice that Abu Zayd was deemed an apostate, divorced from his wife, and forced into exile.⁴ Laws regulating personal affairs and family matters such as inheritance and marriage are still derived from the Islamic legal tradition. Issues ranging from religion, politics to foreign relations all find themselves touched by history's influence. It is no wonder, therefore, that many Arab intellectuals have dedicated volumes to this subject.

Abu Zayd argued that the Arab people in particular have an “incessant and anxious obsession” with *turath*, as it was constructed in the *nahda* era. He lamented that the *umma* is all but “unique in its entanglement with the robes of its past.”⁵ On the contrary, though, this preoccupation with history is hardly unique to the Arab world. History renders arguments credible, the Syrian intellectual Sadiq Jalal al-Azm points out, because “legitimacy and credibility are often connected with a sense of continuity and historic roots.” Due to this, even modern movements in Europe claim historic roots in the classical age.⁶ The Iraqi historian ‘Abd al-Aziz al-Duri, reminds us that it is in the name of history that Arab lands are occupied, referencing Palestine. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Arabs view history as sacred and enacting “the Will of God.”⁷

Contemporary Arab intellectuals approach the historical heritage with a diverse set of attitudes, an observation that was not lost on Abu Zayd. He classified these attitudes, identifying three main trends that have evolved in the second half of the twentieth century. He wrote that while nuanced differences exist between various

⁴ For details on medieval history of the law see, Balz, "Submitting Faith to Judicial Scrutiny," 139.

⁵ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 13.

⁶ 'Azm, *Dhahniyat al-Tahrim*, 17.

⁷ 'Abd al-Aziz Duri, al, *Awraq fi al-Tarikh wa al-Hadhara Awraq fi 'Ilm al-Tarikh* [Papers in History and Civilization Papers in the Science of History] (Beirut: Markiz Dirasat al-Wihda al-'Arabiyya, 2009), 111.

intellectuals belonging to each trend, they still tend to fall into one of these three categories.⁸

The first group includes intellectuals who believe that we live in “a completely different and new age that is not connected to the past in any way, shape or form.” Consequently, the past, with its stories, myths, or even its rational contributions “is incapable of speaking to the issues and concerns of the present time.”⁹ Discussions of freedom, Abu Zayd wrote, easily illustrate this attitude. Texts on this subject written during the progressive ‘Abbasid time, even in its most sophisticated classical form, cannot rise to the level of sophistication humanity has reached at the current time with its convoluted layers of social, national or even international legal systems. Consequently, Abu Zayd wrote, those who belong to this group wonder, “How can an awareness of the heritage with its specificities, historicity and limitation of time and place offer a solution?” The answer for intellectuals who espouse this view is that the heritage is irrelevant to current challenges.¹⁰ Therefore, the solution is “an epistemological discontinuation” with the past and an exclusive focus on the present to address today’s challenges in their own context.¹¹

Abu Zayd criticized intellectuals who support this trend because they are unable to answer questions regarding the *umma*’s identity, which is inevitably derived from its history.¹² An example of this intellectual current, according to Abu Zayd, is Adonis’ book, *Al-Thabit wa al-Mutahawwil* (the Fixed and the Changing), to be discussed

⁸ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta’wil*, 177.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 177-9.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 179-80.

shortly.¹³ Other scholars also identified the existence of such a group. For example al-Duri writes that for those who espouse this outlook, *turath* is “pulling us backwards, preventing free movement and progress.”¹⁴ Haddad gives the example of Salama Musa who “advised severance from the past and concentration on the future; since the past was filled with ignorance and fantasy, he saw no benefit in dredging it up.”¹⁵ Perhaps Ghalyun belongs to this trend as well, as he writes that the past is “the very shackle preventing the freedom of consciousness necessary for the adoption of modernity.”¹⁶ What unites these intellectuals is that they see the past as devoid of any value to offer the Arab world in contemporary times.

The second intellectual trend goes to the opposite extreme of the first trend, Abu Zayd wrote. It includes followers of the slogan “Islam is the solution” as well as Salafis for whom the future is only valuable for its potential to offer a return to the glorious past.¹⁷ As Derek Hopwood notes, for those who are attached to the past, the present is but “an interval between perfect origins and their re-establishment.”¹⁸ Their excessive attachment to the heritage, Abu Zayd pointed out, stems from the notion that “it has an existential and cognitive priority. It is the pervasive essence that the present has to follow and the ideal to which to aspire.”¹⁹ Consequently, the extent to which the present is different from their picture of *turath* is the extent to which the present has become

¹³ Adonis, *Al-Thabit wa al-Mutahawwil: Bahth fi al-Itba' wa al-Ibda' 'inda al-'Arab* [The Constant and the Chagining: Research in Immitation and Creativity for the Arabs], 4 vols., vol. 1 (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2003).

¹⁴ Duri, *Awraq fi al-Tarikh wa al-Hadhara*, 114.

¹⁵ Haddad, *Contemporary Islam and the Challenge of History*, 15.

¹⁶ Burhan Ghalyun, *Ighthiyal al-'Aql: Mihnath al-Thaqafah al-'Arabiyya Bayna al-Salafiyya wa al-Taba'iyya* [The Assassination of Reason: The Crisis of Arab Culture Between Salafism and Dependence] (Beirut: Al-Markiz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi, 2006), 173.

¹⁷ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 180.

¹⁸ *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, 3.

¹⁹ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 141.

“deviant and perverse.” Thus, Abu Zayd explained, the Salafis are constantly attempting to reformulate the present to match the past.²⁰

Abu Rabi‘ also described Salafis in similar terms writing that their movement “has understood progress in terms of a return to the sublime past.”²¹ Given that the past the Salafis long for is one in which Muslims enjoyed civilizational superiority, Tarabishi points out, the only ‘correct’ and acceptable order in the world is one in which the Arab Islamic civilization is dominating, not equal or inferior to others.²² This perception of the heritage therefore sees in the reestablishment of the past a reversal of the current challenging state of affairs in the Arab world.

Another characteristic of this trend is that its members hardly distinguish between Islam and the Arab Islamic history and heritage. Consequently, Abu Zayd pointed out, “They treat the heritage as something sacred, approached with reverence and sanctity and not an object of scrutiny.”²³ Those who hold this attitude towards *turath* consider it blasphemous to attempt to subject the heritage to critical inquiry. As an illustration, Abu Zayd gave the example of the reaction to his own critique of Imam al-Shafi‘i and the outrage towards him for questioning a historical figure. He also referenced the reaction to ‘Abdulraziq’s book on the caliphate, as well as the doctoral thesis of Khalafallah which touched on the historicity of the Qur’an.²⁴ In each of these examples, scrutiny of a historical figure caused a strong adversarial reaction, mainly by Islamists. Abu Zayd

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought* 69.

²² Tarabishi, *Al-Muthaqqafun al-'Arab wa al-Turath*, 47-50.

²³ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 180.

²⁴ Ibid.

charged that the only acceptable relationship with the heritage for this current is one in which the Arab Islamic heritage is repeated without ever being examined for accuracy.²⁵

The third trend Abu Zayd identified is the one he referred to as the “centrist and conciliatory” (*al-wasatiyya wa al-tawfiq*).²⁶ In his book *Naqd al-Khitab al-Dini* (Critique of Religious Discourse), he likened the centrist approach to history to painting (*talwin*), as these intellectuals merely paint over old structure in an attempt to give it a renewed look and conceal its outdated nature, without any real renovation.²⁷ This current takes from the past what could be used to justify progress in the present. Describing the shortcomings of this trend, Abu Zayd wrote:

The problem with this centrist conciliatory current is that it ends up fabricating [history], by collecting elements here and there, i.e., intellectual elements taken from different, at times contradictory, systems [in order] to make from them, despite their disparity, a single structure that fits the present. An idea is only sound and true if it is useful and not the opposite. The criterion for the selection is utility in its ideological sense, and not in its epistemological one. Meaning, an idea is not useful because it is true.²⁸

Using historic precedent in this manner, Abu Zayd argued, undermines the epistemological value of ideas and marginalizes the process and methodology of obtaining knowledge. Under these circumstances, these intellectuals unwittingly empower the trend of “Islam is the solution” because the latter adopts the same utilitarian attitude toward history. In other words, although the conciliators and Salafis have different goals, they both accept the utilitarian tenet that knowledge is good not insofar as it is true, but insofar as it is useful for achieving predetermined goals. The only

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 184.

²⁷ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*.

²⁸ Ibid., 184-5.

difference, to Abu Zayd, is that the Salafis have access to funding and media outlets to propagate their ideas.²⁹

Another example of the conciliatory trend is what Abu Zayd referred to as the “Islamic Left,”³⁰ a term coined by the Egyptian intellectual Hassan Hanafi during the early eighties.³¹ The name was attached to Hanafi as he published a magazine with the same name, *Al-Yasar Al-Islami* (The Islamic Left).³² The title, Riexinger wrote, “intended to serve as the label of a new ideological movement.”³³ Hanafi professed to follow in the footsteps of ‘Abduh and Afghani in their effort “to modernize the Islamic creed by taking into consideration the political and social needs of the Muslim masses.”³⁴ Therefore, while acknowledging the need to adopt changes, the past is employed to justify these changes.

For Abu Zayd, however, the intellectuals labelled as Islamic Left “drop on Islam values deemed beneficial, without deep analysis of the structure of Islam itself”³⁵ He acknowledged, nonetheless, that adherents to the Islamic Left do not aspire to restructure the present to look like the past because “they realize that the problem with the present is in fact its resemblance to the past.”³⁶ Still, as far as Abu Zayd is concerned, the supporters of the Islamic Left fail to achieve an academic level of objectivity and critical thinking in their approach.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 125-6.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Martin Riexinger, "Narsserism Revitalized. A Critical Reading Of Hasan Hanafi's Projects "The Islamic Left" and "Occidentalism" and Their Uncritical Reading," *Welt des Islams* 47, no. 1 (2007): 64.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 66.

³⁵ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 128.

³⁶ Ibid., 142.

Exemplary of Hanafi's bias in tackling history is his insistence on blaming the medieval Ash'ari school of thought for the Arab world's backwardness while insisting that the rational Mu'tazilites' thought embodied the authentic heritage of Islam. Hanafi then, according to Abu Zayd, offers the Mu'tazilites as the solution to today's crisis.³⁷ This was unacceptable to Abu Zayd, who, although he too blamed the Ash'ari school of thought for today's problems, denied that either of these historical schools could address the current challenges of the Arab world. Both intellectuals, however, impose on the historical schools of thought today's standards of reason (or lack thereof), neglecting the specific historic context and sophistication of these schools in their own time. Like Abu Zayd, Tarabishi also criticized Hassan Hanafi's work. He wrote that in Hanafi's attachment to the Mu'tazilites over the 'Ash'aris, he made the former look better and the latter worse than they actually were.³⁸ Riexinger, however, charged that both Abu Zayd and Tarabishi, in their critique of Hanafi, "indulge in malicious polemics."³⁹ The polemical tone is in fact an aspect of contemporary Arab thought across intellectual trends.

In his assessment of the Islamic Left, Abu Zayd presumed that intellectuals like Hanafi who argue for the adoption of modern principles like rationalism by referencing their precedent in Islamic history fall into one of two traps amounting to either ignorance or deceit. In the first category, they lack the intellectual capacity to conduct thorough and unbiased scientific inquiry; in the second, they deliberately and knowingly manipulate the masses into accepting modern changes by mining the historical record for their desired

³⁷ Ibid., 168-70.

³⁸ Tarabishi's critique of Hasan Hanafi is more thorough than Abu Zayd's. See, Tarabishi, *Al-Muthaqqafun al-'Arab wa al-Turath*.

³⁹ Riexinger, "Narsserism Revitalized. A Critical Reading Of Hasan Hanafi's Projects," 65.

case for Islamic progress.⁴⁰ But as he did elsewhere with his opponents, including the *nahda* reformists he critiqued, Abu Zayd did not consider the possibility that such intellectuals are in fact convinced of the efficiency of their approach, without harbouring any self-serving or malicious intent. More importantly, throughout his work, Abu Zayd himself exhibited the same practice by imposing modern values on the historical Islamic heritage. This is particularly evident in the manner in which he tackled women's rights.

Abu Zayd did not indicate to which of these trends his own thought belonged. Presumably, he is part of a fourth trend to which he alone thus far adhered. Abu Zayd saw himself as attempting to arrive at an accurate and scientific understanding of history, siding with reason over any other nationalist, religious or emotional bias. According to him, history, studied objectively, should be neither vilified nor idealized. Rather, it is subjected to academic scrutiny with detachment to findings. Its relevance to the present flows naturally from an accurate reading of the past, with neither anachronistic imposition of modern values nor utopian idealization of a glorified past. But to Abu Zayd, each of these three trends fell prey to one ideological influence or another. What is missing, he wrote, is careful examination of history in order to draw the right lessons. This however, would require a restructuring of epistemology in the Arab world and liberation of knowledge.⁴¹

The Presence of History

With the foregoing discussion in mind, the issue of the study of history is critical for several reasons. Among them, Abu Zayd argued, is that history in the contemporary

⁴⁰ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 185-6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

Arab world does not in fact lie in a hermetically sealed past. Rather, it crowds the present lives of Arabs who constantly feel torn between the past and the present. Explaining the Muslim psyche, Abu Zayd wrote:

The Muslim world lives two contradictory moments simultaneously, which leads to social and intellectual schizophrenia: The moment of material technological advancement produced by Europe, in which a Muslim lives entirely in every detail of his daily life, and the moment of religious consciousness, which is a consciousness that has not developed fundamentally since the fourth century *hijri* calendar, eleventh century AD. The contradiction between these two moments enables a Muslim doctor to do fertilizing operations in lab tubes without the scientific advancement affecting his self-image. He is able to separate scientific practices inside the laboratory and immersion in mythical consciousness outside the lab.⁴²

Other contemporary modernists also share Abu Zayd's view on the strong hold of the past over the present. The Syrian intellectual Hashim Salih, for example, wrote that Arabs, while contemporaries of the West in time, are not at the same civilizational level because of their anachronistic way of life, living in the past while physically in the present.⁴³ This sentiment has also found its way to poetry. In his poem, "On the Margins of al-Naksa," the famous Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani, wrote, "We wear the shell of civilization while our soul is still living in *jahiliyya*."⁴⁴ For Qabbani, the shell of civilization means superficial material aspects of modernity. Abu Zayd considered Qabbani's lines to be "a genuine poetic expression of an astounding discovery and discernment." Modernity, Abu Zayd, lamented, is simply a shell, one that is too thin to

⁴² Ibid., 115.

⁴³ Hisham Salih, *Al-Insidad al-Tarikhi: Limadha Fashila Mashru' al-Tanwir fi al-'Alam al-'Arabi?* [The Historical Gridlock: Why Did the Enlightenment Project in the Arab World Fail?] (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2007), 155-6.

⁴⁴ Nizar Qabbani, *Al-A'mal al-Kamila* [The Complete Works], 698.

conceal the traditional structure underneath.⁴⁵ Therefore, other modernists share Abu Zayd's perspective.

Abu Zayd charged that this anachronistic way of life runs rampant throughout the Arab world because the separation of body from soul has been deemed 'Islamic.' This separation leads to a disconnect of mind from emotions as well, the latter remaining entirely immersed in the past while the mind adopts the surface-level achievements of modernity – much like the scientist who embraces modern science in the laboratory but retains a medieval understanding of the self. Abu Zayd accused the supporters of the religious discourse of perpetuating this dualistic way of life⁴⁶ by presenting unscientific religious theories with such certainty as to give the impression that they constitute Islam itself.⁴⁷ In other words, the partisans of the religious discourse normalize this anachronistic way of life and give it a veneer of authority. From its perspective, Abu Zayd argued, if the Arab world, for practical reasons, must embrace Western aspects of daily life, its soul and emotions must remain traditional. Consequently, the mind “thinks according to the traditions, customs and values inherited from the past while the body lives in modernity enjoying all that science produced without ever participating in its production.”⁴⁸

Abu Zayd argued that the adherents to the religious discourse dealt with this discord between such binary elements as science and culture, or rationalism and emotions by enacting *talfiq* (fabrication) in order to make the values of *turath* appear more

⁴⁵ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 230-1.

⁴⁶ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 51.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 45.

beneficial than those of modernity and science.⁴⁹ This is the case, Abu Zayd wrote, because “at the level of the soul, we imagine that our Islamic *turath* depository surpasses any accomplishments by modern civilization.”⁵⁰ The “we” in his statement refers to Muslim Arabs for whom *turath* is the only legitimate frame of reference. This strong grip of the past is exemplified, Abu Zayd wrote, in the notion that the Arab world can solve its current problems, introduced mainly by modernity, with solutions from the Arab Islamic history and heritage – a position to which, in his view, the supporters of religious discourse are especially committed.⁵¹ But this reliance on the past as a solution to the present fails to take into account the historical context, leading to further disillusionment and alienation as people see the failure of both the present and the past.⁵²

Abu Zayd wrote that the supporters of the religious discourse, in their attempt “to solve current political, social, and ethical problems by resurrecting solutions that the Muslim community of a bygone era used,” presuppose that the subsequent unfolding of history is irrelevant.⁵³ They assume that “since Islam solved the problems of the seventh century, it can just as easily solve our problems today.”⁵⁴ For Abu Zayd, this assumption is absurd: “Life is in a constant state of flux. New problems arise – problems that call for creative solutions, not solutions taken from the past and superimposed on problems of the present.”⁵⁵ Therefore, Abu Zayd advocated that challenges be examined and addressed in their current context.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 45-6.

⁵⁰ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 239.

⁵¹ “There is reliance on the authority of *turath*, on the predecessors and on their texts.” Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 55.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 112-3.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 114.

The past is attractive, Abu Zayd explained, because the present is in a state of crisis but the past represents the glorious accomplishments of *turath* at every level.⁵⁶ But this is an illusion resulting from cherry-picking from the historical record. Rather, Abu Zayd argued, to address the challenges of the present, new ideas must be allowed to compete: “If ideas were to compete on equal footing, it is inevitable that the modern ideas would undermine the old, change them, or supplant them.” However, what is taking place on the ground “is simply juxtaposing the old with all its sacredness and holiness—which it has acquired through repetition and duplications—with the new, which has no reverence.” In this biased light, modern ideas and solutions are either marginalized or ignored altogether.⁵⁷

Other contemporary modernists who share Abu Zayd’s perspective include the Syrian intellectual Muhammad Shahrur. Sounding almost identical to Abu Zayd, Shahrur stressed: “In order to solve the current problems of the Arab-Muslim world we are required to use the ideas and thoughts of our most creative minds even if their proposals appear unusual or unfamiliar. But the familiar and the well-acquainted are often insufficient to solve the challenging problems of our ever more complex world.”⁵⁸ Like Abu Zayd, he associated clinging to past solutions with creating further challenges for the Arab world. Shahrur wrote: “It would be an extreme regression if we tried to establish a modern society on the basis of pre-modern values and bygone norms.”⁵⁹ Such optimism concerning modernity’s potential contributions to the Arab world is, it would seem, a hallmark of modernist Arab thought.

⁵⁶ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 143.

⁵⁷ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 20.

⁵⁸ *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reseason: The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, ed. Andreas Christmann, trans. Andreas Christmann (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 1.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

Abu Zayd identified a number of reasons why imposing bygone solutions on current problems would be ineffective and even detrimental. He argued this practice hinders innovation, stifles progress and prevents Arabs from living or contributing to their own era. The reliance on the authority of the past necessarily places “the frame of reference of the modern mind outside the life in which it exists. Creativity is then always contingent upon another external authority that is critically misplaced outside the actual experience.”⁶⁰ This approach not only ends up “suffocating any possibility for scientific or intellectual creativity,” wrote Abu Zayd, “but it also leads to the perpetuation of political, social, and intellectual dependence (*taba‘iyya*). It teaches future generations to consume rather than produce knowledge.”⁶¹ He lamented that Arabs do not take the initiative to produce new knowledge but rely on ancestral knowledge, all the while remaining dependent on Western technology due to sheer necessity.⁶² This reliance on previously discovered knowledge, Abu Zayd argued, is analogous to eating solely canned food, which could lead to cancer. Therefore, the *umma* is under the threat of developing a cancerous tumour if it continues to rely on processed, old information, he asserted.⁶³

Modernists like Abu Zayd place a great deal of value on the present and future and very little on the past. They see the past as a step in human evolution, never to be repeated but only a phase on which to build the next. By contrast, partisans of the religious discourse view Islam and the religious heritage to have revealed all there is to know for the future. There is nothing new to be added. The Egyptian Islamist Huwaydi, for example, concludes that the reason for Muslim world backwardness is that the *umma*

⁶⁰ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 146.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 146-7.

⁶³ Ibid.

diverted away from the Qur'an, which is being held hostage, presumably by forces that resist his interpretation of Islam. In his book *Al-Qur'an wa al-Sultan* (Qur'an and authority), he portrays the Qur'an as a wellspring of scientific progress and military might.⁶⁴ He asserts, "When the Qur'an is released, the *umma* will be released."⁶⁵ For him, tyrannical authorities are holding the Qur'an back from Muslims to keep them weak and easily dominated. Therefore, from his perspective, the Qur'an has all the Muslims need to know to prosper again.

From Abu Zayd's perspective, however, the supporters of the religious discourse have been trying for almost two hundred years, since the first encounter with modernity, to impose old solutions on new problems without any success. The Arab world is still struggling with the same issues the *nahda* scholars attempted to address. Abu Zayd wrote, "Conservative Islamic discourse merely spreads itself like a veneer over problems that emerge from the changes we experience in the ebb and flow of a world that is in constant flux."⁶⁶ Arabs, Abu Zayd argued, refuse to address seriously the challenges of their present-time context, be they economic, social, or legal in nature. To do so would require inquiry and examination that goes beyond the old texts from past eras.⁶⁷

As far as Abu Zayd is concerned, supporters of the religious discourse hold the lion's share of the blame because their discourse dominates the Arab world, due mainly to state institutional support. He argued that by insisting on looking towards the past, resisting innovation, and maintaining authoritarian tendencies, the proponents of the religious discourse use their capital and access to the masses in a manner that perpetuates

⁶⁴ Huwaydi, *Al-Qur'an wa al-Sultan*.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 13-19.

⁶⁶ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 200.

⁶⁷ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 142-3.

the state of stagnation.⁶⁸ Here Abu Zayd's rationale in naming the adherents to the religious discourse responsible for major problems in the Arab world is rather subjective. The current religious discourse in the Arab world is itself a product of much wider political, social, and economic circumstances. The powerful negative role of the authoritarian regimes, for example, in perpetuating a certain religious discourse is nearly absent from Abu Zayd's work. Mernissi notes how these political regimes "plumbed the depths of sacred symbolism for everything that reinforces the bound of submission," frowning upon dissent and questioning of authority.⁶⁹ However, Abu Zayd focused almost exclusively on blaming the proponents of the religious discourse.

From the perspective of the supporters of the religious discourse, modernists and secularists have been in control of the Arab world's destiny since the birth of the modern state. Advocates of reform, all the way back to 'Abduh, are perceived to have been effective and dominant as well as responsible for the state of affairs in the region. Kushk, for example, wrote that "reformists caused the occupation of our countries" because they thought democracy and adoption of European constitutions and manners would keep the European aggression away, whereas they in fact simply facilitated foreign cultural domination.⁷⁰ Likewise al-'Affani lamented that "the corruption of earth that resulted from abandoning Islam as though rotted with magnificent charlatans." The "magnificent charlatans," in 'Affani's reading, were the Islamic reformists of the *nahda* era and the modernists who followed in their footsteps, whom he held responsible for the stagnation

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (London: Virago Press, 1993), 107.

⁷⁰ Kushk, *Qira'a fi Fikr al-Taba'iyya*, 9.

and suffering that has been inflicted on Muslims.⁷¹ Therefore, from such a perspective, modernity has been dominating and enforcing its solutions with disastrous consequences.

Another reason Abu Zayd offered for the inefficacy of imposing bygone solutions on current challenges was that although *turath* is given high priority as a resource for addressing contemporary concerns, no “creative and innovative critique” or examination of *turath* has taken place. Rather, Abu Zayd emphasized, sporadic episodes of history are taken out of context and recycled. The resulting solutions may not even represent *turath* accurately.⁷² Indeed, how is one to be certain of the ancestors’ messages when the debate is stifled and much of history is off limits to academic inquiry? To Abu Zayd, then, all that is in *turath* must be subject to scientific inquiry.⁷³

Abu Zayd is not alone in drawing attention to the urgency of this issue. To the Syrian intellectual Hashim Salih, however, this scrutiny is unlikely to happen in the immediate future. He argued that while attachment to the past and the constant pull towards the ancestors is useless, it will continue to be an issue until it is confronted. Unless Arab scholars match Europe’s effort of applying critical thinking to the past from the time of Spinoza and the Renaissance, the Arab world is not likely to overcome its predicaments.⁷⁴ Like Abu Zayd, Salih believed that the secret behind Europe’s advancement is the application of critical thinking to its heritage – including its taboos. Without tackling the difficult questions that history presents, this gap in progress between the Arab world and the West will continue to exist because “settling of the scores with

⁷¹ 'Affani, *'A'lam wa 'Aqzam fi Mizan al-Islam* 1, 4-5.

⁷² Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 231.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁷⁴ Salih, *Al-Insidad al-Tarikhi*, 69.

the past precedes building a present and a future.”⁷⁵ Likewise Jabri, stressing the importance of such re-examination, wrote that “When the predominant culture is one that places tremendous value on history and traditions, the discourse of modernity must be directed first and foremost towards that tradition with the goal of re-examining it and offering a contemporary understanding of it.”⁷⁶ These intellectuals unite in advocating academic scrutiny of history as a prerequisite to facing current challenges.

Abu Zayd’s ideal for the study of history is an interactive one. He wrote that Arabs “must not overlook the time distance that separates them from *turath*,” nor should they accept or reject it unconditionally. He wrote, “Ultimately, this is our *turath*. Our ancestors did not leave it for us to enchain our freedom and mobility.”⁷⁷ A constructive manner of dealing with the heritage is to “employ the experience gained in the past in a productive and creative manner” while always relying on modernity and reason to determine present issues.⁷⁸ The study of history and the forging of a heritage, then, for Abu Zayd should resemble a philosophical dialectic – examining what is good, true and helpful for today’s world.

In proposing such an academic study of history, Abu Zayd, and other modernists, assumed that the end result would once and for all dispel all illusions regarding the past. However, many supporters of the religious discourse also propose a study of the past because they believe it would further demonstrate that Islam is the reason for the progress and might of the Muslims in past time. Huwaydi is one such intellectual. To him, the study of history would lead Muslims once again to the true source of their strength,

⁷⁵ Ibid., 155-6.

⁷⁶ Jabri, *Al-Turath wa al-Hadatha*, 17.

⁷⁷ Abu Zayd, *Ishkaliyyat al-Qira'a wa Aliyyat al-Ta'wil*, 51.

⁷⁸ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 18.

namely, the Qur'an.⁷⁹ Therefore, far from providing definite answers, the past provides more grounds for dialectic arguments between modernists and their opponents.

History, the Relationship with the Other and Modernity

Modernity's introduction to the Arab world has been unsettling. It led to a debate, as Hopwood points out, "over the relative values of modernity and authenticity."⁸⁰

Hopwood argued that for those who prioritize authenticity, change is viewed as "the corruption of original cultural values."⁸¹ Indeed the encounter has been confrontational.

As Abu Zayd described the troubled introduction between the West and the Arab world,

the start of the confrontation between these worlds brought the challenge of modernity – all of its values such as 'progress', 'power', 'science', 'reason' – penetrating traditional societies and thus violating their well-established identities. The reaction was not invariably negative. Any negative reaction focused on military invasion, the occupation of territory, and exploitation of natural human resources.⁸²

Against the background of military subjugation, Abu Zayd argued, the Arab Islamic history, *turath* in particular, portrays a world in which Arabs and Muslims play an ancient, formative role in human history.⁸³ Consequently, he wrote, "whenever something comes at us from the West, we rush to seek shelter in our *turath*, as if nothing should enter our awareness unless it has precedent in our past, be it real, that precedent, or a product of our illusion."⁸⁴ At the same time, the West is consistently blamed for many of the challenges the Arab world is facing. For example, Hassan Hanafi blamed

⁷⁹ Huwaydi, *Al-Qur'an wa al-Sultan*, 15-6.

⁸⁰ *Islam and Modernity : Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, 3.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 11.

⁸³ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 13.

⁸⁴ Abu Zayd, *Ishkaliyyat al-Qira'a wa Aliyyat al-Ta'wil*, 51.

Western influence for even the loss of ‘intellectual coherence’ in the Muslim world.⁸⁵ Yet, the Arab world is dependent on the West and its material products.⁸⁶ Given this context, Abu Zayd perceived negative perception of the West to be one of the difficult challenges for modernists to overcome in advocating for adoption of modern values such as secularism.⁸⁷

As a consequence of this paradigm, a view of the West has evolved that justifies acquiring its scientific artefacts without adopting its modern mindset. Ajami, echoing Abu Zayd, describes a relationship in which the West is seen as materialistic, having nothing to offer the Arab world but its technology and machines because the Arab world has something the West does not possess, the Islamic soul. Ajami wrote, “Nowhere is the idea of the materialist West as firmly entrenched as it is in the Arab world today.”⁸⁸ The West, apart from its technology that the Arab world can easily buy, is “ultimately a weak cardboard structure”.⁸⁹ From this perspective, the West is seen as “devoid of the social system that gave rise to it, the West without its ideas, its art, its books, its counterculture.”⁹⁰ In other words, such a view of the West spares the Arabs the effort of investigating the mindset that produced scientific progress.

Abu Zayd challenged this negative view vis-à-vis the West. He argued that such a view hinders the Arab world from liberating itself from self-imposed chains of isolation in today’s interconnected world.⁹¹ He pointed out that authoritarian rule has encouraged this suspicion of ‘the other,’ extending even to the individual level. The Arabs, he wrote,

⁸⁵ Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, 153.

⁸⁶ Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought* 13.

⁸⁷ Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, 11.

⁸⁸ Ajami, *The Arab Predicament*, 195-6.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 195.

⁹¹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 244-5.

are stuck in a 'dark tunnel' "between their fears of the world and their fears of one another." The only solution "to exit this dark tunnel to the spaciousness of free life is through free interaction with other cultures of the world and by liberating the individual from animosity towards all of which he is ignorant."⁹²

Abu Zayd believed that the hostility towards the West stemmed from an inability to distinguish between modern values, perceived as largely Western, and Western politics. He wrote that the latter violates modern civilization: "the Western political stance is an extension of the period of colonial greed and occupation and is governed by self-interest."⁹³ This aspect of the West must be "condemned by all means possible and through all intellectual and cultural platforms as well as media outlets both in the West and East."⁹⁴ But Western politics need not corrupt entire attitudes towards modern civilization, despite its connections with the West. Rather, these attitudes should reflect "critical, active and creative engagement."⁹⁵ Thus Abu Zayd asked his reader to detach what he believed are modern values from the foreign policy of the Western powers.

It is typical of modernist intellectuals to stress the importance of distinguishing between Western and modern civilization. For example, Shahrur also argued for the universality of Western civilization. He wrote, "We believe that there are no societies that are isolated from the human heritage in their development and evolution."⁹⁶ In encouraging this global perspective, modernists also invoke the notion that the Islamic history was one of inclusion not exclusion. Abu Zayd recalled that the Islamic civilization

⁹² Ibid., 245.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 239.

⁹⁶ Kamal 'Abd al-Latif, *As'ilat al-Hadatha fi al-Fikr al-'Arabi* [Questions on Modernity in Arab Thought] (Beirut: Al-Shabaka al-'Arabiyya li al-Bahth wa al-Nashr, 2009), 92.

itself “absorbed effectively the heritage of other peoples in a manner that transformed it into an integral part of the Islamic intellectual fabric.”⁹⁷ Therefore, they were not different from their Western counterparts in absorbing the contributions of predecessors. Likewise, Jabri wrote that Islamic civilization is but an amalgamation of human civilizations at the time.⁹⁸ At the same time, Sadiq al-Azm argued that rigidity and exclusivist attitudes of ‘religious thought’ towards the other are mainly a product of the present. The Islamic history, by contrast, is one of fusion with the other and not separation from it.⁹⁹ However, as mentioned earlier, these intellectuals, in attempting to make modernity more appealing to their Muslim audiences, emphasize the contribution of all other past civilizations at the expense of Western contributions that actually played a critical role in engendering modernity.

Given their endorsement of the contemporary other, it is no wonder that modernists like Abu Zayd also emphasize the importance of having these pre-Islamic non-Muslim and non-Arab civilizations of the region be recognized as part of the heritage. Abu Zayd wrote that “the *umma* had a long life prior to Islam. Entire civilizations and cultures existed and they, too, are part of the origins of the *umma*.”¹⁰⁰ Abu Zayd believed that such integration would be critical, not only to comply with academic standards, but also to put the Arab heritage “in its civilizational perspective.”¹⁰¹ The *umma* would reap further benefits from such an inclusive study of history as well. Abu Zayd wrote that “rediscovering some aspects of our history would correct our relationship with the other, enhancing equality and marginalizing dependence

⁹⁷ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 13-4.

⁹⁸ Jabri, *Al-Turath wa al-Hadatha*, 37-8.

⁹⁹ 'Azm, *Dihniyat al-Tahrim*, 48.

¹⁰⁰ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 8.

¹⁰¹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 14.

(*taba'iyya*). Equally true is that our [hostile] relationship with the other prevents us from having complete *taba'iyya* to *turath*.”¹⁰² Therefore, a more honest, rigorous study of history would simultaneously address the relationship with the other and with *turath*.

Few who ascribe to the religious discourse share such views on the study of history, of course, because they see the Islamic civilization as an independent and unique civilization, one whose foundation is Islam, not the contributions of other civilizations. Huwaydi for example, describes the Islamic civilization as one inspired primarily by the Qur'an. He wrote of “the children of the Qur'an” who produced thousands of books in physics, mathematics and astronomy, etc., portraying the Qur'an as their sole inspiration.¹⁰³ In this outlook, Islam invented a civilization from the Qur'an, one that is so powerful, its rays “shone to Europe through Andalusia, Sicily and southern Italy,” against the wishes of Christian priests who saw in such Muslim philosophers as Ibn Rushd a threat to their authority.¹⁰⁴

For Huwaydi, therefore, Islam is the source of civilization and the West is the enemy that is keen on destroying Islam. As Tarabishi points out, from this perspective, everything Islamic is inherently superior and the contributions of other civilizations must remain absent or marginalized.¹⁰⁵ Thus the gap appears unbridgeable between those who see the Islamic civilization on equal footing to all other civilizations before and after it and their opponents who view it as representing a unique divine miracle and evidence of Islam's power.

¹⁰² Abu Zayd, *Ishkaliyyat al-Qira'a wa Aliyyat al-Ta'wil*, 53.

¹⁰³ Huwaydi, *Al-Qur'an wa al-Sultan*, 15-17.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁰⁵ Tarabishi, *Al-Muthaqqafun al-'Arab wa al-Turath*, 47-50.

Instrumentalisation and selectivity

In George Orwell's novel *1984*, Orwell's main character, Winston Smith, notes that the past is constantly altered to serve the agenda of the reigning political party. Manipulating the past, he shows, is closely connected with controlling the present.¹⁰⁶ Abu Zayd's view on history and its exploitation mirrors Winston's. It is not history per se that is restraining the Arab world. Rather, Abu Zayd argued, history itself is a victim of the manipulation and exploitation of various political and religious powers.¹⁰⁷ He wrote that "dominating powers interpret history and *turath*, in its widest meaning, to speak their interests, achieve their ambitions and accomplish their aspirations."¹⁰⁸ The focal point in their rhetoric is seemingly the past. However, Abu Zayd argued, in reality it is the present that they dispute as these dominating powers "attempt to usurp the past to tighten their grip over the present." To this end, they use the language of the public interest and claim that their values are derived from the Islamic heritage as they force them on others.¹⁰⁹ The fact that history lends itself, as it does, to various readings makes it fall easy prey to ideological interpretations.

Abu Zayd objected to the utilitarian approach to history in which it is used as a tool and a means to an end.¹¹⁰ He made a distinction between *manfa'a* (benefit) at the epistemological level and *manfa'a* at the ideological level.¹¹¹ Much of the selective study of history is made at the ideological level. Consequently, "an idea is sound because it is useful and not simply because it is truthful."¹¹² This ideologically driven approach to the

¹⁰⁶ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin Group, 2000), 40.

¹⁰⁷ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 26.

¹⁰⁸ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 129.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 139.

¹¹¹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 184.

¹¹² Ibid.

past, Abu Zayd argued, reduces thought and ideas to merchandise in a marketplace – but not one in which all ideas compete freely. Rather, it is a vicious marketplace of competition over *turath* merchandise. This ideological struggle often becomes violent, Abu Zayd noted, because intimidation and coercion are major tools to enforce one’s ideology. Abu Zayd wrote, “Through the mechanisms of political and social tyranny, a certain discourse was imposed as ‘absolute truth,’ any questioning, criticism, or analysis of which is considered *kufir* (atheism), and blasphemy.”¹¹³ Jabri shared Abu Zayd’s view, writing that “We live today an ideological warfare in which history and *turath* are abused worse than ever before by the forces of regression and exploitation.”¹¹⁴

Abu Zayd’s critique of the exploitation of history extended not only to those who want to use it to advocate a return to the past but also to intellectuals who, from his viewpoint, exploit history to justify modernity in the present. He gave the example of the Islamic Left, especially its founder Hasan Hanafi. In his book *Al-Turath wa al-Tajdid* (Heritage and Renewal), Hanafi advocated renewal by emphasizing progressive figures or episodes in Islamic history, such as Ibn Rushd and the Mu‘tazilites’ rationalist school of thought.¹¹⁵ Abu Zayd argued that in this interaction with *turath*, the Left fluctuates between recognizing the need to renew *turath*, which implies the past’s inadequacy for the present, and stressing the importance of *turath* as a means by which to justify progress for the present. Abu Zayd considered this effort to be counterproductive because

¹¹³ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 5-6.

¹¹⁴ Jabri, *Al-Turath wa al-Hadatha*, 121.

¹¹⁵ Hasan Hanafi, *Al-Turath wa al-Tajdid* [The Heritage and Renewal] (Beirut: Al-Mu‘assasa al-Jami‘iyya li al-Dirasat wa al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi’, 1992).

the purpose is to renew only selective progressive eras and individuals rather than examining history in a dialectical manner without an ideological purpose in mind.¹¹⁶

Such an approach towards history is inaccurate, according to Abu Zayd, because, in disregarding the contexts of both present and past, it violates the meanings of each.¹¹⁷

Tarabishi reached similar conclusions to those of Abu Zayd's concerning the duality and contradictions in Hanafi's discourse. Tarabishi noted the duality (*izdiwajiiya*) in Hanafi's work, whom he described as having "unlimited ability to contradict himself."¹¹⁸

However, from Hanafi's point of view, Kersten pointed out, "It is imperative to preserve the intimate connection between the past and the present."¹¹⁹ This disparity in views is characteristic of the debate on history.

Abu Zayd also challenged thinkers on the opposite end of the spectrum who despair of the possibility of a more objective *turath* and therefore advocate discarding it altogether. For example, he critiqued Adonis's book, *Al-Thabit wa al-Mutahawwil: Bahth fi al-Itba' wa al-Ibda' 'inda al-'Arab* (The Constant and the Transforming: Research on Imitation and Creativity of the Arabs).¹²⁰ In this four-volume work, Adonis articulated his theory on *turath* in terms of *al-thabit* (constant or unchanging) and *al-mutahawwil* (transforming or changing). For him, social stagnation stems from a reading of *turath* based on narrow, literal interpretations of historical texts taken out of their context. According to this view, *turath* is fixed and unchanging, just like the texts that document

¹¹⁶ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 158-9.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹¹⁸ Tarabishi, *Al-Muthaqqafun al-'Arab wa al-Turath*, 105.

¹¹⁹ Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, 145.

¹²⁰ Adonis, *Al-Thabit wa al-Mutahawwil*, 1.

it. Adonis advocated instead an understanding of history “that does not see any authority in texts. Rather, it relies on the *‘aql* (reason) and not *naql* (imitation).”¹²¹

The heritage, according to Adonis, plays a role in the structure of society, which he perceived as consisting primarily of two classes: ‘the exploiter’ and ‘the exploited.’ It is the hegemonic interpretation of *turath* that enables the ruling class to maintain its control, a pattern that repeats itself throughout the generations, as new members maintain the same basic paradigm even if their particular interpretation changes.¹²² The heritage, from this perspective, serves only as a tool to exploit the masses. Therefore, Abu Zayd noted, Adonis failed to recognize the diversity of *turath*, seeing it not only as a theoretical problem, but a political and social one as well.¹²³

From Abu Zayd’s perspective, recognition of the complexity of history would instigate positive change. Once revealed, this diversity would preclude any one interpretation of history and foreclose the possibility of instrumentalising it. For Abu Zayd, the lack of free debate about history is the only reason it is a tool for control. *Turath*, he pointed out, included art, philosophy, jurisprudence, as well as their different iterations from the various historical periods that produced them.¹²⁴ Adonis, however, repelled by the present exploitation of *turath*, was unable to envision a neutral, let alone a positive, role for the past. Creativity and change, he insisted, can only happen through complete abandonment of the past because those who monopolize the interpretation of *turath* accept *ittiba* ‘(imitation) and reject *ibda* ‘(creativity).¹²⁵ Therefore, to eliminate the option of mere imitation, *turath* should be discarded. Only complete “negation” and

¹²¹ Ibid., 13-4.

¹²² Ibid., 3: 239-40.

¹²³ Abu Zayd, *Ishkaliyyat al-Qira'a wa Aliyyat al-Ta'wil*, 231-3.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 231-2.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

“rejection” of the past can lead to creativity and progress, for, Adonis stressed, by its very definition, creativity results in something new.¹²⁶

As part of his argument against Adonis’s theory, Abu Zayd wrote that the past could not simply be negated. He gave the illustration of an individual with a past consisting of positive and negative memories. The past is the foundation on which knowledge is based and experiences are accumulated. Erasing one’s memory is equivalent to erasing oneself. One would lose the ability to live or appreciate the present without past experiences, and the same, Abu Zayd argued, holds true for groups as well.¹²⁷ In other words, the past with its experiences can exist for nations without necessarily serving as chains of immobility. For Abu Zayd, an ideal relationship with the past is one that is not static but based on an on-going conversation as new findings are discovered that shed light on both the present and the past.¹²⁸

Other contemporary modernists share Abu Zayd’s view on the importance of re-examination of history as a means to battle the forces of stagnation and immobility.¹²⁹ Muhammad Arkoun, for example, also stressed the importance of “excavating what Islamic thought has until now either ignored, neglected, failed to subject to critical interrogation, or rejected out of hand as being part of the civilizational heritage of the Muslim world.”¹³⁰ Hashim Salih predicted that the moment of “unmasking and stripping” will inevitably take place, marking a critical shift in the Arab world when it does. He wrote: “It is the moment when the truth of our past will be revealed for how it actually happened and not how we imagine it happened. It is the moment when the lights of

¹²⁶ Adonis, *Al-Thabit wa al-Mutahawwil*, 3, 251.

¹²⁷ Abu Zayd, *Ishkaliyyat al-Qira'a wa Aliyyat al-Ta'wil*, 254-5.

¹²⁸ Abu Zayd, *Naqd al-khitab al-Dini*, 140.

¹²⁹ Abu Zayd, *Ishkaliyyat al-Qira'a wa Aliyyat al-Ta'wil*, 231-2.

¹³⁰ Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, 201.

critical scientific vigour will be focused on the Arab Islamic *turath*, revealing its true historicity for the first time ever. Only then will we be liberated from its shackles, residues and delusions.”¹³¹

However, that rational inquiry into history would radically alter the contemporary Arab world remains an untested hypothesis. One other possibility for more historical excavation is a continuation of the endless disagreements over which thought, scholar, or action accurately represents the Islamic heritage, as has been the case for the past fourteen hundred years of contemplating Islamic history. A reconciliation may still be elusive, as each side insists on the legitimacy of its own reading of history. In other words, modernists argument for consensus, one may argue, is naïve and ideological in and of itself.

Mixing Religion with History

As the *nahda* scholars reiterated, Islam was the defining identity in much of Islam’s history. This was cemented in their narrative of *turath* as they merged religion and history with all other aspects of life. This union is troubling, according to Abu Zayd. He wrote: “Granting religion a comprehensive dominance on all aspects of life led to the atrophy of *turath*, limiting it to the narrow understanding of religious *turath*.”¹³² A major consequence of this union is that history has become synonymous with Islam itself, with all the ramifications this entails. Given the resistance to subjecting anything related to religion to academic scrutiny, Abu Zayd wrote, the role of reason (*‘aql*) was limited to

¹³¹ Salih, *Al-Insidad al-Tarikhi*, 69.

¹³² Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 20.

explaining and repeating, leading to stagnation and backwardness in the Arab world.¹³³

This is a new phenomenon, Abu Zayd argued. Even the most orthodox historical Islamic traditions were not as rigid and inflexible as the current dominant religious discourse.¹³⁴

Voicing his concern, Abu Zayd wrote:

Many Muslim theologians either do not recognize or refuse to admit that history's influence on religion has been incorporated into Islam itself. They fail to distinguish between Islam as a divine message and the human, historical way in which Islam played itself out during the thirteen or fourteen centuries since the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad.¹³⁵

By contrast, the view of history Abu Zayd furthered is one in which it is examined as 'human history' that which evolved in social, political, and economic contexts, not cloaked with sanctity and placed above examination and critical thinking.¹³⁶

Abu Zayd is not alone in noting the extent to which *turath* and religion have become synonymous. Carool Kersten's observation of Hasan Hanafi's work is telling of the extent to which religion has become synonymous with *turath*. Kersten describes the "careless use of language" in which Hanafi uses the terms 'heritage,' 'religion' and 'civilization' interchangeably, a conflation of terms that is common among many contemporary thinkers of diverse backgrounds.¹³⁷ Notably, while critiquing the mixing of history, Islam and the heritage, Abu Zayd himself often used them interchangeably as well. This, perhaps, reflects the extent to which they have become synonymous in contemporary Arab thought.

The danger facing intellectuals and thinkers who challenge the establishment narratives of history, especially religious history, is formidable. In addition to Abu

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 108.

¹³⁵ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 113.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 202.

¹³⁷ Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, 168.

Zayd's own experience, one may recall the experience of Mahmud Muhammad Taha, a scholar whose views were in line with Abu Zayd. Describing what happened to Taha, An-Na'im writes, "The fierce hostility of the religious establishment and the Muslim Brothers to Taha's interpretation of Islam led them to stage a trial in absentia in 1986, in which they convicted him of apostasy—passing a death sentence on him and ruling that his wife be divorced from him and his property be confiscated."¹³⁸ An objective reading of Taha would indicate that Taha's reading of the Islamic heritage should not have been considered so threatening to Islam. However, it reveals the limited space modernist intellectuals can occupy in challenging the established narratives.

The hostility towards intellectuals who attempt to excavate history are sometimes more subtle. Abu Zayd gave the example of the Islamist Muhammad 'Imara who published an article in *Al-Sha'b* newspaper in which he evaluated the writings of the Egyptian writer Zaki Najib Mahmud.¹³⁹ The latter, according to Abu Zayd, had attempted to produce a rational examination of history, but 'Imara considered it to be unacceptable by Islamic standards and publicized his judgment with little regard to the dangers that questioning someone's Muslim faith entails.¹⁴⁰ Abu Zayd did not find Najib's attempt sufficiently scholarly, but he was alarmed that Islamist intellectuals such as 'Imara were able to frame the debate on history or interpretations of Islam in terms of apostasy. Creed, Abu Zayd wrote, is in the heart, but for intellectuals who ascribe to the religious discourse, "its members have exclusive rights to speak in Islam's name and those who disagree with their opinions and arguments fall outside of Islam and their creed is

¹³⁸ Mohamed Mahmoud, "Mahmud Muhammad Taha's Second Message of Islam and His Project," in *Islam and Modernity*, ed. Ronald Nettler, Mohamed Mahmoud, and John Cooper (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 106.

¹³⁹ Abu Zayd mentioned and quoted the article in, Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 83-87.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 83-5.

questionable.”¹⁴¹ For Abu Zayd, the fact that a fellow intellectual should resort to questioning his colleague’s conscience rather than debate him academically attests to a very impoverished intellectual freedom.¹⁴²

In this atmosphere in which questioning history can quickly lead to questioning one’s faith, Abu Zayd asked, “How is it that we are supposed to study and learn from history? Are we supposed to simply turn our eyes away? Does not the experience we gain from learning from the past lead us to better planning for the future?”¹⁴³ And by extension, if history is so critical, how is one to arrive at an accurate understanding of it without due examination? Abu Zayd offered an explanation for why examining history is threatening to the religious discourse. He argued: “The two issues of history and religion are in fact tied to one another at the conceptual level as well as the methodological level. Consequently, settling one would inevitably and logically lead to settling the other.”¹⁴⁴ If history were to be subjected to academic scrutiny, then the actions and judgments of those who speak in Islam’s name would inevitably be examined as well, causing a shift in the masses’ perception of them

Conclusion

History weighs heavily in the minds of contemporary Arab intellectuals. While scholars such as Abu Zayd, Jabri, Tarabishi and others tried to demystify it, the path towards a thorough unmasking of Arab Islamic history in a public and open manner remains long and thorny.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 84.

¹⁴² Ibid., 84-5.

¹⁴³ Abu Zayd, *Al-Tafkir fi Zaman al-Takfir*, 106-7.

¹⁴⁴ Abu Zayd, *Al-Nass wa al-Sulta*, 33.

Abu Zayd was careful to stress that this challenge does not lie within Islam itself or even within the historical religious texts. Rather, it is the Arab-Islamic culture that, Abu Zayd wrote, “showed no confidence or faith in democracy and critical thought.” However, according to Abu Zayd, for the legacy of *turath* to be authentic, profound changes must take place in the field of epistemology. Freedom to obtain knowledge must be unobstructed.¹⁴⁵ Abu Zayd wrote: “There can be no doctrinal safe havens or sacred cows inaccessible to critique. Safe havens amount to censorship. Censorship and stagnation go hand in hand.”¹⁴⁶ Abu Zayd opposed limitation on rational inquiry so strongly in part because he believed that all aspects of life suffer as a result of such censorship. By contrast: “Challenging the status quo opens the pathway to progress.”¹⁴⁷ Therefore, for him, freedom lies at the heart of evolution.

The study of history is also critical to keeping it relevant, in Abu Zayd’s view. He argued that history is not a static phenomenon but is rather a dynamic force, constantly changing because it is always viewed through the lens of the equally changing present.¹⁴⁸ In other words, as time progresses, new information and norms come to light that shape and affect the way history is read. As An-Na‘im wrote, “In each era, we understand the past differently.”¹⁴⁹ Therefore, to ensure that history continues to yield new perspectives it must remain open to new interpretations and scientific scrutiny, leaving room for the questions and contestation that that openness entails.¹⁵⁰ The modernist call to constantly

¹⁴⁵ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 186.

¹⁴⁶ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 201.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Abu Zayd, *Ishkaliyyat al-Qira'a wa Aliyyat al-Ta'wil*, 227-8.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 28.

¹⁵⁰ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 186.

question established narratives, however, is met with disapproval by conservatives and traditionalists.

It is evident that Abu Zayd wanted to set his discourse as accurate and based on reason and critical inquiry, as opposed to sentimental myths. However, one may argue, if he were placed in charge of constructing a new heritage based on his examination of history, the outcome would still be subjective. As a modernist, his version of *turath* would highlight certain historical events over others. Therefore, while seeing clearly the subjectivity of his opponents, Abu Zayd was blind to his own. Ironically, he exhibited the same certainty he attacked in his adversaries. While his bias was evident in his views on history, it is even more so in the manner in which he tackled the status of women in Islam, as the next chapter argues.

CHAPTER SIX: WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN ABU ZAYD'S THOUGHT

Abu Zayd considered women's rights to be "one of the most important issues" in contemporary Arab societies; he dedicated an entire book to it.¹ He saw the status of women as an integral part of the wider political conditions and urged that it be at the core of human rights debates.² Kassab noted that Abu Zayd realized that women, fringe voices and minorities are often the first to suffer in an authoritarian environment, and the manner in which these vulnerable yet important segments of society are treated is an indicator of a society's progress.³ This chapter will argue that for Abu Zayd women's liberation is mandated not only by modernity, but by Islam itself.

Abu Zayd described the discourse on women in the contemporary Arab world as overtly "racist and sexist." It is a discourse, he explained, "that speaks of women/feminine in absolute terms as it compares it with the men/masculine." The result of this comparison is that one must be subjected to the other, "willingly surrendering to its dominance."⁴ Even discussions on equality or egalitarianism, Abu Zayd argued, are imbued with an undertone of the superiority and centrality of men or masculinity. Thus, when women are equal, they are equal to men. When they participate, they participate

¹ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir al-Khawf*, 12.

² *Ibid.*, 138.

³ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 193.

⁴ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir al-Khawf*, 29.

with men. Women's contributions on their own, he wrote, are marginalized socially, culturally and politically.⁵

Before giving examples of Abu Zayd's views on specific subjects pertaining to women, it is important to highlight general tendencies and themes that run consistently throughout his work on this subject. Many of these themes and methods he shared not only with *nahda* Islamic reformers but also with his contemporary modernist intellectuals.

Influences of Nahda Scholars

On the issue of women's rights, Abu Zayd spoke highly of the *nahda* Islamic reformists. He quoted them extensively and lamented the absence of similar attitudes towards women's empowerment in contemporary religious discourse. Abu Zayd appreciated the particular context in which the *nahda* scholars had to address this issue. Their exposure to modernity and the West brought into sharp relief the disparity between the status of women in the West and women in Muslim societies. Many Islamic reformists argued that a causal relationship existed between Western power and the advancement of women's status in their society, a realization that caused an internal debate among Muslim scholars.

Among the first scholars to champion the issue of women's standing in society was Rifa'a al-Tahtawi. In 1873, Tahtawi published a book entitled, *Al-Murshid al-Amin li al-Banat wa al-Banin* (The Honest Guide for Education of Girls and Boys) in which he advocated mass education for both boys and girls as the principle means of

⁵ Ibid.

accomplishing the integration of women into society and transforming them into active participants. Muna Abu Zayd noted: “Tahtawi believed that marginalizing Muslim women and depriving them of participation in public life, even though religion did not object to that, are among the reasons for the backwardness of Muslims.”⁶ ‘Abd al-Latif captured Tahtawi’s significance as well, describing his work as an attempt “to institutionalize positive openness to new values,” which includes incorporating women into society.⁷ Muna Abu Zayd, echoing modernist scholars, argued that Tahtawi’s work was responsible for engendering an effort to liberate women and reform their status.⁸

That primary education for girls was considered a ‘new value’ reveals the extent to which women were restricted to the passive roles of family caretakers, but it also reveals the audacity of the early religious scholars in pushing for change. Tahtawi, who was sent by Muhammad Ali to Paris, was inspired by the accomplishments of the West and saw that “the gains of Europe in knowledge, progress, social and political matters can be the basis of the reform project” in Egypt.⁹ Abu Zayd admired Tahtawi and believed him to have laid the foundation for a ‘rational,’ discourse in the Arab world, one which is inclusive not only of women but also of the European other.¹⁰

It was not Tahtawi’s work alone, however, that inspired Abu Zayd’s feminism. Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1906), Qasim Amin (1863-1908) and al-Tahir al-Haddad (1899-1935) each in his own way argued for the causal relationship between the active

⁶ From the introduction by Muna Abu Zayd to the reprint of Tahtawi’s classic book, Rifa’a Tahtawi, al, *Al-Murshid al-Amin li al-Banat wa al-Banin* [The Honest Guide for Education of Girls and Boys] (Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-Masri, 2011), 71.

⁷ Kamal ‘Abd al-Latif, *Al-Mar’a fi al-Fikr al-‘Arabi al-Mu’asir: Nahwa Tawsi’ Qiyam al-Taharur* [Women in Contemporary Arab Thought: Towards Expanding Values of Liberation] (Al-Lathiqiyya: Dar al-Hiwar, 2010), 30-1.

⁸ From the introduction by Muna Abu Zayd to the reprint of Tahtawi’s classic book, Tahtawi, *Al-Murshid al-Amin li al-Banat wa al-Banin*, 70.

⁹ ‘Abd al-Latif, *Al-Mar’a fi al-Fikr al-‘Arabi al-Mu’asir: Nahwa Tawsi’ Qiyam al-Taharur*.

¹⁰ Abu Zayd, *Dawa’ir al-Khawf*, 55.

role of women and the overall strength of the West. These scholars saw the issue of women in Muslim societies as a critical part of the modernization process. Abu Zayd drew extensively from their work, at times appearing to echo their thoughts exactly.¹¹

Like Tahtawi, Muhammad ‘Abduh was an ardent advocate of women’s education, arguing that “the *umma* is raised inside family homes.” Thus women are an integral part the advancement or backwardness of the *umma*. ‘Abduh argued that the deprivation of education has filled women’s minds with myths and trivial matters.¹² Modernizing society and the *umma* at large thus requires reforms for women’s education as a first step.¹³ The influence of ‘Abduh on Abu Zayd is most evident when the latter quotes ‘Abduh extensively to emphasize his theory of direction and the significant break Islam made with pre-Islamic norms regarding women.

As for Qasim Amin, he dedicated two important books to this issue, *Tahrir al-Mar’a* (The Liberation of Women) and *Al-Mar’a al-Jadida* (The New Woman), published in 1899 and 1901 respectively. Amin’s work is considered by many to mark “the beginning of feminism in Arab culture.”¹⁴ Introducing a collection of Amin’s writings, ‘Imara pointed out that while other *nahda* scholars tackled women’s issues along many other topics of the day, Amin prioritized the topic, giving it his exclusive attention.¹⁵ Amin argued that the rise or fall of nations is contingent upon the way they

¹¹ Given the scope of this thesis, I will discuss mainly the scholars whom Abu Zayd himself mentioned frequently as his influences and intellectual role models, rather than examine the vast number of *nahda* scholars and writings on this topic.

¹² ‘Abduh, *Muhammad ‘Abduh: Al-A‘mal al-Kamila*, 1, 169.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁴ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 145.

¹⁵ Qasim Amin, *Qasim Amin: Al-A‘mal al-Kamila* [Qasim Amin: The Complete Works] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1988), 15.

treat women in their society. He wrote, “The degradation in women’s status is the biggest obstacle standing in our way to progress.”¹⁶

An examination of Amin’s work makes his influence on Abu Zayd clear. For example, Abu Zayd shared Amin’s belief that the neglect of women’s rights is directly related to the overall political structure and governance of society. Amin noted that tyrannical rule, which has been dominating the Muslim world for centuries, caused injustice and tyranny to infiltrate even family structure and the treatment of women.¹⁷ In *Al-Mar’a al-Jadida* (The New Woman) Amin wrote, “If we look at Eastern countries, we find women enslaved to men and men enslaved to the ruler. Men are unjust in their household and they are treated unjustly once they leave it.”¹⁸ Tyranny against women, in this reading, is part of the larger injustice of authoritarian rule.

The Tunisian activist and author al-Tahir al-Haddad documented his bold views on women in a book entitled *Imra’atuna fi al-Shari’a wa al-Mujtama’* (Our Woman in *Shari’a* and Society), first published in 1930. Abu Zayd considered al-Haddad to be the most audacious author on this topic.¹⁹ In his book, al-Haddad argued that the majority of Muslim women are secluded and treated not much better than slaves. Under these conditions, women are not fit to raise strong, intelligent and able members of society.²⁰ Al-Haddad emphasized, “An *umma* in which half of the population is unemployed and powerless cannot achieve victory.” The solution he offered to overcome the state of

¹⁶ Qasim Amin, *Tahrir al-Mar’a* [Liberation of women] (Cairo: Kalimat 'Arabiyya li al-Tarjama wa al-Nashr, 2011), 74.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸ Qasim Amin, *Al-Mar’a al-Jadida* [The new woman] (Cairo: Kalimat 'Arabiyya li al-Tarjama wa al-Nashr, 2011), 15.

¹⁹ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir al-Khawf*, 65.

²⁰ Haddad, *Imra'atuna fi al-Shari'a wa al-Mujtama'*.

weakness is to educate women and enable them to be active members of society.²¹ Again, education is offered as the solution to the problem.

Al-Haddad's influence on Abu Zayd is most evident in two principles that the former championed. The first regards the ultimate objectives of Islam, or what al-Haddad called "Islam's essence" (*jawhar al-Islam*).²² The higher objectives of Islam are not always captured by literal readings of the Qur'an, al-Haddad argued. For him, Islam enshrines certain overarching principles, such as social justice and equality of all people, men and women alike.²³ These principles are constant and timeless, al-Haddad wrote, but the mechanisms to realize them admit flexibility to accommodate different times and places. To force all peoples of various times and places to realize the principles of Islam in the same way would necessarily cause violations, defeating the purpose, to some extent, of laying down timeless principles. Therefore, he wrote, jurists must account for both principles and prudential considerations. As for the rules mentioned in the Qur'an, Al-Haddad posed the rhetorical question: Did Islam come to institute these specific rules, or did it come to institute justice more broadly?²⁴

Similarly, Abu Zayd argued that the ultimate goals for Islam, such as social justice, should take precedence over the historical mechanism of achieving them. For him, any legislation on any issue must have in mind "what the ultimate objectives of the Qur'an really are,"²⁵ and that to freeze the message of the Qur'an to its meaning in a specific time and place (such as that of the revelation) is to violate and twist the "Word of God."

²¹ Ibid., 214.

²² Ibid., 43.

²³ Ibid., 42-4.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 167.

Abu Zayd wrote: “When I applied my critical scholarship to the subject of women, I saw how well this subject nestled into the concepts of justice and freedom, two essential objectives of the Qur’an.”²⁶ Therefore, it is not only permissible but mandatory to any reform that it apply the principles, not only rules, of Islam. Other modernist scholars, such as Talbi, used similar arguments to contend that literal readings do not always reveal God’s intended messages.²⁷ However, these modernists do not provide evidence supporting their assumption that on this particular issue, rather than follow the clearly stated Qur’anic text, Muslims should institute laws and regulations with the higher objectives in mind. That freedom, for example, in its modernist sense, is a higher objective in the Qur’an is clearly Abu Zayd’s projection of a modern concept into the seventh century Text.

The second aspect in which Abu Zayd is clearly influenced by al-Haddad concerns the Qur’anic practice of introducing reform by progression. Al-Haddad believed that Islam meant ultimately to achieve equality between men and women in every way. However, given the historical context, it had to introduce reforms in a manner that accommodated the people at the time and place of the revelation. Therefore, in all of the issues in which women are not granted equal rights with men, the rulings mentioned in the Qur’an should be considered as only the first stage towards complete equality. For example, giving women half as much as men in inheritance was only an introductory measure towards economic equality, not the final decree on inheritance.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid., 172.

²⁷ Ronald Nettler, "Mohamed Talibi's Commentary on Qur'an Iv:34 a 'Historical Reading' of a Verse Concerning the Disciplining of Women," *The Maghreb Review* 24, no. 1-2 (1999): 21.

²⁸ Al-Haddad, *Imra'atuna Fi Al-Shari'a Wa Al-Mujtama'*, 56-7.

An example of progressive reform, al-Haddad argued, is the issue of slavery, which he considered to be analogous to the issue of women's rights. Islam, al-Haddad argued, clearly aimed at eventually abolishing slavery. However, given historical considerations, it did not ban slavery outright but introduced a measure that would eventually lead to its abolition.²⁹ As this chapter will demonstrate, Abu Zayd reiterated the same notion and examples using the concept of the 'direction' of Islam.

Abu Zayd admired al-Haddad's application of reason to the sacred text, citing al-Haddad's observation regarding the "finite texts in comparison with the infinity of reality."³⁰ Al-Haddad noted that Islam evolved and changed in the span of the last twenty years in which the Prophet was alive in order to accommodate the evolution that took place during that time. It is only natural, then, that it should continue to evolve with the ongoing passage of time.³¹ Abu Zayd reiterated this notion, writing that "this life, with all its width, breadth and diversity, could not be contained by texts produced for that particular time and place."³²

Perhaps what Abu Zayd admired the most about the *nahda* scholars was their attitude towards change and their belief that bringing in benefits takes precedence over warding off negative consequences. They focused primarily on what can be gained from Europe to advance society, playing down the problem of modernity's negative side effects. To borrow an example that Abu Zayd himself raised, Amin's view on mixing between men and women illustrated this idea: rather than avoiding interactions between the sexes, he urged society to absorb the benefits it can reap from them while attempting

²⁹ Ibid., 58-9

³⁰ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 68.

³¹ Al-Haddad, *Imra'atuna Fi Al-Shari'a Wa Al-Mujtama'*, 42-3.

³² Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 68-9.

to minimize the side effects.³³ He observed that the *nahda* scholars themselves acknowledged that change might indeed cause some corruption in a societal status quo. However, one must not attempt to prevent change from taking place altogether. Rather, the society should endorse change and address negative consequences as they arise.³⁴ The *nahda* intellectuals, Abu Zayd wrote, believed that the way to counter any corruption, or *mafasid*, that may result from interaction with foreign norms is through education for both men and women.³⁵ Therefore, on the issue of women, Abu Zayd was in total approval of the *nahda* scholars' views and attitudes.

Emergence of the Crisis Discourse

Abu Zayd believed that the turmoil the Arab world underwent in the twentieth century, especially its second half, engendered a particular discourse that he referred to as the “crisis discourse” (*khitab al-azma*).³⁶ He lamented that the *nahda* period with its intellectual exuberance came to an end in the first part of the twentieth century. Europe's image was transformed from a role model to a colonizer, exploiter of national resources, and symbol of oppression. The calamities of the region culminated with the creation of the state of Israel and the consecutive defeats of Arab armies against the Jewish state. These developments, he argued, affected all segments of society, especially women.³⁷ As the weakest components of society, they had the least protection against the consequences of these catastrophic events.

³³ I will elaborate further on this issue in the segment on women and work.

³⁴ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 62.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 77-8.

³⁷ Ibid., 77-9.

For Abu Zayd, the defeat of 1967 and the actions of President Sadat particularly exacerbated the situation of women. Sadat's unilateral agreement with Israel emboldened Israeli aggression against the other Arab countries and separated Egypt from the rest of the Arab world, inaugurating an age of disunity (*shatat*).³⁸ He posed the rhetorical question, "Is it a blind coincidence that 1977, the year Sadat visited Israel, is the same year that the Egyptian parliament demanded that women return to their homes as a prerequisite for their dignity, honour and humanity?" To him, the regime's simultaneous defiance of the will of its people and deteriorating economic conditions, on the one hand, and the demand by the regime that "women be isolated from public life and returned to the age of *harim*," on the other, was no accident. Rather, according to Abu Zayd, the regime had made a conscious attempt to divert the debate away from its unpopular policies and focus them on the problem of women.³⁹

In her book *Islam and Democracy*, the Moroccan scholar Fatima Mernissi also argues there is a connection between politics and women's standing in society,⁴⁰ a link Abu Zayd highlights approvingly in his review of her book.⁴¹ Mernissi argues that it is a "state tradition" in the political history of Muslim states to immediately impose restrictions on women, such as banning them from public spaces and prohibiting them from mixing with men, when faced with crises like hunger strikes or popular dissent. Women, Mernissi writes: "have the Gordian knot of the Crisis."⁴² Consequently, they appear to be the default diversion from wider challenges.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 79.

⁴⁰ Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (London: Virago Press, 1993), 153-4.

⁴¹ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 245-9.

⁴² Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*, 153-4.

In his description of the crisis debate, Abu Zayd named 1967 as a significant turning point in the Arab world. Ibrahim Abu Rabi', likewise, chose that year as a defining moment in contemporary Arab thought.⁴³ For many Arab intellectuals, the defeat lifted any remaining doubt regarding the state of weakness, if not helplessness, of the Arab world. The Syrian intellectual Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, for instance, dedicated a book to this catastrophic event in Arab history, entitled, *Al-Naqd al-Dhati Ba'da al-Hazima* (Self-Critique after the Defeat),⁴⁴ and Kassab, likewise, noted the significance of war for the direction of Islamic thought.⁴⁵ That war shattered any remaining illusions regarding the weak conditions of the Arab nations.

The problem of the discourse that has emerged out of the state of defeat, Abu Zayd argued, is that it not only reflects the state of crisis, but it also perpetuates it, even as it professes to have the intention to uplift it.⁴⁶ In his analysis, he wrote that this discourse reflects the humiliation of the Arab man who felt “wounded beyond healing.”⁴⁷ His manhood has been threatened and he needed relief from shame and dishonour. This relief, Abu Zayd noted, exhibited itself in a distorted manner – the Arab man shifted his consciousness away from the impotence of defeat towards sectarianism, sexism and bigotry. In such a context, according to Abu Zayd, violence against women and minorities increased. Furthermore, the crisis debate incorporates the religious discourse, which was itself a component of the predicament.⁴⁸ Consequently, from Abu Zayd's perspective, the religiosity that increased after the war was not necessarily a sign of

⁴³ Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought : Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London ; Sterling, Va.: Pluto Press, 2004).

⁴⁴ Sadiq Jalal 'Azm, al, *Al-Naqd al-Dhati ba'da al-Hazima* [Self-Critique after the Defeat] (Damascus: Dar Mamduh 'Idwan li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi', 2007).

⁴⁵ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 48.

⁴⁶ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 106.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 38-9.

increase in piety or faith. Rather, Abu Zayd wrote, “It is a sign that backwardness is using the language of religion,” just as it used the language of politics and economics in other contexts.⁴⁹

The crisis discourse is also sectarian, which, for Abu Zayd, correlates with sexism. He defined sectarianism as ‘*inqisam al-fard*’ (the splitting of the individual). He wrote, “Sectarianism is an act of dissolution that does not cease its activities at any particular point. It may start at any juncture, but if it is not contained as quickly as possible, it explodes.”⁵⁰ In the Arab world, sectarianism was exacerbated by the 1967 defeat, causing a split within society and even within individuals. He gave the analogy of “splitting the atom of a nucleus, which can cause horrific release of nuclear power if it goes out of control. Equally great is the ability of sectarianism to split human beings into two halves. Two adversarial halves fighting over control and violence in a relationship in which males dominate females in a complete manner.”⁵¹ Abu Zayd noted that in Islamist discourse, the sectarian rhetoric against Christian minorities coincides with calls for women “to return to their homes, to wear hijab and to abandon all they have gained” of rights, except education in narrow fields that are related to Islamists’ definition of femininity.⁵²

Discrediting the possibility that any religious discourse might be a part of the solution, Abu Zayd argued that religion is exclusive and sectarian by its very nature. He pointed out that while most religions boast of their regard for human dignity, the human beings they have in mind are only the ones who adhere to their particular religious

⁴⁹ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 55.

⁵¹ Ibid., 56.

⁵² Ibid., 58.

teachings. Those who fall outside those parameters are subject to scorn in this life and hell and damnation in the hereafter. In fact, those who refuse the particular religious teachings of their environment are often stripped of their humanity and all of their rights because they are perceived to be outside the circle of those blessed by that particular religion or interpretation.⁵³ Therefore, Abu Zayd ruled out religion as an agent for unity or egalitarianism, as far as politics in the Arab world is concerned.

At the same time, Abu Zayd acknowledged the tolerance in many interpretations of Islam. However, he insisted that when it comes to actual practices on the ground, much depends on the disposition of the interpreter.⁵⁴ In other words, Abu Zayd denied the possibility that religious texts can exist independently of interpretations and interpretation and practice are rarely congruent. He wrote, “undeniable disparities exist between the idealism of the text and practices in social and political life in various Muslim communities.”⁵⁵ Therefore, on this issue he diverged from his intellectual forerunners of the *nahda* period, for they considered political reform and the advancement of women to be mandated by Islam. At the same time, Abu Zayd also asserted that Islam’s objectives are in line with modern concepts of equality and freedom.

The discrepancy between texts and application, Abu Zayd acknowledged, is not limited to the supporters of the religious discourse, or even to Arabs and Muslims, for that matter. Consistently critical of Western policies in the Arab world, he inveighed against the hypocrisy of countries that had ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, yet continue to oppress and exploit weaker nations unabashedly, as if human

⁵³ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir al-Khawf*, 129-30.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 130-2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

rights are intended for Europeans and Westerners alone.⁵⁶ This theme of the disparity between the idealism that religious and political texts offer and the practice of those claiming adherence to them runs throughout Abu Zayd's analysis of contemporary Arab thought and society at large.

Blaming Theologians and the Religious Discourse

Criticizing traditional theologians, both old and new, dominates Abu Zayd's work, and he attributed much of the backwardness in the Arab world to their readings of Islam. Abu Zayd was not alone in placing blame on jurists for Arab world struggles; the *nahda* era was vibrant in part because it challenged traditional interpretations, offering modern, updated alternatives. In his analysis of the status of women, Abu Zayd shared the views of scholars such as 'Abduh, Amin and al-Haddad regarding the need to discard traditional readings that no longer serve Muslim communities.

'Abduh believed that the misogyny of jurists is responsible for the decline in the status of women in Muslim communities, in violation of the Qur'an itself, which he saw as advocating egalitarianism.⁵⁷ Likewise, al-Haddad blamed traditional '*ulama*' for the gulf in rights between men and women. He wrote that "this is not the only issue in which the '*ulama*' of Islam have gone against what Islam wants," insinuating that they have in fact worked against achieving Islam's objectives.⁵⁸ Likewise, Qasim Amin saw a direct connection between certain interpretations and the state of backwardness in the Muslim world. Reproaching the '*ulama*', Amin urged those who specialize in *shari'a* "to take

⁵⁶ Ibid., 132-3.

⁵⁷ Muhammad 'Abduh, *Muhammad 'Abduh: Al-A'mal al-Kamila* [Muhammad 'Abduh: The Complete Works], ed. Muhammad 'Imara, vol. 2 (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1993), 70.

⁵⁸ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir al-Khawf*, 71.

into consideration the current needs and requirements of the Muslim *umma*” and “to closely examine what has changed in circumstances and conditions.” He reminded them that the needs of Muslims today drastically differ from those of their ancestors. However, he lamented, the ‘*ulama*’ are yet to take that into consideration.⁵⁹ The theologians are then portrayed to cling to a bygone era.

Abu Zayd believed the religious establishment to be the custodian of hierarchy and patriarchy in society. He accused traditional ‘*ulama*’ of using religion to maintain inequality in society. Specifically concerning gender, Abu Zayd wrote, “When it comes to women, the power structure remains in place. The wife’s duty is to obey her husband—a woman must even obey her younger brothers.” Given that they are treated as inferior, “women, for the most part, are not given the same opportunities to experience life,” Abu Zayd argued.⁶⁰ The Syrian writer, Jumana Taha, goes beyond the gender divide to attack the generational divide as well. She argued that older theologians are more likely to be influenced by the very misogynist culture Islam attempted to eradicate.⁶¹ Therefore, they should be particularly scrutinized.

Applied to the contemporary context, Abu Zayd believed that the supporters of the religious discourse, in their view of women, are motivated primarily by the principle that “warding off evils takes precedence over bringing in benefits” (*rad’ al-mafasid muqaddam ‘ala jalb al-masalih*). For example, if we take the issue of mixing between men and women, warding off evil by prohibiting mixing is more important than the

⁵⁹ Amin, *Tahrir al-Mar’a*, 105-6.

⁶⁰ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 111.

⁶¹ Jumana Taha, *Al-Mar’a Al-‘Arabiyya Fi Manthur Al-Din Wa Al-Waqi’* (Damascus: Itihad al-Kuttab al ‘Arab, 2004), 10.

benefits that can come out of it.⁶² As Abu Zayd pointed out, this approach contradicts the attitude of many *nahda* scholars, who placed acceptance of positive benefits (*masalih*) of modernity over warding off negative consequences (*mafasid*). He also accused the religious discourse of viewing women through a narrow prism, such as his accusation against Qutb, who “was only concerned with women as far as sex, nudity, and mixing in the European lifestyle are concerned.”⁶³ Consequently, from Abu Zayd’s perspective, those who ascribe to the religious discourse object to women’s rights as a pretext for a whole set of challenges to be avoided at all costs, regardless of the wider benefits to the community. But here, too, Abu Zayd failed to acknowledge the diversity among the partisans of the religious discourse, taking the extreme example of Qutb and portraying him as representative of the religious discourse at large.

Abu Zayd was convinced that the supporters of the religious discourse are hostile towards attempts to further women’s rights, whether coming from men or women. He then took this alleged animosity as a proof of their enmity towards women in general, even when they claim to be motivated by the need for “protecting families and the society at large.”⁶⁴ The notable Muslim Brotherhood cleric Mahmud al-Jawahiri embodied this attitude, according to Abu Zayd. In his book, *Al-Ukht al-Muslima* (The Muslim Sister), al-Jawahiri classified into three categories those who call for women’s rights.⁶⁵ First are those women who neglect their religion in an attempt to imitate Western women, in the process, doing themselves and their society injustice. The second category is comprised of immoral men who simply want to take advantage of sexually liberated women.

⁶² Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 120.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶⁵ Mahmud Muhammad Jawahiri, al, *Al-Ukht al-Muslima Asas al-Mujtama' al-Fadhil* [The Muslim Sister is the Foundation of Virtuous Society] (Cairo: Dar al-Ansar, 1978), 14.

Finally, there are “hired” men, presumably by the West, who are determined to dilute society’s morals. These men, according to al-Jawahiri, realize that the most fertile soil for achieving their aims is the corruption of women, because, as guardians of home life, where women go, all of the Islamic society follows.⁶⁶ Such writings frame women’s issues in a narrow context.

To Abu Zayd, of course, Jawahiri’s writing was proof of the animosity that those who ascribe to the religious discourse hold against women. But one could argue that their attention to women in fact reveals the value the religious discourse granted to women as a sort of moral compass for Islamic society. Women’s value in this role would naturally require that they be kept out of harm’s way. The home, in such an argument, is the safest place for them.

The manner in which the opponents of the religious discourse tackle the issue of women undermines women’s rights in two major ways, according to Abu Zayd. First, he argued that the use of religion in the debate “distorts the issues when it insists on discussing them on the grounds of the religious texts, ignoring the fact that these are essentially social issues.” In doing so, those who ascribe to the religious discourse exacerbate the problem because these religious texts do not reflect current reality but that of seventh-century Arabia. Second, “it relies on the odd and exceptional texts and focuses on the weakest links in its attempts to deny the human being.”⁶⁷ The exceptional texts here are Qur’anic verses that do not meet modern standards of human rights, such as the verse allowing men to beat women as a measure of disciplining them.⁶⁸ Distrustful of the partisans of the religious discourse, he believed them to take such verses to establish

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 123-4.

⁶⁸ The Qur’an, (4:34).

inequality as a rule.⁶⁹ That such verses are exceptional, however, is Abu Zayd's own subjective reading.

In instances where the Qur'an is clearly furthering the principle of equality between men and women, Abu Zayd argued, jurists sometimes violate or ignore the Qur'anic text in favour of their misogynist narratives. For example, Abu Zayd noted, jurists ignore the Qur'anic account of creation in favour of the misogynist narrative from the Old Testament. The Qur'an states that men and women are created from one soul. However, what is more widely circulated and believed is the biblical narrative that Eve was created out of Adam's rib, implying an inherent inferiority.⁷⁰ As a result of such views, Abu Zayd wrote, "women became, throughout the ages of backwardness, a symbol of sin and an agent of Satan. Imprisoning them, covering them, and preventing them from mixing and social activities is not intended to protect only them but to protect men as well."⁷¹ However, Abu Zayd's claim that theologians went against the Qur'an in perpetuating that Eve was created from Adam's rib is not supported by any of the classical interpretations of the Qur'an. For example, in its commentary on this verse, *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, one of the most scholarly interpretations also documents that Eve was created from Adam's rib.⁷² In attacking classical theologians, Abu Zayd is essentially claiming to be more knowledgeable in the field of Quranic interpretations than they were. This is an example of Abu Zayd projecting his own modern reading on narratives

⁶⁹ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 123-4.

⁷⁰ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir al-Khawf*, 208-9. Feminist scholar Amina Wadud points out this discrepancy as well in her argument for God's intended equality of men and women, versus dominant jurists' readings. See Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 15-29.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 208.

⁷² Jalal al-Din Sayyuti, al and Jalal al-Din Mahalli, al, *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* [Al-Jalalayn Interpretation] (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2008).

established and accepted for centuries and that were, sometimes, unlike Abu Zayd's readings, supported by the Qur'anic text itself.

Blaming theologians is hardly unique to Abu Zayd but is rather a feature of modernist Islamic thought. Talbi, for example, notes that "Muslim religious authorities and seminary teachers by and large still remain wedded to a textual interpretation which virtually ensures perpetuation of older (more 'conservative') attitudes."⁷³ However, Abu Zayd's views sometimes neglected the nuanced differences in historical development on this issue. Consequently, the current religious discourse represents but a negligible addition in the field of Islamic thought. For example, Abu Zayd did not acknowledge Judith Tucker's point that for most of its history, what came to be called *shari'a* was fluid and flexible. Only in the last century, in fact, did civil as well as some *shari'a* laws become fixed and applicable to all citizens.⁷⁴ Abu Zayd therefore appears at times to be judging all of history by the measures of his own time. He was in fact practising the very ahistoricity of which he accused his adversaries.

In his work, Abu Zayd simultaneously argued for a modern reading of the Qur'an and the religious heritage and for the removal of religion from the debate on public issues, such as women's rights. For him, the fact that religion still holds such strong legislative and legal power on this and other issues is one of the reasons why Arab societies still face so many challenges.⁷⁵ He believed that keeping the debate on women centred on religious texts guarantees that no viable solutions will ever be found because the reality of women's status involves a great deal more than what the religious texts

⁷³ Nettler, "Mohamed Talibi's Commentary on Qur'an Iv:34 a 'Historical Reading' of a Verse Concerning the Disciplining of Women," 20.

⁷⁴ Judith Tucker, *Women, Family, and Gender in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 14.

⁷⁵ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 179.

contain. Confining the debate to a religious context places women at the mercy of utilitarian interpretations of religious texts.⁷⁶ Furthermore, discussing women's rights under the umbrella of religious values negates the important social and economic component of the issue and "ignores entirely and deliberately the relationship between men and women in its real and practical context."⁷⁷ Religious texts, in other words, need not figure prominently in debates over women's rights, for they appeared amidst conditions of life that no longer pertain and thereby do little to address the needs of modern society.

Even in cases where religious texts can be used in women's favour, Abu Zayd warned, referencing religious texts validates the faulty premise of legitimizing religious texts over modern reality. When religion is involved in the debate, he wrote, "moderate discourse pretends to be progressive by emphasizing the original meaning for the text while ideologically justifying exceptional texts. However, this justification allows the discourse of backwardness and extremism to insist on the literal reading that contributes to the fragmentation of society's fabric."⁷⁸ As discussed below, though, Abu Zayd failed to see that he himself used ideological justifications for what he referred to as the exceptional texts in the Qur'an. An ideological reading was, for him, to paint a picture of Islam that matched his image of it as a religion compatible with modernity and contemporary notions of human rights.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 87.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 92.

Defending Islam, as He Saw It

Abu Zayd justified his seemingly incompatible positions – the exclusion of religion from debate on public issues, on the one hand, and a modern interpretation of Islam that supported human rights, on the other – by situating religious interpretation in the supposedly independent and academic field of Islamic thought. Within the parameters of this discipline, he emphasized the importance of salvaging what he believed to be true Islam from the grip of traditional theologians so that it may continue to evolve and consequently be relevant to Muslims today. In doing so, he was in line with the *nahda* scholars who, defending Islam, argued that the status of Muslim women represents a divergence from, not reflection of, true Islamic teaching.⁷⁹ This tactic on Abu Zayd’s part indicates not only his recognition of the degraded status of women but also, importantly, a fear that Islam may come to be blamed for it. He insisted that even such an issue as enforcing *hijab* on women could not be explained by Islam alone. Abu Zayd noted that scholars such as Qasim Amin, and ‘Abduh believed “Islam to be the religion of freedom, modernity and progress.” They attributed the backwardness to ignorance and to the authoritarian rule that has dominated the Muslim world.⁸⁰

In offering his own reading, Abu Zayd relied on several methods, one of which is the argument of the general principles of Islam. In his various books, he used different terminology to describe his theory, including “principles of Islam,” “*maqasid* (objectives) of Islam,” and “Word of God.” For example, he claims that one of the objectives of the Qur’an is justice, a principle he believed to be at the core of the Islamic teachings – to

⁷⁹ Muna Ahmad Abu Zayd also makes that observation in introducing Tahtawi’s book, *Al-Tahtawi, Al-Murshid Al-Amin Li Al-Banat Wa Al-Banin*, 70.

⁸⁰ Abu Zayd, *Dawa’ir Al-Khawf*, 62-3.

Abu Zayd, “this concept infiltrates all the passages of the Qur’an.”⁸¹ Consequently, no regulation or rule should be considered for its own sake but “should derive its legitimacy from the principle of justice because its benefit is not inherent in itself but only inasmuch as it furthers or, at least, does not oppose this principle.”⁸² He argued that jurists (*fuqaha*) who insist on literal readings of texts violate Islam’s intention of justice. To this end, Abu Zayd urged that one should go beyond the agreed-upon *shari‘a* in contemporary times with literal rules and examine the higher objectives (*maqasid al-kulliyah*), which he believed to be lost from religious literature.⁸³ In other words, Abu Zayd wanted modern principles such as freedom of thought and egalitarianism to be the prism through which the Qur’an is reinterpreted because, according to him, these modern notions, coincidentally, are the very higher objectives of the Qur’an.

Abu Zayd placed a great deal of emphasis on the notion of equality among all people. He wrote, “Any *ijtihad* that serves the purpose of arriving at equality, which is a fundamental objective and the higher purpose of religious life, is a valid *ijtihad* and one that adheres to the direction of the comprehensive objectives of *shari‘a*.” By contrast, “An *ijtihad* that violates these objectives, or one that is frozen in the historic timing of the revelation, falls under the category of ‘erroneous,’ regardless of good intentions and sound faith.”⁸⁴ Therefore, for Abu Zayd, only equality between men and women serves the higher objectives of Islam, even if the Qur’anic text indicates otherwise.

Abu Zayd believed Islam set a direction to liberate women and give them equal rights to men. He stressed that the measure of determining the direction “should be the

⁸¹ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 167.

⁸² Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 291-2.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir al-Khawf*, 233.

conditions of women in society before the revelation. It should not be comparing the Qur'anic text to our wishes, even if they are valid," meaning today's standards for women's rights.⁸⁵ He argued that the misogynist Arabs who received the revelation failed to capture the Qur'an's intentions, freezing instead the very degraded status of women at the time of revelation that Islam intended to change.

To give an example, Abu Zayd referred to the fact that the Qur'an addressed women as it did men, directly and not through men, presumably to emphasize their equality to men. This is significant, Abu Zayd argued. The act of addressing women directly represents a new and unprecedented consciousness of equality.⁸⁶ However, one could also argue that this Qur'anic discourse reflects pre-Islamic society in which women had independent agency and therefore the Qur'an had to address them separately. The latter argument is supported by Leila Ahmed's research on the status of women in pre-Islamic communities. Ahmad, in contrast to Abu Zayd and other modernists, in fact marks the loss of agency as the most critical development for women with the rise of Islam.⁸⁷

From Abu Zayd's perspective, however, the Qur'an instituted a shift towards women's rights that was not recognized by the culture and therefore did not translate into a different reality for women. He argued that the status of women is progressive or backward depending on the level of society's adherence to the Qur'anic conscience.⁸⁸ Therefore, according to Abu Zayd's perception, the less equality women are granted in a society, the less adherent to the Qur'anic objectives that society is. Other modernists also

⁸⁵ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 36.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 36-7.

⁸⁷ Leila Ahmed, "Women and the Advent of Islam," *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture and Society* 11, no. 4 (1986).

⁸⁸ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir al-Khawf*, 36.

share Abu Zayd's methodology. Amina Wadud, for example, saw the reforms introduced in the Qur'an during the seventh century as "establishing precedent for continual development toward a just social order." Like Abu Zayd, she drew an analogy between the situation of women and the institution of slavery. In both cases, she argued, the Qur'an appears to push for a certain direction.⁸⁹

However, that an accurate reading of the objectives of Islam would naturally lead to an interpretation that is compatible with modernity and human rights is Abu Zayd's own presupposition. One could argue that such a reading simply imposes our current times and conscience into the Qur'an. There are no clear-cut verses that give women unequivocal equality and egalitarianism in all aspects of life. But this is to be expected, because the notion of human rights as it exists today is relatively new in human history. The absence of such verses and the presence of others that disadvantage women is the basis of many literalists' arguments. While the latter have the actual words of the Qur'an, Abu Zayd's interpretation rests on a claim to know God's unwritten intention.

Abu Zayd relied heavily on the historicization of revelation. Insisting that "the Qur'an is a product of a specific culture,"⁹⁰ he argued that some of its content, especially pertaining to women, is "descriptive" rather than legislative.⁹¹ Here one sees al-Haddad's influence on Abu Zayd. Al-Haddad argued that much of what is mentioned in the Qur'an simply "cannot even be considered part of Islam," including slavery and polygamy. They

⁸⁹ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and woman : rereading the sacred text from a woman's perspective*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), xiii.

⁹⁰ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 177.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

were merely a reflection of the specific historic context and not Islam *per se*. In fact, he argues, such practices are the very ones Islam aspired to change.⁹²

Likewise, Abu Zayd believed that the problem originates from theologians' practice of conflating the descriptive with prescriptive, and the specific historic context with a universal, timeless validity. The Qur'an attempted to reform society gradually, so much of it was addressed to a bygone era's circumstances. But time exists on a continuum; it has not ended in modernity. It is thus understandable that the reforming principles introduced in the Qur'an would still pertain to much of the contemporary situation as well.⁹³ Abu Zayd's selective approach is evident in his presumption in knowing which parts of the Qur'an offer a historical context, rather than a timeless command for Muslims.

Another angle from which Abu Zayd defended Islam was his advocacy for a return to a purer, more distilled version of Islam, uncorrupted by centuries of human scholarship that has been mistaken for Islam itself. This is especially true in the twentieth century.⁹⁴ The challenge that modernist intellectuals face, Abu Zayd wrote, is that many of the erroneous readings of religion

have become pervasive and widespread among Muslim laymen and scholars alike, and not open for discussion or questioning because they have become the foundations of faith. Those who attempt to open the door of discussion are not only questioned in their faith and creed but can be excommunicated from Islam altogether.⁹⁵

This call to return to the 'pure' Islam facilitates the introduction of modern interpretations as it discredits classical theology on which much of conservative

⁹² Al-Haddad, *Imra'atuna Fi Al-Shari'a Wa Al-Mujtama'*, 43.

⁹³ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 212-3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 185-6.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 186-8.

and traditional readings are based. Given that the Qur'an cannot be understood without it, modernists can more easily project into the Text their own interpretations.

This is not to discredit the difficulties scholars face when attempting to challenge any traditional readings. In his edited volume, *Innovation in Islam: Traditions and Contributions*, for example, Kamrava observes the significant restrictions to academic progress of Islamic studies. The authoritarian political environment and its close ties to the religious establishment, he argues, have been a hindrance to genuine progress in the field of Islamic studies.⁹⁶ The Egyptian intellectual Jamal al-Banna articulated a similar frustration in regards to making into Islamic law that which is not related to Islam but represents only the understanding of a particular political group.⁹⁷ The political environment is therefore an integral part of this challenge.

As noted earlier in this thesis, the preoccupation with dominance and the marriage between the religious establishment and rulers is believed to be a major factor in the backwardness that ensued in social issues such as women's rights. The Syrian intellectual George Tarabish dedicated a book to tracing the transition from the Qur'an as the major source of Islamic teaching to the use of hadith as an equally authoritative voice. This development had many ramifications, especially given the lengthy passage of time between the Prophet's time and the time of documentation, as well as the integral role of jurists in collecting and documenting of hadith.⁹⁸ Mernissi's *Women and Islam: An*

⁹⁶ *Innovation in Islam: Traditions and Contributions*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 7-8.

⁹⁷ Jamal Al-Banna, *Hal Yumkin Taqbiq Al-Shari'a?* [Is It Possible to Apply Shari'a?] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2008), 63.

⁹⁸ George Tarabishi, *Min Islam Al-Qur'an Ila Islam Al-Hadith: Al-Nash'a Al-Musta'nafa* (Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, 2010).

Historical and Theological Enquiry also draws attention to the unwarranted elevation, over time, of hadith to the status of the Qur'an. Mernissi traces the history of misogynist hadith that have come to pass for Islam itself, illustrating with detailed examples the harmful role they have played despite their dubious origins.⁹⁹ These contemporary intellectuals, like their *nahda* predecessors, call for the original message of Islam as a mechanism to institute reform in Islamic thought.

For modernist intellectuals, a proper reading of the Qur'an would have only one conclusion: exonerating Islam from all that does not meet the standards of the twenty-first century as far as women's rights are concerned. This argument, which is evident in Abu Zayd's work as well as that of his predecessors such as Haddad and Amin, presupposes knowledge of God's intentions, rather than relying on the text. Abu Zayd and other modernists expressed certainty that those who read some verses of the Qur'an literally are violating Islam's objectives. But this interpretation is essentially based on faith. Ronald Nettler noted the same pattern in the thought of Muhammad Talbi. Nettler posed the question, "How does one know God's aim?" In Talbi's case, which can be applied to Abu Zayd, the presupposition is that "God wants only the 'good' and 'progressive.'"¹⁰⁰ In the absence of clear and decisive divine revelation stating its intent in all contexts, such progressive readings are merely interpretations as valid as the readings they condemn.

Another major presupposition, if not axiom, in Abu Zayd's and other modernists' work, is that Islam greatly improved women's conditions. However, as mentioned above,

⁹⁹ Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

¹⁰⁰ Nettler, "Mohamed Talbi's Commentary on Qur'an Iv:34 a 'Historical Reading' of a Verse Concerning the Disciplining of Women," 28.

this is by no means certain, and some contemporary feminists challenge it with detailed historical claims. Leila Ahmed, for example, argued that the narrative portrayed by most Islamic scholars regarding the pre-Islamic conditions of women is inaccurate. Infanticide, practised only by some tribes in Arabia, is often given as evidence for the low status of women. However, not all groups in pre-Islamic communities practised infanticide, and to Ahmed, the idea “that Islam’s banning of infanticide established the fact that Islam improved the position of women in all respects, seems both inaccurate and simplistic.”¹⁰¹ She argues that women in fact had far more rights before Islam and that the advent of Islam curtailed most of their freedoms, agency and autonomy. For the majority of women in pre-Islamic Arabia, in other words, Islam took more rights than it offered.¹⁰² Therefore, the notion that Islam improved women’s rights is taken for granted without investigative historical evidence. This is the case, perhaps, because it supports the assumption that the revelation must have furthered God’s intention to further what it is progressive and good.

Centrality of the West

Since Europe was the primary catalyst of modernity in the Muslim world, it has always been central to the debate on various issues related to modernity, including women’s rights. Though Europe’s image has gone through a transformation since the *nahda* era, it continues to be an integral part of the debate.

¹⁰¹ Leila Ahmed, "Women and the Rise of Islam," in *The New Voices of Islam: Rethinking Politics and Modernity*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 178.

¹⁰² Leila Ahmed, "Women and the Advent of Islam," *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture and Society* 11, no. 4 (1986).

Interestingly, Abu Zayd's own view of Europe was often negative, except when he was admiring the *nahda* scholars for their openness towards Europe or condemning the supporters of the religious discourse for their enmity towards her. Abu Zayd believed that, in part, the discourse of the *nahda* scholars derived its vitality from its healthy outlook to the 'other,' including an appreciation for its reason and advancement, an outlook he associated with European culture and identity.¹⁰³ Their admiration for the progressive aspects of the European civilization was coupled with the conviction that Islam is conducive to the perceived Western values of modernity. As mentioned earlier, not only did the *nahda* scholars not see any conflict between Islam and European lifestyles, but they also saw Islam as "the faith that stands for liberty, the civil state and progress," Abu Zayd noted.¹⁰⁴

An example of the *nahda* attitude is the admiration Tahtawi expressed for French women, describing them as "very beautiful, gentle, and enjoyable to converse and deal with."¹⁰⁵ Such was Tahtawi's approbation that he attempted to educate women in Egypt to enable them to rise to the level of their European counterparts. Similarly, in his book, *Liberation of Women*, Qasim Amin constantly referred to European women as an example of how women can live uncovered, educated lives in which they work alongside and mix with men, all without necessarily affecting their virtue. Challenging the traditional norms Amin argued: "We see that the more freedom Western women have, the more respect for themselves, their husband and their family they have." Therefore,

¹⁰³ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 60.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁰⁵ Rifa'a Al-Tahtawi, *Takhliis Al-Ibriz Fi Talkhis Bariz* (Cairo: Kalimat 'Arabiyya li al-Tarjama wa al-Nashr, 2011), 90.

Muslims should grant their women more freedoms.¹⁰⁶ By contrast, he wrote, Muslim women are “deprived of all human rights and deprived of all the privileges of a private or public life.”¹⁰⁷

This positive view of Europe receded, especially in the second half of the twentieth century as the crisis debate emerged, Abu Zayd noted. Proponents of the religious discourse in particular, he argued, were not able to see the West objectively, imbued, as it is, with exclusivity and sectarianism. To the supporters of the religious discourse, Islam is the ‘I’ and the West the ‘other.’ The ‘I’ is inflated “to compensate for defeat, disgrace, and dependence (*taba’iyya*). Identity is based on religion and the other is oppressed while women are put under the siege of hijab.”¹⁰⁸ Thus Abu Zayd associated the negative impression of the West with oppressing women.

According to Abu Zayd, the proponents of the religious discourse expend significant effort to isolate and distinguish themselves from the West, even as the latter remains a point of reference for them, albeit an unconscious one.¹⁰⁹ For example, they often point out that Islam preceded the West in advancing women’s rights. The West, still the point of reference, is then attacked for having turned women into sexual objects. They argue that Muslim women are more protected than their Western counterparts.¹¹⁰ This argument achieves two ends. First, “it is a position motivated by defence of Islam against those who attack it as the reason for the backwardness.”¹¹¹ Second, Abu Zayd argued, their argument reinforces the hegemony of the religious texts and inclusiveness of their

¹⁰⁶ Amin, *Al-Mar'a Al-Jadida*, 43.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 24-5.

¹⁰⁸ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 72-3

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 88-9.

authority to all aspects of life, including women's status. This, according to Abu Zayd, can only further undermine women's progress.¹¹²

Abu Zayd gave the example of a speech on the issue of human rights that the Islamist Muhammad 'Imara gave in 1993 at the Egyptian labour party headquarters in Tanta. On Abu Zayd's account, 'Imara started his speech, as typical for partisans of the religious discourse, by reminding the audience that Islam preceded the West in giving women their rights. 'Imara then pointed out that the West degrades women and that the family structure is extinct there. He then gave the extreme example of German men and women who resort to using dogs to have sex, rather than legitimate marital relations, which in 'Imara's estimate, is exemplary of the deteriorating status of the family unit.¹¹³

Another example Abu Zayd gave is the attack of the Egyptian theologian Muhammad Ghazali on the West.¹¹⁴ Throughout his book on women, Ghazali exaggerated the prevalence of practices at the margins of European societies. For instance, under the heading of "The Danger of the Sexual Bomb," Ghazali wrote that practices such as homosexuality, group sex and nudity clubs are "the distinguishing characteristic" of non-Muslim societies.¹¹⁵ Abu Zayd believed that such false representation is characteristic of the partisans of the religious discourse. Indeed such sensationalized attacks on Western societies are quite common in texts written by Islamist writers in the contemporary Arab world. It is unclear if these writers truly believe such statements or if they fabricate them in their ardent defence of Islam;

¹¹² Ibid., 88-9.

¹¹³ Ibid., 43-4.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 105.

¹¹⁵ Muhammad Ghazali, al, *Qadaya al-Mar'a: Bayna al-Taqalid al-Rakida wa al-Wafida* [Women Issues between Constant and Changing Traditions] (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2005), 46.

regardless, these trends that the religious discourse claim are common are hardly the norm in Western societies.

Abu Zayd believed that there was another reason why the framers of the religious discourse attacked Europe. He wrote that it was an indirect way of attacking the *nahda* discourse, which it perceived as its antithesis, partly because of its close connection to Europe.¹¹⁶ Abu Zayd wrote that the religious discourse “regards the *nahda* discourse, which called for liberation of both men and women, with suspicion and distrust. More dangerously, its tone towards it is accusatory, portraying it as threatening the interests of the *umma* and social status of women.” In fact, many went to the extent of considering calls for liberating women to be part of a wider Western or Zionist conspiracy against Islam specifically.¹¹⁷ Abu Zayd quoted ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Qirmawi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood who taught at al-Azhar University, as charging that the *nahda* “feminist movement was in fact a suspicious operation with ties to the colonizers.”¹¹⁸ The Islamists waged an attack against the Arab *nahda* effort, starting from Tahtawi. Their argument, Abu Zayd wrote, was that *nahda* intellectuals wanted to establish *hakimiyya* of humans as opposed to that of God.¹¹⁹

Attacking *nahda* reformist thought is, by extension, also an attack against modernist thought. There is ample literature written by Islamists and partisans of the religious discourse that both portray Western society as a cluster of perverted people and attack Arab modernist intellectuals as complacent with Western colonial interests. As mentioned earlier, Sayyid al-‘Affani dedicated two volumes to exposing these thinkers as

¹¹⁶ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 105.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 94-5.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 98-9. Abu Zayd is quoting here Qarmawi's *Sahwa fi 'Alam al-Mar'a*, 51.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

agents “attacking Muslim society from within” for the purpose of weakening Islam.¹²⁰

Similarly, the title of Muhammad Kushk’s, *Qira’a fi Fikr al-Taba’iyya* [A Reading in the Thought of Subordination] reveals his views on modernist intellectuals who keep the Arab world subordinated to the West.¹²¹ However, such attacks, Abu Zayd argued, are reactionary and defensive. Western accomplishments humble the Arab world. At the same time, many consider legitimate the fear that Western culture, especially its norms concerning women, may succeed in replacing its Arab and Islamic counterpart.¹²²

One may argue, however, that while critical of the anti-Western discourse, Abu Zayd was influenced by it. This is evident in the fact that he was careful to disassociate himself from Europe. He did so by detaching all the Western values he wrote to advocate from their Western roots and by being critical of West’s policies towards the region. His admiration though reveals itself in the manner in which he applauded the pro-Western attitude of the *nahda* scholars.

Visibly Absent

Conspicuously absent from Abu Zayd’s book on women is feminist discourse, be it Western, Arab or Islamic, both contemporary and from the *nahda* era. For example, he did not mention the work of the prominent Egyptian feminists Huda Sha’rawi, Nawal Sa’dawi, or Leila Ahmed. Wider feminist debate is also lacking, such as the work of American academic and Muslim feminist Amina Wadud’s, whose methodology, as she

¹²⁰ Sayyid bin Hussein Al-'Affani, *A'lam Wa 'Aqzam Fi Mizan Al-Islam* [Dwarfs and Celebrities in Islam's Scale], 2 vols., vol. 1 (Jeddah Dar Majid 'Isayri li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi', 2004), 7.

¹²¹ Muhammad Jalal Kushk, *Qira'a Fi Fikr Al-Taba'iyya* [A Reading in the Thought of Subordination] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Turkath al-Islami, 1994).

¹²² Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 105.

articulates it, resembles Abu Zayd's.¹²³ Similarly, Abu Zayd neglected Fatima Mernissi's work on women, especially her book *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*.¹²⁴ Abu Zayd mentioned Mernissi only when he offered a critique of her book, *Islam and Democracy*.¹²⁵ With rare exceptions, this is consistent with Abu Zayd's tendency to neglect mention of his contemporary intellectual peers. His exact reason for doing so is unclear, but one may speculate that doing so would undermine his claim to uniqueness in tackling these important issues.

Also missing from Abu Zayd's discourse is a more nuanced discussion of the contributing factors to the current state of affairs in the Arab world. Abu Zayd fixated on the artisans of the religious discourse, attributing to it the lion's share of responsibility for the backwardness of the Arab world. For example, only in passing did he discuss the potent role of the Arab regimes, even though his critique of Fatima Mernissi's *Islam and Democracy* evinces his awareness of their role. Mernissi argued that authoritarian Arab regimes are the source of many problems plaguing the region, such as the unjust distribution of wealth and a lack of opportunities for the youth.¹²⁶ Abu Zayd is rarely complementary of his contemporaries' work. When he agrees with their work, he does so shyly. His review of Mernissi was not different.

Many would argue, in fact, that the ruling elites and their political policies in the Arab world are the single greatest cause of all other challenges in the region.¹²⁷

Compared with some of his contemporaries who also criticized the religious discourse,

¹²³ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, 3.

¹²⁴ Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*.

¹²⁵ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 243-78.

¹²⁶ Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*.

¹²⁷ For examples, see the research of Adeel Malik and Bassem Awadallah, "Economics of the Arab Spring." They argue that policies taken by the governments of the region ensures stagnation and perpetuation of authoritarianism, (<http://www.csae.ox.ac.uk/workingpapers/pdfs/csae-wps-2011-23.pdf>) last retrieved May 11, 2013.

then, Abu Zayd gave too much weight to only one factor at the expense of all others. Sadiq al-Azm, for example, was more balanced in combining his critique of the religious discourse with state policies, which, among other things, empowers an irrational religious discourse.¹²⁸

Another factor that Abu Zayd largely neglects is the role that the West plays in creating crises in the Arab world. Ironically, he criticized Mernissi for not discussing this same issue, reminding her that the secular West played an integral part in establishing religiously-based national entities. He reminded his readers that it was the West that established a national Jewish state at the expense of Palestinians.¹²⁹ Likewise, it was secular Britain that encouraged the establishment of a national home for the Muslims in Pakistan, dividing them from their fellow Indians with whom they share history and traditions. This contradiction, Abu Zayd wrote, led to enmity towards the West and to confusion regarding Europe's ideals of democracy, secularism and modernity.¹³⁰

If one were to examine various other Western policies, from supporting dictators to turning a blind eye to the destinations of their weapons, one may find a legitimate case for their critical role in the state of affairs in the Arab world. This role, incidentally, is not lost on critics of women's rights; the perceived connection between the West and women's right is a sizeable factor in the taboo status of the issue for many Muslims. As Saba Mahmood, the close association of women's liberal and secular stances and

¹²⁸ See Al-'Azm, *Al-Naqd Al-Thati Ba'da Al-Hazima*.

¹²⁹ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 251.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

‘women’s freedom’ with Western values led to their rejection by many by virtue of association.¹³¹

Therefore, as mentioned earlier, whenever the West is mentioned in Abu Zayd’s work, it is in one of two contexts: either to articulate the same grievances, ironically, that Islamists have with the West, such as occupation of land, support of dictators and exploitation of national resources, or to critique Islamists for not being open to the progressive aspects of the West. In this case, Abu Zayd is in fact similar to many intellectuals of this time who combine their critique of Western policies with approbation of broadly Western ideas such as separation of Church and state. These scholars see Western policies in the region to be at variance with their own modern values such as human rights.

Also absent from Abu Zayd’s work is a discussion of one of the most controversial Qur’anic verse – and one which pertains directly to the status of women in Islam. This is especially curious given that he dedicated a whole book in Arabic to the issue of women. Qur’an 4:34 reads:

Men are in charge of women by [right of] what Allah has given one over the other and what they spend [for maintenance] from their wealth. So righteous women are devoutly obedient, guarding in [the husband’s] absence what Allah would have them guard. But those [wives] from whom you fear arrogance - [first] advise them; [then if they persist], forsake them in bed; and [finally], strike them. But if they obey you [once more], seek no means against them. Indeed, Allah is ever Exalted and Grand.¹³²

Only in his English biography does Abu Zayd address this verse, dismissing the notion that verse allows for beating women, despite the obvious command. In fact, he expressed

¹³¹ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival of the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1.

¹³² Quran.com, 4:34.

his surprise that a large number of Muslims take this verse literally. He wrote: “It’s not only the fundamentalist or radical people who think like this. Somehow, if something is mentioned in the Qur’an, people think it is permissible.”¹³³

What is surprising about Abu Zayd’s assessment is that he, as an Islamic scholar, should find it bewildering that Muslims should follow the Qur’an’s clear text literally. However, from his perspective, this verse was only descriptive and since it was not an act initiated by the Qur’an, it is not Qur’anic. Meaning that the Qur’an was simply recording the practice of beating women and not establishing it as an Islamic practice. Again using the analogy of slavery he wrote, “If everything mentioned in the Qur’an is to be followed as a divine law, Muslims should be consistent and reinstitute slavery as a socioeconomic system. It’s mentioned in the Qur’an, isn’t it?”¹³⁴ However, one may argue, the verse is clearly making a command to discipline women and not a description. Likewise, Islam never banned slavery and to assume that an encouragement to liberate slaves is equal to banning slavery is to say one has knowledge of God’s intention. Abu Zayd’s argument is weak also because if one is to only consider to be Islamic that which is initiated by the Qur’an, then ethics and morals would not be Qur’anic, as they existed before Islam. Which practices should endure, then, and which ones jettisoned?

Abu Zayd discusses this particular verse at length, however, when he argued against the issue of *qiwama*, men’s superiority to women, which entails men to be in charge of women. To the artisans of the religious discourse, this verse establishes superiority of men over women and reflects the inherent and permanent difference between them that render women inferior. Al-Jawahiri’s book on Muslim women

¹³³ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 174.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

exemplifies this. Al-Jawahiri considered equality between men and women to be “a delusional myth” invented by “enemies of Islam” to destroy the family structure. To him, women cannot be equal to men and their primary, and most important, role is to ensure that men have comfort and to raise children.¹³⁵

By contrast, Abu Zayd argued that in most of the Qur’an, men and women are addressed in equal terms to emphasize their equality in duties and rights. However, in a few verses, the men appear to be granted higher status. These verses, according to Abu Zayd, are “few and exceptional” and refer to a particular historical context and condition. Otherwise, egalitarianism should be established as the rule as indicated by the majority of the verses.¹³⁶ He wrote that *qiwama*, as mentioned in the Qur’an, is not legislative but rather descriptive of the state of affairs at the time of revelation, which Islam came to reform. He wrote:

The Word of God continuously emphasizes equality between women and men. There is no distinction made regarding the rewards or punishments both women and men reap in the life hereafter. If there is equality in the spiritual realm, does it make sense that God would smile upon inequality in societies in the here and now?¹³⁷

Abu Zayd, therefore, saw a contradiction if God were to say that men and women are equal in faith but not in status on earth. His argument rests on equality, which has political implications. However, objectively, the two are not necessarily contradictory to one another, at least as artisans of the religious discourse and literalists see it. Abu Zayd, however, presumed to know that God would want to grant women equal rights in both temporal and eternal spheres. At the same time, acknowledging the reality of the literal meaning, Abu Zayd contended, even if this verse was legislative as opposed to

¹³⁵ Al-Jawahiri, *Al-Ukht Al-Muslima Asas Al-Mujtama' Al-Fadhil*, 40.

¹³⁶ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 90.

¹³⁷ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 176.

descriptive, *qiwama* does not mean “absolute authority and blind obedience with the rights to control and make decisions exclusively reserved for men.” The Qur’an clearly states that individuals, be they men or women, are responsible for their actions.¹³⁸ Here again, Abu Zayd appeared to want to impose his own egalitarian reading on a text that was not so.

Leila Ahmed challenges this particular issue of equality between men and women in Islam. She argued that, in fact, Islam strengthened patriarchy and eliminated matriarchy, placing men in charge of women. Islam introduced the concept of guardianship over women, Ahmed noted, referencing the difference between the independent and autonomous pre-Islamic Khadija, who enjoyed agency to marry herself to the Prophet, and the post-revelation secluded and dependent wives of Prophet Muhammad.¹³⁹ These different research findings are telling of a different direction than the one Abu Zayd and other modernists perceived Islam to have instituted.

Comparing pre-Islamic norms to what was introduced by Islam, Ahmed wrote:

Jahiliyya women were priests, soothsayers, prophets, participants in warfare, and nurses on the battlefield. They were fearlessly outspoken, defiant critics of men; authors of satirical verse aimed at formidable male opponents; keepers, in some unclear capacity, of the keys of the holiest shrine in Mecca; rebels and leaders of rebellions that included men; and individuals who initiated and terminated marriages at will, protested the limits Islam imposed on that freedom, and mingled freely with the men of their society until Islam banned such interaction.¹⁴⁰

Ahmed pointed out that Khadija’s independence economically and personally, having concluded a marriage with the Prophet without a guardian reflects *jahiliyya*, not

¹³⁸ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 214.

¹³⁹ Ahmed, “Women and the Advent of Islam.”

¹⁴⁰ “Women and the Rise of Islam,” 197.

Islamic, norms.¹⁴¹ Ahmed's insights, which contradict widely circulated narratives, illustrates the need for more thorough research to untangle myth from fact on this topic. If evidence mounts to contradict the established Islamic narratives, it would be up to the next generation of Muslim scholars to tackle this issue and balance faith in the goodness of God's revelation and historical facts. Abu Zayd's casting doubt on the documentation of the revelation may be the next logical step to absolve God of patriarchy and misogyny.

These aforementioned trends appear throughout Abu Zayd's arguments. They are visible regardless of the particular issue at hand. Below are some of the issues he tackled that exemplify his reasoning.

Women's Employment

As noted earlier, *nahda* scholars who were exposed to Western societies were impressed with the active role women played. In response, these scholars returned home to champion women's liberation from traditional roles, arguing that it was a necessary prerequisite to European-style advancement. With the emergence of the crisis discourse, however, these calls for women's increased participation in public life were drowned out, in part, by demands to restrict them to the private space of their homes. The crisis discourse was effective to some degree, but Abu Zayd exaggerated the extent to which it attained its goals. For him, the crisis debate includes both the religious discourse as well as a political even secular discourse that, while not religious, nevertheless opposes women's rights.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 179.

To Abu Zayd, the partisans of the crisis discourse, which includes the adherents to the religious discourse constantly attempt to isolate women's issues from the larger context of society, as if women were disconnected and independent units rather than an integral part of community and political life. He identified three major arguments of the religious discourse to this end. The first of these was an insistence that a woman's primary function in life is reproduction and motherhood. Women's employment outside the house is not valued compared to her biological role.¹⁴² In fact, if there is no pressing financial need, a woman's work is considered superfluous. Qaradawi, for example, wrote that God had prepared women physically and psychologically for their primary job in life, which is motherhood. "No other financial or literary work, regardless of how important it is, should distract them from this honourable duty."¹⁴³

Some feminist writers challenge this notion. Amina Wadud, for example, contested this presumption on the grounds that "there is no term in the Qur'an which indicates that childbearing is 'primary' to a woman. No indication is given that mothering is her exclusive role."¹⁴⁴ Therefore, the supposed religious determinism can be questioned even on religious grounds.

Abu Zayd compared contemporary discourse to that of the *nahda* scholars, giving the example of Qasim Amin.¹⁴⁵ Amin considered it degrading towards women to lock them in the house and deprive them of public roles.¹⁴⁶ He argued that secluding women from public life not only leads to an *umma* that is half paralyzed, but it produces mothers

¹⁴² Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 82-4.

¹⁴³ From Qaradawi's website, <http://qaradawi.net/fatawaahkam/30/6383-2012-12-24-10-37-40.html> retrieved April 4, 2013.

¹⁴⁴ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman : Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, 64.

¹⁴⁵ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 60-1.

¹⁴⁶ Amin, *Tahrir Al-Mar'a*, 15.

who are unfit to raise children.¹⁴⁷ From his perspective, unless a mother is herself successful and an active member of society, she cannot raise men who are.¹⁴⁸ Abu Zayd also admired al-Haddad's writings on women's employment.¹⁴⁹ Al-Haddad argued, like Qasim Amin, that women who work and participate in public life are better fit to raise children. He also argued that their work in society would make them better mothers.¹⁵⁰

Abu Zayd contrasted the positions of the *nahda* scholars with that of the partisans of the religious discourse, the latter of whom, as mentioned above, assign motherhood as the sole purpose for women and link it with the role of obedient caretaker. The Egyptian cleric Muhammad al-Ghazali, for instance, saw no contradiction in his statement acknowledging the equality of men and women and his assertion that women's primary role is to obey men. He argued that, given that women's biology renders them unfit to work, their sole responsibility is to take care of men: "The man is an obeyed king whose word rules."¹⁵¹ Abu Zayd pointed as well to 'Imara, who likewise saw obedience to men as a woman's first duty.¹⁵² He pointed out that these intellectuals are stunningly unconcerned that blindly obeying another human being may indicate something other than equality between them.

Abu Zayd objected to the assumption that women's primary role is to "be at the service of men," ensuring the comfort of their home and taking care of the family. He contended that such a notion is absurd, as this very duty is the means through which women lose all the rights that the religious discourse imagines it grants them.¹⁵³ Under

¹⁴⁷ *Al-Mar'a Al-Jadida*, 42.

¹⁴⁸ *Tahrir Al-Mar'a*, 73-4.

¹⁴⁹ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 67-8.

¹⁵⁰ Al-Haddad, *Imra'atuna Fi Al-Shari'a Wa Al-Mujtama'*, 190.

¹⁵¹ Al-Ghazali, *Qadaya Al-Mar'a: Bayna Al-Taqlid Al-Rakida Wa Al-Wafida*, 115.

¹⁵² Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 44.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 109.

this paradigm, Abu Zayd pointed out, “the relationship is one that resembles slave and master,” with the man providing food and shelter and the woman’s worth contingent upon the service she provides to her master.¹⁵⁴ The concept of ownership embodies itself, Abu Zayd argued, in the act of imprisonment both externally and internally. She is either imprisoned inside her house or externally in a uniform that covers her – “the hijab of ownership” (*hijab al-mulkiyya*), in Abu Zayd’s words.¹⁵⁵ Thus the potency of the description conveys Abu Zayd’s view on covering women.

Like his intellectual role models, Abu Zayd believed that a woman who is active and fully engaged in society is more likely to raise a sound family than one who is trapped within the walls of a house, regardless of her educational background. For him, education is a dynamic and interactive process.¹⁵⁶ Abu Zayd believed that women who are “imprisoned inside the walls of their houses receive their awareness passively through the media as opposed to having the chance to develop active and positive awareness through free interaction with their society at large.”¹⁵⁷

To support his point of view, Abu Zayd argued that in countries where the state closely controls the media, as it is the case in the Arab world, women are exposed only to what the state wants them to see. State inculcation turns them into subdued members of society who in turn raise equally subdued citizens. Consequently, “the call to free women completely to focus on the family and raising children is, in its deepest sense, a call to put the state propaganda machine in charge of raising the family.”¹⁵⁸ Authoritarian rule, according to Abu Zayd, is therefore the primary beneficiary of the calls to limit women’s

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 111.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 47.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 84.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 85.

mobility to the private space of their home. The state allows the religious conservatives to speak through its controlled media, so supposedly secular state's interests are served by the religious discourse. Patriarchy unites both the state and the family structures.

The second argument Abu Zayd made against the artisans of the crisis debate of perpetuating against women's employment is the biological factor. According to the widely circulated hadith, "women are deficient in rationality and religion." This deficiency is attributed to women's emotional nature. Fatima Mernissi investigates the origins of this popular misogynist hadith and questions its authenticity – particularly given that Abu Bakra recalled the hadith under dubious circumstances after a quarter of a century had lapsed since the Prophet's death.¹⁵⁹ Abu Zayd noted that those who emphasize the biological difference, especially in traditionally male-dominated professions such as law, rely on the "words of ancestors." The latter evoke the eternal 'natural' differences between men and women for the supposed inability of women to compete with men. For them, men are innately stronger and more rational.¹⁶⁰

For many intellectuals who ascribe to the religious discourse, the biological argument is simply one ordained by the divine. Abu Zayd gave the example of Muhammad al-Ghazali who, according to Abu Zayd, used *shari'a* to institutionalize disparity between men and women.¹⁶¹ Ghazali argued that *shari'a* is clear in laying out the biological weaknesses of women, namely pregnancy and menstruation. Given women's weakness during these periods, they are exempted from even praying or fasting. Therefore, Ghazali argued, if God himself exempted women from personal duties due to their weakness, "why should they impose on themselves or why should society impose on

¹⁵⁹ Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, 49-50.

¹⁶⁰ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 185.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 108-9.

them what they cannot do!”¹⁶² Therefore, to Ghazali, *shari‘a* gave clues of why women’s employment is not biologically feasible.

Abu Zayd condemned Ghazali and other conservatives for attempting to use biological differences noted by *shari‘a* as excuses to exclude women from participating in society as equal citizens. He argued that it is an attempt to create a binary division of outside versus inside spaces. This division keeps women secluded in their houses as men monopolize the external space. A woman in this paradigm, Abu Zayd contended, does not represent half the society. “Rather, she is only half of a man since her main purpose in life is to create the appropriate environment for the man internally so he can carry out with comfort his activities externally.”¹⁶³ Therefore, from Abu Zayd’s perspective, this division negates one half of the population for the sake of the other.

The third mode of reasoning used by supporters of the religious discourse to argue against women’s employment is their protection. Abu Zayd stated: “Under the guise of protecting women, we restrict their activities, a climate that perpetuates inequality between the sexes.”¹⁶⁴ What would have been more appropriate, he argued, is to create suitable working conditions for both men and women as a solution. Furthermore, Abu Zayd argued, many of the perceptions regarding the difficulty of women’s employment in the public sphere are handed down from a bygone era in which primitive conditions did make it difficult for both men and women to work. However, in today’s technological world, these concerns are irrelevant. That said, Abu Zayd, pointed out, working conditions in the Arab world today do not meet the level of acceptable standards. He insisted that the focus should be on improving working conditions, which can easily be

¹⁶² Al-Ghazali, *Qadaya Al-Mar'a: Bayna Al-Taqlid Al-Rakida Wa Al-Wafida*, 115-18.

¹⁶³ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 109-10.

¹⁶⁴ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 179.

done, rather than using them as an excuse to deprive women from participating in the work force.¹⁶⁵ Here as elsewhere, Abu Zayd presumed that those who ascribe to the religious discourse were insincere in articulating their motives, that faith and the protection of women are not the real reasons for their positions. The real reason is, presumably, misogyny and fear of social upheaval. He refused to take them at face value, not recognizing the power of the traditional argument.

Turning his attention from the religious discourse, Abu Zayd also critiqued what he referred to as the ‘secular political discourse.’ Like the adherents to religious discourse, they use the same reasoning to argue against women’s employment. Namely, it emphasizes women’s primary role as mothers, emphasizes their biological difference and claims the need to protect them. Abu Zayd gave the example of the Egyptian parliament member Sa‘ad al-Sharif, who argued against women’s employment: “In my opinion the most important purpose for women is motherhood, which goes far beyond the act of giving birth. It means the comprehensive act of raising a sound citizen.” The politician also alluded to the less than ideal conditions from which women suffer when they work outside their houses.¹⁶⁶

Abu Zayd’s refutation of the politician’s stance, which represents many among the ruling elite, was on secular grounds. He argued that the state’s allocation of the responsibility of raising the family solely to women is a fraudulent attempt to exonerate the state and its institutions from their important responsibilities in the wellbeing of a family.¹⁶⁷ In the modern nation state, Abu Zayd wrote, state institutions and services could play an equally important role as having a fine mother for raising good children;

¹⁶⁵ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 108.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 82-3.

this need not be exclusively the woman's purview or duty. As for the protection claim, Abu Zayd responded that such discourse only appears to have concern for women while making them exclusively responsible for the welfare of the family. But as Abu Zayd reminded his readers, a family consists of both a man and a woman. If the man is distressed due to the economic situation, the entire family suffers. Therefore, if his concern was in fact the welfare of the family, the politician would have needed to address the wider economic and political context than to focus exclusively on women.¹⁶⁸

Mernissi made a similar argument to Abu Zayd, presenting the point bluntly. She argued that Arab regimes have been unable to deal with the growing economic challenges facing the Arab world, especially unemployment among young people. Consequently, she wrote: "Any Muslim state can reduce its level of unemployment by half just by appealing to the *shari'a*, in its meaning as despotic caliphal tradition,"¹⁶⁹ which is to say, if women don't count as employable citizens, they don't figure among the unemployed. A conservative reading of *shari'a* can therefore alleviate and divert attention from the economic challenges resulting from state policies.

In placing women's issues in the context of the larger crisis of Arab societies, Abu Zayd's argument could have been strengthened had he drawn on feminist discourse on this issue. For example, the well-known Egyptian feminist Nawal al-Sa'dawi wrote that limiting women's work to domestic duties not only causes great psychological harm to them but also to the children. She referred to research indicating that children who suffer from extended absence from the father and are raised spending their time solely with their mother suffer various psychological problems including "a ten-fold

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World*, 165.

disadvantage in their learning abilities.” By contrast, children who also spend time away from their mothers learn faster.¹⁷⁰ However, Abu Zayd tended to push the debate more towards the unethical nature of the religious and political discourses and practices. It is nonetheless curious that he distended himself from well-known feminists. Consequently, Abu Zayd came across more interested in arguing against partisans of the religious discourse than supporting feminism.

Abu Zayd saw women’s liberation as closely connected to men’s, drawing attention to the view that “human liberation is contingent upon the liberation of society and thought in general.” He gave the metaphor of men and women as a set of lungs, each constituting one lung of a human being. When the air of freedom is inhaled, it simultaneously fills both lungs.¹⁷¹ Abu Zayd argued that women’s issues are essentially social human issues because they cannot be separated from men’s issues, as they both constitute the social existence of humans. However, partisans of both the political and religious discourses emphasize the biological differences, which Abu Zayd believed “negate women’s humanity and replaces them with females,” i.e., the focus on biology denies the common humanity between men and women.¹⁷² Abu Zayd argued that the real intention behind such argumentation on women is “to repress men completely, by starting with what they envision is the weakest link: women.” He argued that oppressing women by isolating them from society leads to men “waging the battle alone and weak,” after removing his supporter.¹⁷³ Consequently, Abu Zayd saw oppressing women is a step towards subduing all citizens, making the issue of women as ultimately a political one.

¹⁷⁰ Nawal Al-Sa'dawi, *Al-Mar'a Wa Al-Jins* (Alexandria: Dar wa Matabi' al-Mustaqbal, 1990), 143.

¹⁷¹ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 87.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 86.

The Issue of Polygamy

Abu Zayd's view on the issue of polygamy matched that of 'Abduh, Amin and al-Haddad. Challenging the notion that it was an Islamic practice, the scholars of *nahda* attempted to eradicate polygamy, or at least make it exceptional and supervised by a judge. 'Abduh blamed jurists for turning an exceptional and 'permissible' practice in the Qur'an into a common and 'required' one, to the extent that they placed no restrictions on men's liberty to divorce or practise polygamy. He lamented the fact that misogynist jurists degraded the status of women so severely that "they turned a marriage contract into a contract for men to enjoy women's bodies sexually."¹⁷⁴ Polygamy, he argued, causes much harm to society, including hatred among siblings of different mothers and social unrest. He urged rulers to ban the practice for the better interest of society.¹⁷⁵

Likewise, Amin believed polygamy to be "a form of severe abasement of women."¹⁷⁶ Countering the argument that the multitude of children resulting from polygamous marriages are an asset to the Muslim *umma*, Amin retorted that children who are products of such marriages are often a burden to society. They are not raised well, as fathers with many wives are "too busy attending to their lust to fulfil their duty as fathers." Furthermore, wives who find themselves having to share their husbands most likely experience a level of emotional distress that obstructs their capacity to raise healthy families.¹⁷⁷ Al-Haddad also attacked the practice as entirely un-Islamic. Rather, he considered it to be one of the abuses of pre-Islamic times that Islam worked to eradicate progressively. Islam started by limiting the number to four, then making polygamy

¹⁷⁴ 'Abduh, *Muhammad 'Abduh: Al-A'mal Al-Kamila*, 2, 70.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 85-7.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁷⁷ Amin, *Tahrir Al-Mar'a*, 85-9.

contingent upon equality among wives, which the Qur'an implies is impossible to achieve.¹⁷⁸ For al-Haddad, who is Abu Zayd's greatest influence, the direction is towards prohibiting polygamy.

Like his intellectual role models, Abu Zayd argued that both literal and historicist readings of the Qur'anic verse allow it to be grounds to restrict, or even ban, the practice. Starting with the literal context, Abu Zayd provided his own translation of verse 4:3 for the Qur'an:

Give orphans the property which belongs to them. Do not exchange their valuables for worthless things or cheat them of their possessions; for this would surely be a grievous sin. If you fear that you cannot treat orphans with fairness [giving them their inheritance], then you may marry other women who seem good to you: two, three, or four of them. But if you fear that you cannot maintain equality among them [within a marital relationship], marry only one or any slave-girl you may own. This will make it easier to for you avoid injustice.¹⁷⁹

Abu Zayd pointed out that if one examines the verse as a whole, it becomes clear that the verse's purpose is to address the orphans' rights to their money and not to institute polygamy. He argued that the specific context of the verse is the battle of Uhud, in which many men died and many children were orphaned and women widowed. Abu Zayd insisted that the verse allowed for polygamy, as a temporary legislation, to achieve one of Islam's principles: justice. Islam allowed this pre-Islamic construct, to achieve justice for the women and orphans in a society that "preyed upon widows and female orphans—often stealing their inheritance from them."¹⁸⁰ Therefore, he argued, "It is not a

¹⁷⁸ Al-Haddad, *Imra'atuna Fi Al-Shari'a Wa Al-Mujtama'*, 79-80.

¹⁷⁹ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 173. (Brackets are placed by Abu Zayd).

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

law. It is a practical solution to a pressing, historical problem. Justice is the broader issue.”¹⁸¹

Abu Zayd believed that justice was the objective and it should remain so, but the tools to achieve it should evolve. On the historical reading, then, because polygamy violates the principle of justice outside of that specific historical context, its permissibility is questionable. A literal reading of the verse also fails to justify the practice, though, as the text clearly makes polygamy contingent upon treating all wives equally, which is not humanly possible. Therefore, according to Abu Zayd, entering into polygamous marriages knowing that one cannot be just violates Islamic morals.¹⁸²

Abu Zayd blamed theologians for the way polygamy evolved in practice. Not only did they ignore the Qur’anic condition for polygamy, they reversed the Islamic intention to help women with norms that place them under complete male dominance.¹⁸³ In stressing the importance of the literal reading of the verse, though, Abu Zayd revealed his own selectivity. Contradicting himself, he condemned literal readings most of the times while emphasizing their importance when the verses in question, read literally, further his modernist view of the Islam.

Assumptions about the nature of modernity and the role of evolution underlie Abu Zayd’s argumentation, as well as the works of the *nahda* scholars. He noted that, at the time of the Prophet, limiting polygamy to only four represented “a historic jump along the path of liberating women from the dominance of males.” Therefore, “limiting marriage to one wife after fifteen centuries of human evolution is a natural development

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 289-91.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 217.

of the path started by Islam.”¹⁸⁴ Here again Abu Zayd is presuming to know God’s intention: limiting or eliminating polygamy in the long run. Other modernist intellectuals make similar arguments to Abu Zayd, especially those concerning misinterpretations of Islam’s intentions on the part of the theologians. Jamal al-Banna dedicated a book to the restrictions on women that jurists enacted in direct violation of the Qur’an.¹⁸⁵

Likewise Muhammad Shahrur considered polygamy “one of the most important challenges facing Arab women.” He argued that an accurate understanding of the above Qur’anic verse was needed, one that reveals its real intention of justice and would transform the traditional reading of it.¹⁸⁶ Interestingly, Abu Zayd pointed out, even on the non-Western issue of polygamy, the West still informs Islamic debate. Polygamy is often enforced as an acceptable norm not because it is clearly supported by the Qur’an but rather because it is viewed as a lesser evil to Western-style promiscuity.

Polygamy served as a dividing line between Abu Zayd and other modernists. For example, Muhammad Talbi – in most other issues an ally of Abu Zayd – posed the question, “which is better to address the exceptional cases, allow fornication outside of marriage or allow polygamy? In the West fornication is not even a crime punishable by law.”¹⁸⁷ Of course, much of Abu Zayd’s objection rested on Talbi’s use of the biological difference and the allegedly superior sexual appetite of men over women to justify polygamy.¹⁸⁸ To Talbi, “the issue of polygamy is not Islamic or religious. It is strictly biological in its animalistic roots.” Abu Zayd, on the other hand, rejected the supposed

¹⁸⁴ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 288.

¹⁸⁵ Jamal Al-Banna, *Al-Mar'a Al-Muslima: Bayna Tahrir Al-Qur'an Wa Taqyid Al-Fuqaha'* (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-Islami, 1998).

¹⁸⁶ Muhammad Shahrur, *Al-Kitab Wa Al-Qur'an: Qira'a Mu'asira* (Damascus: Dar al-Ahali, 1994), 597.

¹⁸⁷ Muhammad Talbi, *Iyal Allah: Hiwar Ma' Muhammad Al-Talibi, Afkhar Jadida Fi 'Alaqat Al-Muslim Bi Nafsihi Wa Bi Al-Akharin* (Tunis: Dar Saras 1992), 125-32.

inherent biological differences often invoked to prevent egalitarianism. For him, they obliterate the difference between animals and humans.¹⁸⁹

Leila Ahmed points out that both men and women in some parts of pre-Islamic Arabia had multiple partners. (This is not to say that it was the norm; the Prophet's marriage to pre-Islamic wife Khadija was monogamous.) Polygyny, she notes, was practised in Mecca but not Medina, which "may have been a chief reason" why there was little intermarriage between the migrants from Mecca and the natives of Medina.¹⁹⁰ Still, that polygamy was a practice at all among the very people the Prophet lived among calls into question whether biology provides a sufficient defence of polygamy. Islam did, it is true, make significant changes to regulations of marriage and divorce, but they were more often than not in favour of men. The changes the Prophet instituted with Islam decisively established patriarchy.¹⁹¹

Given Ahmed's findings, the pre-Islamic conditions constantly invoked to highlight the drastic advances in women's rights that Islam supposedly instituted may not be accurate. The evidence given for the status of pre-Islamic women is selective, and advocates often mine the historical record to make a preconceived argument. Whether Islam did indeed cause such a jump in the quality of life for both men and women remains subject to interpretation.

¹⁸⁹ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 228.

¹⁹⁰ Ahmed, "Women and the Advent of Islam," 680.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 670.

The Issue of Divorce

On the issue of divorce, Abu Zayd again reiterated the views of ‘Abduh, Qasim Amin and al-Haddad. All four thinkers pointed out the innovation on the part of jurists who formed a consensus among themselves that divorce is made by the man uttering the word ‘divorced’ three times, either in one setting or at three different occasions.¹⁹² Such a rule violates Islam, according to ‘Abduh, because “divorce cannot be done how jurists decided it when all the texts of the Qur’an refuse their interpretation.”¹⁹³ ‘Abduh also argued that if governments care about the interest of the *umma*, they would dictate that divorce be in the presence of a judge, permissible only with an official document and the presence of two witnesses.¹⁹⁴ Similarly, Amin argued that it was too arbitrary and chaotic to allow divorce to be verbal and conducted by men alone at their whim.¹⁹⁵

Perhaps the most significant influence on Abu Zayd on this issue, however, was al-Haddad. Al-Haddad argued that jurists, before legislating, ought always to pose the question, “Did Islam come to strengthen marriage so that it may bring to fruition happy families that procreate for the *umma*, or did it come to give man the unrestrained power over divorce until today it has become analogous with its ease to a feather on a windy day?” This is how the ‘essence’ (*jawhar*) of Islam can be distilled, al-Haddad argued.¹⁹⁶ Abu Zayd echoed al-Haddad, writing that “we need a new reading that is based on the fixed objective and essence of *shari‘a*, which is why al-Haddad’s questions are critical.”¹⁹⁷ These thinkers all recognized the bias of modern divorce laws, which

¹⁹² Abu Zayd, *Dawa’ir Al-Khawf*, 67-70.

¹⁹³ ‘Abduh, *Muhammad ‘Abduh: Al-A‘mal Al-Kamila*, 2, 118-9.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁹⁵ Amin, *Tahrir Al-Mar‘a*, 96-8.

¹⁹⁶ Al-Haddad, *Imra‘atuna Fi Al-Shari‘a Wa Al-Mujtama‘*, 43-4.

¹⁹⁷ Abu Zayd, *Dawa’ir Al-Khawf*, 69-70.

facilitate divorce for men, and greatly disadvantage women, who have little to no say in the matter and who stand to lose a great deal economically and socially should their husbands reject them.

Abu Zayd argued that verbal divorce violates justice because it enables men to simply utter the word and divorce their wives following a quarrel or a disagreement. Such laws “emphasize the primitiveness of the relationship in the family. The role of the wife under these conditions is limited to pleasing the man by all means that strip her of her humanity, driven by the fear of the man getting angry and divorcing her.” Given the ease with which a man can divorce his wife, Abu Zayd wrote, “Divorce is like a sword pointed at a woman’s neck at all times.” He stressed the importance of amending these laws that deprive contemporary Muslim women of their independence, whether in their birth families or in marriage.¹⁹⁸ Therefore, Abu Zayd framed the issue as an abuse of women’s rights.

As he consistently did, Abu Zayd blamed the supporters of the religious discourse for these patterns in the contemporary Arab world. They, he wrote, insist on maintaining the imbalance in divorce rights despite the lack of Qur’anic text that justifies it. Abu Zayd appeared puzzled by the lack of progress in this matter. He wrote, “rules regarding marriage contracts changed with the evolution of society from verbal to requiring actual documentation. Likewise, divorce must be regulated—by requiring it to be done in front of a judge.” Such implementation would be in accordance with civil laws as well as the higher objectives of Islam.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 293-4.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 294.

To Abu Zayd, Salafi influence was responsible for hindering the evolution in divorce laws. Salafis, he wrote, object to granting women the right to divorce because they believe in the superiority (*qiwama*) of men over women. He attributed to them “stiffness of mentality” and an “inability to comprehend the advent of time,” which, to Abu Zayd, reveals the structural awareness of Salafis more than it reveals the religious ruling on the matter. He wrote, “Superiority of men over women (*qiwama*), just like polygamy and slavery, is an expression of historic circumstances that have been surpassed by humanity.” Salafis, according to Abu Zayd, appear oblivious to human evolution as far as relationships between men and women are concerned. The reality on the ground, as Abu Zayd wrote, is that “women have proven their capacity to work in all fields.”²⁰⁰ However, this resistance to change is hardly limited to Salafis. Many communities still have a minority that attempts to resist modernity and cling to customs and traditions from ancient times.

Abu Zayd lamented that only in Tunisia the *nahda*’s recommendations are translated into law, banning polygamy and giving men and women equal right to file for divorce, which must be granted by a judge.²⁰¹ Abu Zayd argued that the Tunisian laws are not secular, as some religious people who opposed them claim. Rather, they are derived from real *shari‘a*.²⁰² Admiring the Tunisian example, Abu Zayd wrote that the law “means that the legislature sees the marital relationship as one based on egalitarianism and a contract between two free individuals.”²⁰³ Abu Zayd lamented that this is not the case in most other Arab countries, where it is extremely difficult for

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 295.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 221.

²⁰² Ibid., 297-80.

²⁰³ Ibid., 294.

women to obtain a divorce, regardless of their conditions. As a result, a husband can cause a wife severe suffering for years before she is granted divorce. This is because the will and desires of a man are placed above those of a woman in the eyes of the law.²⁰⁴

In his ardent attack against partisans of the religious discourse—Salafis in particular on this issue—Abu Zayd neglected the fact that in most Arab countries, it is secular authoritarian regimes, not theocrats, who are in charge. Had there been political will, as was in the case in Tunisia, these laws could have been changed with the support of progressive religious scholars. Furthermore, inasmuch as these views are perpetuated in state-owned media that Abu Zayd himself acknowledged, they are given tacit support from the mainly secular ruling political forces. It would seem, then, that Abu Zayd condemned the artisans of the religious discourse not for their actions but for their views.

Abu Zayd also neglected the fact that women's rights are a relatively new development in human history, even in the West. Muhammad Talbi noted this point. He wrote that the issue of women's rights and the troublesome treatment of women in some verses and hadith was not even a concern until the modern period because "the status of women was more or less essentially similar in all civilizations and cultures."²⁰⁵ Consequently what Abu Zayd attributed to the religious discourse can hardly be exclusively Islamist or Arab.

Another weakness in Abu Zayd's argument, as with many other modernists, is that they seem to base their notion of pre-Islamic times on their own perception, rather than actual research. Abu Zayd made the argument that Islam is entirely unconnected to women having no agency in marriage and divorce. However, Leila Ahmed argued that

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 294-5.

²⁰⁵ Nettler, "Mohamed Talibi's Commentary on Qur'an Iv:34 a 'Historical Reading' of a Verse Concerning the Disciplining of Women," 20.

prior to the establishment of Islam in Arabia, “Divorce and marriage appear to have been common for both men and women, either of whom could initiate the dissolution.” Islam gave men “proprietary rights to female sexuality and its issue” by limiting divorce to men and by taking away women’s agency to marry of their own accord or initiative.²⁰⁶ Ahmed points to a specific historical moment at which women lost a right they enjoyed prior to Islam. She wrote, “From about the time of the battle of Uhud, as women’s freedom to form and dissolve unions were all but abolished, and as men were given authority over them, so their freedom to participate in the activities of their society began to be circumscribed.”²⁰⁷ That Islam had such adverse effects on women casts doubt on Abu Zayd’s arguments stating otherwise.

The Issue of Inheritance

Concerning inheritance portions, the Qur’an states that “Allah instructs you concerning your children: for the male, what is equal to the share of two females.” The long verse allocating the portions of the rest of the relatives concludes by stating that “These shares [*hudud*] are an obligation [imposed] by Allah. Indeed, Allah is ever Knowing and Wise.”²⁰⁸ Abu Zayd labeled the issue of inheritance a “thorny issue,” loaded with a long history of literal readings of the relevant passages. A scholar who attempts to challenge literal readings, Abu Zayd wrote, “is inevitably exposing himself to an avalanche of

²⁰⁶ Ahmed, "Women and the Rise of Islam," 180.

²⁰⁷ "Women and the Advent of Islam," 681.

²⁰⁸ Quran.com, 4:11

attacks and accusations,”²⁰⁹ presumably by partisans of the religious discourse. However, Abu Zayd himself took the risk and challenged the literal reading.

Following his historicist method, Abu Zayd argued that the verse should be put in its proper context. He explained, “This issue will not be solved by any interpretation or counter-interpretation but by a real understanding of the socio-historic context of the text.”²¹⁰ He pointed out that at the time of the revelation, communities in Arabia fought over resources by raiding one another. Men enjoyed superior status because they fought for their tribe, whereas women were a liability because they were enslaved when a tribe lost to another. To introduce an equal inheritance in such context would have been entirely out of bounds for the historical moment.²¹¹ He argued that to negate the current social context of increasing equality and, more importantly, to enforce an understanding that is fifteen centuries old is a grave violation of the *shari‘a* principle of equality.²¹²

There is a weakness with such an argument, however. It insinuates that God Almighty, though so bold at times as to institute unknown rights to women, compromised his ideals, presumably equality between men and women, to please the men of Arabia during the seventh century. This compromise by God is presumably meant to convince them to accept Islam, while knowing fully, being omniscient, that human evolution would lead to demands for equality between men and women in all matters, including inheritance.

²⁰⁹ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 300.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 300-2.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 202-3.

²¹² *Ibid.*

Abu Zayd also used his theory of direction to emphasize that Islam established a change “in the direction of equality between women and men.”²¹³ He wrote that women in pre-Islamic times used to be deprived of any inheritance whatsoever. In fact, they themselves were part of the inheritance. However, breaking away from that norm, the Qur’an gave women the right to inherit, “which the early Muslims had difficulty accepting.”²¹⁴ Therefore, giving them half the inheritance made a statement: “Women should have a share in an inheritance just as men do.”²¹⁵ As support, Abu Zayd quoted ‘Abduh,²¹⁶ who explained that the half portion stipulated by the Qur’an was intended to establish a clear break with the *jahiliyya* customs that deprived women and children of any inheritance. Therefore, the point of the verse is not to set a limit on women’s inheritance but to establish the rights of the weak and disadvantaged in *jahiliyya* time.²¹⁷ Jamal al-Banna, likewise, emphasizes the import of the historical context. Al-Banna noted that the inheritance allocation mentioned in the Qur’an is part of an economic structure that is fourteen centuries old. To him, it is illogical and “unnatural” to enforce these standards on such a different world today.²¹⁸ This argument, while persuasive in its way, neglects to address the supposed timeless and eternal nature of the Qur’an.

For Abu Zayd, however, even the literal interpretation would support his theory that the Qur’an set the stage for this equality by placing boundaries or limits on males’ inheritance. Abu Zayd arrives at this reading by offering a different meaning for the word *hadd*, meaning limit or law, mentioned in the context of inheritance. Noting that a close

²¹³ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 187.

²¹⁴ Abu Zayd, *Dawa’ir Al-Khawf*, 230

²¹⁵ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 187.

²¹⁶ Abu Zayd, *Dawa’ir Al-Khawf*, 231.

²¹⁷ Muhammad ‘Abduh, *Muhammad ‘Abduh: Al-A‘mal Al-Kamila* [Muhammad ‘Abduh: The Complete Works], vol. 5 (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1993), 171-4.

²¹⁸ Al-Banna, *Hal Yumkin Taqbiq Al-Shari’a?*, 72-3.

examination of the verse would indicate that the word *hadd* focuses on the male's share of the inheritance and not the female's, Abu Zayd read the verse to mean that the text's purpose is to place a limit (*hadd*) on a man's inheritance, rather than making a law. The limit, in this reading, is *no more than* twice as much as a woman's. In other words, the verse serves to limit the inheritance of men, not women. In this context, a woman can inherit as much as a man, as it is still within the limits (*hudud*) set in the Qur'an.²¹⁹

While in most of his writings Abu Zayd gave the impression that he is unaware of other contemporary scholars who share his views, with this particular argument he broke his pattern. Describing Muhammad Shahrur's methodology as "ambiguous," Abu Zayd stated that "his conclusion at the end does not differ from ours."²²⁰ Shahrur makes an argument that is identical to Abu Zayd in regards to inheritance laws. Shahrur argues that "God gave females half the portion of the males as a minimum limit [*hadd*]. This minimum is [to be applied] when women are not participating in the financial responsibilities of the household."²²¹ Given the changed reality of women's education and employment, there should today be no disparity in inheritance between men and women; this would not violate the limits set by God.

Admiring Shahrur's reading for achieving equality between the genders, Abu Zayd lamented the fact that such *ijtihad* confronts a colossal, nearly insuperable, heritage of literal interpretations.²²² Even in Tunisian law, which has granted women more rights in the Arab world than any other country, women still do not enjoy equal inheritance rights. Abu Zayd interpreted this to mean that the legislation "continued to be under the

²¹⁹ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 233.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 234.

²²¹ Shahrur, *Al-Kitab Wa Al-Qur'an: Qira'a Mu'asira*, 602.

²²² Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 301.

influence of Salafi interpretations and jurisprudence.”²²³ Since the state is influenced by Salafis, an attack on Salafis is also an attack on the political system, according to him.

Conclusion

In his book on women in contemporary Arab thought, Kamal ‘Abd al-Latif noted that “literature related to the issue of liberating women in contemporary Arab thought does not rise to the level of other issues related to politics, culture and society.”²²⁴ He wrote that the battle to liberate Arab women in reality as well as at the intellectual level “still requires multiple efforts to break through the ceiling of positions and ideas that still have a strong grip on hearts, minds and imaginations of individuals inside most Arab countries.”²²⁵ Abu Zayd’s contribution, however, is a valuable addition to such effort. He believed that the treatment of women in a given society “reveals the extent to which human rights are applied. They are the single most truthful indicator of how advanced a society is.”²²⁶

The issue of women is not only a social one but one that touches on other sensitive topics such as religion, which endangers any intellectual tackling this issue. As Kassab wrote, “Not only is it risky to denounce these injustices [to women] and distortions in an atmosphere of intolerance and intellectual terror that can reach the level of physical aggression and elimination, it is also extremely delicate given the sensitivity of each issue, be it religion, women or the nation.”²²⁷ Abu Zayd not only saw women’s

²²³ Ibid., 298.

²²⁴ ‘Abd al-Latif, *Al-Mar'a Fi Al-Fikr Al-'Arabi Al-Mu'asir: Nahwa Tawsi' Qiyam Al-Taharur*, 19.

²²⁵ Ibid., 55.

²²⁶ Abu Zayd, *Dawa'ir Al-Khawf*, 283.

²²⁷ Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought*, 193.

issues in this wider perspective, but his egalitarian interpretation also exhibited itself in his view of Islam and how it should be applied.

Given the role and influence of religion on this issue, Islam is inevitably part of the debate. Abu Zayd vacillated between, on one hand, arguing that the Qur'an is misunderstood and taken out of its historic context but could serve as a sourcebook on women's rights, and, on the other hand, advocating egalitarian modern laws divorced from religion and steeped in current political and intellectual trends. While arguing for the former, he perceived Islam to have achieved a quantum leap in women's rights, introducing principles such as justice and equality. However, this conviction is not always supported by research, as Leila Ahmed's studies on the changes in women's status brought by Islam suggest. In blaming jurists for the inequality that is the reality of many Muslim women, modernist scholars such as Abu Zayd appear to be biased by their own faith in an Islam that may not be supported by the very historicist approach he claims to champion.

While stressing the bold leap made by the revelation, modernists cite the historical context as a reason for not simply instituting egalitarianism from the start with clear texts. This argument raises the question, though, of why, if God was bold enough in the Qur'an to introduce a new consciousness, he did not then go all the way, especially given his prescience? Contrary to the notion that Islam was the first to introduce women's rights, research indicates that many ancient cultures were rather advanced as far as women's rights were concerned. This was not only in Arabia. In Egypt, for example, thousands of years before the introduction of Islam, Egyptian women enjoyed egalitarian

rights that are yet to be reinstated in most parts of the world.²²⁸ Such findings contradict popular notions on Islam's impact on women's rights and call for further investigation on the topic.

However, the precise influence of Islam on pre-Islamic communities is far from certain because, as Chase Robinson points out, writing was not part of pre-Islamic culture. Most of the early Islamic historical record was written considerably after events actually took place, sometimes even centuries later, which casts doubt on its accuracy. Robinson notes, "Whereas written history can be made to conform closely to the imperative of the present, oral history *always* conforms to it."²²⁹ Therefore, as Robinson elaborates, "in societies undergoing rapid social and political change (such as early Islam) oral history tends to be less accurate." In other words, it is impossible to know if the accounts that have been passed down accurately reflect the actual historic events or if they expose later generations' attempts at reconstructing certain narratives.

Perhaps because he was, at some level, aware of the limitations of the text in offering women modern-style equality, Abu Zayd himself at times acknowledged the futility of including the sacred text in the debate on women's rights. He warned that resorting to ancient texts only gives legitimacy to the premise that texts can dictate the way we tackle modern issues. He was ultimately convinced, after all, that solutions to challenges introduced by modernity could only be found by ideas grounded in the present reality.

²²⁸ Taha, *Al-Mar'a Al-'Arabiyya Fi Manthur Al-Din Wa Al-Waqi'*, 23.

²²⁹ Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 10.

CONCLUSION

The work of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd represents a significant contribution to contemporary Arab Islamic thought. His writings embody a particularly important intellectual trend within it, that of modernist Islamic thought. The most distinguishing factor separating modernist intellectuals from other scholars of Islam is their insistence on an apolitical reading of Islam. They advocate the removal of religion, Islam in particular, from the public sphere. This is a tenet of profound implications that transcends the confines of abstract academic debate as it has wide-ranging repercussions in everyday life of the Islamic world at large.

In this thesis, I have tried to provide an in-depth critique and analysis of this intellectual trend through the work of Abu Zayd, one of its foremost representatives. I try to show how he exemplified this wider intellectual family, what were the common denominators and what was unique about him. I also analyse some of his shortcomings, and in particular, how he used some of the very mechanisms of reasoning he criticized in traditional and Islamist thought. The work of Abu Zayd has attracted particular attention. Because of the legal case against him and the dramatic impact it had on his life—forcing him into exile—he became by extension the paradigmatic example of modernist thought. While most scholarly articles written about Abu Zayd focus on the legal case against him, or reflect on his contribution to Islamic thought in a highly positive light, I have attempted to go beyond the myth and put his ideas under greater critical scrutiny to show not only his strengths but also his weaknesses.

Thus, for example, Abu Zayd's thought was marked by an unwavering devotion to "modernity," or what he referred to as the values of "human civilization." These include such typically modern notions such as human rights, secularism, and the existence of a democratic political system, the advancement of which, he believed, Islam was revealed in order to further.¹ In his writings, Islam and these values are intimately intertwined. However, while considering it self-evident that the notions that he considered "modern", such as secularism, are not only compatible with but also contained in Islam, a closer examination of his argument reveals that he fell short of providing a rational argument for this, relying instead on faith.

Abu Zayd's work was also defined by his deep distrust of traditional theology, which he insisted would eventually be rendered obsolete if subjected to modern academic scrutiny. He rejected the majority of medieval scholarship as mostly inaccurate and out dated, a viewpoint he shared with other modernists. However, his dismissal of classical theology was accompanied by his own refusal to engage in a scholarly manner with the classical Islamic tradition. What is important to note, however, is that this position itself was based mostly on a type of faith in modernist Islam and a presumptuous projection of present crisis conditions onto the past. Jettisoning medieval scholars' substantial contributions to Islamic thought, however, served an important goal. Unencumbered by classical arguments stating otherwise, Abu Zayd, like other modernists, was more easily able to repudiate the religious heritage and impose such modern values as secularism, egalitarianism and personal freedoms onto the Qur'an.

Abu Zayd attacked the supporters of the religious discourse for exhibiting epistemological certainty, yet he failed to see that he displayed similar unwarranted

¹ Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab wa al-Ta'wil*, 238-9.

certainty in some of his own arguments. He argued, for example, that Islam is a secular religion despite the fact that the notion of secularism is fundamentally a product of the modern development of the nation-states, that is, of a historical process. Likewise, his assertion that Islam liberated women and set the stage for eventual egalitarianism is highly contentious, lacking firm support from both Qur'anic texts and historical experience. Further, while repeatedly criticizing the ahistorical approach of his opponents, he himself at times made the same mistake in his work, especially when he projected modern values onto certain historical figures and events. For example, he was critical of medieval scholars, including those who he admired, such as Ibn 'Arabi and Ibn Rushd, for their proximity to political authority in their time, without taking into account the particular historical context.² Though, perhaps, it is Abu Zayd's insistence that the ultimate objective of the Qur'an is to further the values of modern civilization, even in cases where the Qur'an is either silent or takes an entirely different stance, that is the most glaring contradiction in his thought, revealing the extent to which he was driven by the same blind faith he rejected in his opponents.

However, despite certain flaws in his reasoning as well as his sudden death in 2010, Abu Zayd made substantial scholarly contributions and his work is likely to continue to inspire future generations of intellectuals. His revival of some rational Mu'tazilite ideas coupled with his theories and ideas about the Qur'an and its interpretations will equip those who want to further dismantle the edifice of traditional theology and its place in the public sphere. More generally, however, Abu Zayd's enduring legacy may be found in two major areas. First, more audaciously than any of his contemporaries, Abu Zayd cast doubt not only on the credibility of classical theology but

² Ibid., 129-38.

also on the documentation of the Qur'an, believed by a majority of Muslims to be the eternal unchanging word of God. The notion that the 'Word of God,' as Abu Zayd articulated it, may have been misunderstood by the early generations of Muslims, in addition to engendering the wrath of traditionalists and Islamists, opens the door widely for radical reform, if not transformation, in the field of Islamic thought.

Second, by refusing to relent in the face of intimidation and persecution by Islamists, traditionalists and the state, and by insisting that space be created for unrestricted academic inquiry into all things including the sacred, Abu Zayd set an example in courage for other Muslim intellectuals to emulate. The publicity he earned as a result of his defiance will ensure that his story is told and retold and his ideas investigated for generations to come.

Abu Zayd made powerful arguments and modern readings in contemporary Islamic thought like his have become highly influential, serving an important function for many Muslims. They provide a workable marriage between Islam and modernity, that is, it allows them to hold on to their Muslim identity while at the same time allowing them to integrate fully into Western contemporary civilization. This is perhaps why, as Nettler points out, it is modernists who "have been most cited and whose presence and contribution to modern Islamic intellectual life have been most prominent."³ Other scholars have also noted the growing appeal of modernist readings. Andreas Christmann, who translated the work of another modernist, Muhammad Shahrur, draws attention to the "enormous number of copies" sold of Shahrur's books, despite the ban in many Arab countries.⁴ Also, the growing attention to their work in the English-speaking academia,

³ Nettler, "Islam, Politics and Democracy: Mohamed Talbi and Islamic Modernism," 52.

⁴ Shahrur, *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason: the Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, xvii.

has helped such intellectuals not only to succeed in defying attempts to silence them, but to have “emerged as a formidable force to be reckoned with.”⁵

It is only appropriate to end this thesis with the words of Abu Zayd himself. He described the purpose of his work as “shaking the foundation of an authoritarian society in order to establish another kind of society in which every individual has the right to know and the right to choose.”⁶ It has been my intention to examine the soundness of Abu Zayd arguments and show the ways in which he fell short. However, his shortcomings must be set against his numerous strengths, in particular, his major achievement of spearheading a momentous historical process, that of shaking the foundations of traditional Islamic thought. The jury is still out, but Abu Zayd’s work, as he had hoped, may yet help rebuild solid foundations for a truly modern society in the Islamic world.

⁵ "Introduction: Reformist Islam in Comparative Perspective," 20.

⁶ Abu Zayd and Nelson, *Voice of an Exile*, 112.

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