

# Heresy or Hermeneutics: The Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd

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## Islam/Islamism

The debate I shall discuss here arose following Cairo University's decision to refuse tenure to a professor of Arabic language and literature, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, in light of an unfavorable report by the tenure committee entrusted to review his scholarly work. Supporters of Abu Zayd quickly brought the case to national attention via the Egyptian press, thereby precipitating a storm of often shrill writing from all sides of the political spectrum, in both the journalistic and academic media. Subsequently, as an Islamist lawyer tried to have Abu Zayd forcibly divorced from his wife on the grounds that his writings revealed him to be an apostate, the foreign media also picked up the story and transformed the case into an international event.

In what follows, I will focus on one corner of this debate concerning contrastive notions of reason and history, issues which, I wish to argue, are implicated deeply in the forms of political contestation and mobilization occurring in Islamic countries today. Such topics seldom appear in discussions that take Islamic movements or Islamic revival as their object, an omission perhaps attributable to the conceptual frames informing these discussions. As we may note, the idea of a social movement presupposes a self-constituting subject, independent from both state and tradition; a uni-

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linear progressive teleology; and a pragmatics of proximate goals, namely, the spatiotemporal plane of universal reason and progressive history, the territory of modern humanity. Such an actor must fulfill the Kantian demand that reason be exercised autonomously and embodied in a sovereign subject. In contrast, one may argue that the protagonist of a tradition of inquiry founded on a divine text is necessarily a collective subject, one that seeks to preserve and enhance its own exemplary past. As such, Islam never satisfies these modern demands and thus must always remain somewhat outside the movement of history as a lesser form of reasoning. Indeed, the assumption of a fundamental opposition between reason and religion, an assumption that is central to the historical development of both modern concepts during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, has meant that investigations into the rationalities of religious traditions have rarely been viewed as essential to the description or explanation of those religions.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, to pose a question in regard to Islam generally means that one must either be asking about politics (the not-really-Islam of "Islamism," or "political Islam") or about belief, symbols, ritual, and so on, but not about styles of reasoning.

We find, for example, that within political economy discussions of oppositional movements in the Middle East, Islam is viewed generally as little more than the culturally preferred idiom through which opposition, be it class or otherwise, may be expressed.<sup>2</sup> Unquestionably, the best of these studies have told us much about the kinds of material conditions and the specific intersections of capital and power that have enabled, or undermined, arguments, movements, forms of practice, including, among others, Islamic ones.<sup>3</sup> Founded upon the same set of Enlightenment assumptions mentioned above, these writings have provided conflicting accounts of the kinds of modern forces transforming the contemporary political structures of the Middle East but are ill-equipped when it comes to analyzing those dimensions of social and political life rooted in non-western traditions.

One way to approach this latter, as Asad has argued, is to understand Islam as a discursive tradition, that is to say, as an historically evolving set of discourses embodied in the practices and institutions of Islamic societies and hence imbricated deeply in the material life of those inhabiting them.<sup>4</sup> Such a perspective requires that we distinguish between those statements, instances of language use integral to the material organization of Islamic social forms and grounded in durable slow-changing historical structures, and those rhetorical performances that lack this longitudinal embeddedness.<sup>5</sup> The fact that the traditions of Islamic argumentation and reasoning stand in oblique relation to much of the current use of Islam by social actors seeking to legitimize their activities or sell their products underscores the importance of making this type of distinction.<sup>6</sup> When a business enterprise calls itself Islamic, in what sense does it intersect with the longstanding discourses of Islam? Admittedly, usages of this type by banks, airlines, political candidates, or government ministries may have a

direct impact upon current definitions and interpretations of Islamic practice and, as such, might be of considerable interest to someone investigating the role of Islamic rhetorical forms in Egyptian political and popular culture, for example. However, for those interested in Islam as a long-standing and durable tradition, as I am in this paper, such instances may not be particularly informative.

The approach being suggested here should by no means be confused with what is commonly referred to as a culturalist argument. Such arguments generally foreground the category of identity, stressing the authenticity of certain cultural practices and symbols for those subjected to the destructive and destabilizing forces of modernization. In contrast, to discuss a discursive tradition implies that one attend to specific articulations of material processes, structures, and practices, including practices of reasoning and speech, embedded in the society one is studying. While this framework directs our attention to the coherence and continuity of a set of discourses, it also enables us to map the transformations that they undergo, including those brought about under the pressure of more powerful traditions. Thus, the last few hundred years have seen an ongoing attempt to adapt the conceptual resources of Islam in order to accommodate, understand, and achieve practical mastery over a reality that is organized increasingly by discourses whose historical locus and most formidable bases of power lie in the West.

In short, those interested in the type of movements appearing in Middle Eastern countries might do well to take note of the contending traditions; both liberal and Islamic, that inform modes of political thought and action in the area. Abu Zayd's work gains particular value in this regard: As a modernist attempt to overcome the divisions separating these traditions, his writings reveal some of the conceptual problematics that such a project entails. In this respect, there are numerous parallels between Abu Zayd and such earlier reformers as Qāsim Amīn or Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Muslim writers whose advocacy of western social and political models went beyond what many of their contemporaries considered acceptable and reasonable. At the core of this project, as I shall explore in this paper, lies an ongoing argument concerning the bases and proper scope of reason and the historical status of divine texts.

## Modernizing Islam

Abu Zayd's writings address a number of issues central to Islamic thought, from methods of Qur'anic interpretation to the authority of religious scholars and the appropriate role of religion in contemporary life. Given the recent turmoil, violence, and challenges to political authority in Egypt, it is not surprising that once his work drew the mass media's attention, it became a rallying point for a number of political currents. Roughly speaking, liberal commentators tended to frame the issue as one of "intellectual freedom": Abu Zayd, in their view, was

being punished for having subjected to critical scrutiny the sacred tenets of institutionalized Islamic authority. Comparisons to Salman Rushdie were drawn frequently, while those Cairo University professors who had opposed Abu Zayd's advancement were charged repeatedly with "intellectual terrorism." Moreover, Abu Zayd's assertion that differences between the Mubarak government and the Islamic opposition were only of degree and not of kind, inasmuch as both were founded upon the same authoritarian, antihumanist, and conceptual foundations, drew considerable praise from many on the Egyptian left. Uncomfortable in either government or Islamist camps, and with grounds for a politically viable Marxist critique long since eroded away, many left-leaning intellectuals were encouraged by this elaboration of a liberal alternative.

According to Islamic writers, on the other hand, Cairo University had been correct in its decision, as Abu Zayd's work was indeed an affront to a long tradition of respected Islamic scholarship as well as a grave injustice to its primary text: the Qur'an. Many saw in Abu Zayd one more member of a Marxist secularist campaign to expunge Islam from the universities as well as from society in general.

Much of the calmer discussion focused on two intertwined arguments central to Abu Zayd's work, one concerning the historical status of the Qur'an and the other addressing the relation of reason (*'aql*) to religion (*dīn*). A review of this discussion, as I will take up now, begins to reveal some of the conceptual fault lines that cut across Egyptian society and structure political praxis.

A key point of departure for Abu Zayd's argument is the idea that the Qur'an, once it was revealed to Muhammad, entered history and became subject to historical and sociological laws or regularities (*qawānīn*).<sup>7</sup> Irreversibly rent from its divine origins, the text became "humanized" (*muta'anas*) and embodied the particular cultural, political, and ideological elements of seventh-century Arabian society:

The Qur'an—the pivotal point of our discussion so far—is a fixed religious text, from the standpoint of the literal wording, but once it has been subjected to human reason (*al-'aql al-insānī*) it becomes a "notion" (*mafhūm*), which loses its fixedness as it moves and its meanings proliferate . . . . It is imperative here that we affirm that the state of the original sacred text is a metaphysical one about which we can know nothing except that which the text itself mentions and which always comes to us via a historically changing humanity.<sup>8</sup>

From the moment of its enunciation, the divine text was shaped, and continues to be reshaped, through the operation of human reason, such that the distance now separating it from the divine is so vast as to render the text all but human.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the abrupt break with the divine occurring at the moment of revelation results in the total secularization of the text, which henceforth becomes a book like any other: "Religious texts, in the final analysis, are nothing but linguistic texts, belonging to a specific cultural structure, and produced in accord with the rules of that culture."<sup>10</sup>

The historical reality of which the Qur'an partakes in Abu Zayd's narrative is that defined by a realist sociology, a space of ideological contestation wherein autonomous subjects of interest (individuals, groups, classes) compete with each other for short-term political and economic goals. The logic of such a space implies, for example, that a correct understanding of the Qur'an must begin by situating it in the context of Qurayshī domination and hence as part of the ideological apparatus undergirding that particular class of merchants. This follows from the simple (if erroneous) observation that "[the principle of] divine sovereignty simply results in the sovereignty of religious men—in the end, nothing but human beings with their own biases and ideological inclinations."<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, throughout Abu Zayd's argument, the downgrading of truth claims to the status of ideology, a function of culture and class interest, grounds a reinterpretation of religion emphasizing hidden motives and personal ambitions. Such a perspective requires us to conclude, for instance, that the claims to correct and true knowledge made by religious specialists must, in reality, be a ruse by which this group (and now the state interests that they serve) secures its power and authority.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the sociological predicates of this domain render the idea of Islam as a coherent historical object untenable, inasmuch as the practices and interpretations ascribed to the traditional have shown considerable variation over time and geographical area. As Abu Zayd states, to posit such unity is to "contradict the actual history of Islam, one which has witnessed a plurality in trends, currents, and camps which emerged for social, economic, and political reasons."<sup>13</sup>

The objects, actors, forms of knowledge, and action that constitute history in this account evacuate completely the divine from (humanly knowable) religion. Not surprisingly, it is the liberal subject who largely fills the resultant void, a substitution effected historically, from this perspective, by a process of progressive enlightenment, a gradual journey from superstition and error to progress, science, justice, and freedom; a movement that, moreover, "humanizes" inasmuch as humanity abandons those traditions that made it subordinate to texts and their interpreters, and increasingly asserts itself as master of its own destiny.<sup>14</sup> Notably, for this modern Promethean subject it is literature, not revelation, that opens out onto the unknown and transcendent. Consider, for example, the following contrast drawn between literary and religious texts:

It is obvious that religious texts don't pose the same problematic in regard to "intention" as do literary texts; or rather, they pose it at a different epistemological level, one constituted by the objec-

tive conditions—social, economic, and political—which circumscribed the production of these texts and defined their field of application, and hence, their original and fundamental signs and meanings.<sup>15</sup>

That is to say, whereas a notion of the transcendent is no longer germane to the task of explaining and understanding religious texts, which only require a sociohistorical analysis, it finds continued application in that indeterminant space defined by the modern idea of literary intention, in that ineffable inner world of individual writers and readers. Clearly, it is a short step from these observations to the claim that “secularism (*almanīyah*), in its essence, is nothing but the true interpretation and scientific understanding of religion.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, once one has learned to differentiate properly the metaphysical text from the real historical one and to exclude the former as a suitable object of knowledge, it becomes possible to analyze the Qur’an as one would any other “sign system,” be it poetry, behavior patterns, or even “fashion trends,” as Abu Zayd suggests provocatively.<sup>17</sup>

Abu Zayd identifies his own work as an attempt to establish an “objective” (*mawdū’ī*), “scientific” (*ilmī*) framework for the analysis and interpretation (*tafsīr*) of religious texts, a goal that evaded those Islamic thinkers who preceded him, as they failed to address adequately the historical dimension of their project. The hermeneutic approach he advocates consists of two moments, each to be placed in dialectical relation to the other.<sup>18</sup> One entails the recovery of the original meaning (*dallālatuhu al aṣliyah*) of the text-cum-cultural-artifact, by placing it within the sociohistorical context of its appearance.<sup>19</sup> The other seeks to clarify the contemporary sociocultural frames and practical goals that motivate and guide interpretations so that one may distinguish the ideological content of those interpretations from the original historical meaning. A “productive” reading results when these two steps are placed in relation to each other in an ongoing dialectic, “a pendular movement between the dimensions of ‘origin’ (*aṣl*) and ‘goal’ (*ghāyah*), or between ‘sense’ (*dallālah*) and ‘meaning’ (*maghzā*).”<sup>20</sup>

Yet despite the supposedly dialectical structure of this interpretive method, we find that it never really strays outside the horizon of modernity, for as Abu Zayd asserts in his introduction, “religion, when correctly understood, is that which in accord with a scientific analysis and interpretation denies the false and mythical, while preserving whatever promotes progress (*taqaddum*), justice (*‘adl*), and freedom (*hurriyah*).”<sup>21</sup> Foregrounded throughout his work and central to the argument, these modernist goals set the criteria for what is to be considered an acceptable interpretation and, in so doing, close off all other historical horizons. Furthermore, the idea of a hermeneutic open to meanings embedded in a distant past makes little sense in light of Abu Zayd’s negative judgment on the utility of past history. He writes:

[The tendency of religious discourse] to obliterate the historical dimension is obvious in its assumption of a congruence between the problems of the present and those of the past, and the application of past solutions to present conditions. Moreover, recourse to the work of earlier scholars, and the attribution of a sacred status to their texts, further effaces this historical aspect and leads to the deepening of human alienation and the covering over of practical problems rooted in reality.<sup>22</sup>

If, as Abu Zayd suggests, the past is that which pulls people away from their real selves as reason-guided individuals acting in a present of pragmatic short-term goals, then his call for Muslims to continue to interrogate the Qur'an may best be understood as a tactical response to the social context of his writing and thus as accessorial to the argument itself.

## Conceptual Origins

The idea that past examples cannot guide us in confronting our present problems emerged in Europe during the eighteenth century and was made possible, in part, by a gradual shift in the concepts organizing historical experience.<sup>23</sup> While there is not enough space here to review the complex series of events involved in this transformation, I shall mention a few key displacements that paved the way for our modern concept of history.

Prior to the eighteenth century, history had referred to an account, an edifying example drawn from events that had already taken place. Over the course of this century, the semantic field of the term extended to include not only the idea of an account but also that of the event itself, the incident in its occurrence as opposed to any oral or written rendition of it. This intertwining of representation with event meant that now accounts were expected to render not simply an illustrative or exemplary report of things past but "history itself" as a coherent all-embracing reality, a meaningful whole. To do justice to this fuller reality, historians had to draw upon the representational resources of other scholarly fields, such as poetics, ethics, and rhetoric, as well as develop new rules of evidence and methods for organizing historical data. As Kosselleck notes: "Without the ability to read past events and texts at several levels, that is to separate them from their original context and progressively reorder them, an advanced interpretation of confusing historical reality would not have been possible."<sup>24</sup>

Thus, theories, hypotheses, and interpretative frameworks—such as the economic and the sociological, as we see in Abu Zayd's work—became essential tools for the historian's task, one that contrasted significantly with the earlier forms of historical representation not facing the same demands for a fuller meaning and coherence. As history began to eclipse God as the omnipotent force in the universe, as this transformation might be described, the topos undergirding the earlier historical practices

shattered, for the older accounts were unable to explain the intensified and increasingly secularized historical reality. Rather than a divine text illuminating the vicissitudes of history, it was history that now had become necessary to explain the text, which henceforth was subjected increasingly to mundane criticism. Importantly, this new omnipotence and compulsion attributed to history, as scholars of postcoloniality have emphasized, was not simply a matter of semantics: The discourses of history became one of the key political technologies of the nation-state and its various institutions (e.g., educational, juridical, administrative) and central to the construction of those practices by which citizen-subjects came to recognize themselves and act as such.<sup>25</sup>

Lastly, once the philosophy of historical progress equipped history with a temporality not grounded in natural cycles (such as the movement of planets or a ruler's life span), it largely stripped past examples of their capacity to instruct. As the past stopped shining a light onto an ever-accelerating future,<sup>26</sup> reason alone remained adequate to the task of illuminating this latter. To meet this challenge, however, it first had to be freed from the shackles of tradition and religion so as to acquire the sort of mobility and capacity for improvisation adequate for organizing a future of probabilities, unforeseen opportunities, and unpredictable outcomes.

In the opinion of Abu Zayd, one he shares with many orientalist scholars, the "backwardness" of Muslim societies is due to a failure to engage directly (i.e., without reliance on texts) with this mundane space of pragmatic interventions, rational calculation, and short-term planning.<sup>27</sup> Thus, he writes, "when social and political conflicts are transferred from the field of reality to that of texts, human reason becomes subordinate to the text,"<sup>28</sup> or similarly, "the principle of textual arbitration (*tahkīm*) led to the demise of independent reasoning, transforming it into an appendage of the text itself."<sup>29</sup> These judgments emerge directly from the logic of the precepts of the modern idea of history, one that concedes no space for the divine or for those practices that presuppose its existence.

It is worthwhile here to compare the positions taken by Abu Zayd and certain arguments on the issue of toleration put forward by John Locke. Writing in the seventeenth century, a period marked by great sectarian conflicts, Locke was one of these endeavoring to articulate a theoretical perspective from which incommensurable understandings of religious practice could be rendered neutral with regard to politics.<sup>30</sup> Adopting a quite literal understanding of the mind-body distinction, he argued that inasmuch as divine worship was essentially a matter of the inner disposition of the believer toward God, and that therefore the actions of the body were without consequence in regard to salvation, religious practices could be ascribed the same legal status as all other social practices and thus be regulated legitimately by civil authority. As MacClure notes insightfully:

In the face of conscientious considerations that order alternative religious practices hierarchically, Locke's defense of toleration



forwards a cognitive secular ground for leveling such differences, specifically by deploying the categories of empiricist epistemology as the source of a new distinctive "difference" that privileges a factual civil discourse over its scripturally framed theological other. To put the point another way, Locke's *Letter* advances a way of converting sectarian "differences" in religious matters into "diversity," by constituting a realm of civil facticity to dissolve those hierarchical and intrinsically relational conscientious "differences" of religious practice into equivalent and independent, that is to say, separate, equal, and diverse, alternative religious communities.<sup>31</sup>

What is key in MacClure's observation is Locke's ability not only to render religious claims into mere speculation but also to ground a domain of earthly "reality" about which a true positive knowledge may be produced. This domain of specifiable objects and social behaviors may be regulated according to the idea of social utility, that is, in keeping with the bourgeois subject's interests of life, liberty, and property. Religion, in its material embodiment as a set of practices and texts, loses all epistemological privilege and joins the other mundane objects subject to this regulation. Once there, it may be taken up by the historian and rendered, as in Abu Zayd's work, a "sign system"—an entirely suitable object of historical analysis and determination. As Chakrabarty has described, this construction of historical objects requires that

we be able to deny them their contemporaneity by assigning them to a specified period in a calendrical past, an act by which we split the present into the "modern" and the "traditional" or the "historical," and thereby declare ourselves to be modern . . . History is therefore a practice of "monumentalising" objects—from documents to sculptures—of simultaneously acknowledging and denying their existence in our "own" time.<sup>32</sup>

To render the Qur'an as "monument" means to redefine its relationship to the present, to accord it new areas of relevance and irrelevance, so as to circumscribe the claims that may be made in its name regarding the private sphere of individual conscience.

While Abu Zayd obviously is writing within the same empiricist conceptual terrain established by Locke and his successors, certain differences arise. Specifically, whereas in Locke we find the believer's encounter with the divine restricted to the "inner worship of the heart," in the case of Abu Zayd the divine never enters human experience at all. Unable to survive the passage into sociocultural embodiment, God remains outside knowledge, history, and the real.<sup>33</sup> In consequence, to the extent that religion speculates on the unknowable and remains moored to a tradition of such speculation, it can only distract us from the practical affairs that constitute

reality, for its reason always remains counter to the logic governing this domain.

One of my aims so far in this paper has been to demonstrate the degree to which the deployment of certain sociological assumptions transforms and reconfigures the object "religion," or "Islam," along specific lines. Studies of such modernist reworkings of nonmodern traditions have begun to shed an important light upon one aspect of the process by which western modernity has transformed the world.<sup>34</sup> I now want to turn to some of the critical responses to Abu Zayd's work that were published during the height of the controversy. My reading here will simply aim to highlight, in a preliminary fashion, a few of the main assumptions informing the arguments. A more thorough discussion of their philosophical and theological bases must be deferred at present.

## Some Dissenting Views

Abu Zayd's scholarly writings were subject to a wide variety of criticism, including, among others, charges of gross historical error, of being political manifestos rather than serious scientific analyses, and of addressing subjects outside his field of expertise. More relevant to the present discussion, however, are those criticisms concerning the bases of rational argument within the Islamic tradition. This issue was foregrounded by many authors, including Abd al Sabur Shahin, the Cairo University professor whose report on Abu Zayd's work was the most influential. In his report, Shahin accuses Abu Zayd of not only failing to understand certain principles of Islamic theology, but, more inexcusably, of rejecting them outright in a manner incompatible with a commitment to Islam and hence unacceptable for a Muslim scholar.<sup>35</sup>

The idea that a certain kind of critical inquiry devolves upon one's commitment to a religious community, as Shahin suggested in the report, stands in sharp contrast to the emphasis on detachment and neutrality characteristic of the tradition of empirical science. Thus, while many of Abu Zayd's critics questioned him precisely in regard to his moral commitment, in the eyes of his liberal defenders such comments were entirely irrelevant to the scholarly assessment of his works and simply represented unscrupulous attempts to discredit him personally. Nonetheless, however accurate the attribution of unscholarly intentions may be, it should not distract us from taking seriously the argument itself: namely, that the practice of reason occurs within a social context and thus presupposes commitment to the principles sustaining that context.<sup>36</sup> As one writer responding to Abu Zayd argues:

For any critical engagement (ijtihad) with the religious texts to be acceptable and legitimate, it must begin with a commitment to the text . . . . Every critical activity which seeks to undermine and

destroy the shari'a texts, is not protected under the notion of intellectual freedom, but rather falls within the range of that which society must prohibit and prevent, especially where the constitution identifies Islam as the religion of state and the shari'a as the primary source of law.<sup>37</sup>

For many authors, Abu Zayd's denial of the divinity of the Qur'an constituted proof of his lack of commitment to Islam. Faith in the sacred status of the Qur'an, they argued, stands as the central and ineluctable tenet of Islam, the foundation stone upon which Islamic society and civilization rest. While Abu Zayd's suggestions concerning hermeneutic method, the importance of clarifying historical contexts, or the need to weed out superstition and error were seen by many to fall within the realm of reasonable argument, his rejection of the Qur'an's divinity necessarily placed him well outside that realm. Moreover, the polemical and often disparaging tone with 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.

Additionally, whereas for the writer cited above Islam is essential to defining the bounded sociopolitical space in which practices of reason acquire their coherence, Abu Zayd locates the limits to rational critique in the imperatives of the secular nation-state:

They [the Islamists] want to link religious apostasy with the crime of betraying the nation; and so, they ignore an essential distinction: the freedom of human beings to choose their religion—a freedom upheld by the Qur'an—and “treason” aimed at harming the modern nation for the benefit of its enemies.<sup>38</sup>

In other words, Abu Zayd juxtaposes a desacralized and nonbinding religion to the naturalized and inviolable nation and its interests. This is not to say that his challengers do not share with him a commitment to the modern nation-state as legitimate container of political practice and identity; only that this commitment is refracted in their writings through an Islamic identity in a way not present in the writings of Abu Zayd.

As I have suggested, central to Abu Zayd's argument is an assertion about the incommensurability of reason and religion, an assertion contested by many of his critics. An article published during the height of the controversy, for example, begins with the question: Are there conditions under which practical interest (*maṣlaḥah*), as determined by human independent reasoning (*'aql*), justifies and requires the temporary suspension of textual authority? Or, framing the issue in its most conventional form: “By what measure do we define our interests (*maṣālihanā*)? Is it reason (*'aql*) or the religious text?”<sup>39</sup> To work through this question, the author draws upon the well-known historical example of 'Umar ibn al Khaṭṭāb's temporary suspension of the prescribed punishment for thievery during a

period of acute famine and reproduces the arguments of several classical scholars who studied the case. Their consensus is that, given the conditions of intense need produced by the famine, 'Umar's decision was consonant with the intentions of the text and did not constitute any sort of abrogation. The argument devolves upon a discussion of the different categories of interest (*maṣlaḥah*), particularly the distinction between those interests defined explicitly within the text (*al maṣāliḥ al mu'tābirah*) and those left unmentioned but in accord with its intentions (*al maṣāliḥ al mursalah*). They argue that the presence of great need, as the Shari'ah makes clear, so changed the nature of the act that it could no longer be judged under the explicit rule pertaining to thievery. Instead, it had to be assessed by reference to the broader and more general principles implied in the texts. Hence, contrary to the opinions of some contemporary scholars, such cases do not demonstrate or authorize any sort of deviation from or rescindance of shari'ah law.

From this example the author concludes: "In truth, interest derived from human reason which contradicts those embedded in the shari'a are not but illusory interests whose apparent rationality soon disappears when illuminated by the light of the shari'a."<sup>40</sup> In other words, real human interests cannot be uncovered by empirical observation on its own, but, in addition, must be consonant with divine intention. The split posited by Abu Zayd between practical reality and sacred texts is replaced here by a vision in which the two domains are thoroughly interwoven, a result that, moreover, requires the ongoing activity of interpretation by the members of the believing community.

The exemplary function of history depends upon a continuity of experience whereby expectations and conditions remain relatively stable over long periods of time. In the case of Islam, as the above discussion suggests, the possibility of such continuity is underwritten by the divine status of the foundational text. Contrary to what is asserted frequently, this historical perspective does not imply that each generation is an exact replica of its predecessors, but only that they resemble each other in those aspects deemed fundamental and/or essential by reason-guided interpreters of the textual tradition. More importantly, now we can see that it is imperative for a religious thinker working within such a tradition to pose the possibility of God or the divine—even as a necessary act of faith—in order to set the horizon within which reasoning may occur. It is the impossibility of taking this step within the space defined by the modern concept of history that animated much of the debate discussed above.

## Conclusion

The fact that many Egyptian intellectuals find modernist renderings of Islam convincing bears witness to the now long-standing project that seeks to reorganize the conceptual and material structures organizing the daily practice and experience of nonwestern peoples. Such reorganization has

allowed space for people who consider themselves Muslim yet find the Qur'an inessential to the task of ordering sociopolitical life. We might say that the adequacy of modernist arguments coincides with the extent to which they embody and depart from the same assumptions—and thus address the same instrumentalities, modes of reasoning, and action—as those dominant discourses that give shape to the modern world. Moreover, we should not be surprised that Islamic institutions are not forwarding a radical alternative to this current world order. Given the kinds of forces brought to bear on those countries, such as Egypt, that occupy dependent positions within the structures of world capital, there are clearly few possibilities for organizing society along lines other than those consonant with these forces.

What are the implications of these reflections for those interested in studying Islamic movements? As I said in the beginning, my purpose here has not been to discuss a social movement but instead to examine some of the conceptual dimensions that those interested in social movements might need to consider. Specifically, I have suggested that we need to pay closer attention to the kinds of assumptions that accompany the frameworks and concepts we use. In addition, we need to distinguish between Islam as a long-standing tradition and the various contemporary uses to which the term is being affixed, be it by scholars, politicians, militants, or ordinary men and women. Contrary to what is commonly stated, this is not to attribute an unchanging essence to Islam; rather, it points to the need to disentangle, in Wittgensteinian fashion, the disparate ideas and historical forms that have come to be subsumed, awkwardly, under the term "Islam."

## Endnotes

1. Of course, there have been exceptions to this general pattern, notably among anthropologists interested in the idea of rationalities. Evans-Pritchard and Malinowski are two early and well-known examples.

2. Needless to say, the instrumentalist view of language such an argument presupposes weds this literature to a positivism few researchers would endorse explicitly.

3. See, for example, Roger Owen, "State Power and Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East," SUNY Series in the *Social and Economic History of the Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 1994). Zachary Lockman, ed. *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East* (New York: SUNY Press, 1994).

4. Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Occasional Papers (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986). See also Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

5. Admittedly, this distinction cannot be made in any absolute sense. Nonetheless, I am simply suggesting that it is theoretically and methodologically necessary for the analysis of discursive traditions.

6. Those authors who point to the manipulative use of Islamic vocabulary to clothe what they see as non-Islamic arguments are clearly addressing usages of this kind. The concept of a discursive tradition directs us toward language use of a different sort, one elaborated by Foucault with the concept of "discourse." See his *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Harper Colophon, 1972).

7. Most of the following discussion is based on Abu Zayd's most recently published book, the one that figured most significantly in the tenure committee's report: *Naqd al Khitāb al Dīnī* (Cairo: Dār al Thaqāfah al Jadīdah, 1992). This work summarizes most of the central themes of Abu Zayd's earlier writings. All translations from the original Arabic are mine.

8. Abu Zayd, *Naqd*, 93 (italics added).

9. *Ibid.*, 96.

10. *Ibid.*, 193.

11. *Ibid.*, 56. Political regimes of various types have often acknowledged the ultimate sovereignty of God without finding it necessary to grant religious specialists authority over all affairs of state.

12. *Ibid.*, 30, 64-69.

13. *Ibid.*, 30.

14. *Ibid.*, 9, 102.

15. *Ibid.*, 110.

16. *Ibid.*, 9.

17. Naṣr Ḥamīd Abū Zayd, "Met al Rijāl wa Bada'at Muḥākamatuh," *Adab wa Naqd*, no. 101 (January 1994): 67.

18. Zayd, *Naqd*, 110-18.

19. *Ibid.*, 114-16. There are a number of Islamic knowledges, most importantly *ashbāh al nuzūl* and *nāsikh wa mansūkh*, that attempt to clarify the context surrounding revelation in order to guide textual interpretation. Abu Zayd, applying the yardstick of modernist historiography, finds these knowledges to be inadequate to the modern interpreter's task.

20. It should be noted that these two steps are grounded upon incompatible assumptions regarding the nature of social reality—the first is objectivist, while the second is phenomenological.

21. Abu Zayd, *Naqd*, 9.

22. *Ibid.*, 53.

23. For a number of interesting analyses of the historical developments underlying our modern concept of history, see Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985).

24. *Ibid.*, 214.

25. On this point, see Nicholas B. Dirks, "History as a Sign of the Modern," *Public Culture* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 25-33; Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Death of History? Historical Consciousness and the Culture of Late Capitalism," *Public Culture* 4, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 47-65.

26. This expression comes from de Toqueville, who observed in *Democracy in America*: "As the past has ceased to throw its light upon the future, the mind of man wanders in obscurity." Quoted in Koselleck, *Futures*, 27.

27. Not surprisingly, one of the most common rebufs given to those calling for the creation of an Islamic state is precisely that they lack a real plan or program.

28. Abū Zayd, *Naqd*, 61. Note that texts may reflect reality but are not an integral part of it.

29. *Ibid.*

30. See Kristie MacClure, "Difference, Diversity, and the Limits of Toleration," *Political Theory* 18, no. 3: 361-91, for an excellent discussion of these issues and their relevance to contemporary strategies of political activism.

31. MacClure, "Difference," 376.

32. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Death of History," 63.

33. Admittedly, many Muslims would concur with Abu Zayd on the ultimate unknowability of God. Most, however, would identify this as one of the epistemological conditions defining the task of interpreting God's message and not as a justification for the abandonment of that project.

34. See, for example, Nicholas B. Dirks, *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

35. This report was reprinted in *al Mujtami' al Madanī* 19 (May 1993): 9-13.

36. Hence an article by four Cairo University professors entitled "Scientific Report on the Views of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd" is prefaced by the following statement:

We undertake this report on the views of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd on the basis of our identity as Muslims, believing in God and His Messenger (SAAS), commanded by God to promote that which is allowed and to prevent that which is forbidden; we offer the advice (*naṣīḥah*) of God, of His Messenger, and of His book to Muslims each and all, as God demands of us that we pursue every legitimate course to correct what is in error.

In 'Abd al Ṣabūr Shahīn, *Qiṣṣah Abū Zayd wa Inḥiṣār al 'Almanīyah fī Jāmiat al Qāhirah* (Cairo: Dār al I'tiṣām, 1994), 112.

37. Fahmī Huwayḍī, "Hadhar min al La'b bi al Nār," *al Ahrām* (20 April 1993).

38. Abū Zayd, "Met al Rijāl," 65.

39. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Mabruk, "Al Nās . . . 'Ām al Maṣlaḥah," *Minbar al Sharq* (1993), 64.

40. *Ibid.*, 75.