

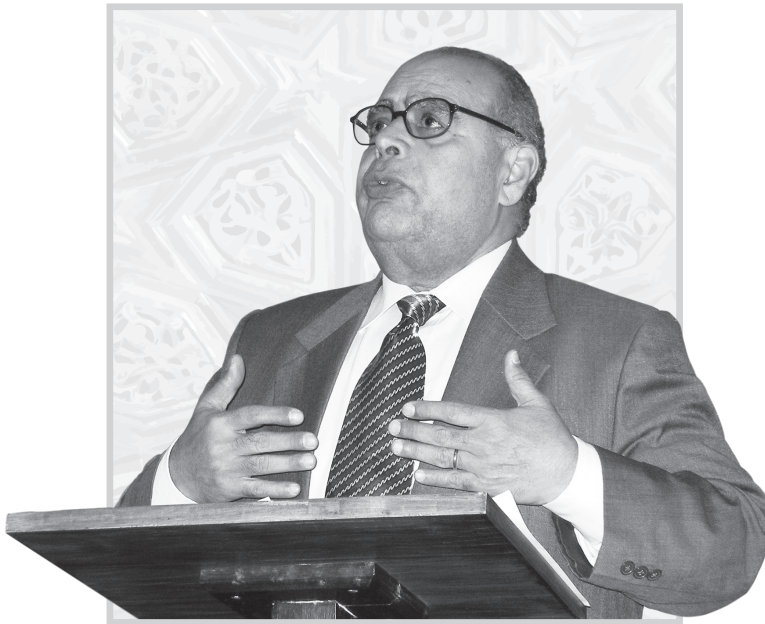
Naṣr Abū Zayd


*A Critical Rereading
of Islamic Thought*

MICHAŁ MOCH

Naşr Abū Zayd

*A Critical Rereading
of Islamic Thought*



Bydgoszcz 2017 

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Author's note

The title of this monograph is consciously related by the author to the expressions used by Naşr Abū Zayd in the titles of his English-language books and essays as “rethinking the Qur’ān” or “reformation of Islamic thought”. However, it seems that the “critical rereading” is the most appropriate description of Abū Zayd’s intellectual project. His method of researching is always based on extensive reading of Islamic sources, from the Qur’ān (that is the Text with capital letter T, as he himself stated) through the Mu’tazila theology of the classical period of Islam and other schools of Islamic thought, to the modernist approaches initiated e.g. by Muḥammad ‘Abduh. Abū Zayd’s reading of the classical sources is critical and influenced both by Arab and European contemporary philosophical developments. Thus, it is not a pure reading of the sources, but rather their rereading and applying to new, dynamically changing contexts. The extensive reading, citing of the texts, playing with their meaning and signification, rooted in literary studies ways of interpreting, is always the point of departure for Abū Zayd. The Egyptian scholar does not represent the radical, subversive approach that was such characteristic in the case of Algerian-born scholar, Muḥammad Arkūn, and his idea of Applied Islamology. That is also the reason why “critical rereading” could better describe Abū Zayd’s work than e.g. “radical rethinking of Islamic thought”, which Ursula Guenther (2006) attributed to Arkūn.

The following work is based on different types of sources: firstly, the rich collection of written sources (Abū Zayd’s books, articles, essays, interviews, translations of his works) in Arabic, English, French, Italian, German, Polish, and other languages. The interviews, conducted during the academic research of the author and his research team in the Netherlands in the summer of 2015, were also utilised. It contains people who were close to him (his widow, professor Ibtihāl Yūnis), academic colleagues (Pieter van Koningsveld), friends (As’ad Jāber) and

intellectual descendants, students working under his supervision becoming close friends in the course of time (the Egyptian/Dutch scholar Umar Ryad). Usage of the biographical interviews adds another layer to this monograph and coincides with the methods of contemporary anthropology and social studies.

Naṣr Abū Zayd's work has not been widely described and analysed in Polish humanities. Polish Arabists and specialists on Islam have rather rarely referred to his texts so far. The first, short, however very important translation of one of his texts into Polish, was made by Izabela Szybilska-Fiedorowicz (2004; some fragments taken from *Naqd al-khiṭāb al-dīnī*). Valuable passages devoted to Naṣr Abū Zayd were made by the acclaimed Polish Arabist, Marek Dziekan in his *History of Arab Culture* (Dziekan 2008: 269, 316). Short texts and occasional notes on the Egyptian researcher were written by Izabela Szybilska-Fiedorowicz (2006, 2007), Ignacy Nalski (2006) and Agata Skowron-Nalborczyk (2014). As Polish-language translations of Arabic literature would be taken into consideration, the Qur'ānic research of Naṣr Abu Zayd is mentioned by Rashīd al-Maghribī (2011) and his work was translated into Polish by Sebastian Bednarowicz.

Thus, the current Polish scientific reflection on Naṣr Abū Zayd's heritage is just developing, and this project aims to underline his proper role as one of the greatest minds of contemporary research on Islam. His texts are intellectually inspiring, based on interesting, mainly Arabic, sources and could bridge the gap of mutual distrust between the West and the Arab world. The purely scientific value of Naṣr Abū Zayd's works (in hermeneutics, religious studies, and literary studies aspects) is often underestimated, because the literature of the subject in different languages often concentrates rather on biographical issues (e.g. the "Case of Abu Zayd"). This monograph is intended to fully reconcile these two aforementioned levels: firstly – the detailed scientific analysis of chosen texts, and secondly – developing of a biographical approach.

The following monograph aims at summing up the state of research on Abū Zayd's biography and intellectual legacy so far, trying to create more established, critical and scientific assessment of his role in the current research on Islamic thought researching and in the broadly understood Muslim reformist and modernist tendencies. In light of the fact that some of the important theses regarding Abū Zayd were not successfully published (e.g. Mansour 2000, Rahman 2001), this proves to be the first comprehensive monograph of his legacy in the English-language scientific discourse, and certainly the first of its kind in Central-Eastern Europe.

The author of the book and the same time the leader of the research project that led to its editing, is a Polish Arabist specializing in literary studies and cultural studies, and earlier particularly interested in the question of religious minorities in the Arab world and the co-existence of Islam and Christianity in the Middle East. The scope of research in fact requires an interdisciplinary approach to incorporate the elements of Religious Studies, broadly defined Arabic and Islamic Studies, literary studies, the sociology and history of contemporary Islamic ideas, and world-views.

Dr. Moch had the opportunity to organise (with Damian Jasiński M.A. and the NGO education association “Collegium Invisibile”) the only Naṣr Abū Zayd’s visit in Poland in November 2007. During this fruitful scientific event a series of interviews with Naṣr Abu Zayd were conducted. Part of this material had been published already in Michal Moch’s monograph (the English title: *The Native and the Alien. The Identities of the Copts and the Maronites in the Arabic Texts of Culture*; Moch 2013). Naṣr Abū Zayd gave two well received lectures for students and scholars of the University of Warsaw and the members of “Collegium Invisibile” scientific association. He had an interview with Ludwika Biernat that was published in one of the most important opinion-forming, liberal, Polish and Central European newspapers, “Gazeta Wyborcza” (Biernat 2007).

* * *

As for the transcriptions of the Arabic proper names, words and expressions, the Brill’s online *System of Transliteration of Arabic and Persian Characters*¹ is utilised. There is one notable exception, for representing the *alif maqṣūra* the sign (ā) is used instead of the misleading in that context ā (long a). In general, this type of transcription seems to be the most practical example of simplified scientific transcription of Arabic into English. All the translations of Abū Zayd’s works quoted in this book were made by the author (Michal Moch – MM), sometimes with the help of the co-investigators in the project *Naṣr Abū Zayd – Rethinking the Islamic Thought* (led by Michal Moch), who are respectively: Joanna Musiatewicz (JM) and Sebastian Bednarowicz (SB). All English translations of the Qur’ānic verses are taken from the Saudi edition published in 1430/2009.

¹ <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-islamica/system-of-transliteration-of-arabic-and-persian-characters-transliteration>. Accessed May 2017.

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And, last but not least, I thank my family – my wife, my daughter and my parents – whom I turn to constantly for their support and inspiration

The time is for the critical revision and transition to the period of liberation, not only from the authority of the texts, but also from every authority which hinders the human journey in our world. We must undertake this (liberation) now and immediately before the flood sweeps us away.

(Wa-qad an awān al-murāja'a wa- al-intiqāl ilā marḥalat al-taḥarrur, lā min sulṭat al-nuṣūṣ waḥdahā, bal min kull sulṭa ta'ūq masīrat al-insān fī 'ālamīnā. 'Alaynā an naqūm bi-hādhā al-ān wa- fawran qabla an yajrufānā al-tufān).

(Abū Zayd 1992: 110)

Naṣr Abū Zayd – Life and Heritage

1.1. Roots and Early Years

Abū Zayd was born on July 10, 1943 in Quḥāfa, then a small village in northern Egypt near Ṭanṭā (Tanta)² in the Nile Delta (VE: 1), now – a kind of suburbs of Tanta. The future scholar was raised in a rather poor, “ordinary, hard-working” (VE: 1) family. As he poetically describes, “the waters of the Nile flow through my veins” (VE: 1). What is more, Naṣr Abū Zayd believes in the strong connection and interrelation of life experience with academic scholarship (VE: 17). Taking into account such an approach combining research with biographical background, one has to refer to the early years of Naṣr Abū Zayd as a very important period in the shaping of his later academic career and personal choices.

His mother’s family was deeply rooted in the village (VE: 18), and his grandfather (from mother’s side) was a professional reciter of the Qur’ān (VE: 18), which gave the family an elevated status inside rural community. His father, originally a farmer, sold a small piece of land and became the owner of a grocery shop (VE: 18). The mother is described by Abū Zayd as a “beautiful, somewhat pampered woman” (VE: 18) with a “regal status” because of being her father’s favourite child. Quḥāfa’s community, a sort of “one huge family” (VE: 18), was a traditional one, but also gave some sense of Egyptian diversity, because there was the group of Copts and a small presence of Jews (VE: 20). Naṣr Abū Zayd remembers e.g. the Coptic carpenter who was

² The city and metropolis is sometimes called Badawī because of the local ‘saint’ Sayyid Aḥmad al-Badawī, a popular Sufi figure coming from Morocco and enshrined in Tanta. Compare: VE: 18.

hosted by Abu Zayd's family (VE: 20). The man called Abū Salāma was a great storyteller and didn't speak about his religious/ethnic background (VE: 20).

Many inhabitants of the village were uneducated and illiterate (however, his father could read and write well), but, in Abū Zayd's memories, they were extremely helpful in enriching and contextualising his growing knowledge (VE: 31). For example, as a young pupil, able to read, he helped his father in reading the newspapers for some villagers, not understanding particularly what he read. As he formulated it, "these illiterate men were among my first teachers. I may have been the reader, but they interpreted what I read. They gave meaning to the text" (VE: 31). This insight directly refers to subsequent scientific preoccupations of Abū Zayd: transmitting the text to the recipient and production of the meaning in the processes of communication and interpretation.

Young Naşr attended the traditional Qur'ānic school (*kuttāb*) where he "learned the Qur'ān, reading, writing and simple math" (VE: 18) and, as he himself stated, by the eight birthday had memorised the entire Qur'ān (VE: 18).

Abū Zayd's father died in 1957 (VE: 24) when his mother was just thirty-five with five children at home. He was the oldest of three boys and had to show maturity and responsibility, despite being just fourteen years old at that time. His older sister, Badriyya (born in 1937 or 1938), had married by this time (VE: 25), and the other siblings were: his brother Muḥammad (born in 1945), sister Karīma (born in 1950), brother Usāma (born in 1952) and sister Āyat, born in 1957, the year of their father's death (VE: 25). The family left Ṭantā for Al-Maḥalla al-Kubrā, the industrial city in the middle part of the Nile Delta, which was connected with Naşr Abū Zayd's work (VE: 32). In the late 1960s finally he and part of the family settled in Cairo where the academic career of the author of *Maḥmūd al-naşş* started. His mother "loved to sew" (VE: 29) and after the father's death sewing was her profession (VE: 29), giving some income for the family. The difficult period after her husband's death influenced her to become a real head of the family and to develop "strength and confidence that suited her well" (VE: 35). It was connected with the broadening of the traditional role played by the woman in the Egyptian society, and in Abū Zayd's view, in this period "she radiated an inner beauty – something I found much more attractive than her physical charms" (VE: 35) She died in the first half of the 1980s after severe heart disease and refusing to have an operation.

The best summary of the influence of his early life on his research was given by Abū Zayd in *Voice of an Exile*, written with the help of Esther Nelson.

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 (...). I was looking for answers to questions – questions that sprang initially from my difficulties I experienced while trying to make ends meet for my family. At first, my 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. How could it not? The whole world (people, animals, plants, and the Earth itself) suffers when inequity takes hold in the society. We are all connected (VE: 26).

1.2. Start of Research and Academic Career

As for his academic skills and interests, he did not start his secondary education in the humanities, but in the field of telecommunication. It was conditioned by the uneasy situation of his family. He graduated from the technical school in 1960 (VE: 31) and then worked in the Ministry of Communication as an electronic technician (VE: 31). His studies at Cairo University, begun in 1968, were complicated because he had to combine studying with regular working hours (VE: 31).

He was yet 29 when he got his BA in Arabic Studies with Highest Honours from the Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University, in 1972. He then continued his academic career at Cairo University, the symbolic place for new approaches to the Qur'ān and Arabic literature (see more: subchapter 2.1.). In 1977, he obtained an MA in Arabic and Islamic Studies from the same Department and with Highest Honours. And in 1981, finally he defended there his Ph.D. thesis, again with the Highest Honours. Logically, in years 1972–82 he assumed the role of the Assistant Lecturer in the Department of Arabic Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts, Cairo University. In 1982 he was promoted to the post of Assistant Professor at the same place and in 1987 obtained there the chair of Associ-

ate Professor. He also had Ford Foundation Fellowship at the Center for Middle East Studies of the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, US (1978–79) and worked in Japan as a Visiting Professor at Osaka University of Foreign Studies (1985–89). Both periods became pivotal for the development of his knowledge and application of Western theories alongside his Arab-Islamic cultural background e.g. structuralism and hermeneutics. Then, in 1992, he started the procedure of getting the status of a full professor at Cairo University which resulted in the upheaval of the so-called “Case of Abū Zayd” (see: Chapter 3). Finally, he left Egypt on 23 July 1995 with his wife³, Ibtihāl Yūnis (Ebtehal Younes), the professor of French literature at Cairo University, travelling to the Netherlands⁴ via Madrid, Spain.

1.3. “The Exile Period” – Outside of Egypt

Just after getting to the Netherlands, Naṣr Abū Zayd started to work at Leiden University as a Visiting Professor. After that, from 2002 he held the Ibn Ruṣhd Chair of Humanism and Islam. The Chair was established at the new scientific institution: the University of Humanistic Studies (Dutch: Universiteit voor Humanistiek) in Utrecht, The Netherlands. At that time, he was still supervising M.A. and Ph.D students at the University of Leiden as well. In the years 2000-2001 he held the

³ He was married twice: the first wife was Aḥlām, the staff worker of Cairo University. It was a rather traditional marriage arranged with the help of his sister, Karīma (VE: 121), in 1981. They divorced in 1992 after more than ten years of marriage (VE: 125). Abū Zayd directly speaks in his quasi-autobiography that he “was medically unable to have children”, however he played earlier a semi-parental role for his younger siblings (VE: 122). There was a lack of real intellectual partnership and a problem of different life priorities and lack of a “common meeting ground” (VE: 125) between him and Aḥlām. Abū Zayd underlines the fact that the divorce was, even according to some members of Aḥlām’s family, a “generous settlement” and all rights and demands of his first wife were preserved and fulfilled (VE: 128). He became a friend with Ibtihāl Yūnis in year 1991, two years after returning from the chair of Visiting Professor at the Osaka University of Foreign Studies in Japan (VE: 123-124). They got to know each other better at the conference on Ṭaha Ḥusayn in Cairo during which Ibtihāl Yūnis was the member of the organising committee, and he was a participant (VE: 124). He remarried in 1992 shortly before the beginning of the so-called “Case of Abū Zayd” (VE: 128).

⁴ He states that they came to Leiden on 25 October 1995 (VE: 16).

prestigious Cleveringa⁵ Honorary Chair in Law, Responsibility, Freedom of Religion and Conscience at Leiden University⁶ which was connected with the occasional speech later published. In 2005, he received in Berlin the annual Ibn Rushd Prize for Freedom of Thought⁷, funded by the non-governmental Ibn-Rushd-Fund, mainly based among the Arabs living in Germany. The other prize winners were e.g. Muḥammad Arkūn (2003; see: subchapter 2.2) and Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī (2008), who were thus the intellectual partners, inspirations and interlocutors of Naṣr Abū Zayd.

In spite of his important research achievements in the West, it was a rather painful period in the life of Abū Zayd's, who defined himself as "a very, very Egyptian man" (VE: 63), however he returned to Egypt several times to visit his family and his wife, who was still very active in academic work at Cairo University. He took part in the important project concerning "Jewish and Islamic Hermeneutics as Cultural Critique" in the Working Group on Islam and Modernity at the Institute of Advanced Studies of Berlin (Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin)⁸. He made many academic visits, e.g. in 2007 the first and only academic journey to Poland, was cooperating on a regular basis with many scholars of different generations from the Netherlands, Germany, US, Canada, Indonesia, Iran, and, of course, Egypt and other Arab countries. In July 2010 he became infected with an unknown virus during his journey to Indonesia, the country that was for him a pivotal example of modernizing Islam in the contemporary age. After getting an infection, he was hospitalised in Cairo, but died on 5th of July, 2010. His rather unexpected and premature death was

⁵ Rudolph Cleveringa (1894–1980), an acclaimed professor at the University of Leiden, a lawyer known for his activities in the resistance movement against the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands and for the famous speech in 1940, in which he protested against the Nazi repressions against the scholars of Jewish origin at his home university.

⁶ Nasr Abu Zayd, Project Gutenberg Self-Publishing Press http://self.gutenberg.org/articles/eng/Nasr_Abu_Zayd. Accessed February 2017.

⁷ As the Fund defines itself in the official Web materials, "(...) is a liberal fund holding up aspirations for progress in the Arab World, for liberty and equality, human rights and social justice (...) [and] will support independent thinkers, artists and scientists by annually awarding prizes". After: <http://www.ibn-rushd.org/typo3/cms/en/the-fund/convictions-and-beliefs/>. Accessed 15 February 2017.

⁸ Information after *Nasr Abu Zayd*, Project Gutenberg Self-Publishing Press http://self.gutenberg.org/articles/eng/Nasr_Abu_Zayd. Accessed February 2017.

widely commented on and quite widely regretted in his native Egypt. Some of the non-positive attitudes towards Abū Zayd changed in the 2000s into more positive outlook (see more: Chapter 3).

His heritage is documented by Mu'assasa al-Duktūr Naşr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd li-l-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiyya (Naşr Abū Zayd Foundation for Islamic Studies), which organizes conferences e.g. the last one entitled *Min al-naşş ilā al-khiṭāb* (From the Text to the Discourse), that took place in Cairo in October 2016 (see more: Chapter 7). His works have become important in the course and context of the so-called “Arab Spring” developments in some Arab countries. It is proved by the growing number of reprints and new editions of Naşr Abū Zayd’s works in the last years. Some of his and similar thinkers theses have also indirectly entered into the public discourse e.g. discussion about the “reformation” or “renewal” of Islam fuelled by using of such rhetorical figures by the current Egyptian president, ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī (see more: chapter 3). In spite of that, Naşr Abū Zayd can still be seen as an independent intellectual figure, distancing himself from both the limitations of conservative official Islamic discourse, and on the other hand – the power of officially secular autocratic rulers, who however often make use of the support of religious elites, using the slogans about religious renewal just for opportunist political purposes.

1.4. Academic Career of Abū Zayd and His Written Heritage

1.4.1. Academic Career of Abū Zayd

As for Abū Zayd’s academic development, Yusuf Rahman (2001: 5) proposes the periodisation and dividing of his career into four periods: “(a) the formative period: from birth to 1972 and 1972–1985; (b) the foundational period 1985–1989; (c) the polemical period 1989–1993 and 1993–1995; and (d) the period of exile 1995–2010”. Of course, the Indonesian-Canadian author scholar formulated his proposition in 2001, but “the period of exile” could be extended into Abū Zayd’s death in 2010.

What is quite interesting, it seems that the aforementioned “foundational period” coincides with the time when Abu Zayd served as a visiting professor at Osaka University of Foreign Studies in Japan.

The Japan's experience proved to be very fruitful for Abū Zayd, he was reading and writing extensively, finding new sources and inspirations as well. As Rahman (2001: 17) points out accurately, at this stage Abū Zayd came to the conclusion that there were three Muslim scholars who played decisive roles in Arabo-Islamic thought: Al-Ash'arī in Islamic theology, Al-Ghazālī in Islamic thought and philosophy, and Al-Shāfi'ī in Islamic jurisprudence. From this point of view, the Egyptian scholar started to rethink the most important elements of Islamic heritage (*turāth*), and how it influences the contemporary Islamic thought.

During this period, he finished the work that can be seen with hindsight as his *magnum opus*: *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ. Dirāsa fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* [The Concept of the Text: A Study of the Sciences of the Qur'ān]. It was finished initially in 1987 and used for the purpose of promoting him to the post of the Associate Professor (*ustādh mushārik*) at the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at Cairo University (Rahman 2001: 12). However, the work was published for the first time three years later, in 1990 in Beirut. Important parts of *Naqd al-khiṭāb al-dīnī* [Critique of Islamic Discourse] were also written during his stay in Japan, particularly the first chapter "Al-Khiṭāb al-dīnī al-mu'āṣir: āliyyatuhu wa-munṭalaqātuhu al-fikriyya" (The Contemporary Religious Discourse. Its Mechanisms and Intellectual Foundations), which was published as a separate text in the journal *Qaḍāyā Fikriyya* in 1989 (information after: Rahman 2001: 14). The full version of *Naqd al-khiṭāb al-dīnī* was published in 1992. Another mostly "Japanese" work of Abū Zayd was *Al-Imām al-Shāfi'ī wa-ta'sīs al-aydiyūlūjiyya al-waṣaṭiyya* [Imam al-Shāfi'ī and the Foundation of the Mainstream Ideology in Islamic Thought], published as well in 1992.

The period after 1989 is characterized by greater concentration on the question of religious discourses in Egypt and the Arab world. Apart from the mentioned publication of *Naqd...*, Abū Zayd published as well in January 1993 an article in the periodical *Al-Qāhira* entitled "Ihdār al-siyāq fī ta'wīlāt al-khiṭāb al-dīnī" [Lack of Context in the Interpretations/Procedures of *ta'wīl* of the Religious Discourse], which provides the summary and clarification of Abū Zayd's critique of the dominant religious discourse and its lack of contextualization of the text. It is important that his criticism touched as well the approaches of left-wing intellectuals as Ḥasan Ḥanafī or Muḥammad Shaḥrūr, e.g. in the essay "Al-Turāth bayna al-ta'wīl wa-al-talwīn: qira'a fī mashrū' al-yasār al-islāmī" (The Heritage Between Interpretation and Biased Reading:

Analysing the Project of the Islamic Left-Wing), published in 1990 in the *Alif*, the periodical of the American University of Cairo. The problem of *talwīn* (falsification/ ideological, biased reading), earlier applied by Abū Zayd to Al-Shāfi‘ī’s works, is attributed here to contemporary works of the thinkers combining Islam with left-wing elements.

The period between 1992 and 1995 is obviously full of polemic texts related to defending the scholar’s views against his adversaries during the “Abū Zayd’s Case”. Apart from collections of his articles written during the course of this period (*Al-Tafkīr fī zaman al-takfīr* [Thinking in the Time of Accusations of Apostasy]) or texts written by other scholars about the case [*Al-Qawl al-mufīd fī qaḍīyyat Abū Zayd* [A Useful Discourse on the Case of Abū Zayd)], he published in the journal *Adab wa-naqd* many articles regarding the problem of *khiṭāb al-ḥurriyya* (the discourse of freedom; cf. Rahman 2001: 19).

In spite of the dominating character of polemics related to the “Abū Zayd’s Case” in this period, the author of *Mafhūm al-naşş* developed some new issues in his research e.g. on the position and discursive imagining of women, also in the light of Islamist approaches. His article from 1993 “Al-Mar’a: al-bu’d al-mafqūd fi al-khiṭāb al-dīnī al-mu’āşir” (A Woman: The Missing Dimension of the Contemporary Religious Discourse), later reprinted in the book *Dawā’ir al-khawf* (1999), signalled this openness to including gender-related topics in Islamic Studies.

The exile period, beginning in 1995, changed a little bit the academic focus of Abū Zayd’s numerous activities. Living in a very international environment, he became very interested in the non-Arab Islam, especially the reformist trends coming from Indonesia, Malaysia, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and the Balkans. It is also visible in the context that some of the most significant works and essays describing and analysing Abū Zayd’s works were written by the scholars born or based in Indonesia (e.g. Nur Ichwan 1999, Rahman 2001, Sukidi 2009). Abū Zayd was very active especially between 1997 and 2002, publishing many articles and chapters of the collective monographs in English (see: Bibliography), and his Arabic books from this period were mostly collections of the earlier texts (e.g. *Dawā’ir al-khawf: qirā’a fī khiṭāb al-mar’a*; *Al-Khiṭāb wa-al-ta’wīl* and *Hakadhā takallama Ibn ‘Arabī*). Probably, his most unfulfilled intellectual project was creating of a kind of the second part of *Mafhūm al-naşş* related to the other type of Islamic text, that is *sun-*

*nah*⁹, and its functioning in the context of processes of interpretation (cf. Rahman 2001: 21). This ambitious idea will be probably rethought and realized by one of the numerous followers or disciples of Abū Zayd in Egypt or other places of the world.

1.4.2. Diversity of Topics in Abū Zayd's Works

The new aspect presented in this dissertation is showing the works of Naṣr Abū Zayd from different angles. Usually, the literature of the subject is rather limited to only one aspect e.g. hermeneutics or “the Case of Abu Zayd”. Here there is an attempt to connect all those motifs and problems, trying to paint the more versatile, comprehensive picture of the unusual intellectual, activist, conscious and critical Muslim connecting tradition with contemporary trends, West with the Arab world, religion with contemporary Western and Arab philosophy.

The main corpus of Naṣr Abū Zayd's works consists of 15 Arabic-language and 3 English-language books. Some of the books are a kind of collection of the articles or papers that were separately published in journals or presented at international conferences (cf. Rahman 2001: 4). Some of Abū Zayd's topics and ideas are also repeated, rewritten in the other contexts or just modernised in works later from the point of view of chronology. There has to be agreement with Yusuf Rahman's point that “it is therefore necessary to study these articles in the order of their first publication and within their socio-political and historical context” (Rahman 2001: 4). This aspect is often omitted in some analyses on Abū Zayd's works, e.g. according to Rahman (2001: 4), Ḥasan Ḥanafī's essay “‘Ulūm al-ta'wīl bayna al-khāṣṣa wa-al-'amma: qirā'a fī a'māl Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd” [*Ta'wīl/Hermeneutical Sciences Between Elites and Masses: A Study of the Works of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd*], published in 1994 in *Al-Ijtihād*, totally lacks consideration of chronological order and socio-historical context of the ideas developed by Abū Zayd in the books published by him till 1993.

Taking into account those ramifications, it is possible to detect some topics in Abū Zayd's rich scientific production that can be treated as dominating:

⁹ The certain lack of *sunna* interpretations and references in Abū Zayd's works, contrasting with richness of his Qur'ānic reading, was noticed as well by Umar Ryad during our conversation in Utrecht, in August 2015.

- A. The Mu'tazila rational theology with its focus on the created character of the Qur'ān, and its implications for subsequent centuries.

First of all, this is the topic of Naṣr Abū Zayd's M.A. thesis, which turned into his first book published in 1982 (*Al-Ittijāh al-'aqlī fī al-tafsīr: dirāsa fī qaḍīyat al-majāz fī al-Qur'ān 'inda al-mu'tazila*; Abū Zayd 2003). However, the question of Mu'tazilite view of non-eternal, created Qur'ān is the recurrent theme in his writings (e.g. in TSL and GM).

- B. Hermeneutics in its Arab (*ta'wīl*) and European sense, from Ibn 'Arabī to Gadamer and Husserl, contextualisation and the process of communication.

The Ph.D. thesis defended in 1981 became the basis for his subsequent important book published firstly in 1983 (*Falsafat al-ta'wīl: dirāsa fī ta'wīl al-Qur'ān 'inda Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī* [The Philosophy of Hermeneutics: A Study of Ibn 'Arabī's Hermeneutics of the Qur'ān; Abū Zayd 2007a]. Naṣr Abū Zayd perceived Ibn 'Arabī's mysticism as an internally Arab pattern of early hermeneutics. The scholarships in the US and Japan let the researcher to deepen his knowledge of Western theories of hermeneutics (Gadamer, Ricoeur, Heidegger). This development and merging of Islamic roots with Western modern/contemporary philosophy plays an important part in one of the most important works of Abū Zayd: *Maḥūm al-naṣṣ. Dirāsa fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān* [The Concept of the Text: A Study of the Sciences of Qur'ān; Abū Zayd 1990/2011], published in 1990. Hermeneutical topics are later continued in such books as: *Al-Khiṭāb wa-al-ta'wīl* (Discourse and Hermeneutics; Abū Zayd 2000) and *Hakadhā takallama Ibn 'Arabī* (Thus Spoke Ibn 'Arabī; Abū Zayd 2006).

- C. Critique of dominating Islamic discourses and academia followed by exposing of the parallel mechanisms of functioning of the political and religious power; critique of the mechanism of *takfirisation* of the opponent.

These problems form the core of the monograph that is often perceived as Naṣr Abū Zayd's *magnum opus*: *Naqd al-khiṭāb al-dīnī* (Critique of Islamic Discourse; Abū Zayd 1994), published in 1992. This book, together with the almost equally important *Al-Imām al-Shāfi'ī wa-ta'sīs al-aydiyūlūjiyya al-wasaṭiyya* (Imam Al-Shāfi'ī and the Foundation of the Moderate Ideology in Islamic Thought; Abū Zayd 1992) published in the

same year, became the main “justifications” for unpardoned attacks by Islamist elites and their supporting environment on the researcher during the so-called “Case of Abū Zayd” (see more: Chapter 3). The case in itself led to the activity of Abū Zayd as a polemic writer, defending his cause, and some of his books published in the mid-1990s cover these issues (e.g. *Al-Takfīr fī zaman al-takfīr*; Abū Zayd 1995a).

D. Arab and Islamic discourses regarding women.

In his two books *Al-Mar’a fī khiṭāb al-azma* [Women in the Discourse of the Crisis; Abū Zayd 1995b] and *Dawā’ir al-khawf: qirā’a fī khiṭāb al-mar’a* [Circles of Fear: Analysis of the Discourse About Women; Abū Zayd 2007], Naṣr Abū Zayd touched on the subject of the discourse concerning the position of women in the Arab countries (See more: Chapter 5). These two collections of essays are accompanied by some articles and essays in different languages.

Situating Naṣr Abū Zayd. Predecessors, Influences, Intellectual Relations

The position of Naṣr Abū Zayd among other Arab intellectuals and religious thinkers has been both central and dissident. As a dissident he became engaged in a battle with the religious establishment of Egypt, being at the same time a faithful Muslim. He is often positioned close to such acclaimed intellectuals as Muḥammad Arkūn, Ḥasan Ḥanafī, and ‘Alī Mabruk. However, his views and attitude were clearly different in some regards comparing to the aforementioned intellectuals. He was a scholar, but as well saw some political edge in his public activity, or to put it plainly, he treated his intellectual project as political as well (cf. Iskandar 2000: 243). In that regard, his position was very centrist, combining some elements of the Islamic heritage (*turāth*) with Western philosophical currents and political orientations. From the European point of view, it results in the opened world-view that combines elements of the conservative, centrist and left-wing schools of political thought. In a sense, it seems to be, as it was famously articulated by the Polish philosopher and historian of ideas, Leszek Kołakowski, a possibility of being “a liberal-conservative socialist”¹⁰ (Kołakowski 2012: 289–293).

¹⁰ L. Kołakowski wrote the seemingly ironically entitled text *How to be a Conservative-Liberal Socialist? A Catechism* in English in 1978 (in the periodical *Encounter*, October), and it was translated into Polish in 1979 and published in the Polish anti-communist opposition diaspora periodical *Aneks*. The text was later republished several some times. Kołakowski suggested in the essay that values of conservatism, liberalism and socialism can be united inside one “ever non-existent, however powerful «political international»” (Kołakowski 2012: 293). Kołakowski recognises the fact that such social forms as families, religions, and nations are necessary for the survival of societies. At the same time, he believes in a socialist sense of social justice. It seems to be quite analogous to Naṣr Abū Zayd’s attitude.

Naşr Abū Zayd was attacked from both sides of the political spectrum, obviously from the point of view of the fundamentalist scholars or political Islam activists, but on the other hand from the more radical Marxist or secular side. However, his centrist, non-fanatical attitude¹¹ seemed to have merits, letting him to stay away from the rifts of the radically anti-Western Islamic left (Ḥasan Ḥanafī) or pure deconstructionism (‘Alī Ḥarb). If one could try to translate Abū Zayd’s experiences and attitude into Western political notions (which is, of course, almost impossible), it would portray him as seemingly close to the Christian democracy ideal of combining tradition with full commitment to democratic values, what is often called as well “the opened Catholicism” when it concerns Central-European countries such as Poland. Abū Zayd’s affinity to some Islamic methods of interpretation, coupled with his clear affirmation of universally understood liberal democratic values, seems to be something unique amongst the Arab intellectuals from the different camps, but often equally radical, violent and authoritative in their intellectual and ideological pursuit.

2.1. Egyptian and Arab Predecessors of Naşr Abū Zayd

Naşr Abū Zayd is obviously rooted in the earlier Islamic reformism and literary approach to the Qur’ān. His position towards the Muslim reformists is a kind of middle ground.

It is totally untrue to claim that Rifa’a al-Taḥṭawi (Rifa’a al-Taḥṭawī), Taha Hussein (Ṭāhā Ḥusayn), Ali Abdel-Razeq (‘Alī ‘Abd al-Rāziq), Qassem Amin (Qāsim Amīn) and other pioneers of critical discourse were nothing but Westernised intellectuals. Their criticism of the Western heritage was at least as acute and perceptive as their criticism of the Islamic past. They attacked mindless imitation and outdated tradition

¹¹ Adding to it, he omitted the risks and ethical downfall of authoritarian, or even totalitarian, attitudes that were embraced too by some European intellectuals. The moving example would be e.g. the period of Martin Heidegger’s (one of Abū Zayd’s philosophical inspirations as well) involvement in the Nazi politics in the Third Reich in 1933 and subsequent years. The Heidegger’s case in the context of his complicated relations with other acclaimed intellectuals, Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, was thoroughly examined by: Lilla 2001: 1-46, or Lilla 2006: 13–46.

wherever they found it. Indeed, does not the Qur’ān itself warn the faithful against the blind observance of ancestral practices? (Abu Zeid 2002).

Probably, it is possible to say that Abū Zayd himself felt attached especially to the intellectual heritage of Amīn al-Khūlī, “whose interdisciplinary method, encompassing studies in grammar and rhetoric, the Qur’ān and psychology” (Mansour 2000: 198) was very influential for the future author of *Maḥmūd an-naṣṣ*. Al-Khūlī can be interpreted as a representative of the line initiated by Muḥammad ‘Abduh and then continued by ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Rāziq, Qāsim Amīn, Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid, and Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, that could be labeled as secular, “enlightened” current, opposed to the fundamentalist followers of ‘Abdūh as Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, Ḥasan al-Bannā or Sayyid Quṭb (Mansour 2000: 198).

As Abū Zayd asserts in the interview with Nina zu Fürstenberg, “modern reformist movement in Islam, which began in the second half of the nineteenth century in India and Egypt, was trying to recover and defend the classical rationalist theology of Mu‘tazilites, and the philosophy of Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), Al-Fārābī and Ibn Rushd (Averroes)” (TSL, 158–159). For the Egyptian scholar, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (1838 or 1839–1897) and Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905) are here examples of the rebirth of the rationalist movement (TSL, 159). Abū Zayd continues with such a general statement:

The twentieth century has contributed to the development of Islamic rationalism on a large scale in Indonesia, Iran, and the Arab world. Today, the discussion about the importance of the Qur’ān and the validity of the tradition of Islam, the state, democracy, human rights, and women’s rights extends beyond the boundaries of traditional religious institutions to become present in a large part of a new civil society built throughout the Muslim world (TSL: 159¹²).

For Abū Zayd, the position of ‘Abduh is somewhat ambiguous, in his works “there is still a classic image of the text of the Qur’ān, the Qur’ān is the eternal, uncreated word of God, that was revealed to Muḥammad and whose recitation is an act of divine worship” (LMI¹³: 106). But at the same time, ‘Abduh started to apprehend and utilise Western scien-

¹² Translated by MM with the help of SB.

¹³ These passages from LMI are translated by MM with the help of SB.

tific notions and, in Abū Zayd's opinion, changed the Mu'tazilite principle of interpretation: "Whatever is opposed to reason is a metaphor" into such a dictum: "Everything that is opposed to (modern) science is a metaphor, and must be subjected to interpretation" [LMI: 105]. This results in the fact that 'Abduh found himself somewhere between the traditional Ashari Qur'ānic exegesis heritage and new researching, combining Arab and Western perspectives. However interesting in his works, he did not exceed the threshold of new textual and linguistic approaches. The big questions concerning the nature of the Text and language (LMI: 107-108) were yet to be confronted by the next generations of researchers.

The intellectual movement leading to the creating of the contemporary literary critique of the Qur'ān is associated with Ṭāhā Ḥusayn (1889–1973), the famous writer and researcher of pre-Islamic poetry. In Ḥusayn's approach, as Abū Zayd describes it (RIT: 54), the most important fact was the emphasis on "aesthetic dimension of the Qur'ān, namely its *i'jāz* (inimitability)", as well as treating the holy book of Islam as a separate, unique literary genre, beyond the scope of poetry and prose (RIT: 54). For Ḥusayn, the Qur'ān was both a reliable source for the understanding of pre-Islamic life, and at the same time – it contained some older narratives that circulated for ages in the Middle East (as the history of Abraham/Ibrāhīm and Hagar/Hājir) in the oral form (cf. RIT: 54).

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn was the symbolic figure of an intellectual transition and *tajdīd* (renewal) in Egyptian intellectual life: firstly he studied at Al-Azhar, then became part of the environment grouped at the state University of Cairo, founded in 1908. This *alma mater* made it possible to introduce a more secular, not strictly religious, point of view in Egyptian research, also conducting some dialogue with Western-based intellectuals. One of the important participants of this movement was Amīn al-Khūlī (1895–1966), professor at the Cairo's University Faculty of Letters. He developed ideas of *tajdīd* in four fields: the study of language (*naḥw*), rhetoric (*balāġa*), Qur'ānic interpretation (*tafsīr*) and literature (*adab*) [RIT: 55]. Al-Khūlī's motto was: *the first step for any real innovation/renewal is the full enquiry of tradition* (Arabic: *awwalu tajdīd qatlu al-qadīmī baḥthan*¹⁴) [after: RIT: 55].

¹⁴ Literally it would be rather translated as: "renewal is at first the killing of the old [tradition] with the means of research".

Amīn al-Khūlī played a very important part in the intellectual development of Abū Zayd: he called him in *Voice of an Exile* “a man I consider to be my grandfather” (VE: 53). In 1947 Al-Khūlī supervised the work of an assistant teacher at the Department of Arabic in Cairo University, Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalaf Allāh (1916–1991). His Ph.D. thesis was entitled *The Art of Narration in the Qur’ān*, and the author was trying to utilise the theoretical framework created by Al-Khūlī, who was “studying the Qur’ān as a literary text” (VE: 53). Khalaf Allāh made some historiographically important remarks, e.g. differentiated between history and Qur’ānic story. After submitting that text, Al-Khūlī was “barred from teaching and supervising Islamic Studies” (VE: 53) and, subsequently, forced into retirement in 1954, as a part of the revolutionary changes at the university after the taking of power by the Free Officers Movement in 1952. Khalaf Allāh was fired by the university and transferred to a non-teaching position (VE: 53).

The young Abū Zayd heard about this upheaval and contact with both researchers influenced choosing his own field of studies. The author of *Maḥūm al-naşş* describes as well the time when he started to think about choosing Islamic Studies as his specialisation and the difficult situation related to the fact that the academic post normally taken by Al-Khūlī was vacant (VE: 53). Abū Zayd mentions a situation that took place many years later, probably in the 1980s, when he was working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at Cairo University, and invited Khalaf Allāh to share his experience and knowledge with his students (VE: 54). Finally, the scholar declined the invitation justifying it by the very long period of isolation from Cairo University where his thesis was rejected (VE: 54). It provoked Abū Zayd to remark that both, he and Khalaf Allāh, can be treated as “the abandoned children of Cairo University” (VE: 54) in the context of his own judicial case in years 1992–1995.

Almost all of these writers and intellectuals had some judicial problems: questioning by prosecutors, excommunicating by Islamic scholars from Al-Azhar (e.g. the case of Aḥmad Amīn, the historian of Islamic civilization), problems with publishing and limitations in the public presenting of their ideas. Apart from the intellectual influence, the aforementioned issues also left its mark on Abū Zayd’s own way as thinker and academic teacher. Those thinkers with their sometimes subversive ideas were always deeply rooted in the Islamic past. The historic and modern Islamic approaches were also the main inspira-

tions for the author of *Naqd al-khiṭāb al-dīnī*, which he formulated frankly in such a passage.

I believe that one of the reasons we currently experience such stagnation in Islamic thought is that we overemphasise the divine dimension of the Qur’ān at the expense of acknowledging its human characteristics. I see my scholarship as a continuation of the rational school of thought started by the Mu’tazilites and further developed by Muslim philosophers such as Al-Kindī, Al-Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna), and Ibn Rušd (Averroes). My scholarship reflects my roots in classical Islam as well (VE: 57-58).

2.2. Muhammad Arkoun (Muḥammad Arkūn; 1928–2010)

According to Abdou Filali-Ansary and Aziz Esmail (2012: 7) “Muhammad Arkoun was a prominent and influential figure in Islamic Studies (...), a searching critic of theoretical tensions embedded in the field of Islamic Studies, and a courageous public intellectual who carried the banner of an often embattled Islamic modernism and humanism”. The Algerian thinker was born into a traditional extended family in Taourirt-Mimoun, a small town in the Great Kabylia, in February 1928. As a Berber in colonial Algeria, he initially spoke neither the language of the colonial rulers nor that of the Qur’ān, and as a result he found himself marginalised from an early age (Filali-Ansari, Esmail 2012: 7). Actually, this situation was constant in the course of his academic career, because the French language dominated as a vehicle of his research, and Arabic played only a secondary role.

He attended a college run by the White Fathers and completed his schooling in Oran, and Algiers. It was then that he established his scholarly reputation with his early studies (1969, 1970) of the Persian historian Miskawayh. It could be said that “he began to consider how one might rethink Islam in the contemporary world, his sophisticated questioning provided a welcome counterpoint to the highly ideological interpretations that had dominated debate in both the Muslim world and the non-Muslim West” (Filali-Ansari, Esmail 2012: 7). Arkoun was Professor of the History of Arab Thought at Vincennes University, and then accepted a chair at the Sorbonne Nouvelle in 1980, there he

was the Director of the Department of the History of Arab and Islamic thought and editor of the magazine “Arabica”.

He was the author of numerous books in French, English, and Arabic, e.g. *Rethinking Islam* (Westview Press, 1994), *L’immigration, défis et richesses* (Centurion 1998) and *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (Saqi Books, 2002).

He was asked to deliver the Gifford lectures and received the Giorgio Levi Della Vida award for his lifelong contribution to Islamic Studies. At his passing he was Emeritus Professor at La Sorbonne and Senior Research Fellow and member of The Board of Governors of the Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS) in London, which organised a seminar in honour of Arkoun’s work in October 2009. He died in September 2010, in the same year as Naṣr Abū Zayd. Ursula Guenther recollects Arkoun’s legacy in the *Obituary*:

He felt a part of all that is capable of opening up new links to intelligence, as he put it and saw himself an “intellectual in revolt”. May his idea that thoughts develop a life of their own prove right, continuing to take effect beyond the walls of cognitive demarcations and dominant ideologies (Guenther 2011).

Filali-Ansary (2012: 9) suggests that Arkoun’s “main struggle was to make science prevail over myth and belief” and that his main topic could be summed up as the issue of “the construction of belief” that alludes to the “Copernican Revolution” that has engulfed the humanities and social sciences, through which belief is not seen as a given that overwhelms individuals and communities, thereby defining their symbolic world – but rather as a complex set of views and attitudes that emerge through historical and social processes liable to observation, analysis and scrutiny”.

In Filali-Ansary’s view (2012: 11), Arkoun “does not seek to advocate some kind of religious reform by redress, nor to correct traditional views through a scholarly re-examination, as was attempted by a number of Muslim scholars of his generation, for example, Fazlur Rahman, Abdelmajid Charfi, and Abdolkarim Sorouch. **Rather, he stresses that we need to subvert, not to reform**¹⁵”. Arkoun employs a historical-critical approach that questions one specific type of categorisation singling out Islam and Muslims as one enduring and efficient reality in the past

¹⁵ Bolding by Filali-Ansary.

as well as the present. Arkoun passionately questioned it in the course of his career. Arkoun was often classified as post-modern, but he did not reject the ideals of truth and of reaching some degree of well-supported representation (Filali-Ansary 2012: 12). Even if all discourses are not equally true, it is possible to “dispel the illusions and distortions that have accumulated through, and can be fully explained by, the various historical processes” (Filali-Ansary 2012: 12). Arkoun created with Claude Cahen a long manifesto essay entitled *Transgresser, déplacer, dépasser* (“Transgress, displace, overcome”: Arkoun, Cahen 1996). Arkoun (Arkoun, Cahen 1996: 57–58) defined there the philosophical substance of the modern historical thought in the form “of epistemic and epistemological propositions”. One of the most interesting points is about “spheres of the supernatural”, with divine or metaphysical features, e.g. gods, magical, popular beliefs etc., “all linked to the imaginary (*imaginaire*)” (Arkoun, Cahen 1996: 58). They should be treated, according to M. Arkoun and C. Cahen as “products of social actors” that would be “submitted to the same analytical and critical investigation as conducted by social sciences in order to assess their pertinence and their effect in the historical shaping of societies” (Arkoun, Cahen 1996: 58)¹⁶.

In Aziz Esmail’s interpretation, Arkoun can be treated as an example of what Paul Ricoeur called the “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Esmail 2012: 29). Arkoun is especially suspicious when he approaches Muslim rhetoric concerning Islam, because he does not believe in the categories of “pure Islam” or distinct Islamic studies. He rather suggests that Islam, when touched on in public, scientific or political discourses, should be always hyphenated because speaking about “Islam” today is more about describing contemporary usage or the problematisation of Islam, and not a set of definite *uṣūl* (principles, roots of faith) or *arkān* (pillars of faith) [cf. Esmail 2012: 29]. In this regard, Arkoun seems to be a kind of a postmodern scholar, using the tools of deconstructionist critique. For example, he utilised a key postmodern piece of termi-

¹⁶ Original French fragment that is analysed here: *Les sphères du surnaturel, de la transcendance divine ou métaphysique, des dieux actifs, omniprésents, ou du Dieu unique, vivant, mais lointain, des croyances magiques, mythologiques, populaires, légendaires, religieuses, toutes rattachées à l'imaginaire, sont aussi des productions des acteurs sociaux; à ce titre, elles doivent faire l'objet de la même investigation analytique et critique, conduite par les sciences sociales pour évaluer leurs pertinences et leurs effets dans la production historique des sociétés* (Arkoun, Cahen 1996: 58).

nology such as *l'imaginaire* (a noun meaning the “imaginary”; a form not easily translatable into English), “deconstruction”, “logocentrism”, “archaeology of knowledge” and “mimetic rivalry” (Esmail 2012: 29). He could have been influenced by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida in using such concepts. However, the aforementioned analysis of the substance of historical thought (in: Arkoun, Cahen 1996) rather tends to the more objectivist description of historical processes with the universal usage of sociological categories leading to the critical-historical approach.

The drawback of Arkoun’s thought lies in the fact that ‘he seemed to be simply insensitive to the fact that societies do need myths and allegories and that no established religion can be subverted through rational argument (...), that religious attitudes evolve not because people are convinced that they should adopt change, but rather when they are “seduced” by rival alternatives’ (Filali-Ansary 2012: 14). Arkoun has become strongly idealistic and utopian, and that is one of the reasons why his thought has not become influential in some strictly Muslim contexts (Filali-Ansary 2012: 14).

The personal account of Arkoun’s impact was formulated by Naṣr Abū Zayd himself as well. He sees Arkoun as “very active in applying a modern interdisciplinary approach to the critical study of Islamic culture, tradition, and scriptures” (RIH: 83). In Abū Zayd’s view (RIH: 83–85) Arkoun’s concentration on the unthought or unthinkable in Islamic culture (or Islamic cultures and societies, as Arkoun prefers in his terminology) leads to the rethinking of the nature of the Qur’ān and revelation, secularism and individualism, all endangered by the dominant position of Muslim orthodoxy. Arkoun’s critique of Islamic reason is based on a strong methodological basis, although as Abū Zayd (RIH: 85) suggests, the Algerian philosopher does not give any detailed explanation how to reconcile modernity with Islamic sources. However, the Egyptian thinker highly values (RIH: 84) Arkoun’s idea of a new “Applied Islamology”, which would use the progressive-regressive method, thus combining short-term perspective (regarding the contemporary Islam/s) with the long-term historical perspective, referring to “the Golden Age” of Islam, when “the classical Islamic reason” activated the mechanism of “the production of meaning” (RIH: 86). Such an “Applied Islamology” would omit the mistakes and rifts posed by both traditional Islamic theology and modern postcolonial Islamology, which in Arkoun’s opinion lacks

the philological-historical depth, regarding only the “socio-political issues considered from a short-term perspective” (cited after: RIH: 84).

Abū Zayd made as well some important remarks about Arkoun in the article, that is accessible in Arabic and French versions (CDR:193212). The Egyptian thinker analysed there the research on the language of religion and the new linguistics made by the Algerian scholar.

Summing up, it seems that positions taken by Arkoun and Abu Zayd are somewhat complementary, but differ a lot as well. They are both interested in the intellectual critique of Islamic orthodoxy and contemporary religious elites in Muslim-dominated countries and environments. They both suggest the critique of *Muṣḥaf*, that would mean the canonised version of Qur’ān (changing its oral character e.g. by the applying of vocalisation to the written text). However, the differences between both thinkers are huge and significant. As was mentioned earlier, Arkoun is not very interested in a thorough project of reforming Muslim societies. His idea of subversion (not reforming) somewhat suggests that the dominating role of Islamic reason should be replaced with a more secular and rational approach. Comparing with it Abu Zayd’s attitude, the latter would be more concentrated on reconciling the values of Islam with modernity and giving Islam some space inside a democratic, open, liberally-oriented environment.

2.3. Ḥasan Ḥanafī (born 1935)

The Egyptian philosopher, often perceived as one of the most acclaimed contemporary reformist Islamic thinkers, seems to be one of the most important intellectual points of reference and inspirations for Abū Zayd. In the interview with Nina zu Fürstenberg, he characterised the intellectual relation linking him with Ḥanafī.

Ḥasan Ḥanafī was one of the great scholars who have exerted a profound influence on me. When it comes to ideas, we are very close, but according to him I presented to the public opinion ideas and subtle concepts in too direct, explicit a way. These ideas should however be addressed, in Ḥanafī’s eyes, only to the academic world. Ḥanafī prefers implicitness, a non-direct approach, playing with words, using the traditional idioms to express contemporary meanings. As far as I know, this tactic does not serve the strategy: it can lead to

unintended targets. My case [the case of Abū Zayd in years 1992–1995 – MM] alerted the whole of society in terms of danger, which is the manipulation of law (TSL:162).

Ḥanafī himself was interested in using the hermeneutical terminology. In his English-language book on religious dialogue and revolution (Hanafi 1977), he starts with part I on “Dialogue” which is based on references to hermeneutics (singular) or hermenutics¹⁷ (plural), the terms vastly used by Ḥanafī with a capital H in his English writings. The first subchapter describes hermeneutics as axiomatics, “far from clerical diplomacy and brotherly hypocrisy” (Hanafi 1977: 1). Three major sections of hermeneutics: criticism, interpretation, and realisation lead to textual criticism. Ḥanafī analyses what the Qur’ānic view is on the authenticity of the Scriptures and of the Christian dogma (subchapter “Certainty and Conjecture”). The approach to hermeneutics is quite materialistic in Ḥanafī’s mode of interpretation, making it closer to Marxism. He says for example that “hermeneutics does not deal with the nature of the relation between God and the prophet and how the prophet received the divine words” (Hanafi 1977: 6). Instead, “it deals with word uttered in history and communicated from man to man” (Hanafi 1977: 6). It is, of course, somewhat consistent with Abū Zayd’s focus on the textual dimension of the Qur’ān, but the difference between both scholars is significant as well in that regard. Naşr Abū Zayd seems to be interested in the very process of revealing God’s word (revelation: *wahy*), showing the multifaceted relation God–Muḥammad–recipients/reciters, and inscribing it into the hermeneutical circle.

The hermeneutical approach according to Ḥanafī opens the perspective for interreligious dialogue. Ḥanafī presents the secular, left-wing point of view when he writes about the status of women in Judaism and Islam, and uses Hegel’s aesthetics as a model of a cultural dialogue. Ḥanafī perceives Zionism as counter-liberation movement, similar to Romantic nationalism and politicising Judaism. Religion can be a Revolution, but in the Zionist interpretation it becomes a counter-revolution.

¹⁷ Ḥanafī’s own notation.

The aforementioned assessment of Ḥanafī made by Abū Zayd is interesting in the light of the collection of the weekly articles and essays published by the first of them in *Al-Bayān* (the first in November 1995, the last 20 January 1997), the daily newspaper located in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, and collected in one book entitled *Fī al-thaqāfa al-siyāsiyya. Ārā' ḥawla azmat al-fīkr wa-al-mumārasa fī al-waṭan al-'arabī* (On the Culture of Politics. Views Around the Crisis of Thought and Practice in the Arab World; Ḥanafī 1998). He defines it in the introduction (*Ilā Dimashq. Qal'at al-ṣumūd*) as the book that would be in the genre of “the direct mainstream culture” (*thaqāfa 'amma mubāshira*) aimed at instant (social, cultural, political) change in the near future (*at-taghyīr al-mubāshir fī al-qarīb al-manzūr*; Ḥanafī 1998: 7). So, his intentions are explicitly political in that regard and his texts are directed not only to the intellectual elites, but to the Arab masses (*al-jamāhīr al-'arabiyya*; Ḥanafī 1998: 6).

In the first part, *Al-'Arab wa-al-wa'ī al-tā'rīkhī* (The Arabs and the Historical Consciousness), Ḥanafī analyses different levels of Arab experience in the fields of history and collective identity. For example, he recollects different stages of the anti-colonial and anti-autocratic attitudes in his generation (the article *Min jīl ilā jīl*; Ḥanafī 1998: 10–14) and denounces the Arab tendency to historiographic pessimism (*tashā'um*; Ḥanafī 1998: 15ff.).

The last ninth part of the book is called *Ramaḍāniyyāt* and refers to social, political, folk culture and religious implications of the month of Ramaḍān. It proves Ḥanafī's strong focus on the importance of Islamic tradition.

Summing up this part, we could ask whether Naṣr Abū Zayd was a kind of a disciple of Ḥanafī? He was eight years younger, Ḥanafī moved from early support for the Muslim Brotherhood to the idea of “Left-Wing Islam”. He had some biographical facts similar to Abū Zayd, e.g. the Ḥanafī's case of alleged apostasy in 2000-2001 after the publication of *An Invitation for Dialogue*. The issue of official Muslim-Christian dialogue was more important for Ḥanafī than in case of Abū Zayd. The

author of *Fī al-thaqāfa al-siyāsiyya* was one of the first signatories of *A Common Word Between Us and You*¹⁸ (2007).

Ḥanafī, often perceived as a left-wing thinker, tried to merge Socialism, Hegel, and Marxian influences with positive references to Islamic tradition. Some researchers suggest he was thinking about the figure of a Muslim “Luther” – a reformer who would change Islam and make it a real force fighting the dangers of the contemporary world (Dziekan¹⁹ 2011: 161).

In spite of the mentioned parallels between two scholars, Abū Zayd’s assessment of the project of the Islamic left was quite critical. He perceived Ḥanafī as a member of the trend “which considers (...) the phenomenon of Islamic resurgence as a civilisational expression of the new reality, that which rejects the American-European hegemony’ (Mansour 2000: 240). For example, they are very different in the outcome of the evolution of Sayyid Quṭb as an ideologue of the radical political Islam. For Ḥanafī, Quṭb was quite close of becoming of the Islamic leftist world-view and only Nasserist repressions made him radicalised. But for Abū Zayd, the radicalism of the author of the *Ma’ālim fī al-ṭarīq* was logical, and followed his approach to the Text as a closed corpus and to *ijtihād* as a very limited intellectual procedure, utilised only in the absence of the Text (cf. Mansur 2000: 242-243).

¹⁸ The Declaration *A Common Word Between Us and You* (Arabic: *Kalimat sawā’ baynanā wa baynakum*), was the theological essay signed and supported by 138 Muslim scholars and public figures from different regions of the world. It was issued on 13th of October 2007, in the day of the Muslim Feast of Breaking the Fast (ʿĪd al-Fiṭr), and on the first anniversary of the edition of the open letter of 38 Muslim scholars to Pope Benedict XVI. The main Islamic organisation supporting the idea of the *Common Word* has been The Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought located in Amman, Jordan. The full text of the Declaration is available at: <http://www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document/>. Accessed April 2017.

¹⁹ The Polish Arabist, M. Dziekan, suggests in the aforementioned passage that Ḥanafī didn’t treat Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī as a good, proper example of Muslim reformist. Dziekan as well attributes to Ḥanafī supporting of Zakī Najīb Maḥmūd’s view about Al-Ghazalī’s philosophy influence on stagnation on the Arab-Muslim thought (Dziekan 2011: 160).

2.4. Şādiq Jalāl al-‘Aẓm (1934-2016)

This Damascus-born professor of modern European philosophy and researcher of Arab/Islamic-Western relations could be seen as an interesting point of reference regarding the positions taken by Naşr Abū Zayd. He perceived Abū Zayd as someone “whose writings seek to reinterpret Islam in a positivist and historical mode rather than as a divine phenomenon” (Al-Aẓm 2014b: 241). Actually, the similarity between the two is more in the choice of topics, and not in the peculiar views. However, even the title of one of the most important of Al-‘Aẓm’s books, *Naqd al-fikr al-dīnī* [The Critique of Religious Thought, 1969] dialogues with Abū Zayd’s *Naqd al-khiṭāb al-dīnī*. The idea mentioned by Al-‘Aẓm in the introduction to aforementioned book, “Arab regimes found in religion a crutch they could use to calm down the Arab public and cover-up their incompetence and failure laid bare by defeat, by adopting religious and spiritual explanations for the Israeli victory...” (Al-Aẓm 2014c: Introduction), coincides well with Abū Zayd’s dismissal of contemporary religious elites in the Arab countries. It seems that Al-‘Aẓm’s critique is more radical and left-wing in a political sense, but in some aspects it is very analogous to Abū Zayd’s assertions. Al-‘Aẓm criticises e.g. the type of, as he calls it, “concordism” (Al-Aẓm 2007: 96-97) that translates into full cooperation between religious and state institutions²⁰. This attitude of state and Muslim elites leads to the situation where “every Arab system of government, no matter what its colour, is not lacking esteemed Islamic institutions ready to issue *fatwas* declaring that its policy is in complete harmony with Islam and contradicts it in nothing” (Al-Aẓm 2007: 97). With an ironic note, the Syrian-born scholar argues that Islamic institutions in Arab states “amass Qur’ānic verses, prophetic traditions, and legal opinions to demonstrate that the position of the given state is truth itself” (Al-Aẓm 2007: 97). In this they

²⁰ “This type of thought declaring concord between Islam and contemporary life is concerned with justifying the social and political conditions which exist, no matter where they may be, on the basis of their complete harmony with the pure religion, its doctrines and law. The religious men of Islam supervise this operation defending the *status quo* and its personalities and policies” (Al-Aẓm 2007: 97).

resemble the role played by the environment of Al-Azhar in Egypt that often justified the policy of the successive Egyptian rulers.

In spite of these similarities, Al-ʿAzm seemed to be far more radical in his critique of Islam, situating himself rather closer to Arkoun than Abū Zayd. The Syrian-born philosopher defended the literary and cultural value of the *Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie (Al-Azm 2014: 7-121). Al-ʿAzm’s remarks on the struggle over the meaning of Islam (Al-Azm 2014a: 157–172) have to be taken into account as well. The Syrian-born intellectual criticises the widely rooted vision of Islam as a “unique, ubiquitous, and almost omniscient and omnipotent determining and moving force for Muslims, dictating everything they do” (Al-Azm 2014a: 157). Such a reductive interpretation, according to Al-ʿAzm, seems to serve only the vital interests of Muslim elites and clergy, both in Sunni and Shia countries. Such a narrative is often accompanied by the concept of “uncritical defence (...) and apology for Islam as a static ideal of eternally valid principles and system of beliefs – known as the True Islam” (Al-Azm 2014a: 157). Both conceptions are wrong in Al-ʿAzm’s eyes and adding to it, actually they support the cause and interests of radical critics of Islam and political Islamophobes²¹.

Al-ʿAzm (2014a: 164–168) enumerates three contemporary types of Islam: official state Islam (e.g. “the petrol Salafi/Wahhabi Islam” of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries), militant, insurrectionary, *action directe* Islam, and middle-class commercial Islam. The last type, “empowering the civil state” and “calling for some respect for human rights” (Al-Azm 2014a: 167) is seen by Al-ʿAzm with some sort of hope (however, his remarks are often a little bit ironic) and relief. Turkey seems to be the instructive (and non-Arab at the same time) example

²¹ Using this argumentation, Al-ʿAzm ironically dismisses (2014a: 158–159) the anti-Islamic film *Fitna*, made by the Dutch right-wing politician, Geert Wilders, and popularised on the Internet in 2008. Abū Zayd, living at that time in the Netherlands, was equally critical of the biased, distorted and non-contextual usage of Qur’ānic verses in the film, and the full identifying of Islam with the message of the most radical and terrorist groups. In February 2017 Wilders’ Party for Freedom (PVV), with its strong anti-Islamic agenda, has become the strongest political party in the Netherlands in the opinion polls (gaining even between 20-25 % of the popular vote, data after: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_for_the_Dutch_general_election,_2017 (Accessed 13 February 2017). However, in the elections in March 2017 PVV finished with the distant second place, gaining just less than 13 % of popular vote and without any prospect of playing any real part in Dutch cabinet politics.

of turning the Justice and Development Party (AKP) into the dominating political force and representative of such middle-class Islam. However, the Damascus-born researcher sees dangers for the Turkish model, and becomes somewhat prophetic when he describes the contradiction between the Turkish Kemalist and the nationalist worldview, and the AKP party’s initial promotion of Turkey’s accession into the European Union (Al-Azm 2014a; 167–168). Such a situation can easily explode into a sort of a military coup d’état or Islamising (or Ottomanising²²) of the ideology of the Islamic ruling party (Al-Azm 2014a: 168), because a “military dictatorship wrapped in the mantels of Islamic dogma and religious fanaticism is never too distant a possibility in the Middle East” (Al-Azm 2014a: 168).

This type of analysis by Al-‘Azm is analogous to political analyses by Abū Zayd, often formulated by him in interviews and European-language texts.

* * *

This chapter was based on a rather subjective choice of Arab thinkers who temporally concurred with Abū Zayd and in some way inspired him (and reciprocally), discussed with him and treated him as an outstanding follower (e.g. Ḥasan Ḥanafī). Certainly, this list could be enlarged and enriched with some other thinkers and intellectual currents, e.g. the Marxist historicism of ‘Abd Allāh al-‘Urwī (Abdallah Laroui, born 1933), the Moroccan historian; or historiographically-rooted theories of Arab philosophy by another Moroccan thinker, the professor of philosophy and Islamic thought, Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī (Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, 1935–2010).

Another topic which will be developed in chapters 4 and 5 is how and whether Abū Zayd got to know, accumulated, and utilised methodologies and ideas taken from different branches of European modern and

²² It seems that Al-‘Azm has previewed the subsequent situation quite precisely. After the failed coup d’état attempt in July 2016, the Turkish leader coming from the AKP party, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, strengthened the grip towards installing a more autocratic and centralised form of government, adding as well some more conservative Islamic and post-Ottoman character to it. At the same time, Fethullah Gülen, the influential Muslim cleric living in the US, who could be seen as a main proponent of a “middle-class” Islam and the former AKP’s supporter and ideologue, became the figure of the enemy of the state, accused by Erdoğan of taking part in preparation of the 2016 coup d’état attempt.

contemporary philosophy. According to Yusuf Rahman (2001: 14) the first of Abu Zayd's works to incorporate Western hermeneutical theories "appeared in 1981". It was an article entitled "Al-Ḥirminyūṭīqā wa-mu'dilat tafsīr al-naṣṣ" (Hermeneutics and the Problem of the Exegesis of the Text) which constituted a review and personal account of the peculiar history of Western hermeneutics from Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), sometimes called "the Father of Modern Liberal Theology", and the German pioneer of hermeneutics Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), to the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), the French thinker Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005), combining phenomenology with hermeneutics, and E.D. Hirsch (born 1928), the American literary critic and theoretician of interpretation. It was probably Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* (Truth and Method), the milestone work from 1960, that directed Abū Zayd's interest in contemporary hermeneutics. He came across this and other related books while a visiting student at the University of Pennsylvania in 1978-79 (Rahman 2001: 14). That was his first longer international academic trip. Abū Zayd's concentration on the nature of the text and relation between the interpreter and the text (leading to the figure of hermeneutical circle) was clearly inspired by the hermeneutical philosophy of the West, but at the same time rooted in the Arab-Islamic traditions of *tafsīr* (exegesis) and *ta'wīl* (interpretation), e.g. Abu Zayd's early research on Mu'tazilites and Ibn 'Arabī.

In the "formative period" (the phrase used by Rahman 2001: 5) between 1972 and 1985, Abū Zayd had also another Western philosophical fascination: semiotics. It is quite obvious in light of his growing interest in the production of meaning, the study of signs/signing, and the processes of communication. E.g. he applied the semiotic theory of Yuri Lotman (1922–1993) to Islamic texts (Rahman 2001: 4) and made as well some translations of Lotman's texts (in: Abū Zayd, Qāsim 1986). Lotman was also a point of reference in some passages of one of the most important Abū Zayd's works, *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ*.

All these aspects give a very complex picture of Abū Zayd's intellectual formation in which his Arab masters of thought and predecessors of literary critique of the Qur'ān, and Western inspirations play equally important roles.

The Case of Abū Zayd (1992–1995). Facts, Judicial Procedures, Further Implications

The so-called “Case of Abū Zayd” (Arabic: *qaḍīyat Abū Zayd/Abī Zayd*) is the sequence of events that happened when in May 1992 Abū Zayd applied for promotion to the post of full professor of the Cairo University where he had studied and worked earlier for almost 30 years.

At the beginning it seemed to be a normal procedure supervised by the University Tenure and Promotion Committee (VE: 1). The Committee submitted Abū Zayd’s works to the evaluation of the three professors who were: Dr. ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr Shāhīn, professor in the College of Dār al-‘Ulūm (for the details concerning his report and other activities: see hereafter), Dr. Maḥmūd ‘Alī Makkī, professor of Andalusian Studies at Cairo University, and Dr. ‘Awnī ‘Abd al-Ra’ūf, professor of linguistics at ‘Ayn Shams University (VE: 1-2). The Committee prepared its own report based on the reports of the mentioned three experts forming the Subcommittee. The whole process took seven months which was quite a long time compared to the usual procedure. On December 3, 1992 Abū Zayd discovered that the University Tenure and Promotion Committee had rejected his promotion (by 7 votes to 6) in a situation in which two reports of the experts were generally very positive and one – written by ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr Shāhīn – strongly negative and dismissive and containing such aspersions against Abū Zayd as “cultural AIDS” and “intellectual terrorism” (VE: 2). The offensive, derogatory language used by the scholar representing Dār al-‘Ulūm created an atmosphere of moral panic and probably greatly influenced the (certainly not unanimous) decision of the Committee and

the subsequent rejection of Abū Zayd’s promotion by the then rector of Cairo University, Ma’mūn Salāma (VE: 6).

It seems certain that spreading the motif of Abū Zayd’s alleged apostasy (*kufir*) in Egypt was also Shāhīn’s doing. The latter declared the former an apostate (*kāfir*) during the Friday sermon (*khutba*) at the ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ mosque on April 2, 2013 (VE: 6). Shāhīn, beside his main academic job, performed the role of an imām of this famous mosque located close to the so-called Old Coptic Cairo. A week later, his allegations against the author of *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ* were repeated in many mosques in Egypt, as Abū Zayd suggests – even by the preacher in the small mosque in his native village of Al-Quḥāfa (VE: 6). Adding to it, Shāhīn’s views and evaluation of Abū Zayd’s work inspired Muḥammad Ṣāmida ‘Abd al-Ṣamad, a lawyer with Islamist views, along with six colleagues, “to bring a case against Abū Zayd before the Giza Court of the First Instance” (VE:6) on June 10, 1993. This *ḥisba*-based (see: the subchapters 3.2 and 3.3) procedure opened the judicial dimension of the case, that was especially dangerous for the Egyptian scholar in terms of personal security and possibilities of his continuing academic career in Egypt.

3.1. The Context and Timing of the “Case of Abū Zayd”. Shāhīn’s Report

Before taking into account the content and implications of the Shāhīn’s report, we have to take into account the context and timing of the so-called “Abū Zayd’s Case”. There were some dramatic developments temporally correlated to it: in 1992 – Faraj Fawda²³ (Faraq Foda) was killed, and in 1994 – there was a stabbing attack on Nagib Mahfouz (Najīb Maḥfūz, 1911–2006), the famous Egyptian writer and the only Arab winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature (1988). The “politically motivated assaults” in the early 1990s symbolised growing violence against Egyptian intellectuals seen by the Islamists²⁴ as leftist, secular,

²³ Before his assassination in 1992, he was accused of blasphemy by the committee of clerics established at Al-Azhar. It greatly resembles the situation of Naṣr Abū Zayd in the similar period of time.

²⁴ The very notions of Islamist/Islamism are vague, however omnipresent in the contemporary discourse concerning the rituals of Islam, interpretations of the Qur’ān, and the political uses of religion. For that reason, both terms are utilised in this book, but carefully and with reservations.

or liberal. There was as well growing cooperation between so-called ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ Islamists.

The wider context of the case can be as well illustrated by the attitudes of some of the scholars (probably a significant majority) from Al-Azhar who supported the subsequent judicial procedures against Abū Zayd. The example would be the statement issued by Muḥammad al-Bīrī, the deputy chairman of the association of Al-Azhar scholars.

It is not enough for someone to declare his Islam and be considered as a Muslim: rather words should be accompanied by action. (...) [Abū Zayd] tried to say that Islamic rulings should not be applied exactly as they were mentioned in the Qur’ān, but that we should bear in mind the current changes that occur on a daily basis. As an example he argued that males and females should have equal shares of an inheritance, although the Qur’ān clearly stipulates that a woman’s share is one half of the man’s. His only aim was to attack Islam and claim that it has some weak points. If *Sharī’a* were applied, this man would have been killed (after: Mansour 2000: 232).

Most of the *ulamā’* associated with the famous institution found especially *Naqd al-khiṭāb al-dīnī* extremely offensive.

As was mentioned earlier, one of the reports concerning Abū Zayd’s academic qualifications was written by ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr Shāhīn (1928–2010), a professor of Arabic linguistics at Dār al-‘Ulūm and a regular Friday preacher at the Cairo ‘Amr ibn al-‘Āṣ mosque. Shāhīn seemed to be a scholar closely associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, although not always a member of this organisation. He was expressing anti-liberal and anti-Western views such as were often associated with very radical, even conspiracy theory-related criticism of Zionism and Jews. He perceived the conflict between the West and Islamic countries as a religious one and treated secularism as “heresy and atheism”²⁵. Such a perception obviously influenced ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr Shāhīn’s reading of Abū Zayd’s books.

Shāhīn’s report starts with a critique of Abū Zayd’s book *Al-Imām al-Shāfi’ī wa-ta’sīs al-aydiyūlūjīyya al-wasaṭīyya*²⁶. He suggests that it con-

²⁵ Such statements are included in the video with his interview from 2006 for the television Al-Nās. See: Egyptian Cleric Abd Al-Sabour Shaheen: Our Conflict with the West Has Religious Roots, <https://www.memri.org/tv/egyptian-cleric-abd-al-sabour-shaheen-our-conflict-west-has-religious-roots>, 9 July 2009. Accessed 9 March 2017.

²⁶ F. Najjar (2000; 179–181) made some important remarks about Shāhīn’s report.

sists of only 110 pages and does not have real scientific weight (*dhū wazn khaṭīf ‘ilmiyyan*; Shāhīn 1995: 21). These patronising remarks are then developed into some more theological and historical points. Abū Zayd showed Al-Shāfi‘ī as a thinker trying to find some middle ground between different schools of jurisprudence (Shāhīn suggests that Abū Zayd understands it as *talfīq*²⁷). This attempt, however understandable, meant for Abū Zayd giving preference to tradition (*naql*) over reason (*‘aql*). This approach, which is rather simplistically deduced by Shāhīn from Abū Zayd’s book, is strongly criticised by the professor of Dār al-‘Ulūm (Shāhīn 1995: 21-22). Moreover, Shāhīn denounces Abū Zayd for using some tools of historical critique in approaching the first events shaping the history of Islamic *umma*. In the words of Shāhīn, Abū Zayd’s vision of Al-Saqīfa²⁸ and the early caliphate is “the history of conspiracy (*mu‘āmarā*²⁹) carried out by caliphs from the Quraysh’ (Shāhīn 2000: 21). Shāhīn just wonders ‘how dare he [Abū Zayd] depict the great Muslim jurist as *mulaḥfiq* (falsifier) and *mughālīṭ* (deceiver)’ (cf. Najjar 2000: 180).

Another point criticised is Abū Zayd’s approach to secularism (*‘almāniyya*), that is unacceptable for Shāhīn. The latter seems to be outraged by Abū Zayd’s assertion³⁰ that secularism is ‘nothing more than the genuine interpretation’ (*laysat fī jawharihā siwā al-ta’wīl al-ḥaqīqī*)

²⁷ The term is understood here as “piecing together”, that is deriving rules from the existing various schools of Islamic law. It could be a part of modernising or reforming the Islamic jurisprudence. The word has also other connotations in modern literary Arabic, e.g. ‘invention, falsification, fabrication’.

²⁸ The name of the house (used earlier by the Jewish tribe of Banī Sā‘ida from Madīna) in Al-Madīna al-Munawwara, used as shorthand for the event, or the gathering, which was a crucial turning point in the history of Islam. On the day Muhammad died (June 8, 632 CE), the Medinan Muslim or “Al-Anṣār” gathered in the Saqīfa to discuss the future and leadership of the Muslims. The meeting probably concluded with choosing the future caliph and paying allegiance (*bay‘a*) to Abū Bakr as the first leader of the Islamic Ummah after Muḥammad. It could pave the way for more divisions in the community and clearer separation of the *shi‘at ‘Alī*, party of the followers of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib. The meaning and course of the very event is a matter of disagreement between Sunni and Shia Muslims.

²⁹ Shāhīn probably tries to “bounce the ball”, using such an argument about the conspiratorial vision of the history of Islam in light of the frequent usage of conspiracy theories by Islamist scholars.

³⁰ The analysed passage is included in *Naqd al-khiṭāb al-dīnī* (1992: 11).

and scientific understanding of religion (Shāhīn 1995: 22). Shāhīn points as well to his premonition that Abū Zayd perceives belief in the supernatural (*al-aql al-ghaybī*) to be “mired in myths and legends” (*ghāriqan fī al-khurāfa wa-al-uṣṭūra*). For the Islamist-oriented scholar it was logical that it should have been treated as “the basis of the faith” (*al-ghayb asās al-īmān*; Shāhīn 1995: 22) and there should have been no further discussion regarding the subject. Scandalising for the Islamist-oriented sphere was also the fact that Abū Zayd criticised the violent reaction of Muslim masses against the *Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie. The author of *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ* linked this phenomenon as well to massive censorship problems with the edition of the famous novel by Nagīb Maḥfūz, *Awlād Ḥāratinā* [Children of Our Alley], published firstly in 1959, then translated into English in 1981 and into Polish in 2013. Abū Zayd compared critically this violent upheaval with the more nuanced attitude of the Catholic Church that did not try to prevent the worldwide popularisation of Martin Scorsese’s film *The Last Temptation of Christ* in the late 1980s.

The enmity towards Abū Zayd’s works probably derives from the fact that in some way it opposes the traditional mode of thinking common among Muslim jurists and theologians. They created some sort of rationality dependent on the central role of God–Allāh, but Abū Zayd believed in forging some middle ground between the Western and Arab theories and pursuing a more independent attitude of the Human Mind and the way of reasoning rooted at the same time in Arab culture and the Greco-Roman and Western Enlightenment heritage. Adding to the longstanding conflict concentrated on the problem: a created Qur’ān as opposed to an eternal Qur’ān, it fuelled the conflict between Abū Zayd and his adversaries and foes. Of course, the forces were unequal: scholars such as Shāhīn knew that they could distort the views of Abū Zayd without any limitations, and even count on the support of the “Egyptian street mob”, mobilised by some groups of political Islam.

The hostile tone of Shāhīn’s argumentation is strengthened by how he presented the reprinted version of the report in the book *Qiṣṣat Abū Zayd’ wa-inḥiṣār al-‘almāniyya fī Jāmi‘at al-Qāhira* (Shāhīn 1995). On the book’s cover there is a coloured image with a caricature-like vision of Abū Zayd as a “dwarf”, a small podgy man, accompanied by the tall, elegant and erudite-looking Shāhīn and his intellectual comrades (cf. Loza 2013: 39).

As a result of the pressure of radically conservative scholars and activists, Abū Zayd’s academic promotion (to the full professor title) was denied in 1993 and, subsequently, it led to individual lawsuits against him.

The main critique of Abū Zayd, in addition to Shāhīn's report, was formulated by the Islamist intellectuals with different background e.g. Muḥammad 'Imāra (born in 1931) who was a Marxist at the beginning of his academic career. Probably, these problematic origins of Arab intellectuals' world-views are a reminder of why their disputes and arguments are so heated and even violent. The interchangeable labelling of intellectual foes as atheists, secularists, or Marxists is the often employed strategy of those academics who support different movements of political Islam. Abū Zayd was the obvious victim of such stereotyping and hostile way of thinking.

3.2. The Legal Aspects of the “Case of Abū Zayd”

Fauzi Najjar (2000: 186) suggests that “never before has an Egyptian court ruled that a husband must be separated from his wife on grounds of apostasy”. It seems that the case was not unique, but probably the most complex and widely-commented one as for the situation in Egypt in the 1990s.

The judicial proceedings in the “case of Abū Zayd” took more than three years. The court rulings were made in three instances of the Egyptian judicial system: the Court of the First Instance in Giza (27.01.1994), the Cairo Court of Appeals (14.06.1995), and the Egyptian Court of Cassation (5.08.1996) [cf. Bälz 1997: 136].

The legal case was firstly brought to the Personal Status Department of the Giza Court in 1993. The context of this first process was the growing publicising of the case (e.g. the publishing of Shāhīn's report and the subsequent polemics in *Al-Ahrām*, the renowned Egyptian newspaper) and campaign of hatred against the scholar. A movement of support for him arose both in Egypt and Europe as well. The polemics and quarrels were very intensive on both sides, as is expressed e.g. in the volume of mostly pro-Abū Zayd essays and commentaries edited by him as *Al-Qawl al-mufīd fī qaḍīyyat Abū Zayd* (Abū Zayd 1996). However, only the anti-Abū Zayd side wanted and could refer to something that we could call the “voice of the Egyptian street” or the prism of moral panic.

In January 1994, the Giza Court rejected the apostasy lawsuit against Abū Zayd on procedural grounds, but the ruling was appealed against, and on 14 June 1995, Cairo's Appeals Court (*Maḥkamat al-Isti'nāf al-Qāhira*), reversing the earlier decision, ruled Abū Zayd an

apostate (*murtadd*), and ordered his separation from his wife. Ironically, two weeks before (31 May) finally “the Cairo University Council had decided to promote Abu Zayd to a full professorship after his second application for promotion” (Rahman 2001: 20). Unfortunately, this late decision did not play any role, taking into account the difficult position of the scholar and his wife in the context of judicial proceedings and the Islamist campaign against him. The decision about both of them going into exile was just taken.

The Cassation Court (*Maḥkamat al-Naqḍ al-Miṣriyya*) upheld the decision and argumentation used by the Appeals Court. That time, Abū Zayd and his wife, Ibtihāl Yūnis were already in exile, in Leiden, in the Netherlands.

The Appeals Court based its decision on its interpretation that the principle of *ḥisba* is applicable in matters of personal status (Najjar 2000). *Ḥisba* – is a kind of a doctrine of “accountability” inside the Islamic community, a doctrine related both to morality and market. The real content of this principle and who should exercise it is a matter of lively discussion. It can be defined as well as “an old, little used Islamic concept where any Muslim can take a fellow Muslim to a religious court on the charge of conduct in violation of the *sharīʿa*, even if he himself is not personally affected by the behaviour” (Al-Azm 2014b: 241).

Part of the argumentation in the Appeals Court decision was related to Abū Zayd’s critique of the practice of *jizya*, that is a per capita yearly tax historically levied by Islamic states on certain non-Muslim subjects – dhimmis (*dhimmī*) – permanently residing in Muslim lands under Islamic law. The court’s argumentation seems to be very emotional and politicised.

The defendant’s proposition that the requirement of Christians and Jews to pay *jizya* (poll tax) constitutes a reversal of humanity’s efforts to establish a better world is contrary to the divine verses on the question of *jizya*, in a manner considered by some, inappropriate, even for temporal matters and judgments notwithstanding its inappropriateness when dealing with the Qur’ān and Sunnah, whose texts represent the pinnacle of humane and generous treatment of non-Muslim minorities. If non-Muslim countries were to grant their Muslim minorities even one-tenth of the rights accorded to non-Muslim minorities by Islam, instead of undertaking the mass murder of men, women, and children, this would be

a step forward for humanity. The verse on *jizya*, verse 29 of Sūrat al-Tawba, which the defendant opposes, is not subject to discussion". (p. 16 of the Appeals Court judicial opinion)

The Appeals Court sentence contains almost all the allegations raised by the plaintiffs in the first part of the Case. For example Abū Zayd was thus accused: "he denied God's character as a king sitting on a throne; he denied the existence of the angels, of the jinns and of the devil; moreover, he denied that the Qur'ān is the word of God and claimed it was a «man-made» text" (Bälz 1997: 145).

The Appeals Court used strongly politicised arguments, suggesting that it was capable of distinguishing between belief and apostasy presenting interpretation that was very negative towards Abū Zayd.

Belief [*i'tiqād*] is what people conceal in the inner reaches of their conscience; it must be distinguished clearly from apostasy [*riḍḍa*], which is a crime [*jarīma*] bearing a substantial element [*rukn māddī*] which is presented to the Court. (...) Apostasy is established on the basis of an acknowledgement [*iqrār*] or a legal testimony [*bayyina shar'iyya*]. An acknowledgement is someone's recognition of a set of facts which imposes certain legal consequences upon him. In this instance, no evidence through other means is required... He [Abū Zayd] acknowledged that he is the one who wrote the aforementioned publications and if they contain a testimony of explicit unbelief [*kufr ṣarīḥ*] - this equates with an acknowledgement which meets the legal requirements for a ruling dissolving the marriage (cited after: Bälz 1997: 145).

Subsequently, the following definition of apostasy is contained in the sentence itself.

Apostasy [*riḍḍa*] is legally defined as "turning away from Islam" [*rujū' 'an dīn al-Islām*]. The apostate [*murtadd*] is the one who turns away from Islam to unbelief [*kufr*]. This requires a declaration of unbelief through an explicit declaration or an act in which it is implicit. [These conditions are met if] someone denies what is established through the verses of the Qur'ān or the Ḥadīth of the Holy Prophet (cited after: Bälz 1997: 146).

It has to be admitted that argumentation contained in The Appeals Court sentence was closely replicated by the Cassation Court in 1996.

Ironically, as was mentioned earlier, in 1995 Cairo University promoted Naṣr Abū Zayd to the post of full professor, actually for the sec-

ond time, because he had completed the procedure previously in 1993. The opinion of the Academic Committee from 1995 proves that the Egyptian academia had finally decided to support Abū Zayd.

After reviewing the works submitted by Dr. Abū Zayd in his application for promotion, examining them both individually and as a whole, we have reached the following conclusion: his prodigious academic efforts demonstrate that he is a researcher well-rooted in his academic field, well-read in our Islamic intellectual traditions, and with a knowledge of all its many branches — Islamic principles, theology, jurisprudence, Sufism, Qur’ānic studies, rhetoric, and linguistics — he has not rested on the laurels of his in-depth knowledge of this field, but has taken a forthright, critical position. He does not attempt to make a critique until he has mastered the issues before him, investigating them by way of both traditional and modern methodologies. In sum he is a free thinker, aspiring only to the truth. If there is something urgent about his style, it stems from the urgency of the crisis which the contemporary Arab-Islamic World is witnessing and the necessity to honestly identify the ills of this world in order that an effective cure be found. Academic research should not be isolated from social problems, but should be allowed to participate in current debates and to suggest solutions to current dilemmas by allowing researchers to investigate and interpret as far as possible.

3.3. The Impact of “Abū Zayd’s Case” after 1995

3.3.1. The New Ḥisba law

The context and impact of the Abū Zayd’s case was accurately portrayed by Ṣādiq al-‘Aẓm (2014b: 221):

The broad trend in the Arab world to make religion a private matter represents a retreat for the hegemony of religion over public life. The issue of faith and the observance of religious rites are now up to the individual, then the family. It has become common to find within one family one religious daughter, an atheist son, and another daughter in between, as in Najīb Maḥfūz [Naguib Mahfouz’s] novels. (...) Islamism

is an attempt to recapture a situation which prevailed in the past, when Islamic societies were Islamic. What does this mean? It is a form of acknowledgement, a confession that the hegemony and control previously exercised by religion have retreated from public life in these societies in favour of something else. Islamism is trying to regain a position it has lost. In this sense, it is a reactionary and restoration movement in the true sense of both terms. The entire question of *ḥisba* in Egypt, for example, was an attempt to strip the individual of his recently acquired right to decide freely in matters relating to religious faith and religious observance, or the lack thereof.

The first direct effect of the Abū Zayd's case was the broad public discussion concerning the very notion and way of utilising *ḥiṣba* as a legal procedure. It resulted in passing the new *Ḥisba Law* by the Egyptian People's Assembly on 29 January 1996. Taking into account that religious courts were abolished in Egypt in 1955 (Najjar 2000: 192), the status of the new law was ambiguous. On the one hand, as its official name stated: *Regulating the procedures of the ḥisba action in personal status matters*, it was focused on limiting some extremist interpretations directed at the intellectual freedom of thought (cf. Bälz 1997: 141). It was declared by the Egyptian lawmakers in a rather strong and explicit way.

Combat intellectual terrorism [*al-irhāb al-fikrī*] and protect intellectuals from attempts to inflict moral and psychological harm upon them ... [by] extremists who consider it their privilege to be the only Muslims and whoever opposed them to be unbelievers³¹ [*kuffār*].

However, on the other hand the new law codified or even reified the purely religious principle and institution being the proof of the mixed, ambiguous religious-secular character of Egyptian law. It was criticised e.g. by the former judge and liberal thinker Muḥammad Saʿīd al-ʿAshmawī, who found the new *ḥisba* law superfluous and “satisfying the claims of extremists and terrorists” (Najjar 2000: 192). Probably the most important paragraph of the amended law was the transferring of the right to exercise *ḥisba* to the public prosecutor (*al-Niyāba*

³¹ Cited after: Bälz 1997: 141. Bälz's translation is slightly corrected by MM.

al-Amma)³². At the same time the plaintiffs were required to “have a personal and direct interest” in the procedure (Bälz 1997: 141), which aimed at limiting the most ideological and politicised cases. Kilian Bälz (1997: 142) suggests that such a solution was intended to be a sort of transition from the traditional Islamic position of *muhtasib*³³ to the contemporary more secular and judicially rooted post of the public prosecutor (*niyāba*). Thus, the judicial procedure and way of performing the Muslim individuals’ duty to *hisba* became more limited, but at the same time the controversial principle, not even purely explicated and mentioned in the Qur’ān and *hadīths* and surpassing other sources of Egyptian law, became an official part of the codified law.

It has to be admitted as well that the Cassation Court, proceeding the Abū Zayd’s case in the third instance (1996), did not take the new *hisba* law into account because it did not have retroactive application. Thus, the case that had really influenced the law later passed by the Egyptian parliament could not have been revoked with the usage of the newly defined institution of public prosecutor. Knowing this paradox, it has to be underlined that the *hisba* principle is still used in Egypt in the cases regarding limits to the freedom of speech and intellectual discourse.

A different account of the *hisba* discussion is given by Abū Zayd’s widow, Ibtihal Yūnis, in her statements published by Pierre Loza. She thinks in the context of Abū Zayd’s case that “the Egyptian people discovered a disastrous loophole in Egypt’s laws called *hisba*, which can separate two spouses” (Loza 2013: 89). So in her eyes, “one of the positive ramifications of Abu Zaid’s [Abū Zayd’s] case was that a team of lawyers contested *hisba*’s constitutionality in Egypt and as a result of these efforts, a *hisba* case can only be launched by the attorney general’s [public prosecutor’s]

³² The Article 1 of the law stated that “the public prosecutor is exclusively entitled to raise an action based on *hisba* in personal status matters”. Cited after: Bälz 1997: 141.

³³ The *Muhtasib* (literally: inspector of the markets) “was responsible for enforcing Islamic morals and behaviour in the community of Muslims” (Najjar 2000: 191). This traditional, even Byzantine-linked, institution was Islamised in the Abbasid times. The office of *muhtasib* was called *hisba*, and subsequently it became a more general term describing individual duty entitling every Muslim to bring an action” in a case of infringing the “claims of God” (*huqūq Allāh*) [Bälz 1997: 139].

office” (Loza 2013: 89). The earlier analysis proves that such a rather optimistic approach could be juxtaposed with more negative consequences of Egyptian (somewhat schizophrenic) manoeuvring between the judicial framework of the modern nation-state and the Islamic or Islamist outlook, which is so clearly represented in the phenomenon of *ḥisba*.

3.3.2. Evolution of the Perception of Abū Zayd’s Works and Personality in Egypt and in the Eyes of Egyptians and other Arabs

The attitude of Abū Zayd in the light of the accusations regarding his alleged apostasy was expressed in his interview given to Nadia Abou El-Magd (2000).

I’m sure that I’m a Muslim. My worst fear is that people in Europe may consider and treat me as a critic of Islam. I’m not. I’m not a new Salman Rushdie, and don’t want to be welcomed and treated as such. I’m a researcher. I’m critical of old and modern Islamic thought. I treat the Qur’ān as a *naṣṣ* (text) given by God to the Prophet Muḥammad. That text is put in a human language, which is the Arabic language. When I said so, I was accused of saying that the Prophet Muḥammad wrote the Qur’ān. This is not a crisis of thought, but a crisis of conscience. (...) I criticised the religious discourse and its social, political and economic manifestations, and this threatened the interests of some institutions. (...) I would like to tell the Muslim nation that I was born, raised, and lived as a Muslim and, God willing, I will die as a Muslim.

The deeply demonised image of Abū Zayd as an apostate or heretic, shaped between 1992 and 1995 by the Islamist *milieu*, started to change in Egypt after 2000. Especially after 2003 more interest in Abū Zayd’s works in Egypt could have been noticed. This process of growing Arab and Egyptian media attention and its effects on Abū Zayd’s public image is quite interestingly described by Ibtihāl Yūnis:

Media access made a huge difference, and before appearing on Egyptian television, Abu Zaid [Abū Zayd] first appeared on a number of Arab media outlets like al-Jazeera [Al-Jazīra] and others. The difference came in the reactions of average people. People saw that he had no horns gaping out of his forehead or smoke coming out of his nostrils and that he wasn’t this devilish figure the Islamists had portrayed him as.

People could see a regular, simple human being with baby-like features who expresses himself with a simplicity that allows him to enter peoples’ hearts (Loza 2013: 80).

In 2005 Naṣr Abū Zayd appeared on one of Egypt’s most-watched state-owned television programmes *El-Bit Bitak*³⁴ [literary Arabic transcription: *Al-Bayt Baytak/Baytik* “The house is your house”], with his colleague, a famed TV announcer Mahmoud Sa’ad (Loza 2013: 61). This interview showed the more humanistic, personal side of Abū Zayd. e.g. he elaborated on the question of how he delayed his entrance into university in order to financially strengthen his family. The topic of corruption and cronyism at the academic institutions in Egypt was also addressed (cf. Loza 2013: 61). All these aspects could introduce to the Egyptian audience a more accurate image of Abū Zayd, devoid of the brand of an “apostate”.

In 2008, after getting the prestigious Ibn Rushd Prize in 2005, he gave the first lectures in Egypt since “the Case of Abū Zayd” began, resulting in his subsequent exile to the Netherlands in 1995. It was the lecture entitled *Art and Taboos* and was presented at the American University of Cairo in May 2008 (Loza 2013: 60). It was just less than two years and a half before the unexpected death of Abū Zayd after he was infected by an unknown virus during his visit to Indonesia. In December 2008 Abū Zayd delivered four lectures at the Library of Alexandria (Loza 2013: 60). He was personally invited to give them by Youssef Ziedan (Yūsuf Zaydān³⁵), the then director of the Centre of Manuscripts at the Library of Alexandria. The Alexandria series of lectures aimed at recapitulating Abū Zayd’s redefining of Qur’ānic interpretation/s (cf. (Loza 2013: 60).

Another important incident in the last phase of Abū Zayd’s life was the controversy over his planned trip to Kuwait when he was denied an entry visa to this Gulf country (Loza 2013: 62). Probably it was because of the political wrangling and dealing between the ruling Al-Ṣabāḥ family’s government and the parliament, with the strong Islamist faction. Abū Zayd did not

³⁴ The full unofficial coverage of the programme is accessible on the YouTube website: *Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd ḍayf bi-barnāmij “Al-Bayt Baytak”, taqḍīm Maḥmūd Sa’ad*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YugMjBi773k>. Accessed April 2017.

³⁵ Yūsuf Zaydān (born in 1958) – the Egyptian scholar specialised in Arabic and Islamic studies, especially in researching the classical Arabic manuscripts. Zaydān is also an acclaimed writer of fiction. His second novel is the sophisticated, philosophical-theological novel *‘Azāzīl*, which won the 2009 International Prize for Arabic Fiction (often referred to as the “Arabic Booker”).

deliver the lecture in Kuwait (organised primarily by the Kuwaiti academic, Ṭālib al-Mawlā, a member of the Centre for Cultural Dialogue “Tanweer³⁶)³⁷. Although not a promising one in scientific and political terms, the Kuwaiti incident showed that Abū Zayd’s reception among the elites and masses of Egyptian society had become more positive, and he received many expressions of support from its different segments (cf. Loza 2013: 63–65).

In 2010 Abū Zayd took part in a programme on the popular Qatari-based Al-Jazīra channel. It was the question-and-answer session between Abū Zayd and viewers, and the general atmosphere was quite welcoming and positive towards Abū Zayd and his *tajdīd*-related ideas (Loza 2013: 61).

The period of Abū Zayd’s death, and the subsequent funeral and mourning, exactly reflected the growing tolerance or even respect towards Abū Zayd especially in the environment close to Mubārak’s regime. For example, an extensive obituary was published in *Al-Ahrām* (Loza 2013: 67), the famous and important Egyptian daily newspaper, which was state-run and usually stayed in line with the official discourse of Mubarak’s regime. The aforementioned newspaper published a lot of material about the Abū Zayd’s case in the 1990s, but did not show significant or clear support for the thinker. At the same time, the mostly Islamist critics of Abū Zayd even after his death were totally dismissive of his works and ideas. The period shortly after Abū Zayd’s death was recapitulated by Gaber Asfour (Jābir Aḥmad ‘Uṣfūr³⁸, born in 1944), his longtime friend and academic colleague, writer, thinker and translator.

And now I see both the regime and opposition newspapers
racing to celebrate the man. These are the same newspapers

³⁶ *Tanwīr* is an Arabic word meaning “enlightenment, renaissance”. Supporters of the modernist movements in the Arab world are sometimes called *tanwīriyyūn* “those who are enlightened”. The Islamist factions use this label pejoratively and ironically.

³⁷ Details concerning the case of Kuwait’s unrealised lecture of Abū Zayd are included in the article: No author, Top academic is not allowed into Kuwait. December 17, 2009. *Arab Times*. <http://www.indiansinkuwait.com/ShowArticle.aspx?ID=2116&SECTION=0>. Accessed April 2017.

³⁸ ‘Uṣfūr, however often independent in his views, had contacts with Egyptian regime elites, resulting in his growing political role after 2010. He was the Minister of Culture for just nine days (1–9 February 2011), in Aḥmad Shafīq’s government, witnessing the events of the so-called 25 January Revolution, growing Egyptian protests, and the resignation of Ḥusnī Mubārak. He regained this post under ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī power, between June 2014 and March 2015.

that facilitated his detractors’ efforts to cast doubts about the man’s faith. On the other side of the debate there are the satellite channels and internet websites of bigotry that continuously deliver their jeers and taunts at Abu Zaid’s [Abū Zayd’s] death. Even though the man is now with his Creator... but they know nothing of values (cited after: Loza 2013: 67)

If we assess and comment on the legacy of Abū Zayd’s case and, more generally, his intellectual heritage, the most interesting aspect is probably the importance and up-to-date character of his ideas. Just several months after his unexpected passing the revolutionary movements overcame Tunisia and Egypt leading to the overthrowing of long-standing dictators, the beginning of political transition in both countries, and “the domino effect” producing yet more violent developments in subsequent Arab countries. This sequence of the “Arab Spring” in some way paved the way for more interest in Abū Zayd’s legacy, especially in his native Egypt, or at least these political and social changes have positively coincided with it. However, the primary optimism of the “Arab Spring” discourse was strongly eclipsed by the humanitarian tragedy of Syria, probably the most tragic conflict in the world after the Second World War. The drive towards democracy, tolerance, and a more open society was somewhat replaced after 2012 by growing sectarianism, terrorism, politicisation of Islam, and a return to the softly upgraded old forms of dictatorship and political cronyism.

However even in this context the intellectual legacy of Abū Zayd was still lively. It can be proved e.g. by ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī’s speech on religious revolution (Egyptian Arabic: *sawra dīniya*). The newly-elected Egyptian strongman delivered the speech on 1st of January 2015 at Al-Azhar, the *alma mater* that played an important, but rather indirect role during Abū Zayd’s judicial procedures and the campaigns of defaming the Egyptian scholar. Al-Sīsī, in a somewhat astonishing way, strongly attacked the world-view often attributed to the Islamists and at least part of the Azhari establishment. He used vocabulary that seemed to be quite in line with Abū Zayd’s *tajdīd* and *naqd al-khiṭāb al-dīnī* understandings.

That thinking (*fīkr*) – I am not saying «religion» (*dīn*) but «thinking» – that corpus of texts and ideas that we have held sacred over the years, to the point that departing from them has become almost impossible, is antagonising the entire world. It’s antagonising the entire world!” (cited after: Neriah 2015).

It has to be admitted that Al-Sisī's speech could have been made just for rhetorical effect. However it also underlines how reformist thinkers have changed the Egyptian intellectual and social landscape in spite of hardships, legal problems, and animosity towards them on the part of the big conservative segments of society. Even the military and political elites, rather authoritarian than democratic in their practices, feel obliged to relate to the concepts introduced by the Muslim reformists on the verge of the 19th and 20th c. The weak point of such invocations to the reform of Islamic discourse is the fact that the Islamic establishment in Egypt (e.g. scholars from Al-Azhar) is mostly very averse to any changes. The paradox is that the official image of Al-Azhar's grand imam Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib is moderate and tolerant, although "hardliners remain there in senior positions and have failed to reform its curricula"³⁹ (*The Economist* 2017), which was also one of the main critics of the dominant Muslim theological establishment elaborated in Abū Zayd's *Naqd al-khiṭāb al-dīnī*. Moreover, even if Al-Azhari scholars were to stand at the forefront of the fight for more open religious discourse and a more democratic society, still they would not have the zeal and convincing power of the propaganda prepared by the so-called Islamic State or radical Salafi activists. Thus, it seems that 22 years after the start of Abū Zayd's exile, the reforming of the dominant religious discourse and embracing the hermeneutic approach to the Qur'ān, remains a thorny issue in Egypt.

* * *

The "Case of Abū Zayd", the main events of which took place between 1992 and 1995, had many implications in many areas of Egyptian and (speaking more generally) Arab public life and contemporary reflection on the reformation of Islamic thought (using the title of one of Abū Zayd's English-language books). At a personal level, it was a trauma for

³⁹ An interesting idea is expressed by the Egyptian political analyst and a former jihadist, Kamāl Ḥabīb: "You are asking Al-Azhar to renew religious discourse while the state is not renewing its own discourse. There is no mechanical relationship whereby you change religious discourse and therefore things will be better" (cited after: *The Economist* 2017). Ḥabīb presents the view that reforming and renewing the religious discourse would not be possible without a broader change of political paradigms into building a more democratic and inclusive system and society. The current authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rule can instigate violent radicalism and jihadism owing to its own nature, even more strongly than the conservative approaches embraced by many Al-Azhar's or Dar al-'Ulūm scholars.

Naṣr Abū Zayd and his wife, Ibtihāl Yūnis, resulting in exile and separation from the beloved country⁴⁰ in whose culture and daily life they were both very strongly rooted. At a more public level, the case was one of the main proofs of the scale of the conflict between Egyptian liberals/reformists/secularists on the one side and Islamists/radical conservatives/radical preachers on the other. The whole problem of Abū Zayd’s accusation, and the imputation that he was an apostate made by the plaintiffs during the judicial case, highlighted more general problems in the nature of the Egyptian nation-state, its (inseparable, it seems) relationship with Islam, and the question of whether coexistence between the secular law rooted in Western patterns and Islamic *sharʿa* law can be somehow achieved. It even showed how the main body of Islamic jurisprudence in the course of time has become covered with many institutions and principles, not exactly rooted in the Qurʾān and ḥadīths, but having a big impact on daily life activity as well as on the understanding of the morals, values, and even limits of free scientific and academic discourse⁴¹ in Islamic society (e.g. the principle of *ḥisba*, so extensively used in procedures directed against Abū Zayd). The only purely positive aspect of the “Case of Abū Zayd” was the fact that the Egyptian scholar became more present in the European/Western academia and his English-language books published in this period made him better known to a wider audience both in the Netherlands and the other European countries.

⁴⁰ In Abū Zayd’s own words taken from *Voice of an Exile*: “It is Egypt who calls me at night in my dreams. It is Egypt to whom I long to return” (VE: 16).

⁴¹ Edward W. Said (Arabic: Idwār Wadī Saʿīd, 1935–2003), the famous Palestinian-American intellectual, professor of literature and pioneer of postcolonial studies, said in his commencement address at the American University in Cairo, on June 17, 1999, that it is unlikely “[university] can survive as a real university if its governance and teaching mission become the objects of scrutiny and direct interference not of its teachers but of powers outside the university. (...). We must always view the academy as a place to voyage in, owning none of it but at home everywhere in it. There can be no forbidden knowledge if the modern university is to maintain its place, its mission, its power to educate. (...). The whole notion of academic freedom underwent a significant downgrading during the past three decades. It became possible for one to be free in the university only if one completely avoided anything that might attract unwelcome attention or suspicion” (cited after: VE: 16). Abū Zayd himself states that he doesn’t know “whether Said had [his] case in mind (...), his words, though, certainly apply” (VE: 16).

The Intellectual Legacy of Naṣr Abū Zayd. An Approach to Hermeneutics

4.1. The Diversity of Interpretations and Religious Meanings

One of the most widely known characteristics of Abū Zayd's main ideas was given by Navid Kermani, who extracted three main ideas from the Egyptian scholar's writings.

1. to trace the various interpretations and historical settings of the single Qur'anic text from the early days of Islam up to the present;
2. to demonstrate the "interpretational diversity" (*al-ta'addud al-ta'wīlī*) that exists within the Islamic tradition; and,
3. to show how this diversity has been increasingly neglected across Islamic history (Kermani 2006: 174).

Kermani (born 1967), a German writer and thinker of Iranian origin⁴², was one of the leading commentators of Abū Zayd's books, es-

⁴² Navid Kermani became well-known in Germany in 2014 when he delivered a speech in the Bundestag praising the German immigration system. In addition, he won many prestigious literary prizes e.g. for his book *Zwischen Koran und Kafka: West-Östliche Erkundungen* (2015). In 2017 he was considered as a candidate for the post of president of Germany after the term of Joachim Gauck was to finish. Finally, he did not take part in the elections, as the SPD (Social Democratic Party) chose the other candidate, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, to represent it as a consensual candidate of SPD and CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union). The Federal Convention elected the latter on February 12, 2017. See: Who will be Germany's Next President? *TheLocal.de*. 7 June 2016. <https://www.thelocal.de/20160607/who-will-be-germanys-next-president>. Accessed April 2017.

pecially *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ* (Kermani 1996). He underlines the importance of the *turāth* in the Egyptian scholar's writings. The critical approach to it leads to a hermeneutical diversity of interpretations. The style of Abū Zayd's writings in Arabic is very characteristic – we could call it a phenomenon that is quite difficult to express in Western languages. This also explains the relatively small number of translations, especially complete books with a scholarly scientific apparatus, into European languages. German, French and Italian translators and commentators have done more significant work than has been done so far by their counterparts writing in English. Abū Zayd's works are extensively filled with digressions and some of the main ideas are still repeated and reformulated in subsequent parts of his texts. From the Western point of view, in some moments it can give the impression of redundancy, but probably it would not be the case as for the Arabic-native recipient.

His use of the Arabic language is quite sophisticated and creative, Kermani (2006: 171) accurately described his style as “refreshing – free from solemn rhetoric but at times quite complicated – (...) a blend of almost antiquated Arabic, neologisms, and foreign European phrases”. The German-Iranian researcher is also right when he underlines the serious approach of Abū Zayd to the Eastern sources and schools of thought.

What is even more striking in his writings, however, is the manifestation of an abiding sense of surprise at the way in which certain of the ideas and content of traditional Islamic learning and attitudes are to be found – in different forms and with a different terminology – in Western learning, and that the latter (“alien”) knowledge provides a possible key to understanding his “own” tradition. As a consequence, the categories of “own” and “alien” constantly blur and sometimes vanish in Abū Zayd's works (Kermani 2006: 171).

This ability to creatively use classical Islamic sources in dialogue and with modern and contemporary Western ideas and methodologies proves to be the most valuable element of the Egyptian scholar's works. It is rather underestimated both in Arab and Western scientific discourse, because in the 1990s the focus was rather on the “Abū Zayd's case” developments than on his research itself. However, the scientific content of, at first, *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ*, proves to justify itself and still be inspiring for younger generations of researchers. Abū Zayd's method juxtaposing classical Muslim thinkers and theoreticians of language

(Al-Zamakhsharī, Al-Suyūṭī, ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī) with contemporary Western semiotic and hermeneutical approaches, proves to be intellectually refreshing. His conclusions are not always totally convincing, as is however rather unavoidable taking into account his ambitions.

Kermani’s points are supported by the statements made by Abū Zayd himself, e.g. in *Rethinking the Qur’ān*, which is a short English-language book, very strongly inspired by the spirit of *Maḥmūd al-naṣṣ*.

The empirical diversity of the religious meaning is part of our human diversity around the meaning of life in general, which is supposed to be a positive value in our modern living context. In order to re-connect the question of the meaning of the Qur’ān to the question of the meaning of life it is now imperative to indicate the fact that the Qur’ān was the outcome of dialoguing, debating, augmenting, accepting and rejecting, not only with pre-Islamic norms, practice and culture, but with its own previous assessments, presuppositions, assertions etc. (RQ: 11).

4.2. Revelation as an Act of Communication – The “Humanistic” and Semiotic Aspect

We could start this passage with the citation from the Indonesian researcher Sukidi, who characterises, as he calls it, the “humanistic” approach to the research of the Qur’ān, that is presented by Abū Zayd. The researcher gives the following enumeration of arguments supporting such terminology in the article “Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd and the Quest for a Humanistic Hermeneutics of the Qur’ān”.

1. The Qur’ān is no longer defined as the eternal Speech of God kept in the Preserved Tablet in Arabic letters. Instead, Abū Zayd provides what I consider humanistic definitions of the Qur’ān as “created Speech of God” (*kalām Allāh makhḷūq*) in the human world a “linguistic text” (*naṣṣ lughawī*), a “human text” (*naṣṣ insānī*), a “product of culture” (*muntaj thaqāfī*), a “producer of culture” (*muntij li-l-thaqāfa*), and a “historical text” (*naṣṣ tā’rīkhī*).
2. A hermeneutic act concerning language is humanistic because Abū Zayd regards Arabic as the human language of revelation in Islam. As an intended consequence of

revelation in a humanly comprehensible language, the Qur'ān was and continues to be recited in Arabic. If revelation and recitation are in the human language of the addressee(s), Abū Zayd would rethink the origin of language as the product of human invention and convention (*iṣṭilāḥ*).

3. Abū Zayd offers a more humanistic hermeneutics of revelation as an “act of communication” between two parties who are (1) humans, for example in pre-Islamic poetry and the Qur'ān (2) humans and the jinn; and (3) God and humans in three different manners, either “by inspiration, or from behind a veil, or by the sending of a messenger to reveal, with His permission, what Allāh wills” (al-Shūrā/42:51). Each manner of revelation is examined with the most attention paid to the revelation of the Qur'ān by means of sending a messenger (*rasūl*). Revelation is no longer a relationship of two or even three parties; but is a “four-person-relation”: God, Gabriel/Jibrīl, Muḥammad, and the human. (Sukidi 2009: 185)

These assumptions are also justified and proved by the argumentation used in this dissertation in the passages above and below. It seems that the most important element of Abū Zayd's theory is his approach to revelation (*waḥy*). Revelation is understood by him in the light of the semiotic approaches by Yuri Lotman and Ferdinand de Saussure. Such a definition of revelation is formulated in one of the passages of *Maḥmūm al-naṣṣ*:

The Qur'ān describes itself as a message (*risāla*). The message represents (*tumaththil*) an act of communication (*'alāqat al-ittiṣāl*) between sender (*mursil*) and the recipient (*mustaqbil*), transmitted via a code or a linguistic system (*min khilāl shifra aw niẓām lughawī*). In the case of the Qur'ān it is not possible to treat the sender as a matter of scientific inquiry. So, it is natural that the scientific researching of the Qur'ān begins with the researching of reality and culture (Abū Zayd 1990: 27).

He is saying in other words, that the key moment in this historiographic vision is revealing, sending (*tanzīl*) of the Text by the first sender (*mursil*) – God to the first recipient (*al-mustaqbil al-awwal*) who is Muḥammad (God's Messenger–*rasūl Allāh*). The message is transmitted

via an intermediary – the archangel Jibrīl. Abū Zayd describes this event as the act of communication or relation of communication (*‘alāqat ittiṣāl*). Such an act is possible thanks to the role of the code or linguistic system (*shifra/nizām lughawī*) and takes place in a specific reality and cultural context (*siyāq wāqi‘ wa-thaqāfi*). The message (*risāla*) or Text (*naṣṣ*), especially at the moment of codification into written form, acquires the traits of a historical cultural product (*muntaj taqāfi*⁴³), and at the same time becomes itself a “creator of culture”. Muḥammad from being the first recipient evolves into the role of the sender of the Text, which itself as well begins to change in time and history. The *mursil–mustaqbil/mukhāṭab* communication relationship is established and repeated in every moment when the Qur’ān is recited, read and interpreted.

The choice of the language is important, however in Abū Zayd’s interpretation because, as he formulated it, language has not been an “empty vessel” (Abū Zayd 1990: 27), devoid of the broader historical and cultural context.

To these cultural-historical assumptions, Abū Zayd adapted the hermeneutic relation: the Text (*naṣṣ*) – interpreter (*mu’awwil*). Interpretation (*ta’wīl*) thus assumes the “movement of the mind of the interpreter towards the Text” (*ḥarakat dhīhn al-mu’awwil fī muwājahat al-naṣṣ*; Abū Zayd 2011: 239). This resembles the figure, used in European hermeneutics, of the hermeneutic circle in which the interpreter begins to understand the text by having preliminary judgments related to his culture, language, and education, and the process of interpretation permits the verification of these original convictions (Burzyńska, Markowski 2007: 177). The hermeneutic circle is also a continuous, alternating movement from detail to general and from whole to detail.

4.3. The Other Aspects of the Hermeneutical Reading of Qur’ān. Ta’wīl, Contextualisation, Ma’nà and Maghzà

Naṣr Abū Zayd’s innovation, which obviously did not meet with a very positive reception in the wider Egyptian and Arab *milieu*, was

⁴³ This expression is used by Abū Zayd (1990: 27) in a sense that the text is a cultural product in its reality and essence (*al-naṣṣ fī ḥaqīqatihi wa-jawharihi muntaj taqāfi*)

his switching from metaphysics to a more humanistic point of view. As we cannot describe or truly recognise the true nature of God, the focus should be on the human dimension of texts, and the Text – that is the Qur'ān.

As Rahman (2001: 147) rightly asserts, Abū Zayd's approach is "a critical one", strongly rooted in the historical-critical current. Although Abū Zayd was treated in the Arab world as a modernist, Marxist, or secular thinker, his method of interpretation was rooted in a rather traditional diachronic approach which, according to the critical opinion of John Barth, "examines the genesis, original meaning, and historical reconstruction of the Text, all of which questions are now considered *passé*, having been surpassed by the «new paradigm»" (after Rahman 2001: 146). Abū Zayd, however starting with this presumption and always keen on researching the historical and humanistic context of the Text (cf. Campanini 2005: 58-59), is not only a diachronically thinking scholar, but employs as well many elements of the more synchronic approach. Rahman summarises this not merely historical touch of Abū Zayd's works as "this critical attitude is equipped with by a variety of methods ranging from historical and textual interpretations to literary theory, such as hermeneutics, discourse analysis, and semiotics" (Rahman 2001: 148). By doing this, the Egyptian scholar was able to link diachronically – with synchronically-oriented methods of interpretation.

The main purpose of Abū Zayd's critical interpretations was underlined in one of the passages of *Al-Imām al-Shāfi'ī wa-ta'sīs al-aydiyūljīyya al-wasaṭiyya* (Abū Zayd 1992: 110).

The time is for the critical revision (*murāja'a*) and transition to the period of liberation, not only from the authority of the texts, but also from every authority which hinders the human journey in our world. We must undertake this (liberation) now and immediately before the flood sweeps us away.

(Wa-qad an awān al-murāja'a wa- al-intiqāl ilà marḥalat al-taḥarrur, lā min sulṭat al-nuṣūṣ waḥdahā, bal min kull sulṭa ta'ūq masīrat al-insān fī 'ālamīnā. 'Alaynā an naqūm bi-hādhā al-ān wa-fawran qabla an yajrufanā al-ṭufān).

The critical interpretation made by Abū Zayd is based on the dialectical (*jadaliyya*) relation⁴⁴ between the Text and its reader, who reads it in the specific context (*siyāq*). Context and contextualisation of the text (or the Text) are probably two absolutely crucial categories in Abū Zayd's approach, so the Egyptian scholar always recommends reading the Text in the historical context and understanding its original meaning. According to Rahman (2001: 142), "it does not mean, however, that the meaning of the Qur'ān has to conform to that context, because (...) Abū Zayd differentiates between the historical meaning of the Qur'an and its significance". From that there emerges the important conclusion, that the historical meaning of the Text (that could be expressed in Arabic as *dalāla tā'rīkhiyya* or *ma'nà*) is rooted in classical history or represented by the historical context, while its significance (*maghzà*) relates its meaning to the present and forms a dynamic contemporary meaning of the holy book of Islam. The other scholar researching the works of Abū Zayd, Mansour Iskandar, put it in a slightly different formulation: "the meaning is the original meaning of the Text according to its conditions and at the time of formation and according to the intention of the author (whether God or the Prophet Muḥammad), while the *maghzà* is the contemporary meaning given to the Text according to the conditions of its readers/interpreters" (Iskandar 2000: 235). The "intention of the author" is not a matter of metaphysical interest for Abū Zayd, as he treats the Qur'ān as a linguistic Text (*naṣṣ lughawī*), and is always rather preoccupied with the human dimension of the holy book, not trying to analyse the issue of "God's authorship".

It could be said as well that perhaps the difference between *ma'nà* and *maghzà* could be compared to the distinction between traditional exegesis, focused on the original, fixed, historical meaning of the given text, and hermeneutics, more directed at its changing, dynamic interpretation, taking into account historic and social developments. Of course, this distinction is in the case of Islam even more blurred than in the matter of Christianity and the Bible, because even in the classical era (the period of the Qur'ān's canonisation) there were tools of histori-

⁴⁴ Abū Zayd puts it *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ* (2011: 42) as "dialectical relationship" (*jadaliyyat al-'alāqa*) between the text and cultural reality (*bayna al-naṣṣ wa-al-wāqī' al-thaqāfī*), to which the text belongs and embodies by itself (cf. Suki-di 2009: 187). Abū Zayd suggests that this important dimension is invalidated (*ihdār*) or omitted by some conservative scholars.

cal contextualisation extrapolated on the Holy Text as *naskh* or *asbāb al-nuzūl* (see below).

It was also one of the aspects that drew a red line between Abū Zayd and his Islamist opponents, as Muḥammad 'Imāra or, in some sense, Sayyid Quṭb. They believed in the pre-existence of the fixed holy Text, and limited the practice of interpretation in Islam (*ijtihād*) just to cases when the literal meaning of the given Qur'ānic verse was not possible to detect. Totally unlike Abū Zayd, 'Imāra believed as well in the divine nature of the prophecy of Muḥammad, and the divine metaphysical nature of *sharī'a* law as included in the holy Text of the Qur'ān (cf. Iskandar 2000: 238ff.).

One of the most explicit explanations of the contextual and historical character of the holy book of Islam was contained in the subchapter *Al-Naṣṣ* (The Text), being a part of the first chapter of *Naqd al-khiṭāb al-dīnī*, and before the publication of the aforementioned volume, it was one of the last parts of the separate text "Al-Khiṭāb al-dīnī al-mu'āṣir: āliyyatuhu wa-munṭalaqatuhu al-fikriyya" (see: subchapter 1.4.1).

The [Qur'ānic] Text changed from the very first moment – that is, when the Prophet recited it at the moment of its revelation (*ma'a qira'at al-nabī lahu lahẓat al-waḥy*) – from its existence as a divine Text (*naṣṣ ilāhī⁴⁵*), and became something understandable, a human text (*naṣṣ insānī*), because it changed from revelation/sending to interpretation (*li-annahū taḥāwwala min al-tanzīl ilā al-ta'wīl*). The Prophet's understanding of the Text is one of the first phases of movement resulting from the Text's connection with the human intellect (Abū Zayd 1994: 126⁴⁶).

Abū Zayd strongly objects to attempts to make the trials of making single and stable interpretation of the Qur'ān, treating them as a kind of idolatry or a mixing of a purely human dimension with transcendency.

Such a claim [that the Prophet's understanding is sacred] leads to a kind of polytheism (*shirk*), because it equates the absolute (*muṭlaq*) with the relative (*nisbī*) and the constant (*thābit*) with the changeable/transient (*mutaghayyir*); and,

⁴⁵ Specific expressions or terms used or coined by Abū Zayd, such as *naṣṣ ilāhī* or *naṣṣ insānī*, are often written by him in parentheses in the Arabic original text.

⁴⁶ The similar translation is presented by: Kermani 2006: 172.

more specifically, because it equates the Divine Intent (*al-qaṣd al-ilāhī*) with human understanding (*fahm insānī*) of this Intent, even in the case of the Messenger's understanding. It is a claim that leads to an idolisation (*taqdīs*) of a conferral of sainthood upon the Prophet, by concealing the Truth that he was a human, and by failing to present clearly enough the fact that he was merely a prophet (*ḥaqīqat kawnihi nabīyyan*) [Abū Zayd 1994: 126].

4.4. Historicity (ta'rīkhiyya) in Abū Zayd's works

Taking into account the category of historicity seems to be a factor linking Abū Zayd both to roots of Arab philosophy/theology and to 20th-century European philosophy. The Arab background of it is logically derived from the discourse of Mu'tazilites who tried to problematise the "eternal" character of the Qur'ān, locating the revelation and sending of the holy book of Islam in its historical context. Adding to it, Abū Zayd seems to be conscious of the European discussion on the very question of historicity. It is both a historic and philosophical issue, and the more limited historical understanding of it strongly differs from philosophical understanding. The topic of historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) was especially discussed in the German-language Humanities. It was defined in quite a different way by such thinkers as G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831), Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911), and even earlier by the Italian thinker Giambattista Vico (1668–1744). While Dilthey approached the problem of historicity linking it to the issue of historical relativism (life can only be understood in the reference to the historicity of human existence), the subsequent discussion was leading to evolution of its meaning in hermeneutics and existential philosophy. Martin Heidegger's (1889–1976) position on historicity, rooted in his specific philosophy of being, non-attributed straightforwardly to any school of thought, has been of particular importance. He put his most important remarks into the chapter on temporality and historicity contained in his philosophical *magnum opus* entitled *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*, 1926).

The thesis of the historicity of *Da-sein*⁴⁷ does not say that the worldless subject is historical, but that what is historical is the being that exists as being-in-the-world. (...) The occurrence of history is the occurrence of being-in-the world. (...) The historicity of *Da-sein* is essentially the history of the world which, on the basis of its ecstatic and horizontal temporality, belongs to the temporalising of that temporality (Heidegger 1926/1996: 355).

The notion of *tā'rīkhiyya* seems to be crucial in some of Abū Zayd's works. There, it is not just the historiographic category regarding the questions of historical accuracy, actuality, or the factual status of some persons or events (e.g. the very existence of Muḥammad or Jesus Christ). On the contrary, Abū Zayd treats historicity rather in a phenomenological way as "the history of constitution of any intentional object, both in the sense of history as tradition and in the sense where every individual has its own history"⁴⁸. It coincides well with the fact that the Arab reflection on history (*ta'rīkh*) is often directed at the notions of tradition, legacy (*turāth*), and imitation (*taqlīd*). Some of Abū Zayd's hints also resemble the aforementioned discussion between Heidegger and Jaspers on the temporal aspect of historicity. It is not surprising, taking into account that the Egyptian scholar extensively read Gadamer's *Truth and Method* and Heidegger's *Being and Time*, especially during his stay at Pennsylvania University in the late 1970s (cf. Rahman 2001: 3).

Abū Zayd defines the issue of historicity (*ta'rīkhiyya*) in one of the chapters of *Al-Naṣṣ*, *al-sulṭa*, *al-ḥaqīqa*. *Al-Fikr al-dīnī bayna irādat al-*

⁴⁷ German neologism *Da-sein* (literally: being there or 'presence') is the key term in Martin Heidegger's philosophy. It does not mean simply "existence", but rather refers to the experience of being in the sense of human being. It is also closely related to notions of temporality and space, and thus inscribes human experience into historical or historiographic categories. Heidegger's approach differed from the works of his then friend, Karl Jaspers (1883–1969) who strongly delineated the difference between *Existenz* and *Da-sein*, finding *Existenz* the realm of authentic and transcendent being. In this interpretation *Da-sein* was the most basic form of existence, confined by the schemes of objectivity, empirical studies, and science.

⁴⁸ Formulation after: Entry *Historicity (philosophy)*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historicity_\(philosophy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historicity_(philosophy)). Accessed 10.04.2017.

ma'rifa wa-iradat al-haymana (Text, Authority, and the Truth. Religious Thought between the Will of Knowledge and the Will of Domination).

Historicity means here the occurring in time (*al-ḥudūth fī al-zaman*), even if that time was the beginning of the world. It is a moment when there is a division and distinction between the highest absolute being, that is, the existence of God, and the existence of a temporal condition. If the first act of God, or the act of creating the world, was the beginning of time, then all the deeds that followed this act remain historical, in the sense of their existence in time and in history. And everything that is the result of these divine acts is created (*muḥdath*), that is, it happens at a certain moment in history (Abū Zayd 1995: 71⁴⁹; a similar version of the text: Abū Zayd 1995a: 205)

Actions depend on the possible world. Their source and basis for their latent effectiveness is absolute power. By their dependence on historical possibilities, they are immanent in history. The first divine act is the creation of the world, drawing it from the shadow and nothingness to light and existence, according to the statement of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī in the *The Niche for Lights*⁵⁰. This act is considered the beginning of history because it is the act that opened the concept of "time". The creation of the world counts as a historical event in itself. This means that its being is an event preceded in the world only by a divine plan of whose essence we do not know. That is why we all say that the world is existent (*muḥdath*). Its existence is not a matter of dispute. This does not mean anything other than its temporality and historicity. Those who in the history of Islamic thought claimed that the world was eternal only spoke of the substance from which it was created, that is, of the original matter according to Aristotle's terminology. However, their claim about the eternity of substance does not necessarily deny the historical creation of the world. The concept of historicity is therefore immanent in the creation of the world or more precisely in the process of its creation, whether creation is cre-

⁴⁹ This and following passages, taken from *Al-Naṣṣ, al-sulṭa, al-ḥaqīqa. Al-Fikr al-dīnī bayna iradat al-ma'rifa wa-iradat al-haymana*, translated by MM with the additional help of JM.

⁵⁰ Famous work known in Arabic as *Mishkāt al-Anwār*.

ation from nothing or creation from something eternal (Abū Zayd 1995: 71; Abū Zayd 1995a: 204-205).

Abū Zayd introduces the distinction between divine power and divine action. It is related to the traditional quarrel between the Mu'tazilite and Ash'ari understandings of the historicity of the Qur'ān:

Among the most important, dominant and deep-rooted ideas that have become part of the "doctrine" (*al-'aqīda*) there is the concept that the Qur'ān, revealed to Muḥammad by God as the Supreme Revelation (*al-waḥy al-amīn*), is an eternal (*qadīm azlī*) Text (*al-naṣṣ*) and one of the attributes of the Divine Being, which is also eternal and has no cause, as well as its attributes and all that comes from it. As the Word of God (*kalām Allāh*), the Qur'ān is one of these eternal attributes. Anyone who says that it is "generated" (*muḥdath*), and not eternal, or that it was "created" (*makhlūq*), meaning that the Qur'ān was not present at first, and then it started to exist in the world, opposes the doctrine and deserves to be accused of "infidelity" (*kufīr*). If it is said by a Muslim, he can be considered an "apostate" (*murtadd*), because the eternity of the Qur'ān, i.e. lack of its creation and coming into being in history, is part of the doctrine without which recognition of the Muslim faith would be incomplete (Abū Zayd 1995: 67–68; Abū Zayd 1995a: 199–200).

Andreas Meier gives five conclusions resulting from the Abū Zayd's linguistic-cultural-historic approach to the Qur'ānic Text (*naṣṣ*)

1. Religious texts are linguistic texts. They are constructed according to the same structures and rules as every other linguistic text.
2. Religious texts, as linguistic texts, are human texts. They are associated with the general condition of human thought and human speech and communication.
3. Religious texts, as human texts, are products of human culture. They owe their genesis to a certain cultural context, through whose specific characteristics they are substantially and formally shaped.
4. Religious texts, as products of human culture, are historical texts. They are, like every other product of human culture, subject to the conditions of time and space.

5. Religious texts, as historical texts, are the subject of research through the historico-critical sciences using the standard methods, as these are applied also to all other historical texts. (Meier 1994: 64; cited after: Rahman 2001: 144).

The historicity of the Qur'ān is, thus, in the category of being the effect of treating the fundamental religious Text of Islam as a cultural production created at a certain historical moment. This affects the definition of historicity cited above as the occurrence or occurring in time (*al-ḥudūth fī al-zamān*; Abū Zayd 1995: 71). It refers to the classical age of Islam and the discussion between Mu'tazilite⁵¹ and Ash'ari understandings of the historicity of the Qur'ān. Abū Zayd was interested in the Mu'tazila since the early period of his academic activities at the University of Cairo. His M.A. thesis and first published work *Al-Ittijāh al-'aqlī fī al-tafsīr: dirāsa fī qaḍīyat al-majāz fī al-Qur'ān 'inda al-mu'tazila* [The Trend of Rational Exegesis of the Qur'ān: A Study of the Mu'tazilite Concept of the Qur'ānic Metaphor] looked at this philosophical-theological school as pioneering the type of rational interpretation of Islamic texts, inspiring also for later generations.

Mu'tazilites stressed the linguistic dimension of the Qur'ān calling it the speech of God (*kalām Allāh*). The speech of God was treated by this theological school as one of God's attributes of action (*ṣifāt al-af'āl al-ilāhiyya*) and not as the attribute of the God's essence (*ṣifāt al-dhāt*; Abū Zayd 1995: 68). This led Mu'tazilites to the assumption that the Qur'ān is created and non-eternal (the specific quality of the

⁵¹ Al-Mu'tazila was the school of Islamic theology supporting the rationalist direction in medieval theology, using the categories and methods taken from Hellenistic philosophy. They emphasised the unity and uniqueness of God, as opposed to anthropomorphism and attributing to God anthropomorphic features, while claiming that the Qur'ān was the created (*makhlūq*) and non-eternal speech of God. The Mu'tazila gained the greatest popularity at the turn of the 8th and 9th centuries. During the reign of the Caliph Al-Ma'mūn (813-833) Mu'tazilism became a mandatory doctrine in the Abbasid caliphate. However, during the reign of Al-Mutawakil (847-861), Mu'tazilites were condemned. One of their outspoken critics was, among others, Al-Ash'arī (873-935), founder of Al-Ash'ariyya theological school, rejecting the causal reasoning and overwhelmingly popular in the subsequent of history of Islamic theology.

Qurān's timelessness is called in Arabic *azliyya*), also because logically the speech cannot precede or be simultaneous with God himself. So, as the Mu'tazilites suggested and Abū Zayd develops, the Preserved Tablet⁵² (*Lawḥ Mahfūz*), mentioned in the Qur'ān, should be understood metaphorically and not in a literal way, similarly as in the case of "God's Throne" (*al-kursī*,⁵³ *al-'arsh*)⁵⁴ [*yajibu an yafhama fahman majāziyyan walā fahman ḥarfīyyan mithl al-kursī wa-al-'arsh*; Abū Zayd 1995: 69].

In another place in his text, Abū Zayd gives a deeper analysis of the status of the Preserved Tablet (*Lawḥ Mahfūz*):

What is the *Lawḥ Mahfūz* on which, according to some images, the Qur'ān was written? Is it eternal, or is it just generated and created (*muḥdath makhlūq*)? Surely it is generated and created like the Throne (*al-'Arsh*). In case of the other approach, we would be maintaining an image of the supernatural that any thinker in the Muslim tradition would disagree with. Had the *Lawḥ Mahfūz* been created and generated, how could the Qur'ān be inscribed on it eternally and perpetually? Does not this lead us to an array of logical contradictions

⁵² *Lawḥ Mahfūz* is believed to include the Qur'ān before it was sent down by God. Cf. Qur'ān 85: 22: *Bal huwa Qur'ān majīd/fī Lawḥ Mahfūz* [Nay! This is a Glorious Qur'ān/(Inscribed) in the Preserved Tablet!]

⁵³ Qur'ān 2: 255 is the famous verse called *Ayat al-Kursī*: "Allāh! La ilāha illā huwa (none has the right to be worshipped but He), *al-ḥayy al-qayyūm* (the Ever living, the One Who sustains and protects all that exists). Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth. Who is he that can intercede with Him except with his permission? He knows what happens to them (His creatures) in this world and what will happen in the Hereafter. And they will never compass anything of His knowledge except that which he wills. His *kursī* extends over the heavens and the earth, and He feels no fatigue in guarding and preserving them. And He is the Most High, the Most Great". The form *kursī* literally means "footstool, chair" and there is a polemic between Islamic scholars whether "the Throne" can be utilised as an equivalent. See more: Qur'ān 2: 255 (pg. 57, footnote 1).

⁵⁴ *Al-'Arsh*, as it is understood in the light of the Qur'ān and *sunnah*, is distinguished from *Kursī*. Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), the Hanbali Muslim theologian, thought that the *Kursī* was in front of the *'Arsh* at the level of the feet (after: Qur'ān 2: 255 [pg. 57, footnote 1]). *Al-'Arsh* is mentioned in the Qur'ān e.g. in the verse 10: 3: "Allāh (...) then rose over (*istawā*) the Throne (*al-'arsh*), disposing the affair of all things", or 85: 15: "Owner of the Throne, the Glorious (*dhū al-'arsh al-majīd*)".

that make the “content” (*muḥtawà*) eternal, while we know that the table that contains this “content” is created? How is it possible to write the Qur’ān, the eternal word of God, on a surface that does not have the same attribute?! (Abū Zayd 1995: 72)

Abū Zayd’s view is that the deification of such ideas as the Preserved Tablet creates new eternal beings besides the eternal God. In his interpretation it would be equivalent to giving the socio-historically rooted metaphors a status equal to God’s. The other elements also prove the historic character of Muslim Revelation (*wahy*) as e.g. the piecemeal, gradual character of revealing the Qur’ān (*tanjīm*), *asbāb al-nuzūl*⁵⁵ (the occasions or circumstances of revelation) or *naskh*, the practice of Islamic exegesis based on abrogating some verses in case they are contradictory with other Qur’ānic material.

The conclusion that could be taken from these remarks is that the socio-historic context of Islamic revelation, namely the historic reality (this expression is often expressed in Arabic as: *al-wāqī’ al-ta’rīkhī*) of the Arabian Peninsula in the 7th c. AD, hugely influenced the process of canonising the Qur’ānic Text. As Rahman rightly suggests (2011: 145–146), Abū Zayd’s approach leads as well to such understanding as that the historical prescriptions of the 7th c. do not necessarily fit into the present context, so not all of them can be applied today, in this totally different historical context. This, of course, paves the way for the plurality of interpretations and the critical approach not only to the Qur’ān and *Sunnah*, but also to other elements of the Arab cultural heritage (*turāth*).

Abū Zayd sees the acknowledging of historicity and contextualisation as the main elements distinguishing him from the Islamist *milieu*. In his opinion they do not see the difference between history and historiography, between political instrumentalisation and a creative attitude towards *turāth*.

⁵⁵ The type of exegetical texts that associates given Qur’ānic verses with the general situation related to them. Such a type of *tafsīr* literature (it could be translated as well “the reasons of revelation”) was initiated quite late, at the verge of 10th and 11th c. One of the leading authors of *asbāb al-nuzūl* was ‘Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī (died ca. 1075) who characterised the importance of this genre of Qur’ānic literature saying that “you cannot possess exegetical knowledge of *ayats* and its aims without stopping at narrations about occasions and ways of its revealing” (after: Dziekan 2008: 160).

If the word of God is an act as indicated above, it is a historical phenomenon, because all divine acts are acts in the created and existing world, and so are historical. The Qur'ān is a historical phenomenon also because it is one of the manifestations of the word of God, even if it is the fullest, because the last, of these manifestations. At this point we come to the heart of the problem of the brutal and (unfortunately) mindless campaign against the concept of **historicity** [bold – NAZ]. Those of its critics who have good intentions approach the matter in the mistaken belief that it undermines the principle of the **universality of meaning** ('umūm al-dalāla) [boldface – NAZ], which leads them to treat the Qur'ān as “archaeological excavations” (*ḥāfriyyāt*), which can only be investigated by specialists. They certainly do not know that there are different kinds of meaning and they do not realise that linguistic meaning is governed by specific laws. If, in our times, we find pleasure in reading literary and poetic texts written more than fifteen centuries earlier, it is only because these texts are still capable of conveying meaning. This concerns texts created by people, so can you imagine that the religious texts that have been given to us and which are still well received and respected by various scientific disciplines are incapable of speaking to man and conveying meaning to him? (Abū Zayd 1995: 75).

On the Nature of Religious Renewal and Question of Women in Islam

5.1. The Nature of Religious Renewal

The idea of renewal (*tajdīd*) or rethinking of Islam is a very important element of Abū Zayd's writings. He gave some general remarks about the nature of this phenomenon.

The question of how to renew religious discourse is preceded by two other questions. The first of these concerns the relationship of religious discourse to public discourse in the social, economic, and political fields. The second question concerns the meaning of, prospects for, and caveats which condition the notion of "renewal" (Abu Zeid 2002).

This means that we need to research freely into our religious legacy. This is the primary condition for renewal. We have to lift the ban on free thinking. The scope of renewal should be unlimited. There is no room for "safe doctrinal havens" which are inaccessible to critique. Such havens restrict the process of renewal. They constitute a censorship that has no place in the history of Islamic thinking. Such censorship, whenever it has appeared in the past, always inaugurated an age of stagnation and deterioration – and not just in religious discourse. For as I have already said, religious discourse is an integral component of public discourse in its broadest sense. This has always been true in the past, and it remains true now.

Therefore, we must let the call for renewal expand to embrace all fields of thinking and creativity. The spirit of renewal

should be tolerant of idiosyncrasies, departures from the norm, and challenges to consensus. Only freedom can protect itself, and the rest of society, from decay. Only freedom can safeguard us against corruption and the phoney claims of “protecting identity and tradition”. Only confident and free societies can protect themselves against stagnation and erosion. Challenges to the consensus are the only way to build a new consensus which will be capable of sponsoring progress. We have to protect the right to error in interpretation and opinion. The right to err is sacred, indeed rewarded, in Islam (Abu Zeid 2002).

But what are the sources and real content of this given project of modernisation? Of course, it is rooted in the earlier intellectual projects of re-examining Muslim thought and religious tradition. It starts with the internal criticism of Islamic culture.

This is where we should start our search for those faults which have led to the spread of ignorance, injustice, and tyranny. Those faults are to be found in the social history of Islam, not in its religious texts. We have to see the past of the Muslims not as a sacred history, but as a history of one section of humanity – a history that is based on social, economic, and political factors. In analysing Muslim culture and critiquing its thought, we have to see the history of Islamic culture as a whole, and not focus selectively and uncritically on certain segments to the exclusion of all others. In the core of rationalism, we will find undeniable elements of mysticism. And at the heart of mythical tradition, we will find unmistakable evidence of rationalism. We cannot segregate the cultural edifices of our past. More importantly, we have to stop relying on the distinction that is commonly made between Islam and Muslims, a distinction which is used by many to present Islam as a pure and abstract form of perfection situated safely above the rough and tumble of geography and history⁵⁶. This utopian idealist Islam does not exist today, and never did exist in the past (Abu Zeid 2002).

⁵⁶ He expresses here the idea quite similar to Muḥammad Arkūn’s ideas of “Applied Islamology”. See more about the Algerian thinker’s methodology: subchapter 2.2.

It is no wonder that the role played by Muḥammad ‘Abduh seems to be pivotal. He seems to be a pioneer of any criticism of the Qur’ān based on literary studies approaches.

His most important contribution in this area was his insistence that the Qur’ān is not meant to be a book of history nor a book of science; it is a book of guidance. Consequently, any search for proof for any scientific theory is invalid. The Qur’anic narratives, on the other hand, should not be taken as historical documents. Indeed, historical incidents mentioned in the Qur’anic narratives are presented in a literary and narrative style, to convey lessons of admonition and exhortation (RQ: 58)

‘Abduh was the actual predecessor of the textual, literary studies-based critique of the Qur’ān which seems to be the most important part of Abū Zayd’s renewal project. However undeniable the pioneering role of ‘Abduh was, his ways of realising the modernisation of Islamic thought were not consequent and not conclusive in their proceeding. Abū Zayd tried to avoid those rifts and stood in the same ranks as the preceding Egyptian thinkers: ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Rāziq, Qāsim Amīn, Aḥmad Luṭfī al-Sayyid, Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, and Amīn al-Khūlī. The “renewal” aspects, partially borrowed from their heritage and developed by Abū Zayd, included e.g. the critique of the traditional understanding of a state and caliphate in Islam (‘Alī ‘Abd al-Rāziq) and, from the other side, the new understandings of discourse, rhetoric and the literary values of the Qur’ān (Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Amīn al-Khūlī). This Egyptian background shaped Abū Zayd’s thinking, making him a middle-ground thinker, not a unique and directly innovative one, but joining different strands of Islamic reformism. That was the reason as well that his project for the renewal of Islam did not become so radical and full-scale as was in the case of Fazlur Rahman and Muḥammad Arkūn.

5.2. Renewal of Islamic Tradition vs. European Postsecularism

If we want to assess the ideas of renewal in the Arab world and in Muslim thought, we have to take into account the fact that “secularisation” or “secularism” in the Arab world was a very superficial phenomenon in the Arab/Islamic context. It involved the partial adoption of judicial paragraphs and constitutions based on Western legal solu-

tions, while simultaneously freezing creative debate on various aspects of religion. Islam in this situation was by no means illuminated by the Western Reformation, but was rather pushed into a secure periphery of social life from the point of view of the given government. In this way the reformation-like idiom of the nineteenth-century Arab renaissance was largely lost, and the attempts at utilising modern approaches to the reading of the Qur'ān were rejected as dangerous both for the secular authority and the religious establishment sponsored by the former (compare: subchapter 2.2.4 and similar ideas of Šādiq Jalāl al-Azm).

The realities of participation in any discourse on religion are completely different in the Muslim territories from those in Western Europe and at the same time, the two models of secularisation – European and Arab – have developed in diametrically opposed ways. In the Middle East, especially after 1967, there emerged a real resistance against the style of “secularism” represented by the Arab regimes, that, by the way, actually have not changed the petrified structures of clan, tribe, and denomination as the main distinguishing levels of Arab identities. Formally dethroning Islam as the omnipresent religion of the state and the law, these regimes and their dictator-like leaders have also introduced a complete blurring of boundaries between the political and the religious. Islam has functioned as a “dead discourse”, a kind of canonical cultural text that can be opportunistically used in any situation whenever it is desirable by the political side which has gained power.

It would be interesting to compare Abū Zayd's positions with the so-called postsecularism or postsecular critique in Western Europe. It could be said somewhat ironically that when Giorgio Agamben⁵⁷ spoke about profanation, as an expression of the returning of religious concepts to everyday language or their “common use”, the author of *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ* made a real profanation (or declaration of apostasy) in the eyes of some Muslims, in spite of speaking from the position

⁵⁷ Giorgio Agamben, born in 1942, the Italian philosopher, analysing the figure of *homo sacer* (sacred man). He suggested the crucial role of profanation as something that “neutralises what it profanes”, so “deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized” (Agamben 2007: 77). By this, Agamben distinguishes between profanation and political secularisation, which just changes the heavenly monarchy into earthly monarchy, and by that point Agamben criticised Carl Schmitt's political theology (cf. Ruda, Voelker 2013: 91).

of a committed Muslim constructing his message on the basis of hermeneutical reading of the holy book of Islam. Abū Zayd, although far from the method and views of the Italian philosopher, seeks in a somewhat similar way the space of freedom in the articulation of religious experience, the possibility of respecting the multi-layered reading of the Qur'ānic text that can be addressed in human life. Unlike the Western trials of a very radical deconstruction of the traditional views on Christianity (e.g. Alain Badiou⁵⁸ rereading of the figure of Jesus Christ who became a figure of a revolutionary destroying existing relations of power and subordination in the religious fervour of The Event), the Egyptian scholar is fighting as seriously as he can to confess Islam in spite of the limitations of its official versions. Thus, it is difficult to find a greater gap in the possibility of religious reinterpretation than that

⁵⁸ Alain Badiou, a French contemporary philosopher, born in 1937 in Rabat, then part of French-dominated colonial Morocco, has been a very controversial figure given the fact that on the one hand he tried to fight postmodern relativism, and on the other – he supported the idea of returning to communism, however with some theological ingredients. Concerning the problems of the Arab world, e.g. interesting is Badiou's position on Hizb Allāh (Hezbollah), the Lebanese Shia party and military organisation. He stated in one of the interviews: *Take, for example, the phenomenon of Hezbollah and the most recent war in Lebanon. The pretextual nature of Israel's aggression was clear: they set out to destroy an entire country because one soldier was taken prisoner. Without wanting a frontal war, Hezbollah was fortunately able to exercise an effective, consistent resistance that turned the Israeli aggression into a fiasco. What is striking about this movement, however, is its difficult relation with the State. Here, we come back to the question of organisation. Hezbollah is competing for State power, while nevertheless not reproducing a military or insurrectional model. They remain in a state of semi-dissidence and conflictual alliance with the State* (Del Luchesse, Smith 2007). In spite of supporting some of the military activities of Hezbollah, Badiou saw flaws and inconsistencies in the relation between Hezbollah and the Lebanese state, and also criticised the non-universal character of the Shia political-theological messianism praising at the same time its revolutionary potential and zeal. By the way, it proves that not only have contemporary Arab intellectuals been eager to look for the figures of new revolutionaries and support some new ideological forms of Marxism or even Leninism, but that such views have been present among the French academia luminaries as well.

between Slavoj Žižek⁵⁹ and Badiou on the one hand, and the new Arab Qur'ānic exegetes on the other.

In the Western post-colonial reality, religion has become a reservoir of motives that can be reinterpreted in any way: one can juggle them like other cultural motifs and quotations, all with the funny face of a postmodern master of ceremonies who is able to transform it into the latest intellectual chic, perfectly adapted to the requirements of popular culture. The new interpretations of the Qur'ān and Islam are something completely different, because they represent a violent and dangerous battle for language, symbols, and everyday life practices. Using the Polish painter and theatre director Tadeusz Kantor's famous formula, it could be said that Islamic renewal is never unpunished and often associates with a transgression of tangible social norms and a real possibility of repression, including even loss of life (as e.g. in the aforementioned Faraj Fawda's case; cf. chapter 3).

Saying that, we have to admit that the idea of renewal has had many influential opponents in the Arab world, who are somewhat similar to the group of the religious establishment or contemporary 'ulāmā' often mentioned by Abū Zayd.

A timely warning is in order here. The many vocal advocates of the conservative genre will be tempted to misrepresent the motives for the current call for the renewal of religious discourse. They are likely to portray this call as a reaction to outside pressures – pressures created by 11 September and its ramifications. They are also likely to produce a “new” discourse of their own, which will try to dodge and mitigate these pressures, rather than addressing the real issues at hand. Indeed, much of what is published in the press nowadays suggests that this type of reaction is already well

⁵⁹ Slavoj Žižek, the Slovenian thinker was born in 1949 in Ljubljana, then in federal Yugoslavia. Žižek, being mainly rooted in Freudian psychoanalysis and Hegelian-influenced Marxism, was interested in Islam. For example, he published two essays: *The Antinomies of Tolerant Reason: A Blood-Dimmed Tide is Loosed* (Žižek 2006) and *A Glance Into The Archives of Islam* (Žižek 2006a). The latter was the developed version of the op-ed “Defenders of The Faith”, published in the *Washington Post* in March 2006.

underway. In these circles, “religious discourse” is equated with sacred propaganda and the rhetoric of Friday sermons. This is wrong. Religious discourse does not consist in preaching, but in religious thought. It is a process of cognition, not a mere reference to words uttered by certain persons on such and such an occasion. Of course, the practice of preaching too is in great need of modernisation: but this is a separate issue. When I talk of religious discourse in this article, I am referring to a certain structure of thought, not to a type of rhetorical expression.

This is an important distinction. If we want to create a society which is based on freedom and justice, we will have to change the way we think. The call for the renewal of religious discourse should be seen as part of the more general call for freedom. Thought can never flourish without freedom. Free thinking is necessary for the success of any endeavour, including economic enterprises – for everything from a small factory down to a simple chicken farm (Abu Zeid 2002).

In the other interesting passage of his article from 2002, Abū Zayd says that the push for the religious renewal cannot be limited because of both outside and internal pressure. He suggests that the West’s influence cannot be treated as an obstacle or justification for a slowing down of social change in the Arab world and a torpedoing of painful reforms. So, the reformers have to be aware of criticism from both sides: the internal Arab conservatives and the outside Western pressure, often associated with simplified or Islamophobic discourse.

All the more reason, therefore, for us to address these questions head-on, rather than hide behind the lame excuse that we cannot act under outside pressure. Such defensiveness will not help us, for it is simply a false stand on behalf of a phoney identity. We are not to be defined in terms of backwardness and resistance to progress. We must not let ourselves be pushed into the ranks of the reactionaries, on the pretext that we are defending our religion and our identity. We have to judge our actions by our need to move ahead, to break free from outdated structures. This was the main thrust of our Renaissance, which ground to a halt before it was halfway through. We have no option but to resume the efforts begun by that movement, and seek solid ground on

which to base our reforms. In order to do so, we must look into the causes of our failure and seek answers to certain old questions. In particular, we must address the question of how we may renew our religious discourse (Abu Zeid 2002).

5.3. The Question of Women in Islam According to Abū Zayd

Abū Zayd was very interested in the wide problematics regarding the status of women in Islam and the Qur'ān. He published two books concentrated on those issues: *Al-Mar'a fī khiṭāb al-azma* [Women in the Discourse of the Crisis; first edition: 1994] and *Dawā'ir al-khawf: qirā'a fī khiṭāb al-mar'a* [Circles of Fear: Analysis of the Discourse about Women; first edition: 1999]. Actually, the second one was a revised and developed version of the former, as *Al-Mar'a...*, published initially by Dār Nuṣūṣ li-l-Naṣr, did not have a wide distribution.

Abū Zayd's interest is in both judicial and practical issues regarding the Qur'ānic image of woman, but at the same time he is more interested in the entangling of women in the discourses popular in the Islamic world such as the *khiṭāb al-azma* (discourse of the crisis), mentioned in the title of his book. His approach is multidisciplinary, taking the issue from many angles: legal, moral, political, religious, and linguistic as well.

In the chapter *Inthrabūlūjiyyat al-luġa wa-injirāḥ al-huwīya* (Anthropology of Language and Wound/Impotence of Identity), contained in *Dawā'ir al-khawf* (Abū Zayd 2007: 29-41), the Egyptian scholar attaches the crisis regarding the position of Arab women to more general phenomena in the Arab world: lack of democracy and transparency, societal and national fragmentation (*tashardhum*), racism, and sectarianism (*'unṣuriyya ṭā'ifiyya*), and a crisis of identity seen by Abū Zayd as touching the most intimate aspects of male honour and its traditional dominating role in the society. It is no wonder that the crisis in the sphere of male Arab identity is designated by the scholar as *injirāḥ* that refers as well to a lack of sexual potency (see also: subchapter 6.3 on longstanding effects of the Six-Day War traumatic loss on the Egyptian society).

Abū Zayd's reasoning starts with the general exposition of his criticism of the discrimination directed against women in contemporary Islamic societies.

The discourse generated (*muntaj*) around women in the Arab world is generally discriminatory. It is a discourse that stereotypes men and women, and places them in a comparative relationship. When a relationship between two parties is identified this way, then it means that one party succumbs to the other and obeys it. It is natural that the party that believes it is strong produces a racial (sectarian) discriminatory discourse. This is not the case with the religious discourse alone, but is also part of the current Arab discourse that is dominant in both culture and media. It is also not difficult to find in the discourse of “equality” and “participation” an undertone of superiority that emanates basically from the discourse which places males in the centre. When woman is equal to man, and when she is allowed to participate, she is merely participating with the man. But in all cases, the man becomes the centre of everything. The matter seems to be incontrovertible. And in some human societies, a woman’s social, cultural, and political activities are marginal and without meaning if a man is not involved in them as well (Abū Zayd 2007: 29)⁶⁰.

The roots of the discrimination are located by Abū Zayd in the very nature of Arabic language. His remarks are quite controversial in a linguistic sense.

Contemporary Arab discourse has its roots in language itself. It is a language that insists on differentiating between Arab names and foreign names with a system of signs that is called *al-tanween*⁶¹. This is a sign that is put at the end of Arabic names only on the level of pronunciation (*nuṭq*) and not when they are written. One can therefore say Muḥammad-un or ‘Aliyy-un in the nominative case, and to add –in and -an endings in the other two cases: genitive and accusative. But this sign is not attached to non-Arab names like Bush (Būsh) or Abraham (Ibrāhīm). We should also notice that the terms ‘*ajam* (collectivum: non-Arabs, barbarians – MM) or *al-a’ājim* (broken plural:

⁶⁰ This and following translations were made by MM.

⁶¹ Abū Zayd probably refers here to the fact that in the classical Arabic system of *tanwīn* endings was rigorously used when speaking in the speaking practice. Today, it is still an important part of the practices of Qur’ānic recitation. However, these are rather relics of the Arabic classical language and today the spelling without *al-tanwīn* clearly dominates.

speechless, speaking bad Arabic, barbarians – MM) are derived from the same word formation core as the form *al-'ajmāwāt*, depicting animals or wild beasts. This is a categorisation that gives Arabs a superior status. It also gives their language the place of “the Language”, as though any other language is not important, and that those who speak another language are like animals that cannot express themselves (Abū Zayd 2007: 30).

In the other part of this text Abū Zayd criticises also inequality at the level of grammatical gender.

This linguistic discrimination between Arabs and non-Arabs on the basis of language and its meaning breeds another discrimination between males and females in Arab names. Female Arab names are also considered to be less important. In addition to the female “t” (*tā' marbūʿa*) used to differentiate between males and females, the *tanwīn* is absent from female names just as it is absent from foreign names. There is therefore a linguistic racial discrimination not only against the “Other” but also against females of the same race who are treated as “Others” as well. This is noticeable in all existing contemporary discourse, in which women are treated as minorities since they are required to be under the protection and the authority of men.

The linguistic discrimination is widespread inside this specific ideology of language. All nouns in the language are either male or female and there is no neuter in the Arabic language, as there are in other languages such as German, for example. Linguists differentiate between the true female word and the figurative female word, but this discrimination does not mean that the figurative female is exempt from succumbing to all the mechanisms of categorisation to which she actually does succumb. On the other hand, we do not find a difference between the “true” male and the figurative male which reveals that there is a preconception that males are active, while females are inactive and passive. Based on this assumption, the plural is treated as a male plural even if it is about a group of women, on the condition that one single male is present among that group of women. This means that one man’s presence is more important than the presence of a whole group of women. It is therefore called the male plural and not the female plural. (Abū Zayd 2007: 30-31).

Abū Zayd does not state that these discriminatory practices are limited only to the Arabic language, but he suggests that it cannot be a justification for some Arab defenders of the *status quo* even if similar situation functions in Western countries as well.

If we were to say that this does not concern the Arabic language alone, and that it concerns many other languages on earth, this does not disprove its significance. Instead, it shows how widespread it is in human consciousness in general. If that is the case on the linguistic level, it is not always the case in the consciousness of groups throughout history. In some contemporary societies that speak English, for example, there is a growing consciousness of the ideology of language and the danger of surrendering to it. There are, for example, some attempts to change the language and replace it with a different consciousness, for example, when people try to avoid overusing the personal pronoun “he” by using “he” or “she” alternately. People also avoid using the male or female to describe certain positions and professions, where we no longer say “chairman” but “chairperson” and “spokesman” but “spokesperson” [these terms were put in English by Abū Zayd – MM]. This new consciousness is largely absent from Arabic discourse and this is what concerns us here (Abū Zayd 2007: 31-32).

If language treats women from a racial and ethnic perspective that equates them to *al-a'ājam*, then it also reflects the level of consciousness of the people who created this language. Although consciousness does not develop in isolation of the language and language does not develop in isolation of those who speak it, every type of consciousness has its independent history and distinct path. Sometimes the two clash, which can lead to crucial changes in the structure of the language. This might sometimes lead to a victory of the traditional consciousness over the new consciousness. In the history of the Arabic language, which represents the history of the people who speak it, there is a distinct consciousness represented in the Qur'ān, which addresses women in a direct way, as it addresses men. Addressing women has been performed in an indirect manner through addressing men; but in the Qur'ān it is not so. In this context, we have to dismiss some of the illusions that people have concerning the

inferiority of women's status in Qur'ānic discourse based on the fact that a woman's inheritance is half that of the man's. The real criteria for evaluation has to be the status of women and their position in the society of the *jāhiliyya* period, not just a comparison between Qur'ānic discourse and our legitimate wishful thinking concerning a woman's status. Based on these criteria, addressing women independently from men in Qur'anic discourse is a new form of consciousness that is unprecedented except for some harbingers in non-typical *jāhiliyya* or *post-jāhiliyya* poems as for example the *qaṣīdas* made by so-called *al-ṣa'ālīk*⁶².

But this consciousness in Qur'ānic discourse has entered into conflict with a consciousness already present in the language, and this is through a complex conflict on the ground of politics first and then on the level of religious thinking and the entire Arab culture after that. As much as the conflict has leaned towards the new consciousness, women's status has developed, and as much as the balance has leaned towards traditional consciousness and what it represents in terms of enclosed tribal values, women's status has changed from group to group and from state to state in the Islamic Empire. The status of women in Andalusian society⁶³ is worthy of attention, insofar as a woman had the right to stipulate that her husband divorce another wife in a case where the first wife had not been informed about the second. (...). None of the scholars at the time said that those conditions conflicted with

⁶² The term *aṣ-ṣa'ālīk* (singular: *ṣa'ālīk*; literally: vagabonds, beggars, poor people) denotes peculiar brigand poets in The Arabian Peninsula, especially before the advent of Islam. They originated from the people excluded from their own tribes and were types of outsiders or "outlaws" in the Arab societies of the pre-Muslim world, either by their own choice or by exclusion (Borg 1998: 670). Their often difficult economic situation forced them to provide for their living by theft, e.g. attacks on caravans. (Borg 1998: 670). Their poetry contained realistic descriptions of poverty, violence, and exclusion, and as well it was structurally distinct from the most prevalent pattern of the *qaṣīdas*. For example, *aṣ-ṣa'ālīk* poems did not have the customary first part of the poem – *nasīb* (Borg 1998: 670-671). One of the most famous *ṣa'ālīk* was Al-Shanfarā (died ca. 540).

⁶³ Abū Zayd obviously refers here to the society of al-Andalus in the classical era of Islamic history.

the principle of male superiority (*mabdā' al-qiwāma*) which became the norm in later eras.

In eras of backwardness and retardation, women are hidden, and they are seen as lacking intelligence and religion. The idea that women are not to make love during menstruation has evolved into avoiding speaking with her and eating with her, which goes back to mythical taboos. The story of Adam's departure from paradise is rehashed in the Old Testament version, where Eve is tantamount to a snake and Satan. A discourse is created even in the film industry, where movies are called e.g. *The Devil is A Woman*. Woman is transformed into a lust-inciting creature that provokes temptation, which is also related to the Qur'ānic narration about Joseph (Yūsuf) and its meanings. The only solution becomes burying women alive as the Bedouin Arabs in the *jāhiliyya* (pre-Islamic period) did [with the girls and female toddlers – MM], but instead the contemporary reaction is to bury woman alive inside a black dress with two holes for eyes⁶⁴ (Abū Zayd 2007: 36-38).

From these linguistic-cultural remarks, Abū Zayd switches to more political and identity-related issues including the aforementioned trauma of 1967 Six-Day War. His language is here quite polemical, even strong.

Following defeat (*hazīma*) in 1967, Arabs increasingly felt a sense of shame. To compensate for his impotence (*injirāh*⁶⁵), the Arab male self (*al-dhāt al-'arabiyya al-rajuliyya*) resorted to escaping to the past, to his original identity, to the illusion of manhood. In politics, there was a move against unity (*waḥda*), and on the social level sectarianism (*tā'ifiyya*), instead of pan-Arab nationalism (*qawmiyya 'arabiyya*), began to blossom. At the same time, at the level of affiliation (*intimā'*), religion substituted nation/motherland (*waṭan*), history, common interests, and geography etc.

Only fragmentation (*tashardhum*), sectarianism, and the cloak of religion (*ghīṭā' al-dīn*) were left. When the three are to-

⁶⁴ This irony is obviously directed at Salafi/Wahhabi interpretations of the limitations concerning women's style of dressing as e.g. the mandatory *niqāb* in the Saudi style.

⁶⁵ It could be translated as well as a "deep, painful wound". Abū Zayd plays here with the meanings of the word *injirāh*.

gether, they breed only terrorism that finds expression through the self: it is violence and terrorism on all levels: Muslim against the Christian, Christian against Muslim, Sunni against Shia and vice versa. In this environment charged with violence and terrorism, man turns against women (Abū Zayd 2007: 38-39).

This is followed by the characteristic polemical fragment where Abū Zayd uses the example of Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd's article from the mainstream Egyptian daily, *Al-Ahrām*, as a symbol of conservatism and backwardness.

Are we confronting religious discourse? It is wrong to say that. We are facing a backwardness that might use the language of religion or the language of politics or sociology or economics. But it is not merely a discourse of backwardness. It is also a terroristic aggressive discourse against women, which was proved by the incidents in Al-'Ataba and Al-Ma'ādī⁶⁶. Boys and young men resort to different forms of physical and verbal abuse during the illegal gatherings under cover of darkness (*al-mujtama'āt al-'ashwā'iyya*), and among the marginalised communities (*al-tajammu'āt al-muhmisha*). The aggression against women is represented on the level of rhetoric as well, such as Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd's article in *Al-Ahrām* (18/2/1992), where he said: "These days, we hear rebellious calls by our sweeter halves – women – most of whom are wives of wealthy men, who demand to go out to work and leave their children in the street. Each one shouts to her husband that she wants to realise herself and that she is equal to him. This sort of logic puzzles me: what kind of self-realisation will a woman find as a secretary to so and so, or a sewage engineer, or bank teller, or supermarket vendor. There is a lost identity in all those jobs. Self-realisation (*tahqīq al-dhāt*) is merely words fit for novels, an empty demand and a will to sleep around⁶⁷ all over the town with men."

We notice here that the author begins with his vision of an ideal Muslim woman (*muslima badīhiyya*), which says that women must not go out to work except to fulfil their eco-

⁶⁶ Names of the districts of Cairo.

⁶⁷ The Egyptian dialectal word *ṣarmaḥa* pejoratively denotes girls or women going out in connection with „sleeping around“ all over the town.

conomic needs. The aforementioned image influences Maḥmūd's arresting phrase: "most of them are wealthy women". Owing to such rhetoric, the issue of the self-realisation of women can be portrayed as an embarrassing case. Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd therefore makes women going out to work a matter that enters into the field of the prohibited (*mahzūrat*) – something that is allowable only when necessary (*darūrāt*). It opens another dimension: Maḥmūd's opposition to secularists (*ar-radd 'alā al-'almāniyyīna*). He tries to diminish the Qur'ānic verses regarding the special qualities of "the women around the Prophet Muḥammad", saying that these verses are derived from the specificity of the context, and do not apply to women in general. However, most of the Muslim jurists treat them according to the classical rule: the precepts are derived from the universality of expression (*'umūm al-lafẓ*), not the specificity of the context (*khuṣūs as-sabab*). It is a pity that Maḥmūd is not conscious of it, but rather aims at building a beleaguered fortress against the alleged anti-Islamic attacks of secularists under the pretext of women's employment.

The defence of the Islamic stance, made by Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd, who at the same time pretends to be not totally against women's employment, seems to be malicious. Note how Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd is surprised that the women who want to go out and self-realise are "wives of wealthy men", and how, tragically they throw their children out into the street although they are wealthy and of course could bring in foreign maids. But he does not say this – instead he says they throw them out into the street. Look how Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd's discourse changes to the melodramatic when he says "she shouts in the face of her husband about her self-realisation, wanting to be equal to him". If we assume this scenario is true, then what sort of man is this whose wife has to shout that sort of sentence to him? Undoubtedly it is the husband who thinks he has bought his wife with his money, a husband who treats her as he treats the most trivial things. Undoubtedly, a wife who speaks to her husband in this manner is responding to inhumane treatment. We suspect that Muṣṭafā Maḥmūd listened to some of the complaints of his wealthy friends concerning the rebellion of their wives, so he simply wrote an article about it. That is why his discourse resorts to debasing

women's work through naming some jobs that he despises such as secretary, sewage engineer, bank teller or supermarket vendor (note the mechanism of debasement), and so on. He therefore moves from sarcasm through debasement to social injury. (...). Sarcasm to him is a manner of debasement, which leads to social injury that is not different from verbal and physical assault in the street (Abū Zayd 2007: 39-42).

As Yusuf Rahman points out, Abu Zayd's method of interpretation and the theory behind it can be compared to those of Fazlur Rahman⁶⁸ (Rahman 2001: 192). Their intellectual projects have quite a similar point of departure: "reviving the Mu'tazilite doctrine of «the created Qur'ān» through a redefinition of the concept of revelation" (Rahman 2001: 192). Their theories of interpretation, which are based on the historical dimension of the text are also analogous. Even if the hermeneutical sources of inspiration were different, both researchers came to the comparable conclusions: that there is a distinction between "historical values" and "moral values" or between "historical meaning" (Abū Zayd's *ma'nà*) and "significance" (Abū Zayd's *maghzà*), and that objective, critical researching of the historical meaning would be possible. Despite this similarity, Abū Zayd makes "no reference whatsoever to Rahman in any of his works" (Rahman 2001: 192), so there is no direct relation or influence between the two. Abū Zayd's approach to the question of "the discourse of woman" in Islam is related as well to the approach of the Moroccan feminist writer and sociologist Fatema Mernissi (Fātima Marnīsi, 1940–2015), the author of some important works e.g. *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Muslim Society* (first edition: 1975). Abū Zayd exactly commented on Mernissi's views in one of the chapters of *Dawā'ir al-khawf* which he based on references to her book *Islam and Democracy: Fear of the Modern World* (first edition: 2002). The title formulation on "circles of fear" was also based on Mernissi's conceptions analysing different types of fear in contemporary Arab societies and the Western world e.g. the fear regarding modernity/modernisation, democracy, freedom of thought etc. (Abū Zayd 2007: 246ff.) It seems

⁶⁸ Fazlur Rahman Malik (1919–1988) – the modernist Islamic scholar born in the current-day territory of Pakistan, working as well in the United Kingdom (Oxford University) and Canada. After 1968 he lived in the US and taught at UCLA and the University of Chicago. He was a very versatile scholar working in many fields of Islamic Studies and philosophy.

that Abū Zayd, giving it due importance, treated these issues as part of his broader research and not as the main focus of interest, what is quite different from the European perspective⁶⁹ in which the topics of

⁶⁹ The instructive example could be Slavoj Žižek's essay *A Glance Into The Archives of Islam* (Žižek 2006a), which is based on very limited source material, and following this text, one can rather get the impression that the author reads more of the writings of Freud and Lacan, giving them a taste of reference to Islam, than he undertakes independent work on material related to Islamic religious tradition. In quoting the Qur'ānic verses about women, Žižek relies entirely on the psychoanalytic attempt to interpret Islam preferred by the Tunisian-French scholar Fethi Benslama (Fathī ibn Salāma, born in Salaqta, Tunisia in 1951, but working scientifically in France) in his book *La psychanalyse et l'épreuve de l'Islam* (Paris 2004). The text of the Slovenian thinker is rather a set of loose, less elaborated ideas or projects of interpretation in a very inchoate phase. Some of them are interesting, as based on the reference to Claude Levi-Strauss, the theme of Islam as an obstacle to achieving the desired harmony (almost a sexual relation) between the West and the East, founded on embracing Christianity and Buddhism, or rather their 20th century interpretations. This motif reflects the fear of an unpredictable Islam, which in the Western perspective could be seen as a disturbing paradox, e.g. in such assertion: what would make sense in the coming of another monotheistic religion after everything has already been explained in Christianity? The relationship to sexuality and sensuality becomes in Žižek's text an extremely important factor distinguishing the Muslim religion from other systems of belief. The role of a woman, so important in the history and genealogy of Islam (the fundamental importance of Hagar/Hājir as the mother of Ismā'īl, the ancestor of the Arabs, or Khadija, the beloved wife of the Prophet Muhammad and his reliable supporter in the time of revelation—*wahy*) was lessened by a fixation on the patriarchal nature of religion and the imposition of limitations regarding the female body. Žižek (2006a) presents as well a concept of a very close connection between Islam and Judaism, repeating the words of Hegel, who wrote about Islam as a pure, sublime, universal form of Judaism. The ethnic particularism of Judaism must have collided in this regard with the universalism, dynamism, and mission of Islam. The particular expression of this "conflict inside one family" was the difference in approach to Abraham/Ibrāhīm, who was considered a "biological father" by the Muslims, while in the Jewish faith he would have remained a "symbolic father". This aspect deserves closer examination, although in the text of Žižek it is not developed convincingly, being a good example of a simplified lecture on Islam by the famous, "fashionable" thinkers in Europe.

the position of woman in society and Islamic feminism play a pivotal role, often taken out of context.

In Abū Zayd's opinion the breakthrough in Islamic feminist hermeneutics was related to the Tunisian Al-Ṭāhir al-Ḥaddād (1899-1935) who was the first "to challenge the historicity of the Qur'ānic stipulation, especially in the field of women's rights" (RIT: 90). Despite the fact that Al-Ḥaddād's views were expressed in the 1930s, they paved the way, according to Abū Zayd's approach, for the new hermeneutical trials of an analysis of the Qur'ānic story of Adam and Eve. He refers here to the theories of two non-Arab feminist Islamic writers: the Pakistan-American theologian Riffat Hassan (born 1943) and the African-American scholar Amina Wadud (born 1952) [cf. RIT: 89-91].

In this context, the Egyptian scholar performed an in-between role: he was strongly supportive towards the women's fight for their social and political rights in the Arab world, but made some reservations about the academic forms of feminism, or to more precisely – its ways of deconstructing some traditional approaches to the Qur'ānic verses related to polygamy, divorce, male superiority, and so on.

The way these issues are solved in feminist hermeneutics is neither new nor original. Like the reformist approach to the Qur'ān, feminist hermeneutics faces the problem that as long as the Qur'ān is dealt with only as a text – implying a concept of author (i.e. God as divine author) – one is forced to find a focal point of gravity to which all variations should be linked. This automatically implies that the Qur'ān is at the mercy of the ideology of its interpreter. For a communist, the Qur'ān would thus reveal communism, for a fundamentalist it would be a highly fundamentalist text, for a feminist it would be a feminist text, and so on (RIT: 91).

Abū Zayd seemed to understand the problem of relativist readings of the Qur'ān. However, he believed that concentration on the category of discourse instead of purely textual approaches, would make it possible to redefine Qur'ānic interpretations without the danger of falling into the trap of relativism and one-sidedness. In addition, he treated the *sharī'a* law as a purely human production, so it needed adjusting to constantly changing reality.

Other aspects of *sharī'a*, such as those dealing with the rights of religious minorities, women's rights, and human rights in general, also

need to be revised and reconsidered. Contextualisation of the Qur'anic stipulation and examination of its linguistic and stylistic structure – as discourse – would reveal that the jurists' work was basically to unfold the meaning of such stipulation and to re-encode this meaning in various social contexts. The Qur'ān is not in itself a book of law; as we have already seen, legal stipulations are expressed in discourse style, and these reveal a context of engagement with human needs in specific times. This, in turn, opens up the appropriation of the intended “meaning” into every paradigm of meaning. As discourse, the Qur'ān provides multiple options and a variety of solutions, as well as an open gate of understanding (RIT: 95).

Thus, he treated changes in the understanding of the social and legal position of woman in Islam as an inevitable element of the process of renewal in Islam, of the democratic and humanistic hermeneutics, and of the discourse-based approach to the Qur'ān and *sunnah*.

Naṣr Abū Zayd on Politics and Identity

6.1. Naṣr Abū Zayd on the Nature of Arab and Muslim Identity – New Sources

The main theoretical framework built on the notions of text and discourse could be enriched with references to another essential category – identity. During his 2007 visit to Poland the Egyptian scholar made some very interesting remarks about the nature of the nation-state in the Arab world, its limitations, and the challenges ahead of it. We discussed as well the topic of the functioning of the Coptic/Christian minority inside the Egyptian state. Here there are some parts of Nasr Abu Zayd’s statement made at the time, recorded and compiled by M. Moch⁷⁰.

Nationalism in the Arab world is a relatively late matter in a historic sense, however at the same time it is a universal phenomenon, linking territories in the Middle East with the world after the First World War. I don’t like too much nationalism or “pan-nationalism” in the style of Pan-Arabism, that replaced the previous Pan-Islamism. This change has not been very striking, because Arab nationalism did not mean a break with religious affiliations and inspirations. In Europe, the category of nation-state is largely defined by the division between religion and nation (with the exception of e.g. Poland), and here it has become quite the opposite. The Arab nation-state is never completely secularised (a civil state), it is

⁷⁰ The Polish translation of these earlier unpublished statements and comments of Nasr Abu Zayd is contained in the book: Moch 2013: 104-106. English title of the book is: *The Native and the Alien. The Identities of the Copts and the Maronites in the Arabic Texts of Culture.*

also a religious one, it is rather something in-between categories known to us. It is a dilemma in itself, nothing in such country as Egypt is clearly defined and delimited. The ideology of Islamic fundamentalism in such conditions is provoked by the very nature of such a state and the ruling regimes, so this Islamic dimension functions alongside the official national identity (NAZ).

In Abū Zayd's opinion the difficult task of building the inclusive Egyptian identity has not succeeded so far.

In the Arab world nationalism of the country is mixed with a Pan-Arab element, for example in Egypt there are proponents and supporters of "Egyptianism" and "Pharaonism", that combine the idea of the modern nation-state with references to the pre-Islamic era, the ancient past of the area and the roots associated with the culture of the pharaohs of Egypt. In reality, however, the other approach has become the dominant form of Egyptian nationality, based on the simultaneous references to Islam and Pan-Arabism. When we ask, therefore, how the Christians of Egypt can define themselves according to the dichotomy built by Arab nationalism, it must be said that if they define themselves as Egyptians, in this way they admit their Arab background and identify with the Arab-Muslim culture, something a good portion of them would probably prefer to avoid. National identity has become a problem under these conditions and a hotbed of crisis. A similar process can be seen in the Gulf states; for example a lively issue seems to be whether Yemen belongs to the region or not (NAZ).

These remarks have a universal aspect as well, not being limited only to the Arab world situation.

The whole concept of nationality and the nation-state is nowadays in crisis. Globalisation often means that contemporary states lose power and the ability to fully, independently conduct their internal policies. The international community led by the United States heavily interferes in the affairs of individual states. Interventions are carried out when human rights are violated or the rights of minorities are restricted. The very concept of the nation-state becomes therefore somewhat vague and weak.

The answer to this crisis should aim at strengthening civil society, non-governmental organisations, and various independent groups. Society should work not only on the principle of submission to the direct power of the nation-state, but the multitude of “players” and social actors should be taken into account. Fundamentalism can be one of those factors, but you cannot let it become the only and dominant force. It is visible every day in the Arab world, that there are really many actors trying to play a role in the social and political game, and also in the field of religion. This is the only way to prevent the catastrophic scenario of fundamentalist takeover in the Arab countries (NAZ).

Abū Zayd made as well some interesting points about the biggest Egyptian minority – the Christian Copts.

The majority of Egyptian Christians (and I am talking here about mass, communal feeling) thinks of the Egyptian ethnicity as a phenomenon not necessarily related to Arabness. It is quite opposed to the Muslim belief that Egypt is part of the world of Islam and Muslim identity, indeed the dominant idea since the 7th c. AC. on the territory of the mythological “Land of the Pharaohs.” The nature of the Egyptian state is largely vague, whether it is a secular state or a religious one. The Constitution of Egypt introduces an additional ambiguity: in one article it emphasises the importance of non-religiously understood citizenship, but in another place speaks about the fundamental role of *shariʿa* as a source of law. The Muslim imagines Egypt as a Muslim country, and such an idea is hardly inspiring for the Copts. Both groups, Muslims and Copts, therefore define its identity, in relation to their different heritages.

Copts sometimes say: “we are true, authentic Egyptians, who existed before the Arabs arrived and created an Arab state.” That is what I call an identity crisis. In the 60s, when Pan-Arabism was the dominant ideology in Egypt, Christians did not have such problems, because the then Arab nationalism was not entirely synonymous with Islamic fundamentalism and Islam. A Christian could easily identify with Arab culture, because he spoke Arabic, learned the language and lived in this cultural environment. Christians were real pioneers and promoters of nationalism throughout the Arab world. This kind of Pan-Arabism was a less risky version of identity for them compared to Pan-Islamism. Today, the only

cure for the identity crisis may be the determining of the rules and the declaring by the state what types of identification or collective identity are required and promoted by it; rather than prolonging the current state of confusion. Even for me as a Muslim, the nature of the Egyptian nation-state is not clear, whether it is a religious or secular one (NAZ).

6.2. Political Positions

One of the main preoccupations of Abū Zayd was to show his intellectual and social activities as part of being a socially and politically engaged Muslim, despite the labelling of him as *kāfir* (infidel) by some radical Islamist scholars and political factions.

Abū Zayd's works are not only scientific volumes. Their political dimension is obvious and, presumably, fully conceived by the author. There are some passages that are very polemic e.g. parts of *Al-Naṣṣ*, *al-sulṭa*, *al-ḥaqīqa*. *Al-Fikr al-dīnī bayna irādat al-ma'rifa wa-irādat al-haymana*, that deal with the opponents of the rational interpretations of the Qur'ān. It can give the impression of a very violent argumentation on the verge of a quarrel, but somewhat normal inside the conventions of Arab discourse.

In 2007 Abū Zayd gave an interview to the Polish journalist Ludwika Włodek-Biernat. It was conducted during the scholar's visit to Poland in the presence of the author of this monograph. The interview was published in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, one of the most recognisable Polish daily newspapers of the liberal-centre-leftist orientation. This material is not known in the Western Europe, so some passages are worth fully citing, also because they give the interesting account of the Egyptian scholar's intellectual and political choices and evolution.

Abū Zayd elaborates here how he became a supporter of the local Muslim Brotherhood organisation in his adolescent years.

When I was small, in the early 1950s, every child in Egypt sympathised with them. The Muslim Brotherhood began as a charitable community. In my village my teacher was associated with them. They helped people to cope with crises – and then the crisis was even when someone's cow died. Children, instead of playing on the street, were going to their local office. I insisted on my name being written on the list of members of the organisation. In 1954, in Cairo, there was an attempt to assassinate President Nasser. We, boys from the village, had

nothing to do with it. But all the Brothers offices were searched and members were arrested. Also me, a ten year old kid. In the ideology of the Brotherhood, I was attracted by the idea of social justice derived from Islam. But in the 1960s, when I was at Cairo University, the ideology of the Muslim Brothers began to radicalise. They maintained that they formed a better sort of community. They started to despise the rest of the citizens, condemning them as infidels. I did not like this exclusive tone. At the University I encountered Western literature. Islam was for me just an inspiration for implementing social justice. I read a lot as well about communism and socialism. I began to look critically at the Egyptian regime. (Włodek-Biernat 2007⁷¹).

In the other part of the interview, Abū Zayd analyses how radical ideas are disseminated in the Islamic world.

We say that when the Palestinian sneezes, someone in Indonesia catches cold. For example, Muslims from the Middle East have stimulated what was happening in Chechnya. This interdependence is not conducive to the development of liberal thinking. Islam becomes a shelter for people with a sense of being under threat. It does not matter whether this feeling is true or imagined. We live in the media world and they are interested only in those who shout loudly. If the bomb explodes, everyone immediately talks about it. But when someone delivers a lecture on humanist Islam, it goes without notice. But the fact that the world does not follow the debate on the liberal, humanistic Islam that is taking place in Egypt, Iran, or Indonesia does not mean that there is no such debate. The reform movement exists. Voices like mine – and I am not the only one – are putting pressure on the establishment, on the regimes (Włodek-Biernat 2007).

Also, very interesting are remarks of the Egyptian scholar on the nature of modernity in the Arab world.

The Muslim world is seemingly very modern. Its infrastructure sometimes differs not a lot from that in European countries. But our way of thinking is still traditional. Modernity in the Muslim world has emerged as an import from the West. It is embraced only in the largest cities and elites, not by the

⁷¹ This and following excerpts are translated from Polish by MM.

masses. Material modernity was accepted, spiritual – no. Modernity has become a way for Muslims to draw from modern technology, but not a way of conducting scientific research. In the Muslim world, scientific knowledge is still not being produced, rather: its existing products are consumed (Włodek-Biernat 2007).

This sober assessment of the shape of modernisation in the Arab countries, is followed by the analysis of the reasons for the growing role of religious fundamentalism and how the fragmented type of religious authority in the Sunni Islam is related to this.

There is no single authority in Sunni Islam. Institutions such as the Grand Mufti [the most important religious judge in many Muslim countries] are questioned. People often say: what an idiotic fatwa! Many significant movements have not been initiated by any official body – such as the Muslim Brotherhood. I like this fragmentation of authority. The fact that individuals are allowed to debate. But to have a real debate, we need democracy. It is not enough that there are many people who scream and shout at each other. Fundamentalism owes its strength to better organisation and discipline. **It attracts young, uneducated, misinformed Muslims all over the world. It is more a result of the shortcomings and weaknesses of our societies than the merits of fundamentalism itself. We [the Arabs – MM] cannot accept taking responsibility. We still accuse the West, Europe, the United States. But the popularity of fundamentalism rather corresponds to the weakness of our own educational systems and to the lack of public debate that favours these uninformed voices and allows them to attract crowds [boldface – MM].** We, liberals, still do not know how to acknowledge it. Still, I would not agree with the proposal of one of my friends, who suggested that in the Muslim world some institution similar to the Church should be created. He said so: we have to set up the Church so that we can then separate it from the state. However, the real challenge for the Muslim world is to improve living conditions, education and health care (Włodek-Biernat 2007).

These views could be summarised with a very important point held by Abū Zayd on the relation between Arab and European cultures in response to the question about his life in Europe.

(...) Europe is not a paradise of freedom as I imagined before I came here. Now, for example, I am constantly being asked to criticise Muslim culture. In the meantime, I am fighting with the stereotype of a strict division of cultures into European, Islamic, and some other. I would like to have a culture that would be partly Islamic and partly European. A culture supporting freedom, enabling research, advocating negotiation, dialogue, acceptance of all people regardless of the race, religion, ethnicity. When these rules are broken, I oppose it – whether it is in Egypt or anywhere else (Włodek-Biernat 2007).

6.3. Abū Zayd on the West and Israel

The case of Israel and establishment of the Jewish nation-state in the heart of the Middle East seems to have been a crucial issue for the Arab politics of identity for the last more than 60 years. It is interesting how this case is perceived by such a liberal and secular (in the Arab context) intellectual, as Abū Zayd. In *Voice of an Exile* he gave a moving testimony of the impact of the Six-Day War of 1967 on him personally, on all his generation, and on the wider social reality of the Arab world.

The defeat in 1967 did not come as a total surprise to me, nor was it a surprise to most intellectuals. But being defeated in a matter of hours was shocking. I was not married at this time, but had many friends who were. I heard story after story from my friends about how they were unable to engage in regular sexual intercourse with their wives – it was as though they were castrated⁷². The whole country was abuzz with this kind of testimony. Men felt their manhood had been severely compromised. The defeat was understood in religious terms. God was punishing us – Muslims – because we had abandoned Islam. Apparently, God was rewarding the Jews. Judaism had triumphed over secularism. How could Muslims bring about

⁷² The partially neologism-like expression *injirāḥ al-huwwiyya* (impotence or deep wounding of identity), utilised by Abū Zayd in *Dawā'ir al-khawf* (Abū Zayd 2007: 29ff.), was coined with reference to the sense of shame touching especially the Arab males after the trauma of 1967 Six-Day War.

a solution to this humiliation? Return to Islam. Establish a strong Islamic state to compete with a Jewish state (VE: 74).

Abū Zayd shows here the reasons for the defeat of secular nationalism (e.g. in the form of Pan-Arab socialism) and its replacement with Islamist ideologies. He also criticises Anwār al-Sādāt's policy of negotiating with Israel without consulting Egyptian society (cf. VE: 76-77). In the 2000s, being in exile, Abū Zayd felt the stronger need to express his solidarity with the plight of Palestinians, seeing a link between Israeli power and the "new American colonial projects".

Here in the Netherlands, it has become more difficult to speak about Israel in a critical context without feeling like a criminal. And I'm talking here about universities, about intellectuals – people whose very job is to wrestle with subjects within a critical context. Ordinary folks, the people in the street, may not be overtly religious; nevertheless, they have absorbed the Christian mythology that has shaped this European country. Many do not reflect on what gives their ideology its particular shape. It just seems right to them, having unreflectively absorbed the myths of their particular culture (VE: 192).

Abū Zayd criticises here the Zionist Christianity movement supporting Israel, seeing it as an important factor of the triumph of mythological thinking in politics. This development of a religious-mythological narrative, coupled with the worldwide influence of the American superpower, creates dangerous Arab resentment. As Abū Zayd puts it, the younger generation of Arabs "hates America" and is not able to distinguish between the "colonising aims of the West and the beneficial values the West offers" (VE: 188). This crucial distinction, in Abū Zayd's opinion, had still been present in the Arab world modernising movements (e.g. in Muḥammad 'Abduh's thought), but disappeared later and the "positive gains of the Islamic Reformation Movement of the nineteenth century came to a grinding halt in 1948" (VE: 187), with the establishment of the Israeli state.

With these explicitly critical remarks, Abū Zayd is rooted in the mainstream Arab critique of Zionism and Israeli nation-state functioning in the Middle East. However, he is always distant from the elements of the radical anti-Jewish discourse which spread in the Arab countries mostly as a by-product of European antisemitism. Abū Zayd always distinguishes between Zionism as an ideological project and Jews as

distinctive individuals. He also was fascinated by some intellectuals of Jewish origin as Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), who in some way similarly to Abū Zayd’s *hisba* case, faced expulsion from his native Jewish community in Amsterdam. It has to be taken into account as well that Abū Zayd’s criticism of Israel is not directed at the fact of its Jewish identity, but rather on the exclusive, anti-Arab character of it. Abū Zayd believes also that Israeli activities are counterproductive in the context of what is probably the most important task in the Arab world.

I firmly believe that separation of the state and religion is essential for protecting religion from political manipulation. When the state identifies itself with a certain religion, folks who belong to another religious tradition inevitably are discriminated against. In addition, those folks 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. 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 (VE: 183).

The dramatic developments in the Middle East after the 2011, 9/11 attacks, have intensified the opposition between the Native and the Other, both in the Arab world and the West. The George W. Bush-like rhetoric of the “axis of evil” and “our values”, endangered by the terrorists, was felt by Abū Zayd as an exclusion and as the other side of the coin of the Islamist fundamentalists tendency to treat their enemies as infidels (cf.: VE: 186). In this context, the religious exclusivist approaches were still flourishing and secular intellectuals in the Middle East suffered many setbacks in the first years of the 21st century. This, of course, was a matter of sadness and reflection for Abū Zayd.

Naṣr Abū Zayd in the Eyes of Those Who Were Close to Him. Biographical Interviews

The following chapter is based on the interviews, conducted during the academic research of the author and his research team in the Netherlands in the summer of 2015. It refers to people who were close to him (his widow, professor Ibtihāl Yūnis), academic colleagues (the Dutch scholar Pieter van Koningsveld), friends (the Palestinian-born teacher and translator As‘ad Jābir), and intellectual descendants, students working under his supervision becoming close friends in the course of time (the Egyptian-Dutch scholar Umar Ryad), This method – conducting the so-called biographical interviews, is similar to the approaches of contemporary anthropology and social studies.

Ibtihāl Yūnis played a major part in establishing the Naṣr Abū Zayd Foundation/Institution for Islamic Studies (*Mu‘assasa al-Duktūr Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd li-l-Dirāsāt al-Islāmiyya*) in 2011. They organised two major seminars regarding the heritage of the Egyptian scholar in 2014 and 2016. The articles which were the result of the first event were published in 2015. Scholars of different generations from Egypt have taken part in the seminars, in addition, in 2016 during the next symposium entitled “Min al-khiṭāb ilā al-naṣṣ” (From the Text to the Discourse) there were speakers from Algeria, Sudan, and Poland. As well, the website (despite hacking of it multiple times⁷³), YouTube channel, and Facebook site of the Foundation were established.

⁷³ As for June 2017, the internet website with the biggest number of materials, electronic books, articles, pictures, interviews and films, is included at the *Riwāq Naṣr Abū Zayd* website (“The Gallery of Naṣr Abū Zayd”, <https://row-aqnasrabuzaid.wordpress.com/>; accessed 20 June 2017).

Ibtihāl Yūnis relates how she personally reacted to Naṣr Abū Zayd's books.

He never published anything in the period of our marriage before reading it to me. His scientific Arabic was very sophisticated. Some people could not get it exactly. Sometimes I would ask him to make it less sophisticated. That's the reason why his books are so difficult to translate. But he thought that the one who was reading should have to make an effort. He didn't want to go down with the level of language. He also used to say that his books were academic, not for the general public, contrary to his interviews that were very simple and he was even speaking with the manner of an ordinary Egyptian man. Personally, I like *Dawā'ir al-khawf* very much, because it touches on the question of women. The other book, which I like, is *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ*, because it was our first intellectual encounter. But what I like the most is his constant development from the notion of the text to discourse or discourses, because as for the Qur'ān we cannot speak about just one discourse. He did not finish some projects e.g. he wanted to publish a commentary to the Qur'ān based on the chronological order of revelation, not according the order of suras in the *muṣḥaf*. The commentaries that ignore chronology can be ahistorical and anachronistic. Now, I would like to support a research team consisting of young scholars from different parts of the world who would finish this project (IY).

As for the reception of works of Abū Zayd in Egypt, she praises the situation which she calls "a rediscovery" of his works, especially after the 25 January Revolution of 2011. In Ibtihāl Yūnis' opinion, it was because of two factors – firstly, the young Egyptian generations discovered that he was equally criticising the religious elites and the political authorities, and secondly – because what he was writing about, really happened as a political and social change. She gives the interesting example.

At the symposium in October 2014, we had a young man in his twenties, coming from Al-Azhar. He started to read works of Abū Zayd treating him as an enemy. But after reading it, he started to think that rather the Al-Azhar circle was an enemy and not Abū Zayd. It is a very good example, because this young man was still in the cycle of the religious, *sharī'a* education – from the primary school to Al-Azhar. But

the reading of Abū Zayd's books caused a complete change in his mind. One of the associate professors from Al-Azhar took part in our seminar and published the text in our collective monograph after it, but he said that presenting such a paper at Al-Azhar would stop the process of his getting a full professorship there. At this famous university there are so many young talented people, but the old generation is keeping them silent. In general, there is a renewal of interest in Naṣr's works, especially in the countryside, among the young people coming from there e.g. from the south of Egypt. There is a big demand for his books lately. In January 2015 there was a new edition of almost all his books in Egypt. In Morocco, in Rabat and Casablanca's bookshops, I also found many books by him (IY).

Pieter van Koningsveld, professor emeritus of Islamic Studies and a guest professor in the Institute of Religious Studies at Leiden University, a long-time friend of Abū Zayd, assesses the reception of his ideas in the Netherlands and Europe.

Naṣr's ideas were very popular among this part of the Muslim community in the Netherlands and other European countries that has a refugee background. They were often persecuted in their native countries e.g. in Iraq or Syria. Some of them were leftists and social democrats, and there were some intellectuals and artists. They were a minority inside the whole Muslim community, but a very important minority. In this group Naṣr was very well known; they invited him to conduct lectures and so on. There was a different situation with migrant workers, mostly from Northern Africa, Turkey, and Pakistan, who came from a different social, cultural, and educational background, and were far more conservative. With them this was a different matter. However there were some open-minded persons from the second group who had had an academic training and were also interested in Abū Zayd's views. In the Islamic bookshops of the Moroccan and Turkish communities in the Netherlands, you probably will not find any of Abū Zayd's books. You would find his books in some more leftist bookshops with modern Arabic literature, as e.g. Dār al-Sāqī bookshops in London or Paris, but not here in the Netherlands. However his books are available in the system of public libraries, and they were bought by their librarians for Arabic-speaking readers. Of course, they preferred

buying Abū Zayd's books to e.g. the works of Ibn Taymiyya. Naṣr was careful not to export the animosities from Egypt into the Netherlands. For example, he would not give a lecture in a mosque, but would give one for groups of intellectuals e.g. Iraqis, Sudanis, or non-Muslim Dutch scholars. Once we had an experiment on the television: there was a musician playing the piano and Naṣr was reciting Qur'ānic verses. I performed the role of the chorus. I received very angry letters from various people, some of them well known in the Muslim communities, that our performance was blasphemous. However, they knew me better than Naṣr and he himself had no problems with these groups and people. He was not a public figure in the Netherlands, but he had some non-Muslim Dutch opponents who were resisting his liberal vision of Islam. One of the best known was the Islamic Studies scholar, Johannes Juliaan Gijsbert "Hans" Jansen⁷⁴, who later became a member of the PVV radical right-wing party led by Geert Wilders. (PVK).

Umar Ryad (ʿUmar Riyād) provides a different perspective on Abū Zayd. Ryad is currently an Islamic Studies scholar, working especially on the topic of relations between Muslim reformism and Eastern Christianity, and interwar Muslim groups in Europe. Before coming to the Netherlands, he was a student at Al-Azhar University, and now he holds the post of Assistant Professor at Utrecht University. Abū Zayd played a large and important part in his stay in Holland. He calls him "a father" which is by the way a very interesting formulation remembering Abū Zayd's words about Amīn al-Khūlī: "a man I consider to be my grandfather" (VE: 53). It seems that there is something that we could call a relay of Egyptian-born scholars who inherit the legacy of their masters.

Umar Ryad recollects the memory of his first meeting with Abū Zayd.

It was August 1999, I will never forget it. We arrived in the Netherlands from Egypt, two Egyptian students, as part of the scholarship programme between Egypt (mainly Al-Azhar University) and Leiden University. Generally, there were 11 students from Egypt at Leiden University in the period of time between 1996 and 2003, so two or three per year. We came from

⁷⁴ Hans Jansen, who was an Arabist representing the "revisionist" school of the critique of the early history of Islam, was even elected for PVV party as a Member of European Parliament in 2014. He died in 2015 because of a cerebral infarction.

the airport straight to the campus of Leiden University. Inside the building the secretary asked whether we were those two Egyptian students and said that Professor Abū Zayd was waiting for us. We were quite shocked, because as young students we had not been able to see the man and read his book yet, and our knowledge was shaped by his image [following the “Case of Abū Zayd” between 1992 and 1995 – MM], when he was often called in Egypt *murtadd* or *kāfir* and treated almost as a monster. We were really shocked (“O my God!”) especially given the fact we were “green” and unexperienced students. He stood, had his beard, was a bit bald and started to talk in the Egyptian formal style. Then closed the door, said “Ahlan, yā ahlan”, and then he hugged us, and took the wallet from his pocket and gave each of us 100 gulden. He was very eager to help: “if I can help you, I will be here” (UR).

Umar Ryad paints the picture of a man who became his teacher, a scientific master, but as well played the role of a father or was a father-like figure for the Egyptian living in the European environment.

Each time we came back to his office to discuss something, we discovered a man with a gentle heart, a really caring person. I had this honour to develop our personal relationship. Amongst the other Egyptian students, it was a really special relationship. He was not only my teacher, but he became my father (a father-like figure) too, of course not in a literal sense. By the way, when he was in Egypt, he visited my family and my father. My father became one of the best of Abū Zayd’s companions, so it was like a personal relation on the level of families. My daughter used to call Naṣr “grandpa”. I never forget the devastating scene when we were sitting with my wife and daughter after the news about his death. The daughter was six-years old that time and she said in Dutch that grandfather Abū Zayd did not die actually and that he was still part of our house (UR).

The context of “the Case of Abū Zayd” is mentioned as well by the Dutch-Egyptian scholar.

It was immediately after “the Case”, I was a second or third-year student at Al-Azhar University. I met one of our junior teachers, after he was in Germany studying. We were talking and he mentioned the case of the Egyptian professor

who was accused of apostasy. It all sounded strange to me. At that time, I didn't recognise Abū Zayd as a person exactly. Later, there were interviews in the Egyptian press about him and about what he stood for. I will never forget the caricature making fun of him, published in one of the newspapers. This was my image of him with which I arrived in the Netherlands. When I settled in Leiden, I decided to read his books and went to the Leiden University library to collect them (of course, there was no Internet or pdf. files that time). I started with reading *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ* and *Imām al-Shāfi'ī*... I even thought about translating one of his books into English but it wasn't fulfilled (UR).

Umar Ryad thinks that it is Abū Zayd who invented and popularised the concept of *tajdīd al-khiṭāb al-dīnī* (the renewal of religious discourse) which has become part of political discourse nowadays and is even utilised by the Egyptian president, 'Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Sīsī. As Umar Ryad formulates it, "the fluidity of this term is now in the air, but everybody has forgotten that it was Abū Zayd, I say ironically: the so-called *kāfir*, who invented it" (UR). Ryad also treats Abū Zayd as, in some ways, the follower of Muḥammad 'Abduh, but he distinguishes between the types of modernisation that could be associated with both of them. 'Abduh's modernism would be apologetic and reactionary (e.g. in a sense of reacting against criticism from the West), and Abū Zayd's would be rather a full-scale version of it, not so interested in the outside reaction towards it. In Ryad's view, Abū Zayd's attitude towards Islamic law was characterised by "finding out the ethical framework of what *sharī'a* should be" (UR). For example, Abū Zayd thought that the idea of gender equality was inherently included in the Qur'ānic discourse, but was not realised in the practical sense and was not contained in the judicial discourses and decisions. Ryad adds that a point which he would criticise in Abū Zayd's approach would be his apparent lack of interest in *ḥadīths* and their historical background. It was also discussed during Abū Zayd's encounters with Muḥammad Arkūn, and Ryad regrets that none of Abū Zayd's e-mail or paper correspondence with Arkūn, Ḥasan Ḥanafī or Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī was preserved or digitalised.

An additional element is added by Haifa-born As'ad Jābir, the close friend of Abū Zayd, translator of Arabic literature, teacher of Arabic at Leiden University, and one of the editors of the Dutch edition of the Qur'ān.

I was living in a suburb of Leiden and each day I used to take a bus to get to the Department of Arabic at the University of Leiden. I sat in the same place in the bus, it was a daily routine. One day, at the bus stop, I've noticed a strong guy with excellent sharp eyes. It was Abū Zayd. I recognised him, but I didn't want to interrupt and ask many questions because he had just got permission to come to Leiden and I didn't want to make him any problem regarding the circumstances of his departure from Egypt. After two or three months of not talking to each other, I came across him at the university, in Professor Pieter van Koningsveld's room, and we started to talk. From that time, we started to meet quite often (given that we used the same bus connection and we lived close to each other) and on Fridays we usually dined and talked about new books, the Qur'ān, *tafsīr* and many other things, often just for academic gossips. For example, we were collecting some opinions (*fatwas*) of Islamic jurists and discussing their application in the Dutch or European conditions. Abū Zayd firstly was a farmer, a peasant, so he was open and direct. At the same time, he was gentle and sophisticated. He settled in Europe, but remained the same guy he was in Cairo, even in his way of eating, drinking, and talking. He was a good scholar – patient and very open towards students. I really miss him (AJ).

All these biographical accounts paint the picture of a man who became really important and influential in the intellectual life of the Leiden and Utrecht academic communities, despite not being a famous public figure in the Netherlands. He was also still “a very Egyptian man”, (an expression that he often used), helping his compatriots and very open towards the international group of students and young scholars. Probably the funny, but accurate, summary would be here the title of the memoir article by Umar Ryad (Riyād 2015) which called Abū Zayd “the shaykh of the Egyptian tribe in Leiden” (*shaykh al-qabīla al-miṣriyya fī Lāydan*).

Conclusions

It is not easy to assess the intellectual impact of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd's works, just seven years after his death, but it proves to be valuable in many aspects. Probably the most important is his constant interest in analysing the Islamic revelation (*wahy*) as a process of communication, both in direct and non-direct senses. Abū Zayd explains how the message (*risāla*) is revealed by God to Muḥammad – the Prophet, the Messenger – via an intermediary: the Archangel Gabriel/Jibrīl. The message is transmitted via a communication code, which is the Arabic language. Then the *wahy* is transformed into the Text in two forms – the written one: the canonised record of the Qur'ān; and the oral one, when it is recited and enters into daily life. Abū Zayd convincingly shows how this process of communication is manifold and continuous (God–Jibrīl–Muḥammad–Companions of Muḥammad–editors of the *Muṣḥaf*–Muslims/ all reciters of the Qur'ān), and how the Qur'ānic message interacts with people in different historical periods. This complicated interaction has four aspects at least: aural (e.g. listening to the Qur'ānic recitation), oral (e.g. daily recitation of the Qur'ān by believers), exegetical (*tafsīr* – commentaries to the Qur'ānic suras, verses and expressions), and hermeneutical (*ta'wīl* – metaphorical interpretation of the Qur'ān). Abū Zayd explains, e.g. in *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ* (Abū Zayd 2011: 239), the hermeneutic relation between the Text and the interpreter, showing how the Text changes in the course of time, and how its meaning loses its fixedness, receiving new significations. This hermeneutic intention is rooted both in rereading the native Arab *turāth*, and utilising modern Western theories.

Arabic Abū Zayd's texts offer a fascinating intertextual approach, based on combining literary and linguistic rereadings of the passages from classical and modern Arabic texts: theological, philosophical, po-

etry, and belles-lettres. The diversity of Arabic sources and their interpretations makes Abū Zayd “a very Arab and Egyptian thinker”, and it is not possible to fully translate this aspect into European culture or languages. His sophisticated Arabic can be seen from the European point of view as a little bit redundant, and too digressive, but it fully matches the richness of modern Arabic poetics, based on a rethinking of the classical *turāth*.

Abū Zayd can be treated as a thinker really rooted in the pre-modernist aspects of classical Arab-Muslim thought. It is shown by his focus on the doctrine of the “createdness of the Qur’ān”, which makes him a sort of a neo-Mu’tazilite thinker (as some commentators describe him as well); or by a critical reading of Ibn ‘Arabī’s mystical ideas of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of existence). At the same time, Abū Zayd’s commitment to contemporary Western thought was serious and ambitious. It is illustrated by the passages in *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ*, and *Al-Naṣṣ, al-sulṭa, al-ḥaqīqa. Al-Fikr al-dīnī bayna irādat al-ma’rifa wa-irādat al-haymana*, in which he really tried to translate/adjust the terminology of Y. Lotman, F. de Saussure, and E.D. Hirsch, into Arabic, and integrate his European and Arab inspirations into one coherent theory.

His premature death brought some of his non-finished projects to a halt, such as the preparing of a systematic commentary to the Qur’ān, or more developed studies on the *hadiths* and *sunnah*. Perhaps this research will be done in the future by younger generations of Egyptian, Arab, and Western scholars.

Probably the best homage to the intellectual legacy of Abū Zayd was paid by Muḥammad Arkūn, by the way, a famous scholar with whom the Egyptian thinker had quite an abrasive relationship (cf. VE: 193–194). Arkūn described⁷⁵ Abū Zayd, as “the first Muslim scholar who writes directly in Arabic while teaching at Cairo University, [who] tried to break the numerous taboos that prevent the application of the most relevant achievements of contemporary linguistics to the Qur’ān” (cited after: Rahman 2001: 252⁷⁶). The author of *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ* was consistent in this intellectual and political pursuit for the freedom of thought,

⁷⁵ Arkūn published as well the article in the *Encyclopaedia of Qur’ān* (Janet Dammen McAuliffe [ed.], vol. 1, Leiden: „Brill”, 2001, pg. 426) on Abū Zayd.

⁷⁶ This is a little bit corrected version of Rahman’s translation, that was based on: Muḥammad Arkūn, *Al-Fikr al-uṣulī: naḥwa tā’rīkh ākhar li-l-fikr al-islāmī*, translated into Arabic by Hāshim Ṣāliḥ, Bayrūt: Dār al-Sāqī, 1999, pg. 63.

and he did not make any concessions towards the Islamist-oriented environment, and this is what distinguishes him from e.g. Ḥasan Ḥanafī and Adūnīs. Even if Abū Zayd did not match the latter in literary genius, he can still be seen as positive example of a contemporary intellectual – courageous in expressing his views, and loving his native culture wholeheartedly, but however open to its critique and sober rethinking.



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