

On Anti-Anti-Foundationalism: Nasr Abu Zayd's 'Rethinking' of the Qur'an¹
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I'm very glad to have been included in this memorial to Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and know that, if he had been here today, he would've greatly enjoyed our discussions. I suspect, however, that he would have found any controversy even more invigorating given his own fondness for contention. On my part, therefore, I will honor his spirit by tracing our mutually different approaches to the Qur'an and I believe a discussion of Islamic feminism provides a good opportunity to do that. First, however, I will sum up his views so as to situate feminism itself within the context of some broader epistemic and methodological debates in Islamic newthinking, as it is being called.

Basically, Abu Zayd wanted Muslims to stop seeing their "religious texts as repositories of truths, from which ... [to] 'retrieve' an egalitarian Islam"² and he felt the only way to do this was to "rethink" their status, especially of the Qur'an. By this he meant to stop regarding it as a sacred text and treat it instead as a historically produced discourse incorporating both divine and human voices. If Muslims were in fact to do this, we wouldn't need "to recontextualize one or more passages in the fight against literalism and fundamentalism, or against a specific historical practice that seems inappropriate for our modern contexts."³ Indeed, such an approach might even obviate the need for hermeneutics altogether.

Though Abu Zayd never put it this way, and even nodded in the direction of an "open and democratic hermeneutics,"⁴ he was disapproving of the interpretive enterprise as a whole. Thus, he chided "modernist hermeneutics" for justifying the "historicity and hence the relativity of every mode of understanding," while also allowing people to claim "that our modern interpretation is more appropriate and more valid."⁵ He also faulted classical jurists, as well as reformists and feminists, for treating the Qur'an as a text because it meant taking a "focal point that will always point to God."⁶ A focal point that "can be claimed as universal—the irrevocable and the eternal truth," he said, is what leaves the Qur'an "at the mercy of the ideology of its interpreter." As he put it, "For a communist [it] would reveal communism, for a fundamentalist... it

¹ Text of comments I was invited to deliver as an introduction to a discussion of "Islamic Feminism."

² This is Raja Rhouni's reading of Abu Zayd's position. *Secular and Islamic Feminist Critiques in the Work of Fatima Mernissi*, Leiden, Brill, 2010, 272.

³ Nasr Abu Zayd, *Reformation of Islamic Thought*, Amsterdam University Press, 2006, 98.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

would be a highly fundamentalist text, for a feminist it would be a feminist text and so on.”⁷ The only way to avoid this “crisis of interpretation and counter-interpretation”⁸ was to discard not only *asl* readings purporting to make truth-claims, but the very idea of a universal truth and to abjure foundationalist approaches to religious knowledge.

Some new wave feminists, like Raja Rhouni, are now drawing on Abu Zayd’s thinking to advocate a post-foundationalist approach to the Qur’an and to feminism, so I have also included her work in my review of different positions. My intent, however, is not just to draw out the contrasts between these but also to defend Islamic feminism against what I see as the incoherence of post and antifoundationalist criticisms. (I can only do this in very broad strokes, of course, given the fifteen minute time-limit.)

As an example of feminist hermeneutics, I will take my own reading, but since I’ve also registered my resistance to being called a feminist in three public debates with Margot Badran, I want to briefly explain the seeming incoherence of my own stance.

It was Badran who first put my work in the category of Islamic feminism, which she defines as “a discourse of gender equality and social justice that derives its understanding and mandate from the Quran and seeks the practice of rights and justice for all human beings in the totality of their existence across the public-private continuum.”⁹ This is wonderfully comprehensive description and it certainly applies to my work but I continue to question Badran’s need to call it feminist specially when she herself notes that some Muslim women were reading the Qur’an as a discourse of equality before the advent of feminism. In effect, what I object to isn’t her definition but the unilateral, insistent, and retroactive mapping of feminism onto the Qur’an, which makes it seem as if sexual equality can only be the epistemic preserve of feminists.

As to why and how I read the Qur’an as such a discourse myself, it is partly on the basis of some of its key teachings, particularly, that women and men originate in the same self and have the same capacity for moral personality. I take this ontological view of equality¹⁰ as the framework for understanding other Qur’anic teachings including its sometimes different treatment of women and men. In this context what I find significant is that the Qur’an never ties its differing approach to claims about male ontological superiority and nor does it “portray women and men as opposites, or women as lesser or defective men or the two sexes as incompatible, incommensurable,

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Margot Badran, “Islamic Feminism: Beyond Good and Evil, Beyond East and West,” unpublished paper, 2003.

¹⁰ I borrow this understanding of equality from Riffat Hassan, “An Islamic Perspective.” In *Sexuality: A Reader*, edited by Karen Lebacqz. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1999

or unequal”¹¹ in the manner of theories of gender inequality. In fact, the Qur’an doesn’t even associate sex with gender, which is to say that while it recognizes biological differences, it doesn’t assign them any gender symbolism.

More crucially, from my perspective, it refuses to map gender symbolism onto God and rejects the patriarchal imaginary of God as father which serves to justify male privilege in religious patriarchies. As I’ve argued elsewhere,¹² inasmuch as we can’t patriarchalize God in Islam, we also can’t take male authority as reflecting divine partiality to males. There is absolutely no theological basis for assuming that a God who is above sex/ gender would fall prey to shoddy sexual partisanship.

Naturally, I’m aware of the few lines in the text that speak to male authority as it existed among the seventh century tribal Arabs whom the Qur’an addressed in real-time. I just don’t consider it noteworthy given the realities of that historical context. But, what I *do* find aberrant is the obsessive Muslim fixation on only those lines and taking that seventh century Arab patriarchy as a focal point in interpreting the entire Qur’an. This strikes me as benighted for two reasons.

First, that form of patriarchy is long gone, along with its other attendant social institutions like slavery and concubinage based on war-making. It is therefore frankly, absurd and ignorant to try and keep resurrecting it by yoking misogynistic readings of a few lines around women’s necks in the name of honoring God’s word. This is just a rank and self-serving ploy to claim outmoded forms of male power, nothing more.

Second, scriptures have more than one meaning and they incorporate a horizon of ethical possibilities, not just one. For precisely that reason, we shouldn’t confuse the normative with the historically contingent, as Fazlur Rahman argued.¹³ To put it in the language of feminist and scriptural hermeneutics, we should seek to contextualize the Qur’an by reading behind it and also to recontextualize it by reading in front of it so as to make it applicable to our own lives today.

This is a very rough and partial summary of my approach and of Islamic feminist hermeneutics in general and I will now examine Rhouni’s rebuttal of these.

Her main criticism is that feminist hermeneutics “chooses to give a more progressive, or egalitarian meaning to a verse and presenting [sic] it as the truth, when it has the means to do so, while resorting to the idea that such and such verse needs to be contextualized in order to discover its contingency, when it reaches a semantic dead-

¹¹ Asma Barlas, “Believing Women” in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an, University of Texas Press, 2002, 129.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, Chicago University Press, 1982.

end.”¹⁴ In effect, she maintains that contextualization is just a strategy “to rescue an insufficient and unconvincing interpretive method ... rather than a systematic and pondered approach that recognizes and asserts the Qur’an’s historicity.”¹⁵ To Rhouni, as to Abu Zayd, asserting its historicity means disavowing the idea that it is “a divinely authored text that has been revealed to all humanity regardless of its context of production, or historicity.”¹⁶

She labels her own approach post-foundationalist because it “goes beyond the dogma of Islamic feminism that gender equality is foundational to the Qur’an’ and transcends the egalitarian approach that seeks to claim its reading as the most original and truest.” This is the only way, she says, to get “out of the vicious circle of ‘truth talk.’”¹⁷

As is obvious, Rhouni draws heavily on Abu Zayd’s arguments and I will now respond to both, as well as to other secular Muslims who share their views.

Her weakest claim is that one can *either* explore the relationship between text and context *or* the meanings of the text itself without justifying as to why this should be so given that the standard interpretive practice is to do both, and not just in Islam.

As to her and Abu Zayd’s insistence that we need to contextualize and historicize the Qur’an, it seems to confuse contextualization, historicization, and authorship. To contextualize a text doesn’t mean to tie it to only one set of historical circumstances. We can also recontextualize the same text by reinterpreting it in the present; in effect, texts have multiple contexts. Further, the fact the Qur’an was revealed at a particular point in history doesn’t in itself mean that God couldn’t have been its author. This is another way of saying that one can’t establish its non-sacred nature by contextualizing or historicizing it in the sense in which Rhouni uses these terms. It is also necessary to argue against belief in God, the idea that God speaks, and the claim that God’s speech is timeless. It is these beliefs together that make the Qur’an sacred.

Then, too, it is naïve to think that if we were to regard the Qur’an as a discourse, we could put an end to interpretation, counter-interpretation, and “vicious” truth-talk. Interpretive differences aren’t just a function of texts or of a belief in God or in the idea of a universal truth. Discourses, no less than texts, lend themselves to different interpretations; besides, as Abu Zayd himself once said, the “empirical diversity of religious meaning is part of human diversity around the meaning of life in general.”¹⁸ Why then want to quash it?

¹⁴ Rhouni, 14.

¹⁵ Ibid., 256.

¹⁶ Ibid., 260.

¹⁷ Ibid., 272.

¹⁸ Abu Zayd, 99.

Finally, even those who don't treat the Qur'an as a text or as sacred and who don't believe in universal truths, engage in interpretation and truth talk of their own. Their very claim that there are no universal truths rests on everyone's willingness to accept it as true and, preferably, truer than the opposite assertion.

As I see it, then, contextualization and historicization are just code words for wanting Muslims to secularize Islam but without having to engage their belief system. Hence the various euphemisms, about not treating the Qur'an as a text, moving "beyond the text, saying no to the text" and so on, all while paying lip service to the Muslim right to believe in God. The questions, of course, remain: why *should* Muslims abandon their view of God's word as sacred; and, why *shouldn't* they want to read it in egalitarian and liberatory ways?

If making this argument makes one an apologist for Islam, then surely I am one. But it seems to me that secular Muslims are also apologists for modernity and secularism who hold their own truths to be so self-evident that they want believers to embrace them too. All on the promise of then being able to "think the unthought."¹⁹ However, prescribing a uniform and universal faith in the lack of belief in the sacred isn't a strategy for liberating others; it is a demand for their conversion. If salvation does, indeed, lie in thinking the unthought, then it seems to me that secular Muslims and critics of Islam could well begin by questioning the foundational dogmas of secularism itself; after all, why should *they* harbor no doubts about their own certainties?

¹⁹ This is Rhouni's borrowing from M. Arkoun's book, *The Unthought in Islamic Thought*, Saqi Books, 2002.