The Modernist Reading and Critique of Religious Heritage in the Thought of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd



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Abstract:

This article analyzes Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's modernist approach to Islamic heritage, centering on hermeneutics (taʾwīl). Abu Zayd argued against sanctifying historical juristic works, equating them with the sacred texts (Qur'an and Sunnah). He emphasized the reader's active role in interpretation, viewing the religious text as historically situated and open to multiple readings across different contexts. While the Qur'an's wording is fixed, he contended that its meaning becomes fluid when engaged by human reason.

The study outlines Abu Zayd's hermeneutical mechanisms, his advocacy for the text's historicity, and key criticisms of his project. It concludes by summarizing the research findings on his effort to separate foundational texts from their later interpretive traditions.

Keywords: Heritage; hermeneutics; Religious Text; Ijtihad; Historicity.

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Introduction

The issue of hermeneutics is considered one of the most important issues that has occupied a prominent position in our contemporary era, in both Arab and Western thought alike. In Arab thought in particular, it has been closely associated with heritage, specifically religious heritage. The issue at stake concerns the act of reading this heritage and the effective and viable mechanisms for reading it.

With the adoption of a hermeneutical approach, the reading of texts undergoes a transformation, whereby the reader becomes the central and productive axis of this process. This does not mean that hermeneutics is a newly emergent issue; rather, it is an ancient one in the history of human thought. The issue of reading and hermeneutics constitutes the most important subject studied by the contemporary Egyptian thinker Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, to the extent that he has been regarded as a pioneer of the hermeneutical current in contemporary Arab thought.

With remarkable boldness, Abu Zayd proceeded to open the file of religious heritage and attempted to study it through a new method and an approach that had not previously been applied. He sought to unveil the real reasons underlying certain readings of religious heritage. Abu Zayd worked on several concepts, most notably hermeneutics, which he considered a mechanism for reading the religious text and an ijtihadi means that opens wide the door to plurality and difference -difference that jurists and scholars themselves acknowledged as a form of mercy. In this context, he adopted the statement of Imam Abu Hanifa al-Nuʿman: *"They are men, and we are men,"* in order to demonstrate the legitimacy and necessity of reading and counter-reading.

Accordingly, several questions arise: How, according to Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, can one arrive at a correct understanding and a sound reading of religious heritage? What is the role of the hermeneutical process in this regard? What are the limits of hermeneutics in reading the religious text? What is its benefit? And does the claim of the historicity of the religious text constitute a strong argument for the necessity of reading it through diverse hermeneutical approaches?

1 – Hermeneutics in the Thought of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd

For Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, the Qur'anic text is hermeneutical by its very nature. Its hermeneutical engagement began with the earliest exegetes who dealt with it. Those who interpreted the Qur'an were, in fact, practicing hermeneutics, even though they formally distinguished between *tafsīr* (exegesis) and *taʾwīl* (hermeneutics). **(Abu Zayd, 2003, p. 12)**

Abu Zayd maintains that the interpretations offered by the Companions of the Prophet and their followers were, in essence, hermeneutical acts. However, Muslim scholars, beginning from the fourth century AH, came to prefer *tafsīr* over *taʾwīl*. It became widespread among them to consider hermeneutics as a deviation from the objective meanings of the Qur'an, and to assume that hermeneutics leads to the introduction of ideas, doctrines, and deliberate distortions of Qur'anic meanings, vocabulary, and structures. **(Abu Zayd, 2008, p. 176)**

In this context, Abu Zayd sought to demonstrate that hermeneutics was present and accepted from the very beginning, but starting from the fourth century AH it was rejected and subjected to

hostility. This rejection was largely due to the reliance of theological sects on hermeneutical methods, which led to the prohibition of hermeneutics and its classification as a means of distorting the religious text and a path leading to deviation and misguidance.

Thus, it became common to regard hermeneutics as a deviation from the intended objectives and objective meanings of the Qur'an, and as a method for affirming doctrines and ideas -or rather, delusions- through the deliberate distortion of Qur'anic lexical and syntactic meanings.

Abu Zayd then proceeds to address the limits of hermeneutics and its full conditions as established by Muslim scholars. However, he does not elaborate on them exhaustively; rather, he confines himself to the following statement:

"Hermeneutics that does not rely on exegesis (*tafsīr*) is rejected and reprehensible. Inference (*istinbāṭ*) must not be based on mere conjecture, nor on subjecting the text to the interpreter's whims and ideology, regardless of how noble the intentions may be. Rather, inference must be grounded, on the one hand, in the factual realities of the text, and on the other hand, in its linguistic data. Only then is it permissible to move from meaning (*maʿnā*) to significance (*maghzā*), without leaping directly to a significance that contradicts the textual meaning". **(Abu Zayd, 1999, p. 35)**

Thus, inquiry into *significance* concerns what is variable, whereas *meaning* remains fixed. Significance is variable because it is historical, linked to prevailing circumstances, modes of life, and their specific conditions in each era. Meaning, by contrast, remains stable within the fixed text.

The meaning inherent in the text is static insofar as it is inseparably bound to the language that expresses it and accompanies it over time. Significance, however, is reached by the interpreter through a dialectical engagement and interaction with the text. In this regard, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd follows the path of major hermeneutical thinkers in distinguishing between meaning and significance. He grounds this distinction in two dimensions:

"The first dimension is historical in nature, in the sense that it cannot be attained except through precise knowledge of the internal linguistic context and the external cultural and social context. Meaning, however, has a contemporary character in the sense that it is the product of a reading belonging to an era other than that of the text". **(Abu Zayd, 1994a, p. 221)**

Here, significance appears as variable, while meaning remains fixed. Through this distinction, Abu Zayd seeks to lend credibility to the claim of the necessity of hermeneutics, so that understanding the religious text may remain in harmony with the contemporary era and the discursive context in which hermeneutics is exercised. Meaning remains bound to the time of revelation, whereas significance evolves. Meaning has limits, while significance -according to Abu Zayd- remains open, as it represents an understanding that transcends language and its denotations, and is thus emancipated from the past.

As for the second dimension of the distinction between meaning and significance, it follows as a consequence of the first:

"Meaning enjoys a considerable degree of relative stability, whereas significance is characterized by movement and change in accordance with shifting horizons of reading, even though its relationship to meaning regulates and guides its movement." **(Abu Zayd, 1994a, p. 221)**

From this perspective, Abu Zayd's conception of hermeneutics can be summarized as follows:

- ¬ Avoiding interpretation based on conjecture and intuition.
- ¬ Refraining from subjecting the text to personal whims and ideological agendas.
- ¬ Grounding interpretation in the linguistic data of the text.
- ¬ Beginning with exegesis (*tafsīr*) prior to hermeneutics, that is, moving from denotation to significance.
- ¬ Ensuring that significance does not contradict textual denotation.

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd devoted extensive attention to the concept of hermeneutics and to all related notions, such as exegesis, metaphor, text, and language. The Muʿtazilites, as an early Islamic intellectual movement, occupied a prominent place in his studies and writings, insofar as they represented the rational trend in Qur'anic interpretation. He also examined their treatment of metaphor in the Qur'an, considering them the boldest among Islamic schools in reading the Qur'anic text and employing hermeneutical methods.

In addition, Abu Zayd engaged deeply with Sufi discourse, particularly in the thought of Shaykh al-Akbar Ibn ʿArabi. In studying Ibn ʿArabi's works, he explored the peculiarities, features, and outcomes of mystical hermeneutics. He devoted to Ibn ʿArabi a book entitled *Thus Spoke Ibn ʿArabi*, and another titled *The Philosophy of Hermeneutics: A Study of Qur'anic Interpretation in the Thought of Muhyi al-Din Ibn ʿArabi*.

The purpose behind Abu Zayd's study of hermeneutics among the Muʿtazilites and Ibn ʿArabi was to identify the most effective hermeneutical approaches for grasping the truth of the religious text as he conceived it. He regarded this text as an open text rather than a single, closed truth—one shaped by culture. Consequently, it is, like other historical texts, a cultural product. By this, he does not mean the text in itself, but rather the interpretations and exegeses written around it, which, unfortunately, have been endowed -according to him- with an aura of sanctity that at times surpasses the sanctity of the religious text itself.

Because of this perspective, the intellectual project that Abu Zayd sought to construct encountered fierce opposition. Doctrinal authority exerted its pressure and ultimately succeeded. Perhaps the most provocative idea that mobilized public opinion against Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was his view of the Qur'an as a cultural product and as a cognitive text that can be analyzed and critically examined. For Abu Zayd, the fact that the text originates from God does not preclude its susceptibility to analysis and study. **(Qadur. & Azizou , 2018, p. 68)**

The rejection of the idea that the Qur'anic text is a cultural or linguistic product is closely connected to the rejection of the historical approach to the Qur'an. Both ideas, according to their opponents, narrow the gap between the absolute and the relative, or between the binary of the sacred

divine and the profane human, bringing them closer to the point where the human becomes intertwined with the divine-something that juristic reason refuses to accept. Another reason for this rejection is the belief that such an approach renders the signs of God in the universe and in human beings mutable and non-fixed, thereby terminating their effectiveness with the end of the time of revelation.

In truth, however, the assertion that the Qur'an is a linguistic text may actually serve the text itself rather than undermine it-this, through hermeneutics.

The rational hermeneutical engagement with the Noble Qur'an constitutes a productive intellectual activity. By contrast, dealing with the Qur'an as a revelation that is immune to reading and hermeneutics transforms the muṣḥaf into a mere material object, a talisman for protection against evil, or a silent entity. **(Yubi., 2011, p. 92)**

The Qur'an is valid for every time and place, and suitable for every nation and human community-this is acknowledged by jurists themselves. Why, then, this rejection of hermeneutics?

Abu Zayd responds by asserting that ideology, inherited cultural patterns, and crude partisanship are the primary reasons. He emphasizes that closing the door of *ijtihād* and hermeneutics is the fundamental cause of the الأمة's catastrophe, its backwardness, and its distance from the hoped-for renaissance-now reduced to a mere dream or mirage, unattainable by minds that paralyze reason and reify the Qur'an, despite its explicit call to the exercise of reason and hermeneutical reflection.

In this sense, modernist discourses in contemporary Arab thought-such as those of Mohammed Arkoun, Farag Foda, and Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, as well as the discourse adopted by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd-seek to construct critical and archaeological visions that interrogate ready-made discourses long surpassed by time and ossified by history. The desired modernity cannot be achieved except through accepting difference, embracing counter-readings, fostering open cultural dialogue, and ceasing the uncritical reproduction of the past-past frameworks that may have been useful in their own time.

Modernity, in its essence, is a process of unveiling; it is a critical, hermeneutical condition that subjects all presuppositions in every field to collapse. In forming a hermeneutical relationship with heritage, modernity exposes its unconscious symbolic structures and performs a painful -but inevitable- deconstruction of its foundational myths. **(Raja, 2005, pp. 144-145)**

Indeed, engaging with what has been silenced within religious heritage -particularly with regard to classical readings- reveals many beliefs that have been invalidated by scientific knowledge and opens the door to doubt and critique. The deliberate or unintentional conflation between what is divine and what constitutes juristic or scholarly *ijtihād* has endowed these human efforts with an aura of sanctity, closing the door to divergent thought and alternative interpretations. This is precisely what Abu Zayd sought to critique.

The religious text -whether Qur'an or Hadith- is fixed, but what must remain variable and aligned with the spirit of the age is its hermeneutical reading and interpretation. Unfortunately, although the Qur'an occupies a sacred and central position in Islamic culture, discourse about it has

come -under the influence of certain ideologies, according to Abu Zayd- to be marked by fear and apprehension on the part of both author and reader alike.

Returning to the text as a cultural source, Abu Zayd begins by affirming the dialectical relationship between the divine and the human. God revealed His Book to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the Arabic language, in Mecca. There is thus a linguistic determination (Arabic), a spatial determination (Mecca), and a human determination (the personality of the Prophet). In his hermeneutical reading, Abu Zayd holds that the Qur'anic text is a linguistic text and a cultural product. It emerged within a specific environment -the Arab milieu- and became connected to events of that historical period and even to events preceding it. **(Qadur. & Azizou , 2018, p. 7)**

Each Qur'anic chapter has occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) and specific circumstances that accompanied it. This, according to Abu Zayd, means that interpretation in that era was context-bound, and that it is therefore necessary to develop a new type of hermeneutics that corresponds to our contemporary age.

Linking the text to the environment in which it was revealed is a logical prerequisite for speaking meaningfully of a text that is readable and intelligible. Claims of the Qur'an's absolute transcendence, pre-eternity, and detachment from history are merely discourses that deny reality. No text whatsoever can be isolated from its historical moment and from the problems of its lived reality.

In this regard, Jaber Asfour states: "The search for the text is, in reality, nothing other than a search for the essence of the Qur'an as a linguistic text; this understanding renders the text an event constructed within history." **(Asfour, 1994, p. 47)**

Thus, the text becomes an event; its verses did not take shape independently of the reality that accompanied the revelation of the Qur'an -or more precisely, the revelation of each specific surah. For this reason, Abu Zayd places strong emphasis on the issue of language. Religious texts- Qur'an and Hadith alike- are by no means detached from the cultural environment in which they were formed. Although their divine source is absolute, they are, in Abu Zayd's view, linguistic texts.

Accordingly, he states: "They are linguistic texts in every sense of the word-language being inherently bound to historical time and place. What lies beyond language and precedes it, namely divine speech in its absolute form, has no direct relation to us as human beings, nor do we possess the epistemic or methodological tools to subject it to study." **(Abu Zayd, 1995, p. 54)**

Here, Abu Zayd affirms the sanctity of religious texts, yet insists that they must be understood hermeneutically, in relation to the time and place in which they emerged. Consequently, their readings may differ from one era to another in accordance with prevailing ideas and conditions. He thus reiterates that the text is fixed in itself, whereas understanding and interpretation are variable. The religious text is therefore an open text, capable of evolving meanings in response to social transformations and changing intellectual frameworks-thereby avoiding stagnation and confinement to the past.

Abu Zayd provides an example through which he seeks to demonstrate that the Qur'anic text is renewable and dynamic, and that its significations differ from one era to another. This example -or more precisely, this proof- is the issue of *abrogation* (*al-nasikh wa al-mansukh*). The fact that one verse abrogates another constitutes the strongest evidence that new developments occurred in reality, prompting the revelation of a verse that nullified a previous ruling. Abu Zayd says: "The phenomenon of abrogation, which scholars have acknowledged as having occurred in the text, constitutes the strongest evidence of the dialectical relationship between revelation and reality. Abrogation is the annulment and cancellation of a ruling." **(Abu Zayd, 1999, p. 117)**

In addition to the issue of abrogation, which confirms that the text is not detached from reality but rather formed in relation to it and shaping it in turn, there is also the issue of the *occasions of revelation* (*asbāb al-nuzūl*). Verses were revealed for specific reasons that necessitated their revelation. Likewise, the Prophetic biography and the noble Hadiths reveal numerous instances in which the Prophet (peace be upon him) engaged in dialogue with the polytheists of Quraysh or with the Jews who posed questions to him, whereupon revelation would descend in response to those events. Alternatively, the Prophet would utter a statement as revelation, since he does not speak from whim but speaks only through divine inspiration.

Abu Zayd says: "Every verse or group of verses was revealed on account of a specific cause that necessitated its revelation, and the verses that were revealed initially -without an external cause- are very few." **(Abu Zayd, 1999, p. 97)**

This means that the religious text is connected to concrete events and lived reality, yet remains valid for every time and place. What is required, however, is a renewed hermeneutical reading that corresponds to the lived reality and its specific conditions.

Another piece of evidence lies in the classification of Qur'anic surahs into Meccan and Medinan, which clearly indicates their connection to specific places and times. All these elements serve as proofs of the necessity of reading the religious text through hermeneutical approaches that link the text to the temporal and spatial context in which it is to be applied and from which benefit is sought. *Ijtihād* and hermeneutics thus become indispensable, rendering the religious text a living, dynamic, and effective text.

The gradual nature of legislation also serves as evidence of the text's connection to reality. For example, the prohibition of wine was not imposed from the outset, but rather unfolded gradually. The Qur'an first pointed to its negative aspects, then prohibited prayer while intoxicated, and finally declared its complete prohibition and clarified its harms.

According to Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, the Qur'an is fixed in terms of its articulated wording (*manṭūq*), yet when subjected to human reason it becomes a concept that loses its attribute of fixity. Its significations move and expand. In this sense, the Qur'anic text is a linguistic text, and the appropriate approach to it is therefore a linguistic one, grounded in the data of Arab culture and its linguistic system.

Abu Zayd says: "When God Almighty revealed the Qur'an to the noble Prophet, He chose the linguistic system of the recipient, for language is the most important tool through which the world is perceived and organized. Accordingly, we cannot speak of a language detached from culture and reality so long as the text exists within the linguistic framework of culture." **(Abu Zayd, 1994a, p. 125)**

The core if the hermeneutical project of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd revolves around the general problem of interpreting texts, whether historical or religious. In his works, he sought to establish a dialectical interrogation of the relationship between the religious text and human reality, which is characterized by renewal and change -especially given that Arab-Islamic heritage is fundamentally grounded in Qur'anic texts above all else.

Abu Zayd clarifies that the essence and reality of the Qur'anic text do not exceed its being a cultural product insofar as it is language -language that is inseparably connected to culture and the discursive field to which it belongs.

He does not deny the divine origin of the Qur'anic text; however, this does not negate the fact that its content is connected to lived cultural reality, and thus to human culture. On this basis, Abu Zayd considers linguistic analysis to be the most appropriate methodological approach for studying the Qur'anic text.

The central concern that preoccupied Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was how to contribute to the formulation and establishment of a rational form of knowledge of the Qur'anic (sacred) text. As he observes: "What unites us as Muslims exists within the text, and this must be acknowledged. However, access to it and its realization can only be achieved through hermeneutical reading, since hermeneutics represents the most appropriate process for expressing deeply complex mental operations in confronting texts and phenomena." **(Abu Zayd, 1996a, p. 192)**

Here, Abu Zayd stresses the necessity of distinguishing between the source of the Qur'anic text -the divine source- and its nature as a text connected to human culture. Like all texts, the Qur'anic text is governed by a dialectic of permanence and change: fixed in wording, variable in significations. Thus, affirming the divinity of the Qur'an does not negate the realism of its content or its connection to human culture.

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd worked to liberate religious thought from the authority of guardianship and to free it from closed ideologies. Hence, he says: "All social (economic, political, intellectual) conflicts among different groups throughout the history of the Islamic state were expressed through religious language in its ideological form." **(Abu Zayd, 1996b, p. 11)**

The new methodology proposed by Abu Zayd is based on the necessity of taking into account the requirements of lived reality and prevailing culture when engaging in hermeneutical interpretation. Accordingly, he says: "Through jurisprudence of the text and of reality, harmony is achieved between the legal ruling and the presented incident, with all its elements, circumstances, and conditions". **(Mohamed , 1999, p. 66)**

Thus, Abu Zayd emphasizes that what truly matters is *significance*, which changes with changing social conditions and circumstances, whereas meaning remains fixed. Consequently, the

reading of the religious text must be grounded in the principle that it is an open text, connected to the reality in which it is to be applied. For this reason, the hermeneutical process applied to the religious text must take into account the specific reality in which interpretation and application occur.

2 – The Historicity of Religious Heritage in the Thought of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd affirms that the hermeneutical interpretation of the text is intrinsically connected to its historicity. Any hermeneutical reading of texts -regardless of their nature-aims to establish a connection between the intent of the text and its temporality. This necessarily requires, first and foremost, an examination of the context of the text, of which history constitutes one of its fundamental references. Abu Zayd builds his modernist discourse in reading the religious text upon the concept of historicity, holding that the text and the reality in which it emerged are two sides of the same coin.

The historicity of the religious text, as articulated by Abu Zayd, signifies "its connection to the cultural reality within which it was formed, in accordance with its linguistic and cultural determinants". **(Kubrit, 2012, pp. 145-146)**. He believes in the multiplicity of the text's semantic levels -namely, the apparent meaning embedded in the text and the latent significance contained within it. Accordingly, he urges the reader to adhere to two principles in reading heritage: first, uncovering the meanings of the heritage text within its historical, cultural, and intellectual context; and second, striving to reach its significance -one of the central challenges that Abu Zayd's hermeneutics seeks to overcome. **(Abu Zayd, 1996a, pp. 6-7)**

On this basis, the religious text-or what is termed religious heritage-must be read as a historical text possessing specific historical and cultural contexts. This leads us logically to acknowledge that classical readings of religious heritage were momentary readings, bound to the historical contexts in which they emerged. Modernist readings, by contrast, differ from classical readings in their mechanisms and objectives, while maintaining fidelity to the linguistic meaning of the religious text.

Any intellectual system that takes shape within a specific historical period possesses its own concepts, which cannot remain identical in subsequent periods. In this regard, Abu Zayd employs historicity as both a method and a mechanism for approaching an understanding of the religious text. Through this approach, he seeks to transcend the aura of sanctity that surrounds the text and renders it immune to study and analysis-elevating it beyond human limitations and leaving it closed in upon itself and resistant to comprehension.

Historicity, in Abu Zayd's thought, aspires to link the understanding of the text to a finite historical moment shaped by the particular circumstances surrounding the text. **(Kuraiba, 2017, p. 3)** This is what Mohammed Arkoun referred to as *"lived religion"*, by which he meant that explanations, interpretations, and juristic rulings derived from the religious text were shaped according to the lived realities of the Arabian Peninsula at the time of revelation.

In his hermeneutical reading, Abu Zayd establishes a close connection between text and event. The first event is the creation of the Qur'an as a divine act that manifested itself within history. Abu

Zayd attempted to ground his theory of the historicity of the Qur'anic text within Islamic heritage itself by drawing upon the Muʿtazilite doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'an. He holds that affirming the historicity of the Qur'anic text **(Kuraiba, 2017, p. 6)** is supported by the Muʿtazilite claim that the Qur'an is created and originated, thereby demonstrating that it emerged in response to a cultural need and within a pressing historical context.

Accordingly, classical understanding remains bound to that context and is not necessarily binding in our present time. Rather, it requires renewed hermeneutical interpretation that corresponds to the cultural context in which we now live. Abu Zayd considers this process to fall within the domain of *ijtihād*, renewal, and the preservation of the vitality and continuity of the religious text.

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd sought to liberate the reading of heritage from any prior authority imposed by the text upon the reader. The principle of the text's domination-or more precisely, the domination of a particular group's understanding of the text-imprisons reason and strips the human being of one of the most fundamental qualities emphasized by the Qur'an itself, as expressed in the verse: *"Perhaps they may reflect."* According to Abu Zayd, such domination ultimately leads to a discourse that calls for absolute submission, thereby contradicting one of the most essential foundations of Islam: the call to reflection, contemplation, the exercise of reason, and the pursuit of hermeneutical understanding.

This conviction prompted Abu Zayd to re-examine the meaning of the term *text* in his work *The Concept of the Text*. He explains that those who repeatedly invoke the slogan *"There is no ijtihād where there is a text"* engage in ideological deception. The text that precludes *ijtihād* is the text that is definitive both in transmission (*qaṭʿī al-thubūt*) and in meaning (*qaṭʿī al-dalāla*). This, however, is not the category under discussion. Rather, the focus is on texts that are not definitive in meaning-and these constitute the majority of texts-thereby rendering them open to hermeneutics and *ijtihād*.

Some have presented their own understanding as though it were the text itself, thereby collapsing the distance between interpretation and text. In addressing the slogan *"no ijtihād with the text,"* Abu Zayd's position aligns with that of Muhammad Abu Zahra in his work *History of Islamic Schools of Thought*, where he clarifies the consequences of such conflation in fueling extremist discourse, particularly among Kharijite groups. **(Mohamed A. , 1996, pp. 65-70)**

Thus, Abu Zayd draws attention to a crucial yet often overlooked issue: the exploitation of the slogan *"no ijtihād with the text"* by certain ideologies as a means of domination, exclusion, and the excommunication of those who engage in thought and hermeneutical interpretation. Sanctity must therefore be stripped from any human formulation that lacks infallibility and remains subject to critique, review, and evaluation.

Abu Zayd's reading of heritage is grounded in the exercise of reason and reliance on understanding and inference. He proceeds to remove sanctity from heritage insofar as it constitutes human thought concerned with religion, insisting on the necessity of distinguishing it from the original

religious text. The latter remains open to multiple and renewed readings that welcome critique, reassessment, and scrutiny.

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd emphasizes that religious thought does not derive its sanctity or absoluteness from religion itself. Hence, he says: "From the earliest moments of Islamic history, during the period of revelation and the formation of texts, early Muslims frequently asked, with regard to a given situation, whether the Prophet's action was governed by revelation or by experience and reason. They often disagreed with him and proposed alternative courses of action whenever the matter fell within the domain of reason and experience." **(Abu Zayd, 1994a, p. 88)**

This demonstrates that religious heritage is subject to critical examination and must be stripped of the sanctity imposed upon it by ideological motives. Such unwarranted sanctification resulted in religious discourse competing with the original sacred text in terms of sanctity-constituting one of the greatest fallacies and distortions in Islamic history-and ultimately led to the closure of the door to difference and *ijtihād*.

The prohibition of hermeneutics, rational inquiry, and inferential reasoning-and, in many cases, their criminalization-together with the elevation of religious intellectual heritage produced within a specific historical period, with its own distinctive circumstances and culture, to a level rivaling the religious text itself in sanctity and claimed validity for all times and places, constitutes the root cause of the maladies afflicting Muslim societies. This, according to Abu Zayd, is the source of excommunication (*takfīr*), heresy accusations (*tabdīʿ*), and division. When reason is killed, creativity is extinguished.

Among Abu Zayd's most daring works is *Circles of Fear*, which provoked intense reactions. Many proponents of fundamentalist and rigidly conservative thought mobilized to refute him. Some self-proclaimed Salafi scholars undertook to collect what they deemed evidence of his deviation, paving the way for declaring him an apostate and legitimizing violence against him-much as occurred with other Enlightenment figures such as Farag Foda and Ali Shariati.

In this work, Abu Zayd presents numerous examples and arguments demonstrating that the religious text must admit multiple, diverse, and temporally variable readings. He says: "Religious texts can be read in their historical significance in order to extract what is essential and permanent from what is contingent and variable. Literal reading alone stops at the contingent, for it excludes the social context of revelation and, consequently, the rulings contained therein". **(Abu Zayd, 2004, p. 68)**

For instance, Abu Zayd interprets polygamy as a response to the social reality of the Arab environment at the time of revelation. Prior to Islam, women occupied a specific social position and were often subjected to extreme forms of availability under various designations, such as bondswomen, concubines, and captives, within a prevailing social and economic system. Abu Zayd writes: "The permissibility of polygamy up to four wives must be understood and interpreted within the context of the nature of human and social relations-especially the relationship between men and

women-in pre-Islamic Arab society. Within this context, we see that this permissibility represented a restriction on the chaos of possessing and exploiting women". **(Abu Zayd, 2004, p. 288)**

According to Abu Zayd, the allowance of polygamy aimed at honoring women and protecting them from the manifestations of enslavement that characterized pre-Islamic Arab society. Polygamy, in his view, was a temporary response to particular social conditions in the Arab environment. Therefore, a ruling revealed in response to a specific historical incident should not necessarily be perpetuated unchanged in the present.

He expresses regret over the fear that prevents critical research into the issue of polygamy and its contemporary consequences for the family-especially its psychological effects on children. While Salafi discourse rejects the notion that verses permitting polygamy were valid only for a specific historical period, citing the definitiveness of the texts, it fails to offer solutions regarding the verses concerning *milk al-yamīn* ("those whom your right hands possess"), which have effectively disappeared due to transformations in Islamic society, culture, and priorities.

Abu Zayd thus concludes that activating certain verses without taking into account transformations and changes in lived reality amounts to disabling reality in favor of the text-even though the text itself does not call for such an approach.

The thought of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was subjected to extensive criticism on the grounds that it shattered entrenched idols and ventured into topics long silenced or deemed taboo. Among the most serious and insightful readings of his thought is that of the thinker Ali Harb, who argued that Abu Zayd's discourse opposes fundamentalism yet remains grounded upon its terrain.

According to Ali Harb, Abu Zayd's assertion-particularly in *Critique of Religious Discourse* and *The Concept of the Text*-that the Qur'an is a cultural product, and that reality constitutes the starting point for reading the text because it was revealed within the Arab environment and addressed people in terms they understood, does not represent a genuine novelty. Classical scholars, Harb contends, also approached the Qur'anic text in a similar manner, albeit with different methodologies, epistemic tools, and intellectual horizons. The difference, however, lies in the fact that Abu Zayd articulated explicitly what earlier scholars left implicit. "While they affirmed that the text is divine speech revealed in the language of the Arabs and according to their linguistic conventions, Abu Zayd explicitly asserts that the Qur'an is a cultural product governed by the laws of reality". **(Harb, 1995, p. 173)**

Ali Harb further critiques Abu Zayd for persistently presenting himself as an advocate of Enlightenment, rationality, and critical freedom in opposition to regressive, scholastic, and dogmatic logic. Harb argues that this attachment to labels is misleading, since rationality itself often conceals forms of irrationality, and history demonstrates that those who championed reason and enlightenment frequently betrayed these ideals and practiced oppression.

Despite these criticisms, Ali Harb affirms Abu Zayd's courage and intellectual competence, stating: "He awakens suppressed questions and speaks unspoken matters." **(Harb, 1995, p. 173)**

Thus, Abu Zayd sought to excavate the marginalized and repressed beneath the dominance of obsolete and reactionary discourses.

Mohammed Arkoun likewise expressed profound admiration for Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, saying: "It can be said that Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd is the first Muslim scholar to write directly in Arabic, teach at Cairo University, and dare to violate the numerous taboos that prevent the application of the most positive achievements of modern linguistics to the Qur'an." **(Arkoun, 1999, p. 63)**

Such testimonies from major thinkers like Ali Harb and Mohammed Arkoun enhance the scholarly value of Abu Zayd's research on heritage, granting it greater weight and impact in confronting reactionary and closed dogmatic thought. They also encourage researchers to shatter idols and reopen the door of *ijtihād* in order to contribute to the renaissance of a community imprisoned within its past and afflicted by intellectual stagnation.

3 – Research Findings

Through this study of the modernist hermeneutical reading of religious heritage in the thought of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, several key findings may be identified:

- Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's hermeneutical project is founded on the principle that the religious text is inseparable from the historical, cultural, and linguistic context in which it emerged. The text, while divine in origin, becomes a human cultural product insofar as it is language addressed to human beings within a specific historical horizon.
- Abu Zayd distinguishes clearly between *meaning* and *significance*. Meaning remains relatively stable at the linguistic level, whereas significance is variable and subject to transformation in accordance with changing social, cultural, and historical conditions. This distinction forms the cornerstone of his hermeneutical approach.
- Hermeneutics, in Abu Zayd's thought, is not a luxury or a marginal interpretive option, but a methodological necessity for renewing religious thought and ensuring the vitality of the religious text. Without hermeneutical interpretation, the text risks being transformed into a rigid and closed structure incapable of engaging with lived reality.
- The historicity of religious heritage implies that classical interpretations are not sacred or absolute. They are historical products bound to the contexts in which they emerged. Consequently, they are open to critique, reassessment, and revision through renewed hermeneutical engagement.
- Abu Zayd's project aims at dismantling the mechanisms of ideological domination that monopolize interpretation and impose a single understanding of the text. Such monopolization leads to the suppression of reason, the closure of the door of *ijtihād*, and the spread of exclusionary and excommunicative discourse.
- Despite the severe criticism directed at Abu Zayd, including accusations of apostasy and deviation, his thought has received significant recognition from prominent

contemporary thinkers, who view his work as a courageous attempt to break taboos and revive rational, critical engagement with religious heritage.

Conclusion

The controversy generated by Abu Zayd's writings reflected the depth of the cultural crisis within the Arab-Islamic environment, the absence of criticism, and the spread of dogmatic, fanatical, and extremist thought that rejects difference and alternative readings. Abu Zayd went through an ordeal similar to that of every free thinker, from Socrates to Ibn Rushd, Ibn Hanbal, Giordano Bruno, and Spinoza.

It began with the rejection of his file submitted to Cairo University for a professorship. The entire committee rejected his file, and Abd al-Sabour Shahin described him with terms that are shameful and unbecoming of a known academic and researcher. He said about him: "Abu Zayd's writings represent an atrophy of religious conscience, accompanied by a state of intellectual terrorism, that they are cultural AIDS and a Marxist secularist attempt to destroy Egyptian Muslim society" **(Abu Zayd, 2015, p. 12).** Matters did not stop there; how similar yesterday is to today, and how similar his ordeal is to Ibn Rushd's calamity. Calls spread for his trial, burning his books, and banning them. Abd al-Sabour Shahin played a major role in inflaming Egyptian and Islamic public opinion against him.

Abu Zayd says with all regret and bitterness: "After the university rejected my promotion, Shahin declared me an apostate from the mosque pulpit" **(Abu Zayd, 2015, p. 18).** A lawsuit was filed against him in court, and soldiers of darkness from extremist lawyers, writers, and those who call themselves Salafists mobilized to raise this case in court against him to dismiss him from the university and separate him from his wife because he was an apostate...!

Abu Zayd says: "Muslims succeeded in attaching the accusation of apostasy to me... Since then, mosque preachers across Egypt demanded my blood, announcing at the same time that as an apostate, I had no right to remain married to a Muslim woman" **(Abu Zayd, 2015, p. 20)**.

He tried to defend himself with articles and writings, but the dark forces judged him, and the matter ended. A ruling was issued to separate him from his wife, Dr. Ibtihal Younes, so he fled with her to the Netherlands for fear of liquidation and assassination, as happened to Hussein Marwa, Faraj Foda, Ali Shariati, and many other free and enlightened thinkers. He did not stop writing until his death shortly after returning to Egypt from exile-which he chose.

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