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Rethinking the Arab-Islamic Tradition.
On the New Translation of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd's
Critique of Religious Discourse (Naqd al-Ḫiṭāb ad-Dīnī)[1]

Abstract

The article highlights the significance of the first full English translation of *Naqd al-Ḫiṭāb ad-Dīnī* (Critique of Religious Discourse), one of the most characteristic and important works of the acclaimed Egyptian intellectual Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (1943–2010). The work was firstly published in 1992 by Sīnā li-an-Našr in Cairo, coinciding with the beginning of the so-called Case of Abū Zayd (1992–1995), the campaign of Egyptian fundamentalists against the scholar. Abū Zayd's critique of the dominant discourses and worldviews in the Arab world, created both by the Islamic fundamentalists and so-called Islamic left, has gained huge acclaim in the international academia but so far there has not been a full translation of the work into English (also taking into account the important role of the full German edition published by Chérifa Magdi and Navid Kermani in 1996). In 2018 Jonathan Wright's translation was published by Yale University Press in the series "World Thought in Translation". The edition was enriched by Carool Kersten's scholarly introduction. The following article discusses the translation dilemma regarding *Naqd…* (e.g. problems with finding equivalents for Arabic semiotic and hermeneutical terminology utilised by the Egyptian scholar), giving examples of the choices made by the translator. Adding to it, the more general issues of the impact of Abū Zayd's work on the contemporary rereading of Arab-Islamic *turāṯ* are analysed.

Keywords: Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, religion, Islam, critique, discourse, text, hermeneutics, semiotics, Islamic renewal, "Arab-Islamic heritage thinkers" (*turāṯiyyūna*)

Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (1943–2010) has been one of the most important contemporary Islamic thinkers, associated with liberal or "secular" world-views. He became widely known mostly because of the so-called "Case of Abū Zayd" (1992–1995), the campaign of Egyptian fundamentalists against the scholar resulting in his subsequent exile into the Netherlands. However, it is his oeuvre and intellectual impact that should be brought to the fore firstly. Abū Zayd's research was mainly rooted in literary studies, and modern reinterpretation of the Qur'ān tended to be the most important and common topic of his output, taking into account its versatility and openness to different issues and methodologies. Abū Zayd was influenced by both the masters of Arab classical thought (from Muʿtazila group to Ibn ʿArabī) and modern Arabic literary studies (Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Amīn al-Ḫūlī, Muḥammad Aḥmad Ḫalaf Allāh). He also made an extensive research on the Western thought, and assimilated into Arabic some notions and theories taken from European semiotics and hermeneutics (e.g. by Ferdinand de Saussure, Yuri Lotman, Roman Jakobson, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Eric D. Hirsch) in order to present a new hermeneutical description of Islamic and Qur'ānic revelation (waḥy). The title of this article can be juxtaposed with one of the important English works of Abū Zayd, *Rethinking the Qur'an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics*.[2] Obviously, it has to be added that these are the Arabic-language books that mostly constitute Abū Zayd's oeuvre. His English publications are just a sort of a summary and do not match the sophistication and complexity of his main Arabic works.

Naqd al-Ḫiṭāb ad-Dīnī (Critique of Religious Discourse) is probably one of the most characteristic and important works of Abū Zayd, next to *Mafhūm an-naṣṣ*[3] [Concept/Understanding of the Text], widely treated as his *magnum opus*. These two books were written in the similar period of time, between years 1985 and 1990. There is a small controversy regarding dating of the first publishing of *Naqd*... In the 2018 Yale University Press's edition,[4] published in the series "World Thought in Translation", and being the major topic and point of reference in this article, there is an information that translation is based on the edition of Dār aṯ-Ṯaqāfa al-Ǧadīda from 1990. To my knowledge, however, the first official edition of *Naqd al-Ḫiṭāb ad-Dīnī* was published in 1992 by Sīnā li-an-Našr office in Cairo, and the second one came out in 1994 by the same publisher. These data are presented on the title pages of the aforementioned Arabic editions, and are also confirmed by other researcher of Abū Zayd's thought.[5] Additionally, on the back cover of the Yale edition there is an inaccurate piece of information about the year of

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[2] Nasr Abū Zayd, *Rethinking the Qur'an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics*, SWP with University for Humanistics, Amsterdam-Utrecht 2004.

[3] Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, *Mafhūm an-naṣṣ: dirāsa fī ʿulūm al-Qur'ān*, 1st ed., Ad-Muʿassasa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li-al-Kitāb, Al-Qāhira 1990 or the 8th ed., Al-Markaz aṯ-Ṯaqāfī al-ʿArabī, Al-Dār al-Bayḍā'–Bayrūt 2011.

[4] Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse (Naqd al-Khitab al-Dini)*, trans. Jonathan Wright, intr. Carool Kersten, Yale University Press, New Haven–London 2018.

[5] Yusuf Rahman, "The Hermeneutical Theory of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd. An Analytical Study of His Method of Interpreting the Qur'ān" (Ph.D. diss., McGill University, Montreal 2001), p. 253.

first publishing (here put in 1994) and a statement that for "the first time a work by Abū Zayd is available in its entirety in any Western language," that needs obvious clarification. Fortunately, it is corrected in the scholarly introduction by Carool Kersten who made reference[6] to the full German translation of *Naqd…* by Chérifa Magdi.[7] There are also translations of some chapters of *Naqd…* into French[8] and Dutch.[9] Izabela Szybilska-Fiedorowicz made the Polish translation of the part of the first chapter on the strategies used in the religious discourse.[10] So, the Yale University Press's release is exactly the first full English (but not Western) translation of Abū Zayd's Arabic monograph.

The Yale edition was translated by Jonathan Wright (born 1953), the British journalist, acclaimed translator of Arabic literature, and winner of the 2013 Banipal Prize for Arabic Literary Translation for the translation of *'Azāzīl* by Yūsuf Zaydān.[11] The scholarly introduction was written by Carool Kersten (born 1964), the Dutch Arabist, specialist on Southeastern Asia, and historian of Islam, currently working at Department of Theology and Religious Studies (as well as at the Department of Middle Eastern Studies) at King's College, London. Kersten published important monographs in the similar fields of studies as e.g. his monographs: *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World. Trends, Themes, and Issues*, and *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*.[12]

Kerstens's introduction seems to be very valuable, however the outlook of Abū Zayd's biography is very brief. The interesting part, which is an important contribution to the overall research on the Egyptian's thinker's legacy, is an attempt to relate Abū Zayd to Western schools of literary theory and criticism,[13] based on references to the work of literary theorist, Terry Eagleton. Very useful is also a concise but accurate categorisation of Abū Zayd's works,[14] in which Kersten described *Naqd…* as "an analysis of discursive formations governing the intellectual landscape of the Muslim world" and as "the hinge

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[6] Nasr Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse*, p. 273 (note 3).

[7] Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, *Islam und Politik. Kritik des religiösen Diskurses*, trans. Chérifa Magdi, intr. Navid Kermani, "Dipa-Verlag", Frankfurt am Main 1996.

[8] Nasr Abou Zeid, *Critique du discours religieux*, (trans.) Mohamed Chairet, Sindbad-Actes Sud, Paris 1999. Despite of the title, it comprises Abū Zayd's texts taken from different sources, but the first (pp. 127–192) and third (pp. 55–92) chapters of *Naqd…* are included.

[9] Nasr Hamid Aboe Zaid, *Vernieuwing in het islamitisch denken: Een wetenschappelijke benadering*, trans., intr, Fred Leemhuis and Robert Leemhuis, Bulaaq, Amsterdam 1996.

[10] Nasr Abu Zajd, *Krytyka dyskursu muzułmańskiego*, trans. Izabela Szybilska, in: *Literatura arabska. Dociekania i prezentacje. Tom 3* [Arabic Literature. Investigations and Presentations. Volume 3], Marek M. Dziekan (ed.), "Dialog", Warszawa 2004, pp. 63–82. For the analogical fragment in the 2018 Yale edition, see: pp. 49–81.

[11] Youssef Ziedan, *Azazeel*, trans. Jonathan Wright, Atlantic Books, London 2013.

[12] Carool Kersten, *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World. Trends, Themes, and Issues*, 1st ed., Routledge, Abingdon-London-New York 2019; Carool Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam*, 1st ed., Columbia University Press, New York 2011.

[13] Carool Kersten, *Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. An Introduction to His Life and Work*, in: Nasr Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse*, pp. 15f.

[14] Ibidem, p. 20.

connecting earlier historical-philological and text-critical studies to the more engaged[15] writings of his later career."[16]

Critique of Religious Discourse consists of the author's introduction and three main chapters which are enhanced versions of the papers published earlier in the Egyptian and Syrian scientific journals. The first chapter *Al-Ḫiṭāb ad-dīnī al-muʿāṣir: āliyātuhu wa-munṭalaqātuhu al-fikriyya* (Contemporary Religious Discourse. Its Strategies and Intellectual Premises) was published as a separate text with the different title in the eight edition of the journal "Qaḍāyā Fikriyya" in 1989, the second one – in the American University of Cairo's journal "Alif" (1990/issue 10), and the third one began as an occasional lecture but was then released in year 1990 by the Damascene periodical "Qaḍāyā wa-Šahādāt" in its number 2.[17]

In the introductory part the author of *Mafhūm an-naṣṣ* gave an important definition of secularism, which "is in essence no more than the real interpretation and scholarly understanding of religion."[18,19] This represented, in Abū Zayd's opinion, the "real meaning" of the term *ʿalmāniyya* which was treated by many Egyptian supporters of political Islam as an equivalent of atheism or heresy. Such an understanding clearly positioned Abū Zayd as a critical contemporary thinker supporting separation of religion and state, but at the same time still very deeply entrenched in the Arab-Islamic symbolic *universum*, linking new European approaches with the Islamic tradition of interpretation (*taʾwīl*). It becomes clear how absurd from the thinker's position was accusing him of blasphemy and deviation from Islam, practiced by the prominent participants of the fundamentalist *milieu* as e.g. probably his most outspoken critic ʿAbd aṣ-Ṣabūr Šāhīn[20] (1928–2010).

The first chapter of *Naqd...* concentrates on describing the "contemporary religious discourse" (which is not itself clearly defined), employed by supporters of political Islam both from the officially recognised and influential academia (Al-Azhar) and radical organisations such as Al-Ǧamāʿa al-Islāmiyya. Actually, it was usually just a question of obeying an exact ruler and his legitimacy, that was a dividing factor between e.g. Wahhabi state-supported Saudi doctrine and non-state radical groups. Abū Zayd didn't record any real difference between "moderate" and "radicals", adding that ideas of Islamist radicals "just acquire order and symmetry when they are placed in the matrix of religious

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[15] C. Kersten refers here to the highly polemical and political writings of Abū Zayd published during the upheaval of the so-called Case of Abū Zayd as e.g. *At-Tafkīr fī zaman at-takfīr*. See: Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, *At-Tafkīr fī zaman at-takfīr* [Thinking in the Time of Anathema/*Takfīr*], 2nd ed., Maktabat Madbūlī, Al-Qāhira 1995.

[16] Kersten, p. 20.

[17] Information after Abū Zayd's "Introduction" in: Nasr Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse*, p. 33.

[18] The phrase in the original Arabic version: *laysat al-ʿalmāniyya fī ǧawhārihā siwā at-taʾwīl al-ḥaqīqī wa-al-fahm al-ʿilmī li-ad-dīn.*

[19] Nasr Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse*, p. 32.

[20] A professor of Arabic linguistics at Dār al-ʿUlūm, regular Friday preacher at the Cairo ʿAmr Ibn al-ʿĀṣ mosque, and author of the most negative opinion about Abū Zayd's scientific achievements, that torpedoed the full professorship procedure of Abū Zayd at the Cairo University. This led to the fundamentalist campaign and prosecution against the author of *Mafhūm an-naṣṣ* in years 1992–1995.

discourse."[21] Common features of such understood religious discourse are: denouncing others as infidels (*takfīrisation* of opponents) and tendency to justify violence in exact circumstances. Abū Zayd assessed such views as "immature ideas",[22] using the phrase of Aš-Šahrastānī (1086–1153), a famous historian of religions. Abū Zayd identified five main strategies used in the religious discourse (conflation of ideas and religion; explaining all phenomena by one starting point; reliance on the authority of tradition and early Muslims; intellectual dogmatism; dismissing the historical dimension), and its two basic premises: *ḥākimiyyat Allāh* (divine sovereignty) and treating of the Qur'ān as an eternal Text (*naṣṣ*) with a fixed, established meaning. In this chapter, what is characteristic of the majority of his oeuvre, Abū Zayd also extensively cites, comments and (sometimes passionately) argues with the chosen texts and their authors, here especially with two important thinkers of widely understood political Islam: Sayyid Quṭb (1906–1966) and Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (born 1926). Abū Zayd made an elaborate critique of many aspects of fundamentalist thought as e.g. its focus, even by the so-called "moderate" currents, on the unity and homogeneity of Islam,[23] and manipulating of the concepts of *ǧahl* and *ǧāhiliyya* in order to serve contemporary political purposes,[24] what was characteristic of Sayyid Quṭb's works.

The second chapter discusses the intellectual project of Islamic left juxtaposing it with the earlier introduced ideas of radical "right-wing" (as Abū Zayd formulates it sometimes) political Islam. This part of the book seems to be the least approachable (and the most demanding for the translator) especially because of the great number of very long citations. The main point of reference is here Ḥasan Ḥanafī (born 1935), an acclaimed philosopher from the Cairo University and in the past one of the teachers and researchers inspiring Abū Zayd. Ḥanafī's five-volume work *Min al-ʿAqīda ilā aṯ-Ṯawra* (From Doctrine to Revolution; 1988) is analysed as the most representative work of the Islamic left. In this chapter Abū Zayd also presented one of the most developed definitions of *ta'wīl*, as an interpretation: "an action that repeatedly moves between a starting point and endpoint, or between the meaning and significance, rather like the movement of a pendulum, and not movement in one direction" (p. 145).[25] This formulation is both semiotic and hermeneutical, referring to de Saussure's theory of a linguistic sign (reinterpreted by

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[21] Nasr Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse*, pp. 47–48.

[22] Ibidem, p. 47.

[23] Ibidem, p. 51.

[24] Ibidem, pp. 77–81.

[25] Jonathan Wright translated here Arabic *dalāla* as meaning and *maġzā* as significance. It seems that this is correct, but in the other place (p. 263 in Wright's translation), Abū Zayd used the form *maʿnā* in the similar meaning to aforementioned *dalāla* – a historical, established meaning, understood directly from the wording of the text. Both forms are translated as "meaning". *Maġzā* "significance" is of more transient, changeable character, and it depends on the context. See more on these three terms: Naṣr Abū Zayd, *Dyskurs religijny a metoda naukowa* [Religious Discourse and Scientific Method], trans. Joanna Musiatewicz, in: Sebastian Bednarowicz, Michał Moch, Joanna Musiatewicz (eds. of a critical edition), *Naṣr Abū Zayd: refleksja krytyczna nad myślą muzułmańską. Źródła* [Naṣr Abū Zayd: A Critical Rereading of Islamic Thought. Sources], Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, Bydgoszcz 2017, p. 28, note 36 (written by Joanna Musiatewicz).

E.D. Hirsch), and to the figure of hermeneutic circle. As for the general assessment of Ḥanafī's theory, Abū Zayd's account is rather critical because he saw the former's project as a sort of a tendentious reading of Arab tradition or "colouring" (*talwīn*) of the text. The author of *Naqd…* made a further distinction between colouring and real *taʾwīl*, which can be understood as well as "productive readings that are not innocent,"[26] "where the lack of innocence rests on the dialectic of the relationship between the self and the object."[27] These premises of "productive reading" were one of Abū Zayd's main intellectual strategies. In his opinion, despite of some intellectual merits, the Islamic left didn't succeed in its trial of creating an internal Arab antidote to the ideology generated by religious discourse, and preferred a kind of "leapfrogging" (originally: *waṯb*) over historic, literal meaning of the texts and dressing it up with a new ideological significance.[28]

The third chapter on reading religious texts is a sort of a summary of the main methodological issues raised in the first two parts of *Naqd al-Ḫiṭāb ad-Dīnī*. The discussion on the eternal or created character of the Qurʾānic text is recapitulated, and aforementioned terminology regarding interpretation, meaning and significance – further developed. For example, Abū Zayd specified three levels of meaning in religious texts: 1) historical relics that can't be interpreted metaphorically, 2) meanings in texts that can be interpreted metaphorically, and 3) meanings that can be expanded on the basis of "significance", related to contextualisation.[29] Subsequently, the Egyptian scholar presented some examples how this level of significance can be excerpted from the real analysis of the Qurʾān and ḥadīṯs. Such issues as women's inheritance[30] and meaning of the concept of social justice[31] in Islam were addressed. A very positive contribution of the editors of the Yale release is an index of proper names and terms,[32] which helps in navigating through complex deliberations of Abū Zayd.

Summing up, the first full English edition of *Naqd al-Ḫiṭāb ad-Dīnī* seems to be a really valuable publication in the wider field of the research on *turāṯiyyūna*, thinkers critically reinterpreting the heritage of Arab-Islamic civilisation.[33] Coming back to Kersten's scholarly introduction, he made an interesting point how Abū Zayd could be located among the modern and contemporary figures rethinking the Islamic rationalist thought. The Egyptian researcher was not merely a contemporary "Arab Averroist" (the term coined by Anke von Kügelgen[34]), but a philologist and linguist rooted in the Egyptian school of

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[26] Nasr Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse*, p. 148.

[27] Ibidem, p. 144.

[28] Ibidem, p. 245.

[29] Ibidem, p. 247.

[30] Ibidem, pp. 266f.

[31] Ibidem, p. 272.

[32] Ibidem, pp. 291–314.

[33] See more about Abū Zayd's relation to other masters of contemporary Arab thought in: Michał Moch, *Naṣr Abū Zayd: A Critical Rereading of Islamic Thought*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, Bydgoszcz 2017, pp. 28–44.

[34] Cited after: Carool Kersten, *Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. An Introduction to His Life and Work*, in: Nasr Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse*, p. 11.

literary studies, represented by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Amīn al-Ḫūlī and Muḥammad Aḥmad Ḫalaf Allāh. This more philological, and not purely philosophical interest, coupled with centrist political views, made Abū Zayd's position quite distinct comparing to such giants of current Arab-Islamic critical thought, as Muhammad Arkoun (Muḥammad Arkūn; 1928–2010) or Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Ǧābirī (1935–2010). All in all, it seems that the author of *Mafhūm an-naṣṣ* made his most important intellectual contribution in applying hermeneutical and semiotic terms of Western and Arab origin to his carefully conducted literary studies research. Correct is also Kersten's methodological point comparing Abū Zayd with the aforementioned Terry Eagleton, who showed how reception theory connected formalised systems of structural analysis with more contextualised hermeneutical approaches.[35]

The 2018 Yale edition of *Naqd al-Ḫiṭāb ad-Dīnī* fills the obvious gap in the sparse collection of Abū Zayd's translations into Western languages. Wright's translation is supple and expressing the complicated syntax of the Arabic original, adding to it a very digressive, repetitive and redundant style of the thinker's works.[36] Also, some etymological issues and Arabic plays on words were rendered well, e.g. remarks on the forms *ǧahl* and *ǧāhiliyya*,[37] or playing with *naṣṣ* meanings.[38] It has to be said, however, that J. Wright's translation is not a critical or scientific edition *per se*. Translator's notes are very rare[39] and major terminological problems (as the one mentioned above in the footnote 26) are not discussed or explained, what, obviously, does not diminish the fact how good is translation overall. Of course, the readers who are not professional Arabists or Islamologists won't see it as any flaw, and, in the first instance, will appreciate the intellectual depth and courage of one of the most important Abū Zayd's works.

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[35] Ibidem, p. 15.

[36] Compare: *Ten Rules for Translating: Humphrey Davies and Jonathan Wright*, "ArabLit. Arabic Literature and Translation", Viewed 26 July 2019, <https://arablit.org/for-translators/ten-rules-for-translating-humphrey-davies-and-jonathan-wright/>. The third rule, proposed by J. Wright, ironically refers to the problem of redundancy of Arabic texts: "Try to persuade your editors that not all writers in Arabic think that repeating a word is a criminal offence. Sometimes they do so deliberately."

[37] Nasr Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse*, pp. 77–81.

[38] Ibidem, pp. 113f.

[39] The examples could be J. Wright's notes on translating the term *ḥakimiyya* as "divine sovereignty" (Ibidem, p. 278, note 1), and understanding of the notions of *iǧtihād* (Ibidem, p. 285, note 85) and *maslaḥa* (Ibidem, p. 285, note 88), that both are retained by the translator in the original Arabic forms. He also made a valuable comment (Ibidem, p. 287, note 108) related to the term *taǧdīd*, proving that "renewal", the widespread English equivalent for it, could have sometimes been inadequate. The last J. Wright's own note (Ibidem, p. 290, note 10) dealt with the interesting Abū Zayd's semiotic remark about linguistic units that referred rather to mental concepts than to material things (Ibidem, p. 251). The Egyptian scholar gave the example of the word *ʿanqāʾ*, as not having a material referent. The translator added that the aforementioned form meant "a mythical creature similar to a gryphon" (Ibidem, p. 290, note 10).