

Nasr Hāmid Abū Zayd. *Naqd al-Khitāb al-Dīnī*. al-Dār al-Bayḍā: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-‘Arabī, 2007, 240 p., ISBN 978-9953-68-262-3.

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In recent decades, while the Arabs are trying to free themselves from the dictators and tyrants, one of the most important questions around these struggles is what should be the essence of authority for a legitimate political order in these countries. It is possible to say that the general indecision among public surrounding this question contributes to the prolonged nature of political instability that impairs the proper functioning of these societies. Several competing claimants to authority are trying to overcome this indecision by converting general opinion to their cause, and naturally some of them take their inspiration from religion which has always been a dominant force in these societies.

The Egyptian scholar Nasr Hāmid Abu Zayd provides a critical exposure of the discourses used by these claimants to authority in his book *Naqd al-Khitāb al-Dīnī* (*The Critique of Religious Discourse*). The book consists of an introduction and three chapters. Abu Zayd starts his introduction by stating that while the phenomenon of religious expansion in Muslim countries has attracted the attention of many scholars and researchers, they use different approaches towards this phenomenon and reach different conclusions about it. He accepts these approaches as discourses and divides them into three categories. The first and strongest approach is the official discourse represented by the Azhar University and some religious scholars even though they seem to be in opposition against the official discourse of the state. What he means by the opposition becomes more obvious in the following pages of the book. The second approach is the leftist interpretation of Islam represented mainly by Hasan Hanafī in his book “*Min al-Aqīdah ila al-Thawrah*”. The third approach is the secularists or the proponents of the Enlightenment (*al-Tanwīriyyūn* or *al-‘Ilmāniyyūn*). At the center of these three approaches lie the text (The Qur’ān and the hadīth) and culture (history and secondary literature on the text). Abu Zayd composes his book in three chapter based on his categorization of these discourses. The main body of the book and its first chapter deals with the first approach which is the most visible discourse in Muslim countries.

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For Abu Zayd, the first approach includes both the extremists and the moderates since he sees the difference between them in degree and not in quality. To exemplify, he examines both Sayyid Qutb and Yusuf Qardawi in this chapter. This approach builds its discourse on some components which are not open for argument and discussion. At the center of these components there are two essentials: the text (*nass*) and the authority (*hākimiyah* (p. 13).

With the preachers and scholars help, the religious discourse employs certain mechanisms to attract its audience in ideological level. The mechanisms are;

1. The unification of the idea and the religion, as a result this, the abolition of the distance between the subject and object.
2. The explanation of the phenomena, natural or sociological, with reference to the first cause which is God.
3. The ultimate trust on the authority of the salaf and the culture (*turāth*), and the acceptance of their sacredness.
4. The self-confidence of being the holders of truth. With the help of this, they can crush any dissent without feeling any guilt.
5. The destruction of the historical context and its ignorance. This enables them to imagine a golden past which they can mourn over it for its lost (p. 14).

Abu Zayd goes on to explain these mechanisms in the following pages. His main opponents in this part of the book are Sayyid Qutb and Yusuf Qardawi. He also gives long explanation of the excommunication process (*takfīr*) utilized by these scholars. According to him, the excommunication happens frequently or randomly based on the closeness of this discourse to the political authority (p. 20).

Abu Zayd thinks that this discourse has two starting points (*muntalaqāt*) to justify their mechanisms. These are the authority (*hākimiyah*) and the text (*nass*). According to this discourse, only God is the owner of authority. However, they ignore their part in the display of this authority in this world. They hold the monopoly of understanding and interpreting God's authority, and by doing so they establish their own authority. Even though they claim that there is no clergy in Islam, their own discourse gives them more authority in Islam than the church gives to the clergy in Christianity. Their understanding of the authority (*hākimiyah*) results in the creation of hierarchy in the society (p. 69).

According to Abu Zayd, there is agreement and conformity between the religious discourse and the political authority even though they seem to be in disagreement on the surface. This is because they both understand the authority using the same mechanisms, and this understanding unites them in nature (p. 82).

According to Abū Zayd the religious discourse also destroys reason in Islam. They explain everything based on the text, and their motto is "if there is a text, there is no room for reasoning". Since they ignore the historical dimension of the culture and the secondary literature, everything which has been produced in this culture contributes as text for them. This in turn causes the freezing of understanding and reasoning (p. 93).

For Abū Zayd the aim of religion is to establish the use of reason in every aspects of life, in society and in natural world (p.62). The essence and the beginning of religion is to establish the rule of reason and there is no way other than to work for that cause (p.108). Even though the religious discourse has the highest and strongest voice in the society, it is just a simple discourse taken from the family, the religious schools, and the mass media. It has no real solution for the problems of the simple citizen, and most of the time the representatives of this discourse are the most corrupt ones in their societies (p. 114).

In the second chapter, Nasr Hāmid Abū Zayd takes the leftist interpretation of Islam into consideration. The title for this chapter itself brings the question to the mind about the leftist understanding, whether it is an interpretation or coloring? (p.115). Abū Zayd gives us some information about the acceptable reading and intentional reading. The Sunni theologians shunned the Shii understanding of Islam labeling it as the intentional reading (p. 118). For in the intentional reading, the interpretation is the result of the reader's ideology projected to the text. Abū Zayd says that the leftist interpretation of Islam is effected by a western ideology which is Marxism, even though the proponents of this interpretation claim to be independent from the hegemony of the West (p.130).

For the leftist Islam the motto is "the solution is the renewal of the culture." Based on this understanding, they read the history from the viewpoint of present day, but this reading is not a hermeneutic, it is the coloring of the sources for the intention of the reader. They assume that the writer is dead, and the text speaks for itself, historical and sociological background of the writer is not a concern anymore (p.120).

The representatives of the leftist Islam can be traced back to the earlier days of the twentieth century. In the middle of the twentieth century, Sayyid Qutb composed some works such as "*the Social Justice in Islam*" and "*the War between Islam and Capitalism*" in a leftist manner. But the term used by Hasan Hanafī in Egypt and he remained as the representative of this interpretation while the others moved from left to the far right. Hanafī's aim as outlined in his encyclopedic project "*Min al-Aqidah ila al-Thawrah*" was a reform in Islamic thought in general, in theology (*kalām*) in specific.

Abū Zayd says that the shortcomings of this approach are the freezing of the present in the past, favoring the politics over thought and the ideology over epistemology, and ignoring the historical and sociological dimensions of the text and the culture. With these shortcomings their understanding and interpretation stayed as the re-coloring of the past (p.183). Besides criticizing them however, Abū Zayd also gives them some praise for their achievements. He says that the leftist interpretation puts the man and his interests at the center of religion (p. 185), they understand the revelation inside the nature and lessen the metaphysical side of religion (p. 188), and unlike the Salafis, the leftists do not think that they are the holder of the ultimate truth, so they open spaces for reasoning and argument (p. 191).

The last chapter is reserved for the explanation of the scientific readings of the text. It is also the chapter for the proponents of Enlightenment and secularism. Abū Zayd mentions al-Tahtawī, Amin al-Khūlī and many others in this chapter. It is possible to say that he considers himself as the part of this group.

For these scholars there is a difference between the religion and the religious thought. While the religion is the total of the sacred texts of Islam, the religious thought is the understanding and interpretation of them according to the environment and the time (p. 196). The discourse of the secularists lifted the cover of sacredness from the culture by accepting it as the product of history (p. 199). They also conducted linguistic research in the textual studies. By doing so, they tried to uncover the metaphysical clothes of the texts. Even though they are the minority, they created a scientific understanding of history in the Muslim countries (p. 204).

The method of this group can be summarized as follows: Abu Zayd refers to Ferdinand De Saussure and his theory of speech and language. According to him, the speech is not the language; it is just a part of the language. So the speech represents a small part of the language which belongs to the whole community. The speech happens in a certain time and environment, and the language is the stage that allows the timely happening of the speech. The same rule applies to the texts, since they are the kinds of speech. If we agree on this rule, we also agree that the texts are the historical products and they have no sacred aspects and open to discussion and argument (p. 204-205). After this methodological explanation, Abū Zayd compares the nature of Jesus and the Qur'ān since both of them are described as the speech (kalām) in the Qur'an. Based on the Qur'anic texts, they are almost the same thing; however the religious scholars accept one of them as the creature (Jesus) and the other (the Qur'ān) as an eternal being (p. 207). According to Abū Zayd, this is a contradiction.

The secularists also accept that there are allegories in the Qur'ān. When the Qur'ān mentions some stories and historical events, they might not be the factual events of the past. The acceptance of allegories helps us to interpret some the texts.

Abū Zayd finishes the book without a conclusion. In the last pages of the book, he touches the problem of finance and the problem of women in the Muslim societies. According to him, these two problems are the results of misunderstanding of the text. The only way for their proper understanding is to apply a scientific method to the text; otherwise there is no solution for the chronic problems of Muslim societies.

The book will give an enormous insight to everybody who has academic or personal interest in the past and present of Muslim societies in general and in Egypt particular. It pushes the reader to think about the problems that they face at the present. It shows that the source of these problems is the misunderstanding of religion. The understanding of religion does not happen in a certain time gets fixed for all times, but every period of time needs its own understanding. If the understanding of the past becomes the only true understanding and reaches to the level of sacredness in a society, only the holders of this understanding can flourish which is a fact commonly visible in these societies.