



Religions: From Phobia to Understanding

Nasr Abu-Zayd

The University of Humanistics, Utrecht, The Netherlands

Abstract: This lead article in the Fall 2010 issue of *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* celebrating him is one of the last published by the renowned scholar of Islam and Humanism, Professor Nasr Hamed Abu-Zayd, before his sudden passing in July 2010. In this paper, he argues that the challenge for Muslim thinkers nowadays is how to reconnect the fragmented Islamic culture of the past, which made the great Islamic civilization between the 9th and the 12th centuries, and contributed to the modern world's values of freedom, equality and justice. It is not an impossible task to accomplish, Abu-Zayd argues, if the modern thinkers have the courage to critically rethink tradition. In his view, a creative humanistic hermeneutics must be developed given that so many creative and courageous thinkers are already active. These voices have to be heard and the world has to listen.

INTRODUCTION

The present situation, especially the 'war against terrorism' campaign led by the United States which led to the empowerment of the terrorist's ideology of 'us against them,' seems to be discouraging. In fact, it is. Nevertheless, giving up to these simplifications is a suicidal decision we need to avoid. We need to dig deep in our universally shared history to uncover the

cultural roots of our humanity. The modern, advanced, and powerful West, regardless of whatever the concept West designates, has to discover that its scientific and technological progress continues to remain possible, because it was built on what other earlier civilizations, including the civilization of Muslims, had achieved. Muslims, on the other hand, need to recognize the historical fact that the Arabs, the original carriers of the Islamic message into the

The late **Nasr Abu-Zayd** (1943–2010), was Emeritus Professor of Islam and Humanism at the University of Humanistics at Utrecht, The Netherlands. At the University for Humanistics Professor Abu-Zayd studied modern Islamic thought by critically approaching classical and contemporary Islamic discourse in the field of theology, philosophy, law, politics and humanism. The aim of his research was to suggest a theory of hermeneutics that might enable Muslims to build a bridge between their own tradition and the modern world of freedom, equality, human rights, democracy and globalization. He also participated in a research project on 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). Abu-Zayd also was a former Professor of Arabic literature at Cairo University. In 1995 a Cairo appeals court ordered Abu-Zayd divorced from his wife on the ground of his alleged apostasy. With his wife he began living in The Netherlands since then, where he held the chairs Cleveringa, at Leiden University, and Ibn Rushd, at Utrecht University, until his sudden and untimely passing in July 5, 2010. Dr. Abu-Zayd's publications include, *Rethinking the Qur'an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics*, Utrecht (Humanistics University Press) 2004; "Spricht Gott nur Arabisch?" (Does God speak only Arabic?), in Michael Thumann (ed.), *Der Islam und der Westen*, Berliner Taschenbuch Verlag, Berlin 2003, pp. 117-26; *Thus spoke Ibn Arabi* (in Arabic), The Egyptian National Book Organization, Cairo, 2003; "The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Quran," *ALIF*, Issue 22, the American University, Cairo, 2003; "How the West blunders on about Islam," *Middle East Times*, October 27, 2002; "Heaven, which way?" *Al-Ahram Weekly*, issue 603, 2002.

world, could not have achieved the building of the great civilization of Islam alone. It was made possible due to the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition of the Umayyad and the Abbasid Empires, not to mention the Fatimid dynasty in the East and the Andalusian dynasty in the West, in Spain. This composition enhanced the development of the philosophical, theological, mystical, legal, and cultural openness that characterizes Muslim civilization. More important for both the West and the Muslim world is to recognize the fact that the distinction between them is entirely artificial.

Islam has become part of the West, as much as the West is present everywhere in the world of Islam. Europe, in particular, has to reorient itself to the colorful composition of its citizens; the white-skin color is no longer the dominant European skin color. Europe also needs to redefine its identity to embrace Islam not necessarily as a religion, but as an essential component of its cultural identity which is under reconstruction now each day. This is historical fact. The 20th century witnessed a great movement of migration for different reasons and Muslims are now a significant component of the European demography.

COUNTERPRODUCTIVE DISCOURSE

The immediate reaction to the September 11th everywhere has put the West at odds with Islam. An atmosphere of mistrust has emerged in the West against Muslims; every Muslim became a suspect, which generated a feeling of insecurity and mistrust for Muslims. The 'war against terrorism' by invading Afghanistan and the occupation of Iraq has already been a great failure. Terrorism has become widespread and Al-Qaeda's leadership is out of reach. London and Madrid suffered as well as Indonesia, Morocco and Egypt in the past decade's terrorist attacks.

The murder of van Gogh in the Netherlands in November 2004 caused significant shock for Muslims as well as non-Muslims. The immediate reaction was extremely irrational; every Muslim became criminal and Islam became the defendant. Now, the political environment has started to calm down and there is serious discussion and intellectual debate about the future. Nevertheless, there are some Dutch radical politicians, radical neo-liberal and fundamentalist rational intellectuals who have continued propagating anti-Islamic discourse. Those intellectuals, and others all over Europe and the USA, identify Islam as essentially a Jihadist violent doctrine directed primarily against the West; they claim Islam as a destructive, dangerous religion which is going to destroy the West and demolish Western culture. They attack the Qur'an, and some would like to have the book legally banned; the first episode of the film *Fitna* was released to express this message. This is the second film using art to defame Islam after the earlier film *Submission*, written by Ian Hersi Ali and directed by van Gogh in 2004, and was produced after the infamous Danish cartoon in 2005.

I believe this kind of political as well as intellectual discourse against Islam is counterproductive and irresponsible. As Islam is now part of Europe and Muslims are a component of the European demography, defaming Islam is, or should be considered, defaming Europe. This is, in my view, one of the essential reasons for the failure of cultural integration in Europe.

Muslims are not solely immigrants anymore; they are born, brought up and educated in European schools. Some of the young Muslim citizens seem to suffer a feeling of non-belonging; they don't belong to the European society, neither do they belong to the original countries of their parents or grandparents. In terms of language they are European, but in terms of culture they are Muslims. Are they torn

between these identities? Before I suggest any answers, allow me to quote an e-mail message I received a while ago. It is one example of hundreds of messages, but this one is from a German-Egyptian Muslim young man; it specifically illustrates this identity issue:

If somebody in Germany asks me where I am from I tell them that I am Egyptian. When I am in Egypt they immediately know that I was not born in Egypt. So actually I am neither Egyptian nor German. I think I came to terms with the fact that I am a traveler in between the two worlds which surely impacts also my spiritual life. Deep down inside of me there is a huge trust and confidence in God, it is a little light. This light makes me seek for truth regarding Islam. But to find truth is not that easy especially when you are not a scholar.

When I look into the Koran, which I can only read in German or English, as I have never learnt Arabic, there are things that make me wonder and things that I simply do not understand or where I am not able to make sense of. So searching for wisdom is not that easy compared to somebody who is a scholar. I have to follow my instinct a bit more and hope that there are some scholars out there who deliver some facts or inspire me. Despite the fact that I have not read so much about the mainstream Islamic theology deep down inside of me I strongly feel that there must be another way; otherwise I will have a big problem in making sense of the current interpretation/theology of Islam. It is funny that I say that, because when I talk to my "western" friends I would always reply that they can-

not judge Islam by evaluating the current Islamic society.

As long as we keep on moving as human beings new things will open up. So I keep on moving and I came across you. It was a great experience getting to know some of your thoughts. I am still at the beginning I have to say but I am excited to read more about you. At the same time I know that I should be reading also the mainstream thought and the replies to your thoughts provided that these people who are answering you have a pure motive.

The reason why I am writing is that I simply wanted you to know that I am inspired by your thoughts and that you make a difference to the Islamic world.

This young man provides a valuable example. He is trying to identify his spiritual identity by looking into a way out of the dominant Islamic discourse; he is doing his own search. The question is: how can we help people like him? And we also have to be aware of those who suffer a more serious identity crisis, which makes it possible for them to identify with the ideology of anger and destruction, terrorism. These are serious questions that only psychoanalysts can tackle.

NON-MONOLITHIC, HYPHENATED IDENTITIES

What is the identity of an immigrant? Considering skin color and physical features, the person would be identified as black African, white, Latin American, Asian, Arab, Indian or Japanese. If religion is considered, he or she would be identified as Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist or atheist. So identity is not built on one essential factor; it has so many facets in its

structure. But the problem in the history of Europe was, and still is, that immigrants are identified according to one single dimension of their complex identity. Before World War II, the Jewish people were only identified as Jewish, not as German Jewish, French Jewish, or Dutch Jewish. In the Netherlands, where I live now, and I have been living here for the last fifteen years, people who belong to different national backgrounds—Turkish, Moroccans, Iraqis, and Surinamese, etc.—are all identified only as Muslims. This tendency to identify people according to their religion has increased since September 11th, especially for those who have Muslim backgrounds. It does not make any difference whether those people are committed Muslims or not. Muslims, whether in Europe or in the United States, are not a homogeneous group. We should be careful about generalization. They are ethnically and culturally different whether we speak about Muslims from the Indian subcontinent, from South East Asia, from the Middle East or from Africa, not to mention the existence of European and American converted Muslims. Unfortunately, people tend to speak about Islam and Muslims in a very naive and simplistic way with no history and no variation.

Within the establishment of the European Union, the discussion regarding European identity did not yet reach any conclusion as we know from the debate about the European Constitution. In the polemic discourse about Islam, there is always the claim of European culture, European values, etc., as opposed to Islam. But what kind of Islam is Europe opposing? Here we can easily recognize the identification of Islam with all the negative non-European values. The challenging question is how to deconstruct these monolithic concepts in order to show the diversity of cultures within both Europe and Islam. How many languages do Europeans speak and how much is there a budget for

translation within the EU? To what extent is British or French culture distinct from German or Dutch culture? Europe seems to be well identified only in comparison with Muslims and in the face of Islam; and to what extent is Europe in opposition to its history and its citizens?

COMBATING FUNDAMENTALISM

Dealing with the fundamentalism as a problem with Islam leads to the theologization of all the issues involved; it is more than that which implicitly encourages the claim of radical Muslims that all the problems can easily be solved if people return back to the true faith. Europe has to remember that according to its modern Human Rights values, it granted refugee status and political asylum in the seventies and the eighties for many advocates of radical Islam for humanitarian reasons, i.e., being persecuted in their home countries. In fact, these protective humanitarian measures began as early as the 1950s when some members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood were persecuted. Without undermining the values which provided protection for such individuals, they were able to establish the mosques from which they propagated their radical Islam, which in the long-run influenced the second and the third generations of the immigrant Muslims. For the purposes of this essay, we will not elaborate on the complicated socio-political context which made this possible.

However, Europe has to deal with fundamentalism politically, culturally and intellectually and not to reduce it to a security problem. Religion is not a temporal phenomenon; it is not a disease as some neo-liberals claim. Religion is a very serious matter; it has to do with the meaning of life for its adherence and followers.

We have to understand the rhetoric of fundamentalist discourse in order to be intellectually able to combat it. Quoting

Qur'anic verses and prophetic sayings out of context, thus implying meanings that appeal to people's emotions, is the major rhetorical tactic employed in fundamentalist discourse. Secondly, they employ slogans that can easily be memorized and repeated, such as 'Islam is the solution,' 'Islam is a religion and state,' 'headscarf is the female honor,' 'death to the enemy of Allah.' Thirdly, they stereotype historical figures and historical events and glorify the past as the golden era of Islam that could and should be returned to by simply returning back to the imagined faith and practice of the good ancestors. Lastly, the rhetorical tactic is the condemnation of any different opinion by labeling it as heresy or apostasy.

Combating fundamentalism by employing similar rhetoric would strengthen its logic, and, thus, reproduce it. The rhetoric employed by radical liberal or radical rational European writers against fundamentalism does, in fact, validate its logic, by employing rhetorical slogans, such as 'our culture,' 'our civilization' and 'our democracy,' slogans which imply the incompatibility of Islam and these values. This is the same claim propagated by the fundamentalist discourse.

Combating fundamentalism in Europe is not possible without realizing the importance of dealing with the original intellectual resources of their discourse, which is the fundamentalist discourse in the Arab and the Muslim world. Freedom is the keyword in combating fundamentalism and terrorism whether in society at large or in specific educational institutions. As long as the governments of the Arab and the Muslim world control every economic, politic and cultural outlet, corruption will always flourish. Only freedom can fight this absolute darkness. Only freedom can lead to a de-radicalization of the fundamentalist discourse. This is very possible when freedom is for all including the Islamists. Freedom will uncover the meaninglessness of

their rhetoric; they have to talk politics instead of manipulating the meaning of religion. We have to make use of all the possible means available, by teaching, writing, debating publicly via public lectures, the press, radio and TV interviews, etc.

My major concern, as a scholar, is to show the historical facts about acculturation, which means there is no such thing as autonomous independent culture; every culture has to give and take in order to stay alive. Islam and the West are imagined concepts while in history they invaded each other, integrated with each other and even fought each other. I always use myself as an example of a constructed identity. Egyptian Arab Muslim means that I carry in my blood multiple cultural components, Pharaonic, Greek, Roman, and Coptic as well as Arabic and Islamic. I studied and taught in the United States and Japan and now I live in Europe. Who am I? Am I an Egyptian, an Arab, a Muslim or a European immigrant? I am all of these components and should not reduce my identity into only one.

There is a need to deconstruct the simple one-dimensional notion of identity, such as European and Muslim, in favor of a complex, multi-dimensional identity. Secondly, rethinking the concept of boundaries, whether cultural, ethnic or religious, should be a priority. The utopian concept of "European Islam" propagated by some well-intentioned intellectuals seems to be at odds with the global world in which we live. This does not mean that there is only one single Islam, a claim which is historically incorrect; Islam has been colored, and will continue to be colored, by the diversity of cultures in which Muslims live. But to formulate a specific European version would raise the question: what is Europe after all? Before all of these considerations, and perhaps above all of them, here is a need to de-theologize the discussion; theologizing socio-political problems is in fact the tactic of fundamentalism, religious as

well as secular fundamentalism.

RELIGION AND THE DYNAMICS OF DEVELOPMENT

The question of whether or not religions could accommodate and sustain human 'equality,' 'tolerance,' 'freedom,' etc., should not be discussed in reference to religion as a 'static' phenomenon. Everyone knows, for example, how the Church stood strongly against secularism and enlightenment. Only as a result of the pressure of social and political changes did Christianity adjust itself to 'modernity' and to its total social, intellectual and political implications. The question is, does religion always determine and shape social life, or is it also shaped by and interpreted in a certain socio-historical context? In order to approach answering such a question, a clear distinction has to be made between the original socio-historical context of a given religion and its development(s) through its socio-historical journey through the present.

Judaism, for example, was meant to free the people of Israel and to unify the tribes under one religious and political leadership. It was then necessary to advocate the notion of 'the chosen people' alongside many symbols of exclusive identity. Christianity, on the other hand, was intended to reform Judaism from its materialistic orientation by emphasizing spirituality. 'I did not come to change the law,' Jesus says, 'but to bring the people of Israel back to the right path.' The claim that the temple was turned to a marketplace provided justification for the new message.

As for Islam, according to the Qur'an, it was not a new religion; it is the same religion of Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Moses, and Jesus. It is then likely that every religion accommodates tolerance in its original historical context as long as its followers are a minority, but when the community of the believers grows and spreads,

the majority seeks power and control over others, and tolerance disappears. This process of transformation from tolerance to intolerance is usually sustained by presenting a new interpretation to the basic teaching of the faith.

When Jesus was crucified Christians were persecuted throughout the Roman Empire. When the Roman Emperors allowed Christians to worship the Gods of their choice, it was under the condition that they also worship the Emperor. When the Christians declined, the Romans were afforded the excuse of persecuting them for refusing to acknowledge the deity of Caesar. Thereafter, Christians were tolerated at best—but often tortured or killed—until the reign of Constantine I (312-337 AD). In 313 AD an edict of toleration for all religions was issued, and from about 320 AD Christianity was favored by the Roman State rather than persecuted by it. It was during the time when the Christians were prosecuted that tolerance was their decision. In this context, 'love for others,' even for enemies, was highlighted besides giving to Caesar what is his and to God what is His, thus recognizing two authorities. After Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire it turned toward the intolerance that was rooted in its religious self-consciousness.

Christianity, just like all monotheistic religions, views itself as a revelation of the divine truth which became human through Jesus Christ himself. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). To be a Christian is to "follow the truth" (3 John); the Christian proclamation is "the way of truth" (2 Peter 2:2). Those who do not acknowledge the truth are enemies "of the cross of Christ" (Philippians 3:18) who have "exchanged the truth about God for a lie" (Romans 1:25) and made themselves the advocates and confederates of the "adversary, the devil," who "prowls around like a roaring lion" (1 Peter 5:8).

Thus, one cannot make a deal with the devil and his party—and in this lies the basis for intolerance in Christianity and both Judaism and Islam. Christianity consistently practiced an intolerant attitude in its approach to Judaism and paganism as well as heresy in its own ranks. By practicing its intolerance vis-à-vis the Roman emperor cult, it thereby forced the Roman State, for its part, into intolerance. Rome, however, had not adapted to the treatment of a religion that negated its religious foundations, and this inadequacy later influenced the breakdown of paganism. Early Christianity was intent upon the elimination of paganism—the destruction of its institutions, temples, traditions, and the order of life based upon it. After Christianity's victory over Greco-Roman religions, it left only the ruins of paganism still remaining. Christian missions of later centuries constantly worked toward the destruction of indigenous religions, including their cultic places and traditions.

The attitude of intolerance was further reinforced when Islam confronted Christianity from the 7th century onwards. Islam perceived itself as the conclusion and fulfillment of the Old and New Testament revelation; from the Christian view, however, Islam was understood as the religion of the “false prophets,” or as the religion of the Antichrist. The aggression of Christianity against Islam—on the Iberian Peninsula, in Palestine, and in the entire eastern Mediterranean area during the Crusades—was carried out under this fundamental attitude of intolerance.

Similar developments occurred in the history of Islam. Tolerance was emphasized and maintained through the first phase of Islamic revelation, i.e., the revelation at Mecca when Muslims were minority. In this context the notion that Islam was a continuation of the Abrahamic religion was introduced. Although the basic adversaries of Islam during its early period were the polytheists, the pagans of Mecca, the

Qur'an expresses its tolerance towards them. The Prophet is advised “If one amongst the pagans ask you (Mohammed) for asylum grant it to him, so he may hear the word of God; and then escort him to where he can be secure” (Qur'an 9:6).

ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY

There is no question that the Qur'an has more favored attitudes toward the contemporary Christians of the Prophet than it has toward the Jews of the same period. There is an historical, rather than theological, explanation for this. It was in Mecca that Islam and Christianity worked in full cooperation. Classical Muslim authorities teach us that prophet Mohammed and his wife *Khadijah* consulted a Christian Arab priest *Warāqa b. Nawfal* for advice, who happened to be a cousin of *Khadijah*. He was a Christian priest, and he was able to write the Gospel with both Hebrew and Arabic letters. The matter of consultation was the first encounter with the Holy Spirit during the vision Mohammed had when he was meditating on mountain *Hira'*. It is reported that,

Khadija then accompanied Mohammed to her cousin who was an old man and had lost his eyesight. *Khadija* said to *Warāqa*, “Listen to the story of your nephew, O my cousin!” *Warāqa* asked, “O my nephew! What have you seen?” Mohammed told all what he had seen. *Warāqa* said, “This is the same one angel Gabriel whom Allah had sent to Moses. I wish I were young and could live up to the time when your people would turn you out.” Mohammed asked, “Will they drive me out?” *Warāqa* replied in the affirmative and said, “Anyone who came with something similar to what you have brought was treated with hostility; and if I should re-

main alive till the day when you will be turned out then I would support you strongly.¹

It is also important to mention that the first Muslim migration, *hijra*, was to Abyssinia. In order to escape being persecuted by the people of Mecca, the Prophet ordered the Muslims to go where, according to a statement related to the Prophet himself, “there is a Christian king who never does unjust to anyone.” Muslims enjoyed the Negus’ protection and hospitality till they returned back after the migration of the Prophet himself to Medina. During the period of their stay in Abyssinia, a delegation from Mecca visited the emperor asking to have Muslims returned back to Mecca. They told him that those who were living under his protection were only some rebels that protested against their own people’s religion and converted not to Christianity but to an unknown religion. In order to turn the Negus against Muslims they told him that they said blasphemy about Jesus Christ. When the Emperor asked Muslim refugees about their belief concerning Jesus, they read him the passages of the Qur’an from the chapter called ‘Mary,’ Maryam, (19:16-40). The report goes on to state that upon that hearing the above Qur’anic verses, the Negus agreed with them about Jesus as the servant of God, ‘and his apostle, and his spirit, and his word, which he cast into Mary the blessed virgin.’²

It seems that the Negus was one of the Abyssinian groups that maintained the interpretation of the nature of Jesus as human, though divinity was later infused into him. ‘Son of Mary’ is one of the most common titles given to Jesus in the Qur’an in order to emphasize his human nature. Nevertheless, the Qur’an also speaks of

Jesus as ‘a spirit from God’ and ‘His word caste into Mary’ by the Holy Spirit.

Another report refers to a letter Prophet Mohammed sent to the Negus. In this letter the Prophet said, ‘I bear witness that Jesus son of Mary is the spirit of God and his word which he cast to Mary the virgin.’ More than that: It was Jesus, according to the Qur’an, who prophesied ‘Ahmad’—Mohammed—to be the coming prophet. “And remember Jesus the son of Mary said: “O Children of Israel! I am the apostle of Allah (sent) to you confirming the Law (which came) before me and giving glad Tidings of an Apostle to come after me whose name shall be Ahmad.” But when he came to them with Clear Signs they said “This is evident sorcery!” (61:6).

ISLAM AND JUDAISM

But it was only after migration to Yathrib in 632 when Muslims started actual contact with the Arab Jewish tribes that came long before from Yemen and settled in Medina. It is also worth mentioning here that the first *qibla* for Muslims was to pray toward Jerusalem, but their prayer direction changed toward Mecca less than one year after immigration. The very well known ‘Medina Covenant’ between the Prophet and both the Jewish and pagan tribes indicates clearly an essential equality between all the peoples who lived in Medina. Liberty of religious practice was guaranteed on equal footing as long as all the parties defended the security of the city against any outside attack or intrusion. Concerning different types of religious faith, equality has been essentially guaranteed unless a war is initiated against Muslims, and then the war conditions as historically practiced are the rules. These war conditions are mostly situated in the chapter of the Qur’an called “Immunity,” chapter no. 9, and these conditions should be understood as only exceptional historical practical teachings.

¹ Cf. Al-Bukhary, Mohammed ibn Isma`il, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, a canonized collection of Traditions, Cairo, 1st chapter (Bab Bad` al-Wahy, chapter of the Beginning of Revelation), no. 1.

² *Ibid.*

Let me again quote the Qur'anic text itself in its essential guarantee of freedom of faith not only for the three religions of the book but for all non-monotheistic religions:

1. Those who follow Muhammad, those who believe in Judaism, the Christians and the Sabian, any who believe in God and the last day, and do righteousness, shall have their reward from their Lord (11:62 and 5:69).
2. Those who follow Muhammad, those who believe in Judaism, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians, and the polytheists, God will judge between them on the Day of Judgment (22:17).

Even the freedom to choose polytheism or atheism after accepting Islam or to convert to another faith is left to man's essential free choice. It is natural in a religious text like the Qur'an to introduce for such an act an after-world punishment, but there is no immediate penalty mentioned. Such a penal code was later introduced by the jurists and was institutionalized as part of the faith. Again quoting the Qur'an will clear the situation:

3. Say (Muhammed), the truth comes down from God: Let him who will, believe, and let him who will, reject: for the wrong doers We have prepared a fire (18:29).
4. He who will turn back from his faith soon will God bring about (other) people whom He will love and they will love him (5:4).
5. Those who reject faith after they accepted it, and then go in adding to their defiance of faith, never will their repentance be accepted; for

they are those who have gone astray (3:90, 4:137).

INTER-RELIGIOUS MARRIAGE

Islam, in addition to all of that, makes no differentiation, nor discrimination, between Muslims and both Christians and Jews in their daily social interaction. The food of the people of the Book is lawful to Muslims and intermarriage is allowed:

This day are (all) things good and pure made lawful unto you. The food of the People of the Book is lawful unto you and yours is lawful unto them. Lawful unto you in marriage are not only chaste women who are believers but chaste women among the People of the Book revealed before your time when you give them their due dowers and desire chastity not lewdness nor secret intrigues. (5:5)

Truly it has been emphasized that intermarriage is only one way. Only Muslim males are allowed to marry non-Muslim females. The reason introduced to explain such a restriction is the fact that Muslims recognize and respect both Moses and Jesus as prophets like Mohammed, but neither the Jews nor the Christians recognize Mohammed as a prophet. It is, therefore, expected that if the family master is a Muslim, the religion of the wife will be secured. Mohammed 'Abduh, an Egyptian reformist pioneer (d. 1905), explains how wonderful the social life interaction between Muslims and both the Jews and the Christians is under the lawful intermarriage Islam permits. Imagine how equality and the respect between religions is maintained by the children who have one of their parents going to the Church every Sunday, and the other going to the mosque every Friday. Abduh continues showing the blessings those children will enjoy hav-

ing both Muslim and Jewish or Christian grand parents and uncles. If intermarriage was permitted for Muslim males only in classical interpretation of the Qur'an, it is now allowed in some Muslim countries that Muslim females marry non-Muslim males.

All the above mentioned aspects of Islamic tolerance are based on the basic teaching of Islamic equality between all humans regardless of race, color, religion, culture or even gender.

QUR'ANIC FOUNDATION OF TOLERANCE

One of the basic and essential teachings of Islam is that all humans are the creation of One God. They are, more importantly, related to one single soul, from which God, first, created its mate "and spread from both of them too many men and women" (4:1.) Humankind, thus created of male and female, has made tribes and nations in order to come to know each other (49:13). Here we realize that unity of origin has developed to allow a multiplicity of nations and tribes, a multiplicity that establishes differences. But differences are not meant to create conflict and establish enmity or cause wars; it is rather meant to work to know each other. Being different in races and languages, ethical and cultural differences, is one of the Divine signs, one as significant as the creation of Heavens and Earth, so says the Qur'an (30:22.) The Qur'an also emphasizes the fact that even within the same community differences exist, whether for good or bad, for the best or for worse. In more than 30 passages it is mentioned that God will judge these differences in the life after. Without such differences in the present world, life on earth is unsustainable; neither is secured in the houses of worship of all religions (2:251, 22:40). All these aspects of human existence are maintained in the Qur'an by indicating the equality of all humans regardless of

race, color, language or culture. This equality is built on the honor and preference God bestowed on humans "over most of His creation" (17:70).

Islam, according to the Qur'an, is not a new religion; it is essentially the same religion revealed previously to Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Moses, and Jesus. It is repeatedly mentioned that God "sent Noah and Abraham and established in their line of Prophethood and Revelation." "After Moses, God decided to send Jesus." The Qur'an continues, "in their wake We followed them up with (others of) Our apostles: We sent after them Jesus the son of Mary and bestowed on him the Gospel; and We ordained in the hearts of those who followed him Compassion and Mercy." "O you who believe, fear Allah and believe in His apostle Mohammed and He will bestow on you a double portion of His Mercy: He will provide for you a light by which you shall walk (straight in your path) and He will forgive you" (57:26-29).

It is then the corruption of faith and belief caused by evildoers that necessitates a new revelation. On the level of faith and belief there is only one religion, i.e., Islam, which means the absolute submission to God. It also mentioned that Mohammed and Muslims are given the same religion given to Noah, and that which were enjoined on Abraham, Moses and Jesus (42:13). The heart of this religion is to worship the only One God without believing in any associates besides Him (3:64).

In this respect all the prophets present Islam in different forms and different languages (2/133.) They, on the other hand, present different laws, *shari'a*; there are, therefore, three laws at least, and every person should follow their own law (5:84). Establishing itself as a continuation of one message from the age of Noah, probably from Adam, the Qur'an furnished the ground for later development in Islamic thought. First, it developed the theory of abrogation, i.e., the possibility of changing

the law within the paradigm of the same revelation according to the chronological order of revelation. This was developed later in the field of Islamic law, *fiqh*, to claim that the Islamic *shari`a* revealed to Mohammed has abrogated all the previous revealed laws. But abrogation is never to be applied to the creed itself.

ISLAM IN MOTION

Negatively considered, the monotheistic conviction results usually in the rejection of all other belief systems as false religions, and this rejection partly explains the exceptionally aggressive or intolerant stance of the monotheistic religions in the history of the world. The conception of all other religions as “idolatry” (i.e., as rendering absolute devotion or trust to what is less than divine) has often served to justify the destructive and fanatical action of the religion that is considered to be the only true one. The connection and the attachment proclaimed usually by a new religion to previous religions—as the cases with Christianity and Judaism on the one hand, and of Islam and both Judaism and Christianity on the other hand show—change in the course of time to sever hostility. Truth is *one* and *absolute*, it is not negotiable nor can it be relativized.

Through the long journey of every religion in history, layers of interpretation and re-interpretation, or rather interpretation and counter-interpretation, are accumulated around the original texts to the extent that the original socio-historical context is veiled. But fortunately this creates a multiplicity of trends of thought within every religion, a multiplicity that constitutes plurality emphasizing different aspects of it.

In the case of Christianity it began as a movement within Judaism. Jesus was a Jew, as were his chief followers, the Apostles. His followers accepted him as the “Christ,” or the chosen one, sent to fulfill God's promise to Abraham, Isaac, and

Jacob. In the Hellenistic world, 3rd-century apologists, such as Clement and Origen, interpreted the Christ in terms derived from Greek philosophy. The Gospel was also interpreted metaphysically, especially in Syria, Egypt, North Africa, and Persia, where conditions existed for an ascetic, otherworldly interpretation.

The journey of Islam in history has also had its positive as well as negative consequences. Islam in its historical and social context was meant to introduce a solution to the critical socio-historical situation of the world as represented in the Arabian Peninsula. The world was divided into two conflicting powers, i.e., the Roman and the Persian empires. The Arabian Peninsula was controlled at its north boundaries by two semi-Arabic states, each of which was affiliated to one of the two great powers. The major aim of these states was to keep the Arabs inside the Peninsula in order to avoid any threat to the boundaries of the two empires and their trade routes. Being forced to absolutely depend on their internal primitive resources of life, the Arab tribes gradually started entering into severe bloody conflict over the water. In other words, one can say that severe bloody strife in an isolated geographical locale led to the emergence of an ethical and social framework we know now as Islam. Because of war and mayhem, there was a necessity of a legal system and a penal code to give some structure to the chaotic reality of the peninsula.

Following this historical line of thought, it is then understandable that Islam would absorb many of the traditions of the peninsula and negotiate, and even compromise, with its habits. For example, in order not to completely destroy human life and to keep trade traffic going, the tribes of the peninsula agreed to have a three-month annual truce. These were the “sacred months” recognized and respected by Islam. In this context Islam can be looked at as a new system of belief, ethics

and social order. It intended to change the life of the Arabs, in order to enable them to solve the critical situation in which they were trapped, while being very conscious of their history and tradition. It is indeed poor faith and outright ignorant to say that Islam is essentially tribal, a common assertion among some Orientalists. Islam, like any other religion, and any other system of thought, but even more so, is part and parcel of the working of history.

Islam is a multi-leveled system; it operates on different planes, but planes that also overlap. On the level of belief, Islam presented the notion of "one transcendent god" to replace the tribal deities, one truth and justice for all. On the social plane, the "community of believers" was created to substitute the social tribal ethos. On the level of ethics, individual "rational conduct" was supposed to be the norm and the bond between the individual and community, based on an ideological, rational understanding, which was to replace the absolute commitment to tribal kinship which Islam labeled as "*jahiliyyah*" or ignorance, dark ages. On the intellectual level, Islam insisted on opening the gate for free "thinking" and argued for rational reflection and condemned blind "following" of antiquated tribal traditions. In addition to all the new teachings, Islam integrated most of the social and religious institutions founded before its emergence like the *hajj* into its own system, for example, the pilgrimage to Mecca. As for history, Islam reconstructed all the oral narratives of antiquities in order to deliver its message as the higher, final and the most complete of the serial of God's messages. Though Islam considers itself the last Abrahamic religion, as referred to earlier, criticism of the existing scriptures of both Judaism and Christianity was emphasized in order to integrate their followers to the Muslim community. In brief, Islam was not meant to be solely an ideology of understanding or explanation of the world or a mere spir-

itual conviction, but it gradually emphasized its nature as an ideology to change the world.

ISLAM AND POLITICS

The issues of the state and sovereignty are perhaps the most contested issues in the history of Islam. Early on, there was a problem. The Prophet died without nominating anyone to be his successor in leading the nascent community, thus leaving the issue unsettled. And naturally, there were attempts to revert to tribal mechanism of choosing a successor from the Prophet's family. A temporary compromise was reached by choosing the father-in-law of the Prophet, but the issue remained unsettled. To make a long story short, after much contesting and civil war, three political parties with different opinions concerning this issue emerged. One group of Muslims, the *shī'is*, which proved to be a minority, believed that the Prophet had in fact designated his successor, and that was his son-in-law and cousin, 'Ali. Another group which formed the majority of Muslims, the Sunnis, took the view that the Prophet had deliberately left the question of his succession open, leaving it to the community to decide who would be the most competent person to assume its leadership. But they emphasized that Caliphate should only be confined to the aristocracy of Mecca, the Prophet's tribe. The third major political trend in early Islam was the rejection of both the Sunni and the Shi'i positions, and its followers came to be appropriately known as the *Khawarij*, meaning an outsider. Allied to their uncompromising attachment to the Qur'an was a democratic temper insisting on the right of all Muslims, irrespective of their tribal, racial and class distinctions, to elect or dispose, or to be elected as, rulers.³ As the *Khawarij*, the

³ Cf. Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political thought*, London, 1982, pp. 69-79.

very early Muslim democrats, in fact, started to support their political position by quoting some verses of the Qur'an, Islamic theology started to emerge and the Qur'an, or rather its interpretation and counter-interpretation, came to be at its heart. The simulation of the Qur'an in the political process thus began, inaugurating a new stage and a very important moment in the history of Islam. This process was advanced as a human endeavor of interpretation of the Qu'ranic text. Legitimate or not, it is an act of human interpretation that may very well be countered. In fact, within the inescapable bounds of reason, under the tyranny of language, wherein we all have to operate, it has to be inevitably restated, re-interpreted, and re-counteracted. There is no alternative to silencing humanity, or to withholding reinterpretation but oppression.

ISLAM IN THE WORLD: THE EMERGENCE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT

Spreading geographically outside the Arab peninsula into the world of the two great empires, the Roman and the Persian, Islam came into close contact with almost all of the old cultures and traditions—Greek, Roman, Indian, Persian and Pharaonic. Practical, political and administrative issues were dealt with by the Jurists, and thus developed a great body of legal literature called *fiqh*, while early theological debates led to the translation of the works of Greek philosophers into Arabic, through the Syraic language at the beginning and directly from Greek and Latin later on. The logic of Aristotle became the basic foundation of epistemology, which brought into discussion the relationship between revelation and reason. Two major positions were formed: One that holds reason is superior and any contradiction to it in revelation should be interpreted in accordance with rationalism. The second position considers revelation to contain the absolute truth

while reason is limited to attain relative truth. Conflict between those two positions took sometimes violent forms especially when the state interfered to support one position against the other.

It is important to mention here that those two theological positions originated as an expression of socio-political conflict, which started around the end of the 1st/7th century and first quarter of the 2nd/8th century. The rational trend of thought started to emerge in response to the Umayyad State political theology that emphasized the creed of 'predestination' to legitimize their political power. Rational theology as presented by the *Mu'tazilites*, and Rational Philosophy presented by Averroes later, could be considered solid ground for tolerance. Both present a very open, human, liberal trend of Islamic thought.

The traditional trend of thought is found mainly in the field of jurisprudence, *fiqh*, because jurists deal with reality, i.e., with the practical action of the individual within society. Because they are more aware of teachings concerning human action, they could, by ways of induction, formalize the essential and ultimate objectives of Islam. But at this moment of formalization, the betrayal of the essence of the method takes place; the ritual that is local and the action that is specific were transformed into the general and the universal, and with a bit of a missionary fervor, it was turned into an act of imposition. At this juncture, law emerges in the history of Islam, and because of its locality, it has to be universally imposed; there is a penal aspect in its intention. Law is a form of policing and punishment.

The result of the inductive method of the traditional school is the five ultimate objectives of *shari'a* and it is not difficult to explain that these objectives are mainly taken from the penal code of Islam, despite their apparent universality. The first one, protection of life, is deduced from the

penal code for illegal killing because retaliation, according to the Qur'an, is in fact to maintain 'life' itself. The second objective, protection of progeny, is mainly taken from the punishment against committing adultery or fornication. As for the third objective, the protection of property, it is in reference to robbery. The fourth objective, protection of sanity, has to do with the prohibition of consuming alcohol. The fifth is 'protection of religion,' which is supposedly meant to be the punishment of an apostate. Two of these penalties, namely those for adultery and alcohol consumption, were not introduced in the Qur'an but are accretions. The same is true for the fifth objective, protection of religion; there is no worldly punishment mentioned in the Qur'an for those who turn their back to Islam after accepting it. What is mentioned is a punishment in the life after. It was later that the death penalty was introduced for mainly political reasons; protecting the political authority was identified with protecting Islam.

Religion and the state are now getting intimate; simmering on long duration, and along with various historical ruptures, the protection of the state, of the Caliphate becomes synonymous with the protection of Islam.

MYSTICISM AND THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF UNCERTAINTY

"My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles, a convent for Christian monks, a temple for idols, the pilgrim's Ka'ba, the tables of Torah and the book of the Koran. I follow the religion of love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith."⁴

These are three verses from a long poem by the very famous Muslim mystic of

⁴ Muhyi'ddin Ibn Al-'Arabi, *Tarjuman Al-Ash-waq, a collection of mystical odes*; (The Interpreter of Desires), trans. By Reynold A. Nicholson, London 1911, p.67.

Andalusia, Spain, Muhyi'ddin ibn al-'Arabi (d. 638/1239 AD)⁵, in which he expresses how his heart, the throne of God situated in man according to his philosophical system, is open to conceive all forms of faith and belief to be all the same and one. One has to indicate here that Ibn al-'Arabi is not referring only to the three revealed monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—but he includes paganism by reference to 'temple for idols.' What

⁵ He was born in Murcia, in the southeast of Spain. In Seville, then an outstanding center of Islamic culture and learning, he received his early education. He stayed there for 30 years, studying traditional Islamic sciences; he studied with a number of mystic masters who found in him a young man of marked spiritual inclination and unusually keen intelligence. During those years he traveled a great deal and visited various cities of Spain and North Africa in search of masters of the Sufi (mystical) Path who had achieved great spiritual progress and thus renown. In 1198, while in Murcia, he had a vision in which he felt he had been ordered to leave Spain and set out for the East. Thus began his pilgrimage to the Orient, from which he never was to return to his homeland. The first notable place he visited on this journey was Mecca (1201), where he "received a divine commandment" to begin his major work *al-Futuhatt al-Makkiyah* (the Meccan Revelations), which was to be completed much later in Damascus. In 560 chapters, it is a work of tremendous size, a personal encyclopaedia extending over all the esoteric sciences in Islam as Ibn al-'Arabi understood and had experienced them, together with valuable information about his own inner life. His daring "pantheistic" expressions drew down on him the wrath of Muslim orthodoxy, some of whom prohibited the reading of his works at the same time that others were elevating him to the rank of the prophets and saints. After Mecca, he visited Egypt (also in 1201) and then Anatolia, where, in Qunya, he met Sadr ad-Din al-Qunawi who was to become his most important follower and successor in the East. From Qunya he went on to Baghdad and Aleppo. By the time his long pilgrimage had come to an end in Damascus (1223), his fame had spread all over the Islamic world. Venerated as the greatest spiritual master, he spent the rest of his life in Damascus in peaceful contemplation, teaching, and writing. It was during his Damascus days that one of the most important works in mystical philosophy in Islam, *Fusus al-Hikam* (Pearls of Wisdom), was composed in 1229, about 10 years before his death. Consisting only of 27 chapters, the book is incomparably smaller than *al-Futuhatt al-Makkiyah*, but its importance as an expression of Ibn al-'Arabi's mystical thought in its most mature form cannot be over-emphasized. For more detailed explanation of Ibn al-'Arabi's thought see my book *Falsafat al-Ta'wil, Dirasah fi Ta'wil al Qur'an* (inda Muhyi'ddin ibn 'Arabi (The Philosophy of Hermeneutics: A Study of Ibn 'Arabi's Hermeneutics of the Qur'an), Beirut 1996.

about the 'pasture for gazelles'; to what does it refer, and what is its significance? According to Ibn al-'Arabi's own interpretation, gazelle signifies the 'Divine subtlety' revealed to the heart of the Gnostic, which could only be spoken about symbolically.⁶ Its plural form, gazelles, indicates the fact that the Divine truth is not limited to one form; neither is it fully manifested in any mode of expression.

Only the 'heart' of the Gnostic is capable of realizing the Divine truth in its continual transformation. It is the only human faculty capable of transforming "according to the various influences by which it is affected in consequence of the variety of the Divine manifestation that appears to its inmost ground."⁷ It is not difficult to find in this notion of continual transformation of the 'Divine truth' an obvious claim of an 'epistemology of uncertainty.' Ibn al-'Arabi always repeats the anecdote: a vessel always gives its shape and color to the water, which in itself has no shape or color. Truth, which in its essence is not limited to any form or expression, is similarly shaped and colored according to the knower's state of mind and emotion. Only the perfect Gnostic, the 'perfect man' in Ibn al-'Arabi's terminology, is capable of knowing that fact and accepting it in all its forms and expressions.

This 'epistemology of uncertainty' is founded in Ibn al-'Arabi's system of thought on a certain ontological framework that makes no real distinction between the 'Divine truth' and the universe or between cosmology and anthropology. In this ontological framework everything in the universe from top to bottom, small or great, is nothing but a grade of manifestation that presents one aspect of the 'Divine truth.' Man alone represents it in its all aspects. In the formation of man,

the whole universe from top to bottom is reflected and presented. Though man is the last manifested being, he is the essential objective of manifestation, or creation. The will of the 'Divine Essence' to be known by an entity other than itself explains, according to Ibn al-'Arabi, the existence of the whole universe by the continuous process of the Divine Manifestation. In other words, God reflects his own image partially in different mirrors, by revealing it through different and gradual grades of manifestation, but the perfect mirror which reflects the Divine Image in its totality is man. Man, thus, represents the whole universe on one hand, and represents the perfect mirror, that reflects God's image on the other. His spirit reflects Godhead; his intellect reflects the First Intellect; his soul reflects the Universal Soul; his heart represents the Throne; and his body represents the Universal Nature.

Being the microcosm, the essential mission of man is to know God by knowing himself. But he has first to remove all the barriers that block his awareness of his inner divine nature. In other words, he has to ascend all the cosmological components covering his real divinity in order to attain such knowledge. Asceticism is the first step of a long journey, the end of which is the realization of true inner nature of reality. In the philosophical system of Ibn al-'Arabi there is an essential concept called 'the Reality Mohammed,' which seems to be a mystical explanation of the Qur'anic concept about the unity of religion. According to this concept, the historical Mohammed born in Mecca around 570 represents the last manifestation of a metaphysical divine reality, i.e., the 'Reality of Mohammed.' The 'Reality of Mohammed', on the other hand represents the inward hidden reality manifested in all the prophets from Adam till it reached its final and complete manifestation in the historical Mohammed of Mecca. This 'Reality of Mohammed' is the epistemological parallel to Godhead,

⁶ Ibn Al-'Arabi, *Tarjuman Al-Ashwaq, a collection of mystical odes*; (The Interpreter of Desires), trans. By Reynold A. Nicholson, London 1911, p. 68.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

which is the ontological agent between Pure Absoluteness and the world of multiplicity.⁸ Mohammed becomes, therefore, the hidden link that sustains the unity of all religion under the tenet of Islam.

It is easy to realize how much Ibn al-`Arabi depends on a specific method of interpretation of the Qur'an, and the Tradition of the Prophet, in order to situate his system of thought on Islamic grounds. It is very likely that Ibn al-`Arabi considers all religions different expressions of one essential religion. Scriptures, accordingly, represent the divine knowledge expressed in multi-semantic levels: the literal level that suits the masses, the legislative level to the jurists of law, the argumentative level that addresses the theologians, and the poetic level that alludes to comprehensive truth. Only the mystic who successfully accomplishes the ascendance journey is the one who is able to decode the real meaning of revelation.

No wonder then that Ibn al-Arabi's hermeneutics of the Qur'an constitute an attempt to integrate the meaning of the Qur'an. All knowledge occurred up to his time from Plato to Averroes. In fact, he wanted to make use of Islam as an open-ended project, one that could reconcile with, and indeed contains, Christianity, Judaism and all other religions. It was to be a religion of comprehensive love as Ibn Arabi termed it in the above verses. The project was very much a product of the Andalusian society based on religious, linguistic, cultural and ethnic pluralism, provincially spoken in the streets, Latin in the Church, classical Arabic in the divans, and a multitude of local dialects elsewhere. It was a project of reconciliation between all these elements and groups.

⁸ cf. my book *Falsafat al-Ta'wil, Dirasah fi Ta'wil al Qur'an c'inda Muç'yi'ddin ibn c'Arabi* (The Philosophy of Hermeneutics: A Study of Ibn c'Arabi's Hermeneutics of the Qur'an), Beirut 1996, pp. 57-67.

CONCLUSION

Needless to say that the project, ultimately, failed, as we already know, because what Ibn al-`Arabi attempted was in the end to formulate a utopia of his own, a formula that gained impetus from the increasing tension and conflict within his own society. Why did it not work out, even though it contained the basic elements necessary to establish not only toleration but also to establish peaceful atmosphere of 'togetherness'? This will take us back to our primary analysis of the world situation of conflict and mistrust. Ibn `Arabi's project failed for similar historical reasons, the following reconquest and the crusades.

But, its historical failure does not mean that the project is unworkable. The core of such projects is to reach the utmost inner spirit of any worldview, whether religious or secular, i.e., spiritual religiosity versus religions in their institutionalized structure, such as the Church and the ultra-Orthodox dogmatic expressions of faith. What is overshadowing spiritual Islam in our modern era is the *shari`a*-oriented dominant Islam, i.e., Islam as a legal system of allowed, *halal*, and forbidden, *haram*, void of the ethical and spiritual underpinning. This is the basic cause of Islamophobia locally and universally.

The challenge for Muslim thinkers nowadays is how to reconnect the fragmented Islamic culture of the past, which made the great Islamic civilization between the 9th and the 12th century, and contributed to the modern world's values of freedom, equality and justice. It is not an impossible task to accomplish, if the modern thinkers have the courage to critically rethink tradition. A creative humanistic hermeneutics must be developed given that so many creative and courageous thinkers are already active. These voices have to be heard and the world has to listen.