

Evaluating Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd's Theory on the Influence of the Culture of the Time on the Understanding and Interpretation (Ta'wīl) of the Qur'ān

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ABSTRACT

Abū Zayd is among the contemporary Arab reformers who exerted considerable effort to address the challenges facing the Muslim world today. The core of his response, however, relied on modern Western methods for understanding and interpreting the Qur'ān. The present article therefore undertakes to examine and critique his theory concerning the influence of the culture of the time on the understanding and interpretation (ta'wīl) of the Qur'ān. The method employed is content analysis, with a critical approach. According to the analysis conducted, the foundational principles (mabānī) of his theory are as follows: the necessity of distinguishing between religion and religious thought; the cultural-geographical fabric of Qur'ānic meanings; the prophetic experience of revelation (waḥy); and the Qur'ān as expressive of the meaning of life, not as a law book. Moreover, the components of the theory include: the Qur'ān as living discourse rather than silent text; the need to consider the horizon outside the text; the necessity of distinguishing between the principal (aṣl) and the subsidiary (far') in Qur'ānic addresses; the variability of Qur'ānic concepts; and the necessity of an open and living interpretation of the Qur'ān. However, the aforementioned principles and components are flawed for reasons such as: a mistaken understanding of religion and religious thought; the grounding of understanding and interpretation of the Qur'ān in the intent of God Almighty; the Qur'ān as divine revelation; the grounding of the meaning of life on the basis of life; the Qur'ān being simultaneously text and discourse; the incorrect determination of the principal and subsidiary in rulings (aḥkām); the non-relativity of Qur'ānic rulings; and the failure to provide the effective cause (manāṭ) of rulings. Ultimately, it must be concluded that Abū Zayd regards understanding and interpretation of the Qur'ān as based on the culture of the time, whereas his view is incorrect according to Qur'ānic texts, ḥadīth-based evidence, historical sources, and rational arguments.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two centuries, a number of religious reformers (nūʿandīshān-i dīnī), primarily Arabic-speaking, have established a current within Islamic theology (kalām) known as the Neo-Muʿtazilah (nūmuʿtazilah). Their objective has been to provide a rational explanation of revelation (waḥy) and sacred law (sharīʿah) by drawing on the discourses of the modern world in the humanities, epistemology, and hermeneutics.

Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (d. 2010), an Egyptian scholar, is one of the most prominent figures of this current in the contemporary period. Independent of anthropological and epistemological foundations, Abū Zayd entered the field largely through concrete analysis, attempting to apply Western methods of textual study—directly or indirectly—to his own Qurʾānic investigations. He maintains that the culture of the time (farhang-i zamānih) plays a fundamental role in the understanding and interpretation (taʾwīl) of the Qurʾān. The majority of Muslim scholars, however, reject such a theory. The present article accordingly aims to expound and critique Abū Zayd’s theory on this matter.

2. Methodology

The method employed is content analysis (taḥlīl-i muḥtawā) with a critical approach (rawish-i intiqādī). The authors accessed primary sources through library-based and electronic research. After examining the principal texts, the essential points relevant to the topic were extracted and analyzed. The subsequent stage involved synthesizing a comprehensive theory from these extracted points. The most significant part of the article consists of critiques directed at Abū Zayd’s theory with respect to both its foundational principles (mabānī) and its constituent components (muʿallifih-hā). This critical section derives primarily from the authors’ own analysis, whereas other sections draw more heavily on the views of previous scholars.

3. Literature Review and Research Background

A considerable number of articles have been written on the exposition and critique of Abū Zayd’s views. Some of these are blended with the perspectives of other Neo-Muʿtazilī figures, such as Muḥammad Arkoun, and are not easily separable. Others address different domains, such as the theology of revelation (waḥy-shināsī), which do not directly relate to the present inquiry. The articles most relevant to the current discussion include:

“An Examination and Critique of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd’s Foundations for Proving the Historicity of the Noble Qurʾān”;

“The Theory of Taʾwīl and Religious Reform: A Study of Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd’s View on Taʾwīl and Its Consequences”;

“The Qurʾān as Discourse, Not Text: A Critique of Abū Zayd’s Final View on Revelation and the Qurʾān.”

4. Findings

4.1. Evaluation of the Foundational Principles (Mabānī) of Abū Zayd's Theory on the Influence of the Culture of the Time

a) Distinction between religion and religious thought

Abū Zayd holds that religion is a collection of fixed, sacred, and historical texts, whereas religious thought consists of the human efforts (ijtihādāt) to understand and interpret them; thus a distinction must be drawn between the two. Contrary to his view, reason ('aql) and religion should be regarded as complementary in the derivation (istinbāt) of religious rulings. Moreover, a jurist (faqīh) cannot engage in derivation free from the religious text and without any constraints.

b) The cultural-geographical fabric of Qur'ānic meanings:

From Abū Zayd's perspective, although the Qur'ānic text is divine, it is simultaneously affected by the mechanisms of human culture, operating within a humanistic framework. According to this view, the Qur'ān inevitably spoke within the cultural-geographical context of the time of its revelation. Consequently, the intention of God Almighty (qasd-i Khudāwand-i Mut'āl) with respect to the Qur'ān becomes meaningless.

c) The prophetic experience of revelation:

Abū Zayd believes that revelation, as divine inspiration (ilhāmāt-i ilāhī), is purely semantic in nature, and that the Prophet (peace be upon him) gives it verbal form. On this basis, the Qur'ān is essentially interwoven with the culture of its time. The verses of the Qur'ān, however, do not tolerate such a view.

d) The Qur'ān as expressive of the "meaning of life", not a law book:

Abū Zayd maintains that the Qur'ān is not a book of law but rather carries the meaning of life, which is continually changing. It must be noted, however, that prior to the "meaning of life" there exists something called the "foundation of life" (mabnā-yi zindigī), upon which the meaning of life depends. Thus, if a person takes belief in monotheism (tawḥīd) as the foundation of life, the law (qānūn) of that life will be oriented around monotheism, not humanism (ūmānīsm).

4.2. Evaluation of the Constituent Components of Abū Zayd's Theory

a) The Qur'ān as discourse (guftār), not text (matn):

For Abū Zayd, the Qur'ān functions as living discourse rather than a silent text. Therefore, the Qur'ān finds itself compelled to revise not only in the face of values that emerged after its appearance but also in the face of its own earlier values. By failing to consider the consequences of this idea, Abū Zayd effectively fosters religious pluralism (takthurgarāyī-yi dīnī).

b) The horizon outside the text:

Abū Zayd thinks that when one engages with the Qur'ān as “discourse,” a broad horizon opens before the community, allowing Qur'ānic scholars to prescribe appropriate rulings according to new circumstances. In contrast, the method of jurisprudential derivation (*istinbāt*) among the *fuqahā'*, while taking into account the worldly interests (*maṣāliḥ-i duniyāwī*) of society and consequently allowing minor modifications of certain rulings, nevertheless emphasizes the stability of those rulings based on their otherworldly interests (*maṣāliḥ-i ukhrāwī*).

c) Determining principal (aṣl) and subsidiary (far') in Qur'ānic addresses:

Abū Zayd claims that Qur'ānic address concerning social affairs is directed at men, whereas in acts of devotion (*ta'abbud*), it is directed at both men and women together. In the Qur'ān, however, men and women are sometimes addressed jointly and sometimes distinctly on account of gender, in both devotional and social domains. Hence, no separation between devotional and social matters has been made in the mode of Qur'ānic address.

d) The variability of Qur'ānic concepts:

Abū Zayd maintains that texts—religious and otherwise—are fixed in terms of their explicit wording (*maṭṭūq*), but are dynamic and variable in terms of concept (*mafhūm*). Based on this supposition, however, Abū Zayd has derived concepts from the Qur'ān that are incompatible with the Qur'ānic text (*naṣṣ*).

e) The necessity of an open and living interpretation

Abū Zayd advocates an open and free *ta'wīl* of the Qur'ān that authorizes different levels of reading and understanding, according to the diversity of readers (*qurrā'*) and the changing states of a single reader. Regrettably, Abū Zayd pays no attention to the practical mechanisms of *ijtihād*, such as consideration of the effective cause (*manāt*) of a ruling.

5. Discussion

Although several studies have been written expounding and critiquing Abū Zayd's views, the present article arrives at a composite theory (*naẓariyyih-yi tarkībī*) by focusing on the element of the culture of the time and its relationship to three factors: the nature of revelation (*māhīyat-i waḥy*), the historical approach to the Qur'ān (*nigāh-i tārikhī bih Qur'ān*), and the adoption of a new method of *ta'wīl* in Qur'ānic exegesis. Moreover, the present article is innovative in its separation between the foundations of the theory and its components.

6. Conclusion

Regarding the influence of the culture of the time on the understanding and interpretation of the Qur'ān, Abū Zayd adopts four foundational principles

(mabānī): (1) the distinction between religion and religious thought; (2) the cultural-geographical fabric of Qur'ānic meanings; (3) the prophetic experience of revelation; and (4) the Qur'ān as expressive of the meaning of life rather than a law book. The components (mu'allifih-hā) of his theory are: (1) the Qur'ān as living discourse, not silent text; (2) the necessity of considering the horizon outside the text; (3) the necessity of distinguishing principal from subsidiary in Qur'ānic addresses; (4) the variability of Qur'ānic concepts; and (5) the necessity of an open and living ta'wīl of the Qur'ān.

However, the aforementioned foundations and components are flawed for reasons including: a mistaken understanding of religion and religious thought; the grounding of Qur'ānic understanding and interpretation in the intent of God Almighty; the Qur'ān as divine revelation; the grounding of the meaning of life on the foundation of life; the endorsement of pluralism; disregard for otherworldly interests (maşāliḥ-i ukhrāwī); a separation between the devotional and social domains of religion; the incompatibility of certain derived concepts with the Qur'ānic text (naşş); and failure to consider the effective cause (manāt) of rulings.

Declarations

Authors' Contributions:

- Data collection: Muḥammad Shukrī, Muḥammad Dargāh'zādih, Şafar Naşīrīyān
- Research report preparation: Muḥammad Dargāh'zādih
- Data analysis: Şafar Naşīrīyān

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