

Religion, Reform and Progress

Critical Voices from Egypt

For many observers, orthodoxy and dogmatism are still dominant in the mainstream Muslim discourse. Critical and progressive Muslim thinkers are scarce and not strong enough to promote clearly distinguishable schools or movements. The following interviews were held with three Egyptian intellectuals who can be quoted as Muslim freethinkers: Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, Gamal al-Banna and Hassan Hanafi Hassanien. All three come from different disciplines and promote dissimilar ideas. However, they do share the common background of the Egyptian reformist movement and stand for a progressive and critical interpretation of religious traditions.

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the last century, efforts have been made within Egyptian academia to promote a religious reform with the aim to transform Islam into the main instrument for progress and modernization. The revolutionary pan-Islamist Gamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1838-1897) and his Egyptian disciple, the theologian and philosopher Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), are recorded as the founding fathers of the school of intellectuals who intended to promote a novel interpretation (*igtihad*) of the religious dogma in order to overcome traditionalism and to re-think religion within the context of a modern society. This *igtihad* was meant to rely on the very bases of Islam, defined by both the Quran and interpretations of the honorable ancestors (the *aslaf*), and therefore called *salafiyya*. Two completely dissimilar branches of thought developed from the *salafiyya* base-lines: one of them a fundamentalist vision –in the original sense of the term– which has been motivating its adherents to take the Quran literally and to relate all activities directly to a strict religious dogma, frequently inspired by the Hanbali-Wahabi school of Saudi Arabia.¹ The second philosophical trend, initiated by Muhammad Abduh's theories, has been formed by a handful of scholars whose intention is to go further in the interpretation of religion and to open up minds to different methodological instruments not necessarily linked to the traditional theology. The first generation of these academics began to write about the relation between Religion and State (Ali Abd al-Razeq (1888-1969)) and changes in society, such as the empowerment of women (Qasem Amin (1863-1935)) at the beginning of the 20th century.

Nowadays, the Egyptian mainstream accepts and defends the literal interpretation of the Quran promoted by its overall holder of the monopoly of religious legitimacy –the Azhar institutions,– which extensively uses all means of mass communication in order to also reach the illiterate masses: Friday prayer,² radio, cassettes and television. Only a few intellectu-

¹ This branch is the one who inherited the name *salafi* because they reduce their approach to the analysis of the ancestors' traditional theology.

² which is to be followed not only in the mosques but in the public field as a whole (metro, big squares, train stations etc.)

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als, continuously fighting against official exposure to public anger, dare to advance a different approach to religion. The writings of these progressive thinkers find acceptance mostly among representatives of the highly educated class. The broader masses only react to their thought when Azhar officials emit *fatwas*³ against these intellectuals. Therefore, the progressive thinkers are not considered a direct threat to political establishment –as, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood⁴– because they do not receive considerable support from the public.

Three intellectuals with very different social and academic backgrounds, originating from three academic disciplines - philology, philosophy and theology were interviewed for this publication. They all belong to what we could call the “progressive heirs” of Muhammad Abduh’s theories. In chronological order according to their dates of birth, the first among them is Gamal al-Banna. Born in 1920, son of a man of religion and brother of the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Gamal al-Banna defends a “new *fiqh* (jurisprudence)” which lately made him come under attack. The second thinker interviewed is Hassan Hanafi Hassanien, professor of philosophy. He was born 15 years after Gamal al-Banna, spent ten years of his university life in Paris and always insisted on a special concept of Islamic progress and the necessity to pass from Islamic reform to revolution. The third academic quoted in this paper is Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid. Born in 1943, Abu Zaid obtained international fame approximately fifty years later due to the apostasy-lawsuit against him, his forced divorce and exile in the Netherlands, a result of his defence of a historical and hermeneutical approach of the Quran.

The questions asked during the following interviews are not identical and formulated such as to respect the differences in work and life of each of the three thinkers. The interviews with Gamal al-Banna and Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid were held in English. Hassan Hanafi Hassanien was interviewed in French.

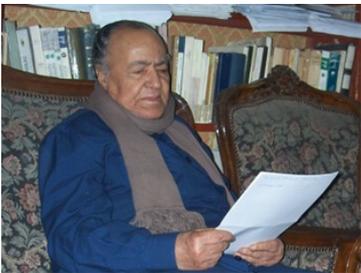
2. The Defense of Freedom of Thought and Expression – An Interview with Gamal al-Banna

Gamal al-Banna was born in 1920. His father was an imam at the local mosque of al-Mahmudiyya and his entire life occupied with classifying the *ahadith*⁵ transmitted by Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (780-855). Gamal al-Banna felt attracted to an autodidactic way of studying at a very young age. After a fight with an English teacher, he left high school and resorted to his father’s extensive library. Gamal al-Banna’s older brother Hassan founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928. In these early years of the organization, Gamal participated in the publishing of its newspaper and went to jail with its most notable members from 1948 to 1950. After his brother’s assassination in 1949, Gamal took a clear distance from the Brotherhood and concentrated on the workers’ movement. During the 1950s, he worked in a textile factory and held a position in the director’s council of the General Workers’ Syndicate of the Mechanic Textile Industry for two years. Meanwhile, he focused his studies on the history of labour unionism in England and the United States. In 1963, the Association for the Instruction of Egyptian Workers was founded and Gamal al-Banna took on a teaching position in the institution. He was to remain a member of staff for the next 20 years. The Arab Labour Organization designated him as a consultant for worker’s pedagogy and syndicalism in 1973. Gamal al-Banna also worked as a teacher in the Egyptian Workers’ University from

³ *Fatwas* are officially proclaimed religious statements made by theologians (*sheikhs*).

⁴ The Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan al-Muslimin*) is an association with religious aims, founded by Gamal al-Banna’s older brother Hassan al-Banna in 1928. The association experienced different changes in their ideology and became directly active in politics with the free officers *coup d’Etat* in 1952. The succeeding governments adopted diverse policies in favour or mainly against them. The Muslim Brotherhood’s relation to official state politics is still controlled and monitored by Egypt’s authorities.

⁵ *Ahadith* is the plural of *hadith*, a transmitted action or saying of the Prophet Muhammad.



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1991-1993. In 1981 he founded the International Islamic Confederation of Labour. The headquarters of this organization are still located in Geneva, where its annual meetings take place at the same time as the conferences of the ILO. The intellectual outcome of his intensive activities in the labour world resulted in the publication of about twenty books, which he wrote in the 1960s and 70s. At the beginning of the 1960s, topics related to Islam also became part of his writings. He criticized the fully materialistic position held by the Marxists just as the Islamists' spiritualistic utopia and hence proposed an intermediate approach. In 2005, he published a trilogy about a new *fiqh* (jurisprudence) in Islam, which was very much criticized by the religious establishment of the Azhar and the Egyptian press. Nowadays, the Egyptian mainstream society often discusses but hardly accepts al-Banna's pleas for free smoking during the fasting month of Ramadan, the abolition of the *higab* (headscarf) and the possibility for women to lead the prayer.

Gamal al-Banna is leading the life of a completely independent freethinker who owns his private editorial. The following interview took place at his office, in one of Cairo's popular areas, on the 27th of May 2008.

In 1946 you wrote a book called "A New Democracy," which contains a chapter about the relation between democracy and religion. Is such a new democracy possible nowadays?

The paradox is that we now have a style of democracy, which is of poorer quality than the political organization of the 1940s, which I criticized in the book you just mentioned. In the 1940s, I asked for a new democracy. Although these years entered Egyptian history as the "liberal period", I wanted more. In my book, you can find a chapter about the new understanding of Islam. At the time it was published, the *Ikhwan al-Muslimin* (the Muslim Brothers) were on their apogee. I could hear their slogans from my house because I was living near their headquarters in Helmeiyya. They used to shout: "God is our aim!", "the Quran is our constitution!", "dying for God is the most honorable thing!" and so on. I told them not to have faith in these slogans but in the *insaan*, the humanity, because if these slogans remain distant from the concept of humanity, they will not make us go the right way but may lead us astray. It was a cry in the desert. The *Ikhwan* still have their old catch phrases and democracy nowadays is worse than it was in the 1940s. This is our paradox and tragedy.

You concentrated your work on the analyses of the working class movements and simultaneously on Islam. What is the relation between your two major subjects of interest?

All religions are made for the poor. This is very clear in Christianity and also in Islam. The poor were the first to believe in Islam. The tribes who followed Muhammed were the poorest of Mecca at a time when the powerful merchants were opposing Islam. From the very beginning a direct connection between the poor and religion could be found. Religion is a way to free the poor from their subjugation. The workers are usually the poor; this is why religion is directly linked to the working class.

You wrote three volumes on the new fiqh –the new jurisprudence– in Islam. Which is the importance of this new fiqh for progress in Egypt?

It is the very foundation of progress because what we want is to go directly to the Quran and not to mix our ideas with the ones our ancestors elaborated more than 1000 years ago. The theologians of al-Azhar, the *Ikhwan al-Muslimin* or Qaradawi⁶ are what we call *salafi*. That means that they go back to our ancestors. When you ask them about any matter they will answer you back: "Malik said this" or "Hanifa said that" and so on. They do not rely on

⁶ Yusuf al-Qaradawi, born in 1926, is a popular Egyptian Muslim scholar and TV-preacher.

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the Quran but on what this great *a'imma*⁷ said. These *a'imma* surely were true genius but they were also the sons of their ages. We are not bound to restrict our rules to what our ancestors said. As soon as we completely free our understanding of the Quran from ancient interpretations and do not let the Sunna⁸ restrict the Quran, we will progress. We do not at all have to accept a text within the Sunna which contradicts the Quran. For example, there is a *hadith* from al-Bukhari which states that anyone who changes his religion must be killed. This is nonsense. This completely contradicts about 100 verses in the Quran about the freedom of belief. This is the difference between our theories and the ones promoted by Azhar and all other contemporary Muslim thinkers in Egypt and in other countries.

What is your opinion about the historical-hermeneutical approach to the Quran made by Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid?

I think that Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid should have the freedom to speak out freely whatever he wishes to pronounce. The authorities should not interfere with what he has to say and did not have the right to forcefully divorce him from his wife. This is a shame. At the same time, however, it is entirely up to me whether to accept his idea or not. He - as a free-thinker - must have the right to make any statement. A thinker should even be given the freedom to deny the existence of God if he pleases. In the 1940s, one writer, Ismail Adham, wrote a book called "Why I am a *mullahed* (agnostic)". No one told the government to imprison this man or to take him to court. Another writer just answered with a book entitled "Why I am a Muslim" and this is how the discussion ended. This was in Egypt's free ages of the 1940s.

What do you think about the Ikhwan's latest political program, especially their exclusion of Christians and women from the presidency?

The *Ikhwan* should have nothing to do with politics. They do not understand the complexity of the modern age. They want to establish a state similar to the political organization in Medina more than 1400 years ago, the caliphate. This cannot be done at all. The real mission of the *Ikhwan* should be education. This was the program of Hassan al-Banna in the 1940s: to teach people how to be good Muslims in their daily lives, starting with the individual, moving on to the family and finally reaching the whole Nation. Everything was about teaching and learning, about building humankind. This was the original spirit of *Ikhwan al-Muslimin*. With this program, they succeeded. Nevertheless, if they entered politics, their first day would also be their last. You can see that all efforts establishing an Islamic State failed. The last of them was Hassan al-Turabi's attempt in Sudan. He was the cause of all these wars between the South and the North afterwards.

You published several papers in which you compare the three monotheistic religions. What is your opinion about inter-religious dialogue?

My latest publication on that topic carries the last sentence of a Quranic Verse as a title: "Say: we believe in that which has been revealed unto us and revealed unto you; our God and your God is One, and unto Him we surrender."⁹ This is a quote from the Quran.

⁷ *A'imma* is the plural of *imam* and means religious leaders or theologians.

⁸ The *Sunna* is the religious tradition of the actions and sayings of Prophet Muhammed. There are various collections, carrying more or less authority in different Muslim communities. It is important to underline that the Quran is believed to be the direct word of God, unchanged by human beings. The *Sunna*, nevertheless, has human sources.

⁹ The Spider Sura (Al-Ankaboot) (29:45).

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Interreligious dialogue is not a good way of treating religious matters, mainly because the religious institutions provide great obstacles, preventing good understanding. These institutions are like lawyers whose mission is the defence of their particular religion. This is because they are mere institutions and not the real religion itself. They have monopolized the defence of religion. Therefore, the dialogue with these institutions is not only difficult but has no meaning at all. If we speak about beliefs as such, we will go nowhere. The real treatment of this matter must happen among the freethinkers of all religions and should not be initiated by institutions such as the Church or al-Azhar. The institutions cannot compromise. Each of them deems its own particular religion the best. The mission of the Pope, for example, consists of Christianizing the whole world. Lately, he confirmed this on more than one occasion. So tell me: how can a dialogue with such a man be possible? Therefore, the dialogue among religious institutions is sure to fail. However, freethinkers who follow different religions and discuss the values of their faiths can reach an agreement. Values such as equality, freedom, abolition of torture, abolition of war and freedom of women and so on are clearly stated in all religions. All religions express a certain opinion on these values. It is therefore possible to agree about the common aims of religions but not about the different faiths.

Is the integration of Muslim societies in Europe fomenting this kind of dialogue now?

I think that most Muslim communities do not appreciate the freedom given to them in Europe. Freedom is a great merit and achievement of European civilization. It is stupid to think that it is a great shortcoming! I have lectured in most European countries and I saw only a few women attending. I therefore have concluded that European Muslims must be excluding their women from participating in European public life. People, who do this, do not understand Islam. I wrote about the Muslim minorities in European countries, on how they can continue practicing Islam while integrating into the European societies and on how they can assimilate their customs to the new environment. I proposed, for example, that if the Muslim woman wants to cover her hair, it is preferable for her to use a hat instead of the traditional *higab*.¹⁰ As for sexual relations: Islam does offer the concept of limited marriage, some kind of Islamic marriage but for a limited time, i.e. for 6 months or even only one. It is lawful. If the spouses are comfortable in their marriage, they can continue. If they do not come along with each other, they can separate in a friendly way and not through a divorce which involves a lot of money. Unfortunately, European Muslims do not accept this because they have taken their traditional way of thinking with them.

3. The Conceptualization of Progress and Reform – An Interview with Hassan Hanafi Hassanien

Hassan Hanafi Hassanien is a contemporary Muslim philosopher who studied in Egypt and France. He was born in Cairo in 1935 and obtained his BA in Philosophy at Cairo University in 1956. Afterwards, he continued his studies at the Sorbonne University in Paris where he received his PhD in 1966 for a thesis about the phenomenology of exegesis on the example of an existentialist exegesis of the New Testament. Since 1976, he has been secretary general of the Egyptian Society for Philosophy. In 1980, he started his work as a professor of Philosophy at Cairo University and eight years later, he became director of his department. In 1983, he accepted the vice presidency of the Arabic Society of Philosophy. In 2001, the Arabic Philosophical Society also nominated him their vice president. Despite his commitments as a representative of the above mentioned institutions, Professor Hanafi has never neglected his work as a researcher and lecturer. He was visiting professor at the Temple University in Philadelphia, USA (1971-1975), the University of Tokyo, Japan (1984-1985), the University of California in Los Angeles, USA (1995) and the University of Bremen, Ger-



¹⁰ The *higab* is the traditional female headscarf linked to religion.

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many (1998). His work about the methods of phenomenology, Islam and religious dialogue has been published in various ways: books, articles and conference summaries. On multiple occasions his theories were subject to criticism from within the religious establishment of the Al-Azhar University. Most recently he was attacked for comparing the possibility of choice within the Quranic text for each individual to the variety of goods offered by a supermarket. He brought this comparison forward on a seminar organized by the Alexandrian Library in October 2006. Among his critiques were Sheikh Abd al-Sabur Shahin¹¹ who discredited Hanafi's quotation as *abhorrent* and *Marxist* and Sheikh Mustafa al-Shaka, from Al-Azhar's Centre for Islamic Research, who emphasized the necessity of executing the sentenced apostate to his audience. In the case of Hanafi, however, he recommended a psychological treatment for "mental disorder".

The following interview was held on the 12th of May 2008, at Cairo University, at Professor Hanafi's department.

How do you define progress? Does a single concept of progress exist?

"Progress" is a word with a multiplicity of meanings. There is, for example, the European form of progress, which is strictly measured by its material side. This is one way of progress which has to be understood as a reaction to the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, progress can also be related to advances in the spiritual, moral and social field. This kind of progress was neglected in the European context in which even Rousseau criticized the total absence of advances in the field of human morals and ethics. He went as far as to conceive materialistic progress as a regression - the opposite of progress - because of its lack of improvement in spiritual matters. We can therefore conclude that the first question to be asked in order to get near the content of progress consists of wherein this progress is made. Secondly, we have to investigate whether or not progress needs a rupture with the past. The European progress most certainly implies a rupture with the past. It is impossible to draw a line in the history of scientific advances starting with Aristotle and Ptolemy. They cannot be taken together with the Church as sources for rational advances. The European conception of progress needs to be freed from the past. This is one form of progress. In other cultures there is no progress without a direct link to the past. Therefore and under these circumstances progress means a new phase of change - a new phase of a big flow. A progress freed from traditions is not possible. This is the reason why in the Arab-Muslim world we are torn between tradition and modernism, authenticity and modernity. It is important to combine both in order to implement advances. A third model is the Asian, Korean and Japanese model. It is neither identical with the ruptured European model nor with the Arab-Islamic model of continuity. It is based on the idea of juxtaposition. The future and the past can be put next to each other. The Asians therefore divide their life into two parts: their private life, where they practice their archaic traditions, and their public life, which they devote to science and technology.

Finally, each culture must be understood in its own temporal context. Most comparative studies about culture are committing the mistake of anachronism. Each culture has its own flow of history. For example, Europe is at the end of its Modernity while the Arab-Muslim world has just entered its Enlightenment.

¹¹ Sheikh Abd al-Sabur Shahin was also the main responsible for the Abu Nasr Zaid-apostasy-case as we will see.

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Do you find any similarities in Muhammad Abduh's theories and the reform initiated by Martin Luther?

I usually let my students compare the German and the Muslim reform theories. I myself have studied Luther's texts with much interest - especially the ones about Islam. Luther wanted to study Arabic in order to understand the Quran and Islamic tradition. He wanted to know why there was no Church in Islam and no mediation between men and God. Martin Luther stood for the freedom of Christians. In Islam the human being is free. This is also a thesis coming from the *mutazili*.¹² The human being must be free because without freedom there can be no personal responsibility.

Each reform movement has its own specific circumstances. The problem Martin Luther had to face was the mediation between men and God: the Church. He was anti-ecclesiastical. There is no doubt that Muhammad Abduh was against traditional Islamic exegesis but this problem was less severe because there has never been an official religious unfaultable authority in Islam. Everybody is free. Al-Azhar is a university and school but never occupied the same authority as the Church. This is the first difference. The second dissimilarity is that Martin Luther translated the bible from Latin to German. By doing so, he politically defended the autonomy of a German Nation. In Islam, religion and nationalism are the same. Muhammad Abduh and his master al-Afghani were among the founding fathers of the nationalist so called "pan-Islamic" movement in the Muslim world.

The third difference between the thoughts of Luther and Abduh is that Luther put forward a theory of blessing based on pure faith and not on the actions of the believer. In Islam, action and behaviour are part of the faith. The ones who do not act have no faith. The reason of faith is the action. In summary, one could say that Luther, on the one hand, proclaimed a faith without action and Abduh, on the other hand, actions without faith. From a political point of view, a governor *kufūr*¹³ who defends justice is therefore preferable to a Muslim tyrant. Final justice is the reference to be taken and not individual beliefs.

Who are the heirs of Muhammad Abduh's reformism in today's Egypt?

I am one of his disciples even in a physical way of speaking. One of his disciples, Mustafa Abd el-Razeq is the founder of the Department of Philosophy at Cairo University. I am a disciple of a disciple of Mustafa Abd el-Razeq who was a direct student of Muhammad Abduh. This is what I can tell about Muhammad Abduh's intellectual genealogy.

Regarding his theories, Abduh has underlined the importance of reason, nation, institution building and independence. His thoughts were also spread through the magazine *al-Manar* (the lighthouse), published by his disciple Rashid Rida. For me this is not enough. I would like to make the transition from reason to revolution as Marcuse did. I am deeply concerned with poverty and oppression. Without any doubt, reason is an important concept but scholars like Abduh, Taha Hussein, and so on have been analyzing it for a century now. I would like to reach an ideology through religion which can act as a foundation for social change. This intention made me publish a magazine called *The Islamic Left* 31 years ago. The question is how to combine Islamic tradition and modernity. Tradition here does not mean dogma but popular tradition - popular culture as Gramsci would say. On the other hand, there are the needs and crises of my times. I cannot separate one thing from the other. If I defend only the Muslim traditional side I turn into a religious fanatic and if I exclusively stick

¹² The *Mutazili* is a branch of Islamic philosophy. It was founded by the adepts of logic and rationalism in the 7th century.

¹³ *Kufūr* means heretic.

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to modernism I become a laic. I want to promote a Muslim left. I part from the Islamic tradition as a popular tradition and consider it a foundation for important socio-political expressions similar to the theories expressed by Ali Shariati in Iran and the ones brought forward by Sayyid Qutb in his book about *Islam and Social Justice*, before he was radicalized in prison and wrote his theories about *gahiliyya*.¹⁴ I want to promote a national dialogue among fractions. I defend unity and multiplicity: the unity of the target and multiplicity of intellectual reference systems. It is impossible to unify human thought. Everyone shall stick to his own reasoning but within a unified action -such as freedom, justice, equality or progress. If an Islamist wants to defend progress in the name of Islam, he shall do so. If a Marxist wants to fight for the same goal within another ideological framework, he shall do so. If a person wants to define progress because of his liberal beliefs, he shall also do so. In conclusion, I call for the multiplicity of the theoretical foundation of unified action. I am making the transition from pure reformism to a revolutionary reformism. My greatest goal is to pass on from reform to revolution.

Egypt has been the scenario of multiple apostasy charges against scholars who were practicing hermeneutical methods in their studies of religion -such as al-Khuli, Khalafallah and Nasr Abu Zaid who were all professors at Cairo University. Alain Roussillon¹⁵ therefore identified the bare import of modern technology combined with the total refusal of modern methods of thought as one of the main causes of Egypt's lack of progress. What is your opinion about the connection between thought and material progress?

Nothing can be done without free thinking, without the opinion and the counter-opinion and without a certain intellectual pluralism. We suffer from a monopolized opinion. We inherited a tradition which puts truth on a certain side. Tradition literally says that the *umma* (the Muslim Nation) has to be divided into 63 sects and that one of them is saved and the others are extinguished. This is the reason why nobody dares to look for an alternative and to criticize the dominant opinion. I have done so and I am therefore considered an atheist. Nasr Abu Zaid has done so and had to go to exile as a consequence. Amin al-Khuli has also done so and was expelled from university. I myself was expelled from university occasionally. We are like the young Hegelians, we are revolutionaries, intellectuals and idealists. In Egypt, unfortunately, everybody is used to dogmatism, *salafism* and the "right way". The dominant unilateralism is protected in order to maintain the *status quo*.

However, we do use hermeneutics continuously. Even Ibn Abu Talib¹⁶ did so when he said that the Quran was a mute book, a book which did not speak. The readers are the ones who give it a voice. This means that the hermeneutist, the interpreter, is the one who reads and understands the Quranic verses within his own time, space, and mind but the Quran itself does not speak. The Quran consists of words on paper but as soon as we read it, the words become alive in our minds. Due to the human condition - which gives each existence a concrete space and time - it is impossible to establish a general abstraction of the Quran. It is impossible to impose a general and abstract version of the Quran on situations as different as the one in Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Sudan and Egypt. The Quran has different missions in this world depending on each reader and his social circumstances. One could say that the reader is like a lamp, which shades colored light on the Quranic text and detects the words written in the same colour.

¹⁴ *Gahiliyya* is the pre-Islamic period of unbelief and disorder. Sayyid Qutb founded a new concept of *gahiliyya*, which can be used to religiously discredit a heretic form of society and government.

¹⁵ Alain Roussillon, *La pensée islamique contemporaine, acteurs et enjeux*, Tétraèdre, Paris, 2005.

¹⁶ Ibn Abu Talib was Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law.

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Jürgen Habermas in his book about Naturalism and Religion recognized a certain importance for religion within the construction of the ethics of the post-metaphysical society. He nevertheless stated that the veritable core of religion is unapproachable for reason. Which is for you the relation between religion and reason?

Habermas comes at the end of European Modernity after all sorts of rationalisms. Nowadays - most probably because of the rise of the neoconservatives - Europe is trying to recuperate a certain fideism, a bit of faith, which she had already criticized at the beginning of her Modern Times. A return to more archaic ways of knowledge can be observed in Europe already stipulated by Ernst Cassirer in his *Philosophy of Symbolical Forms*. I am not in the same position. I am suffering from our fideism. I am suffering from the domination of faith. I am suffering from the absence of reason. Therefore, I defend reason by giving it a nearly complete priority to faith. I cannot accept a dogma without it being rationally proven. This is the *mutazilite* position and also the one of Averroes - the great rational currents in Islam. The fundamentals of faith must be proven. Religion and philosophy are therefore the same. All philosophers have written texts in order to demonstrate that faith and reason are the two sides of the same coin. Platon even put the believer and philosopher at the head of his republic. In the Middle Ages, five rational proofs for the existence of God were found. Nevertheless, the question of Jesus being God's son cannot be undermined rationally, it depends on faith. Another example from Judaism is that the relationship between God and the people of Israel can be understood rationally. However, the reason why God has chosen this people in particular depends on faith only. Islam is a religion without mystery. Everything within the Muslim faith is based on reason. In my religion I can therefore refuse without hesitation whatever is not proven to me on a rational basis.

Your book on Religious Dialogues and Revolution is a comparison between hermeneutics of the three monotheistic religions. How would you define the method of inter-religious dialogue and which are its effects and advances?

I was in Paris during the last years of my PhD about hermeneutics of the New Testament when I was invited to Rome by Pope Paul VI in 1964, in order to participate in the elaboration of the paper about non-Christian religions for the Second Vatican Council. After the Council ended, we founded the Office for Non-Christians, the name of which was changed into *World Conference for Religion and Peace* (WCRP).¹⁷ You can see that I have been involved in this dialogue for a long time. However, I must say that there is a kind of dialogue, which I do not like. I am talking about the one which only consists of the shaking of hands and the politically correct statements about everybody being brothers. This is good for photography and diplomacy. Another type of dialogue which I refuse to participate in is the one on dogma - such as about the nature of Christ, the divine election of the people of Israel, the Quran being the direct word of God, the existence of angels etc. I want to promote a dialogue on the drama of human condition, about things which happen in reality, about poverty, for instance. Poverty and oppression do not distinguish between the religions. The dialogue I am ready to participate in is a practical one that focuses on the minimization of human suffering and the maximization of human well-being. It should be a dialogue on human nature. Identity must not be religious but human. Humanity is a value *per se*. This is an Islamic principle. Each individual will be judged according to his or her actions taken and not by his or her nationality, religion, or faith. Individuals will be judged depending on their actions! On various occasions the Quran mentions the faithful who act in a good manner. It is important to underline that the Quran talks about the faithful but does not specify which faith. It doesn't matter whether one believes in Jesus, Moses, the Nile, nature, energy or anything else... One's belief is measured by one's good actions. This is very universalistic. I

¹⁷ <http://www.wcrp.org>.

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would therefore like to promote a dialogue based on reason, reality, the evidence, and common interests. Unfortunately, nobody wants to participate in such a dialogue. Current dialogues are strictly confined to religion and its dogmas or widely expressed as general statements on fraternity based on mutual respect of each other's differences. This is pure hypocrisy.

4. The Individual Religious Contract - An Interview with Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid

Born in the small Egyptian village of Quhafa in 1943 the professor of literature, Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, reached international fame fifty years later. In May 1993, Abu Zaid applied for promotion to Ordinary Professor in the Arabic Language Section of Cairo University by submitting his publications (eleven articles and two books) to the evaluation committee. One of its members, Abd al-Sabur Shahin, professor of the Dar al-Ulum College and imam at the Amr Ibn al-As Mosque in Cairo, criticized Abu Zaid for insisting on the existence of multiple *mushaf* (written versions of the Quran) in the times of Prophet Muhammad. The same professor and imam also refused Abu Zaid's stipulation of a *human* part of the Quran.¹⁸ Abu Zaid had focused his research on the hermeneutical and historical interpretation of the Muslims' sacred book. He forwarded the possibility of the use of methods developed and used in the field of philology for the text interpretations of the Quran. In his biography, he therefore states: *I believe that in order to make sense of the Qur'an, we need to understand the text metaphorically rather than literally. I also believe that it is essential to interpret the text by taking into account the cultural context in which it was received.*¹⁹

On the 2nd of April 1993, Shahin went even further and declared Abu Zaid as an apostate during Friday prayer in his mosque. Apostasy in Islam - according to some *ahadith* - has to be punished by death.²⁰ Two months later, Muhammad Samida Abd al-Samad, a scholar of Islamic law, and six of his colleagues, deposited a demand for forced divorce of Abu Zaid and his wife to the First Instance Court in Giza as it is illegal for a Muslim woman to be married to a non-Muslim.²¹

In contradiction to the lawsuits against Abu Zaid, Cairo University meanwhile promoted him to the post of Ordinary Professor on the 14th of June 1995. Only two weeks later, the Appeals Court decided that Abu Zaid's texts were a clear proof of his apostasy and annulled his marriage. This ruling was also supported by Egypt's Supreme Court after the appellation presented by the officially divorced couple. Abu Zaid then became the target of the religious fanatics' hatred and since his life was jeopardized he decided to go into exile.

Abu Zaid continued his work as a professor at the University of Leiden, Netherlands. He currently holds the Ibn Rushd Chair of Humanism and Islam at the University for Humanistics in Utrecht while supervising MA and PhD students at the University of Leiden.

¹⁸ According to Abu Zaid, Shahin's hostility against him was most certainly due to the imam's relation with the al-Rayyan Islamic Investment Company, which was one of the money institutions that Abu Zaid had criticized in the introduction of his book *Critique of the Islamic Discourse (Naqt al-khitab ad-dini)*.

¹⁹ Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid and Esther R. Nelson, *Voice of an Exile, Reflections on Islam*, Westport, Connecticut and London, Praeger, 2004, pag. 4.

²⁰ This is the reason why a *fatwa* emitted by a known and respected imam, which proclaims somebody as an apostate, can be compared to excommunication by the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages: it forwards the religious authorization of the assassination of the person declared an apostate.

²¹ In Egypt, Family Law remains the domain of the religious courts. Abu Zaid was, therefore, brought to court by an Islamic judicial principle called *hisba* which allows every Muslim - directly involved or not - to bring to court whatever case stipulated as a crime against Islam. It has to be mentioned here, that in 2000 a law was passed which canceled the use of *hisba*. Unfortunately, nowadays courts do reject to recant the apostasy charges laid against scholars, writers and artists because the *hisba* rule no longer exists.

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In 2003, Abu Zaid returned to Egypt for the first time in order to celebrate his 60th birthday and began to pay more regular visits to his homeland during the following years. The following interview took place on one of these occasions, on the 5th of May 2008, when Professor Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid attended the seminar for the *Future of Higher Education in Egypt* organized for Cairo University's Centenary by the Faculty of Arts and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Egypt.

Which advances have been made in the field of the hermeneutics of the Quran and Islamic history in Egypt since your forced exile in 1995?

I can already perceive that some ideas have entered the official discourse. Nevertheless, they have not yet touched the theoretical framework. This is the reason why the method of putting the Quranic discourse into its historical context is not fully accepted. However, as soon as a practical issue concerning hermeneutics is raised by society, the position of the religious authorities is quite different. To give you an example: whenever the question about the position of the Copts within a hypothetical Egyptian Islamic State is raised, the general answer is that the Copts could not serve in the military within such a political framework. Then the fear of a possible reaction of the Coptic community develops into a fierce debate and the Azhar institutions are forced to forward a statement in order to ease the tensions. The official position of the mentioned religious authorities usually consists of declaring that the *jizya*, the traditional tax for non-Muslims living under an Islamic regime, was a historical institution. We are talking about an official Azhar statement! Also, you have to consider that this tax is explicitly mentioned in the Quran. Therefore, you are forced to acknowledge the fact that there are some Quranic rules which are historical. But the religious scholars are not able to take this conclusion to its end. This is also the reason why it is still extremely difficult only to pronounce the term "hermeneutics". Its Arabic equivalent would be *tafsir*, which is not very much appreciated. "Hermeneutics" - whether in Arabic or in English - is conceived as a foreign, as an alien concept.

Which are the basic schools of Muslim thought here in Egypt nowadays?

In Egypt, unfortunately, I am unable to see any. On the contrary, in Iran, Turkey and Indonesia dynamic discussions increased over the last years. They are concerned not only with specific practical issues, such as gender equality, human rights and so on, but delve even further into the position of the Quran and the status of the Sunna. These debates are – as far as I know - absent in Egypt. They are a taboo in the Egyptian media and whoever disregards the censorship which protects the religious *status quo* risks persecution and arrest. This is what happened to the Quranists. They were arrested because they said that Islam should be based on the Quran only. Lately, another persecution was made against the Baha'is.²² These examples clearly show how people who have a different opinion about Islam or a different religious vocation are persecuted.

²² The Baha'is are a Muslim sect derived from the Bab-movement in Iran at the end of the 19th century that adores their leaders as messianic figures.

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In relation to the Egyptian intellectuals who defend a different interpretation of Islam, what do you think about Gamal al-Banna's theories?

Gamal al-Banna is a very brave man. He is a true *mugtahid* in the traditional sense of *igti-had*. Although, I would not say that he goes very far with his theories because he responded to some of my ideas in a negative way. This is to say that he considers the position of the Quran as *verbatim*, the direct word of God, as a fact, which goes beyond the possibility of revision or reconsideration. So he does not touch this kind of reservations. Therefore, he is working on the same theological basis as all the other theologians. However, he has the courage to issue *fatwas*, which expose him to public attack such as his *fatwa* that allows boys and girls to kiss on the street and the one that religiously justifies smoking during Ramadan. I myself consider these trivial issues. But even to these trivial issues the public's reaction is very harsh. Even Qaradawi himself would be under attack due to the limitation of *igti-had* if he issued certain *fatwas* that were irregular.

What kind of changes in the religiosity of Egypt's mainstream society have you perceived over the last years?

What really frightens me in Egypt is not that people became more religious but that they grew more fanatical about their religion. Historically speaking, the Egyptian people were always religious. Religiosity used to be an open space which means that people went to the mosque or to the church. Egyptians have been well known for their religiosity but not for a kind of religious rigidity which allows an individual to judge other individuals if they don't frequent the mosque. What I can see now is an increased fanaticism which justifies a reciprocal control of religious behaviour. I can observe this very well in my village and this frightens me. Religiosity as such is not a problem, but the fanaticism which takes religion as something to be enforced on other people and justifies the direct judgment of the other for his or her personal behaviour, is to be feared. In my childhood, the people in my village were very religious. However, they did not get involved in everyone's personal way of life. They thought that God was the one to judge the people. Now, unfortunately, this attitude does not exist anymore within their religiosity.

How do you think does this growing fanaticism influence the relations between Muslims and Christians here in Egypt?

The Christians experienced a similar evolution in their religiosity as the Muslims and this frightens me. I really hope that I am exaggerating. Nowadays, the Egyptian Christians seek to be protected by their church and not by the state. This means that for the solution of any problem, they consult the church and the church interferes. When I see the church as the sole protector of the Christians, I do not feel comfortable as an Egyptian. In my articles I try to encourage the Copts to be a part of the state. Unfortunately, the policy dealing with Coptic issues has mistakenly encouraged their isolation and polarization. This is a progression which makes me feel concerned about Egypt's future. Finally we have to mention that if someone converts to Islam or to Christianity this should be neither the concern of the church nor the concern of the state. The individual should be free to decide on his or her religion.

Talking about individual freedom, what is your position within the debate about the freedom of expression in Europe, motivated by the reaction against the publishing of the caricatures made of Prophet Muhammad?

I think that Muslims - regardless of whether they live in the West or in the Muslim World - have to understand that the value of individual freedom is extremely important and that all of us should defend this value and the freedom of expression. This is the reason why we

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should respond to such an insult to our religious or traditional values in a civilized way rather than give proof to the claim of the comics. If the reaction is violent within Muslim societies, the very idea of the cartoon is transformed into a self-fulfilling prophecy. We should therefore rather take this as a challenge than a threat. Nothing of that will destroy Islam. To give you a historical example: thousands of books have been written against Muhammad, against Islam, against the Quran and another thousand books have been written against Jesus and against Christianity. However, this did not demolish the faith of the people in their religion. So let us respond in a civilized way! I think that Muslims in Europe have learnt their lesson after the well-known events of the Van Gogh case in Amsterdam in 2004. The Muslim community in Holland responded to Geert Wilders' announcement of his film naming the Quran a fascist book by going to court. This shows some progress in the way Muslims deal with this kind of situations in the West. Muslims in Europe started to realize that it is not in their interest to react violently. At the end we should engage in this kind of confrontation intellectually. Otherwise, we will give more force to the claim that Muslims generally are violent and unable to discuss in a civilized manner.

What do you think are the advances made by inter-religious dialogue?

I am not quite sure that it will take us any further to bring theologians together. The theologians on all sides are unable to go beyond their dogmas. The dogmas - *per definitionem* - are the walls between the faiths. There is no possibility of negotiation among the dogmas. In my opinion, the promotion of an honest debate among cultures in order to improve the critical mind of people about their own cultural and religious heritage would be more fruitful. As soon as we are able to criticize our own culture and to conduct a dialogue with "the other", who also learned to criticize his or her own culture, we can share a debate which does not exist until now. We have to discover this shared platform. Nevertheless, we cannot discover or uncover common ground if we simply stick to the dogma. The function of the dogmas is to hold up limitations. Pre-dogma in Islam, in Christianity and in Judaism can uncover the very vast common ground that religions share through the recognition of the faith of the people. We should therefore consider the relation between the people within a religious community and their God as a sort of a contract: this means that I have my own contract with God and you have your personal contract with God. Both are not identical but I have to respect your contract and you have to respect mine. The adoption of this principle would gradually lead to a concept of truth, which is not absolute. The dogma, on the contrary, claims absolute truth which implies that outside of this absolute truth is nothing, only *kufir* (unbelief) –so to say. In the Islamic tradition so far, theologians are unable to think historically. Some theologians in Christianity and in Judaism are able to do that. At the same time, the political discourse is hindering all theological discussions. Therefore, the lecture of the Pope in Germany one year ago was very shocking to me. A theologian, a scholar – he used to be a scholar before becoming pope – can not talk this kind of nonsense. He put forward Greek Philosophy and brought the proto-concept of *logos* into the context of Christian theology without mentioning that a very similar process took place in the history of Islam. This was shocking for me because he therefore forced me to think of him either as an ignorant or as a politicized subject. And either way he did not take care of his responsibility as the Head of the Catholic Church.

And within the same context, what is your opinion about Gilles Kepel's thesis on a "Revenge of God"?

I am familiar with his thesis and I consider his analysis correct up until his assumption of the failure of political Islam. I do not think that it failed. It failed within the political field as such. Nevertheless, the politicization of the religion on a social level was very successful. However it can not be considered as a "revenge of God." It is a revenge of the absence of freedom. I would interpret the situation as God being made hostage of political dictatorship

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and its official ideology. Therefore, we have to consider God and religion itself as victims abused by the political struggle. Under these circumstances, the majority of believers are left helpless. They are forced to support the official policy due to their concern about their personal safety. It is a game and a very dangerous one. This game is responsible for the growing fanatic religiosity. We do not experience the effects of "God's revenge" but the ones caused by the absence of political, religious and cultural freedom.

Do you think that literature – with its more hidden and indirect critique - can be a valuable actor for the promotion of political freedom in Egypt?

Yes, I think that literature and art are very important channels. This is also the reason why they are subject to constant political persecution. The Egyptian Parliament often holds long discussions on a painting, a poem, or a novel because the importance of art and its strength for the transmission of ideas is well known. Nevertheless, besides that channel, we need to have a revolution in education. Freedom of expression has to be reached. I appreciate very much the effort done by art and see it as very important but art alone will not be able to trigger the needed effect.

5. Conclusions

Concluding, we can point out that Gamal al-Banna, Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid and Hassan Hanafi Hassanien, in spite of their different positions, do share similar ideas about at least the following four matters: First, they explicitly oppose religious fanaticism and consider it a factor of regression, stagnation and latent violence. Second, they also reject the way political leaders abuse religion for the pursuit of specific interests mainly related to the maintenance of their personal power. Third, the three thinkers do highly appreciate the individual as well as public freedom achieved in Western societies. They all underline the suffering inflicted on people in societies where public freedom is not guaranteed. Their own personal experiences emphasise this point. Fourth, all three of them share the same doubts about the usefulness of inter-religious dialogue. After having participated in inter-religious matters, they all concluded that it is important for progressive thinking to set out a neutral platform where intellectuals can express their thoughts freely without direct supervision by any religious authority. Meetings among the official representatives of the three monotheistic religions do not seem to them more than mere diplomatic events without a direct impact on people's minds. What instead should be promoted in order to enhance unity and decrease conflicts is a space for cooperative work amongst independent intellectuals coming from different cultural and religious backgrounds in an atmosphere of freedom of expression.

Eliane Ettmueller studied Political, International and Religious Sciences in Geneva, Madrid and Cairo and is now writing her PhD in Islamic Science at the University of Heidelberg.