

# HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH TO THE QUR'AN

## A Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's Contribution to Quranic Studies

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### Abstract

*This paper discusses the contribution of a prolific author and an Egyptian scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and his hermeneutical approach to the Qur'an. The article argues that Abu Zayd is a Muslim reformer of the twentieth century through his takwil (hermeneutical concept). His hermeneutical concept is questioning the "an-nash (textual)" tradition of the Qur'an and the transformation of Arab culture from oral to text-oriented culture in the earliest history of the Qur'an. He differentiates between tanzīl (message sent to man) to takwil (interpretation of the message). This article further argues that Abu Zayd's hermeneutical concept should be understood from the history of revelation which speaks to a particular community and respond to a particular situation. Thus, the Qur'an itself is a living phenomenon and open for interpretation, rather than a closed corpus.*

*[Artikel ini mengkaji latar belakang kehidupan Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd dan metode hermeneutik yang ia gunakan untuk menafsirkan ayat-ayat Qur'an. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd termasuk di antara para ilmuwan Muslim yang produktif. Ia menulis lebih dari dua puluh sembilan karya sejak tahun 1964 hingga 1999, mulai dari artikel ilmiah dan buku. Produk pemikiran Nasr dipengaruhi oleh latar belakang pendidikan dan sisi religiusnya. Salah satu bahan kajian menarik tentang pemikiran Nasr adalah diskursus konseptual (an-Nash). Dalam sejarah Arab, teks memiliki posisi yang penting, terutama saat melihat perkembangan sastra dari pra-Islam sampai era Islam. Tradisi lisan sangat berakar pada zaman ini. Teks pada akhirnya diyakini memiliki pengaruh besar dalam pembentukan peradaban melalui pendekatan hermeneutik, yang dikembangkan oleh tokoh modernis seperti Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. Ia mengembangkan pendekatan dalam memahami Qur'an yang telah ditentang secara luas di antara Muslim. Karena ada perbedaan yang sangat mendasar antara hermeneutika di sisi lain, dan tafsir-takwil di sisi lain, sehingga dianggap tidak pantas digunakan untuk mempelajari Qur'an. Oleh karena itu, artikel ini akan membahas metode hermeneutik Qur'an Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd sebagai repertoar studi Islam.]*

**Keywords:** *Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, Hermeneutics, Qur'anic Text*

## Introduction

There are two subjects related to each other noticed in the hermeneutical work of the Qur'an, to understand the characteristic and the nature of the Qur'an and how to interpret it. First, the subject must be related to our view of the substance of the scriptures. Second, it must be related to what methodological steps are deemed appropriate and in accordance with the nature of the scriptures.<sup>1</sup>

Understanding the nature of the scriptures relies on a single dimension. it is included in a socio-cultural understanding as a sacred thing derived from a different realm. On the other hand, it manifests itself

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<sup>1</sup> Dwight Poggenmiller, 'Hermeneutics and Epistemology: Hirsch's Author Centered Meaning, Radical Historicism and Gadamer's 'Truth and Method'', *Global Journal of Classical Theology*, Vol. 1. No. 1, 1998, p. 1-5.

in material facts, using human means in its embodiment<sup>2</sup>. The scripture in the context of the Qur'an was the words of Allah sent down by the angel "Gabriel" to the Prophet Muhammad, then Prophet Muhammad communicated to his *ummah* (peoples).<sup>3</sup> Before revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, *Kalam* Allah (Allah's Word) could not be known how and what it looked like, because it had not yet materialized which could be captured by anyone when the delivery process took of the place. Only after the Prophet submitted to the Companions, the *Kalam* was tangible, first in the form of spoken language, then in writing. The *Kalam*, as we had received at this time had undergone a long transition process before being standardized by *Khalifah* Ustman ibn Affan who was famous for *Rasm 'Ustmani*.

There are two dimensions to see the Qur'an according to different frameworks. *First*, it is seen from the origin of its existence, God. *Second*, it is seen from the material fact which is a certain sound when recited and in the form of a series of letters in the written form. The former is theological, while the latter is linguistic or literary language as the result of culture. The theological difference of the Qur'an takes place in the past, and remains dominant even perhaps up to now is interrupted by the dominance of the theological presuppositions of the Qur'an appeared before the twentieth century, The gradually increasing sounds, a voice shouted aspects of the materiality of the word of God. These voices are starting to catch the attention of the present generation.

Some of hermeneutic Muslims like Fazlur Rahman with two ways of movement method explains the first motion is the flashback phenomena of the decline of the Qur'an, and the second movement from the time of the decline of the Qur'an to the present. Another figure, Farid Essack, with the acquitted methodology of Qur'an, wants the spirit of the Qur'an which influent in the southern of Africa at that

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Anne Weaver, 'Revolution by Stealth', *The New Yorker*, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Abu Ja'afar Muhammad ibn Jarir Al-Tabari, *Jami' Al-Bayan Fi Ta'wil Ayat Al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Dar al-Salam, 2005).

time shackled by the politics of Apharteid. The next figure is Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd whose thoughts will be discussed in this paper.<sup>4</sup>

Abu Zayd's thoughts on theology, specifically on the Qur'an have been cited in his works in both Arabic and English. The articles serve to address several thoughts of Abu Zayd which have caused controversy in the Muslim world and led to the verdict of his apostasy. Among Abu Zayd's thoughts which have stirred controversy on the Qur'an, including the theory of Qur'anic exegesis and several *fikih* issues such as polygamy and the *hijab* (veil).<sup>5</sup>

Setiawan states that Abu Zayd was the same generation as Amin al-Khullī<sup>6</sup>, who was a propagator of the *adabi* (literary) method in Qur'anic research. In addition, Mazlan et al., also argued that Abu Zayd was also said to be one of modern Muslim figures who regarded hermeneutics as part of the Islamic scholarly.<sup>7</sup> It was also claimed that utilizing the hermeneutics concept in the interpretation of the Qur'an was an imitation of the Muktazilah concept. Abu Zayd's involvement in hermeneutics began when he regarded the Qur'an as a textual entity that embodied the characteristics of Arabian culture and that it had been interpreted based on the realities of culture and society.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, Navid Kermani showed that Abu Zayd employed the hermeneutics methodology by justifying that the Qur'an needs to be interpreted through the present historical and cultural contexts. Abu Zayd claimed that Muslim scholars were erroneous when they perceive

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<sup>4</sup> George N. Sfeir, "Basic Freedoms in a Fractured Legal Culture: Egypt and the Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 52, No. 3, 1998, p. 14-402.

<sup>5</sup> Muhamamad Imara, *Al-Tafsir Al-Marxi Li Al-Islam* (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Nur Kholis Setiawan, *Al-Quran Kitab Sastra Terbesar* (Yogyakarta: eLSAQ Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Mazlan Abraham and Achmad Yaman, *Penyelenggaraan Tafsir Al-Qur'an: Kritikan Terhadap Buku 'Fiqih Lintasan Agama'* (Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Press, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Falsafat Al-Ta'wil: Dirasah Fi Ta'wil Al-Qur'an 'Inda Muhyi Al-Din Ibn Al-'Arabi* (Cairo: al-Markaz al-Saqafi al-'Arabi, 1998).

the Qur'an as merely a body of texts.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Abu Zayd proposed a new concept of interpretation of the Qur'an through the theory of hermeneutics. This theory had been caused grave controversy which led to the clash between conservative and liberal thoughts. This clash, according to Abu Zayd, had resulted in the competence of hermeneutics.

Thus, this article would identify the life of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, the background of hermeneutics of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, the hermeneutical method of Qur'anic textuality of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and humanist hermeneutics of the Qur'an.

### **A Short Biography of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd**

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was a Muslim intellectual who was not only known among contemporary Islamic Scholars in Indonesia but also in abroad like Europe and America. Because of his criticism, Abu Zayd was the category of rebel scholars. The author mentioned 'rebel' did not mean negative but named him as an Islamic scholar who had radical thinking and tended to be reformative towards Islamic thought.

Abu Zayd was born on July 1, 1943 in a village called Thantha, Capital of Al-Gharbiyah Province, Egypt. His parents named him with the hope that he would always bring victory over his opponents, considering his birth coincided with World War II. In 1952, Egypt was hit by a leadership crisis that gave birth to the July Revolution on July 26, 1952, as well as the transition of the status of the kingdom into a republic, from the hands of King Faruq to the hands of Jamal Abd Nasr. The World War II situation, the July Revolution, and the life of his family had shaped his personality into a critical, challenging, and responsible person. At the age of fourteen, after his father died in October 1957, he

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<sup>9</sup> Navid Kermani, "From Revelation to Interpretation: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the Literary Study of The Qur'an," *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an* (London: Oxford University Press & The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2004), p. 92-169.

became the focal point of his parents' hope to look after his entire family.<sup>10</sup>

In the history of his growth, it was noted that the movement of Ikhwan Al-Muslimin developed rapidly in the area where Abu Zayd grew up. In fact, Ikhwanul Muslimin branch in his village was one among the most active movements in Egypt. As other children in the area, Abu Zayd was very active in the movement of the Ikhwanul Muslimin and he left Ikhwanul Muslimin in 1964<sup>11</sup>. His personality was religious, just like any other children in Egypt. At the age of 8 years, he had already memorized the Qur'an in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (Elementary School), with the hope of continuing to next step. However, the intention to continue his study at college was hampered by the wishes of his father who wanted him to continue to vocational high school of technology so he could get a job quickly. In 1960, he had obtained his engineering diploma degree in 1961. He got a job as a technician in the transportation department. His desire to go to high school was still passionate until finally he passed the final exam equation. In 1968, he continued his studies to the Faculty of Adab, Department of Arabic, Cairo University. In 1972, he graduated with Cumlaude and he was appointed as a non-permanent lecturer at his almamater. From that moment, his character was shifted from the technician in 1961-1972 to academics. According to his confession, his analytical and critical power grew when he attended college.<sup>12</sup>

There were several studies on Abu Zayd with the focus of his research after the 1995 tragedy that gave him reckless conclusions, such as the apostasy, secular, atheism, and various other symbols shown to him. Abu Zayd's case started from within university environment, when he proposed scientific works for promotion as a professor. After observing

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<sup>10</sup> Fauzi M. Najjar, "Islamic Fundamentalism and The Intellectuals; The Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2000, p. 177-200.

<sup>11</sup> J. Thielmann, *Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd Und Die Wiedererfundene Hisba: Sari'a Und Qanun Im Heutigen Agypten* (Germany: Ergon, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> Georges Tamer, "Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1, 2011, p. 95-193.

his work, one of the members of the scientific research team, Abd Al-Shabur Syahrin, who was also a lecturer, convicted that Abu Zayd's views were incompatible with the teachings of Islam and called Abu Zayd an *murtad* (apostate). The controversy of Abu Zayd was not only heated in the university's world, but also outside the university. Some lawyers, who were sympathetic to the fundamentalist group, carried a divorce suit from both Abu Zayd and his wife, without his own consent or wish. They suggested that the marriage of an *murtad* to a Muslim woman was invalid, and begged the court to divorce his marriage. Something was worse when Abu Zayd had no legal protection from the state, he went to the Netherlands to seek legal protection. The country of the windmill agreed, as long as Abu Zayd served and devoted his scholarship to the field of Academics.<sup>13</sup>

### Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and His Quranic Hermeneutics

On one occasion, Abu Zayd claimed he had felt the revolution of thought at a relatively young age. He was interested very much in reading things that were contrary to the lessons in his school. In adolescence, Abu Zayd preferred to read French literary works which had been translated by several figures in the literary world, so he held the idea that literature could be the first gate capable of enlightening human thought. Enlightenment of his knowledge was increasing as Abu Zayd attended Cairo University of Egypt.

Abu Zayd had the breadth of insight, intelligence, and courage in suing Islamic thought that was considered established, and then he proposed reforms. Although insulted, Abu Zayd remained consistent in his stance. He once said "I remain consistent with the results of my researches until I find arguments that can prove that the results are false."<sup>14</sup>

"The Qur'an is a religious work, a guide book", as Abduh said. But how can we reach that clue? How should we understand the text, so that

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Muhamamad Imara, *Al-Tafsir Al-Marxi...*

the clue can be achieved? We must interpret it. The Qur'an is a message of God which has Arabic code and channels. To hack the code used, I need more text analysis than philologist. This analysis is placed the Qur'an as a structured text. Therefore, the Qur'an is not included in the text of poetry, on the contrary, it is a religious text which has many functions.<sup>15</sup>

It is able to be said that Abu Zayd had a deep concern in the field of hermeneutics in Islam. Almost all of his works were directed to provide new alternatives for reading or interpreting Islamic texts. Based on what the authors explain at the beginning of the introduction, the Qur'an has two dimensions, first is the theological dimension, and the second is the linguistic dimension. The meaning of the theological dimension in the Qur'an will be the product of absolute nature. However, the Qur'an with the linguistic dimension will be relative, since the meanings derived from the linguistic fact derive from the interrelationship between the fact structure and the person who defines the structure, by the interpreter with all the backgrounds that accompany him/her. Thus, in generating meaning, the interpreter tends to seek other possibilities according to the mechanism of the textual relationship with the mechanism outside the text. So by treating it like a text, the Qur'an will always change according to its relation to the outside world. Therefore, the Hermeneutics of the Qur'an became the central point of scientific attention of Nasr Hamid.

### *The Role of Western Hermeneutics and it's Character*

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd is now a professor of Islamic studies at the University of Leiden, Netherland. Now, he is more actively working as professor at Utrechth University for Humanities, and also becomes a coache students who are writing dissertations on interpretation in Islam at several universities in Europe, such as Germany, France, etc. With conditions far from Egypt at the time, Abu Zayd feels comfort in Europe

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<sup>15</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Naqd Al-Khitbab Ad-Diniy* (Egypt: Sina li al-Nashr, 1994); Charles Hirschkind, 'Heresy or Hermeneutics: The Case of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd', *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1998.



because his thoughts is still continued to grow. So, Abu Zayd is closing to study western hermeneutics.<sup>16</sup>

As one of the contemporary Islamic intellectuals, Abu Zayd is not dazzled by Erkenntnis theories progress in knowledge of the West. However, Abu Zayd was also equipped with literary science from Cairo, he was included in a series of Arab scholars who is aware of the wealth of *khazanah turats* (culture from the past whose impact is still felt today) that can be a spirit of renewal and critical thinking.

Abu Zayd is very familiar with several hermeneutical theories, such as the facticity hermeneutics of Heidegger, philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, hermeneutic circle of Schleiermacher, and Emilio Betti with hermeneutic placement as a method of the humanities sciences. His intimacy is encouraged him to look back at the *al-turâts al-qadîm* (classical heritage) with the intent of seeing critical elements in the philosophical thinking of language and literature. So in his hermeneutics thinking, the dimensions of language, literature and culture become a methodology of Abu Zayd's hermeneutical concept.

#### *Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's Hermeneutics Epistemology*

Following Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Abu Zayd said that religious texts are language texts whose position is the same as other texts in human culture. Therefore, studying the Qur'an does not require any special method because creating a special method is the same as preventing humans to understand religious texts independently.<sup>17</sup>

Abu Zayd borrowed Gadamer's dialectical hermeneutics aimed at the study of the Qur'anic text. In it, he is attempted to re-read with the principles of the search for historical meanings and the meaning of structures, the dialogue various necessary requirements both the existing and the left behind when discussing various religious issues ranging from linguistic and methodological issues of the study of the Qur'an. He also

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Naqd Al-Khithab Ad-Diniy...*

borrowed another hermeneutics idea of Paul Ricoeur. From Ricoeur, Abu Zayd discusses the objective interpretation. He creates the Ricoeur in used for helping him to link the importance of methods in addition to the importance of language, in which language is placed as an essential part of hermeneutic conception including Gadamer's hermeneutics. Ricoeur's hermeneutics helps him to emphasize the importance of the method. In the disclosure of the system of meaning of Abu Zayd, he referred to other system scholars such as Levi Strauss. Strauss explained that meaning is not a fundamental phenomenon because meaning always shifts, unlike a system of meaning is stable. The stability of the meaning of the system of meaning or the structure of the language or sign is what enables researchers, and outside researchers, to understand or interpret foreign objects.<sup>18</sup>

In Abu Zayd, understanding of signs is in accordance with the understanding of meaning. It consists of two parts, historical meanings and fixed meanings. Historical meanings are related to the theological stimulus of society, social conditions, politics, economy and morality. While the meaning remains related to the structure and system of meaning contained by the sign. He argues that the text has two meanings, namely the general meaning and the specific meaning. The general meaning is the meaning of something that can be renewed with various readings. The specific meaning is an indication of meaning directly perceived through the historical and cultural realities that exist in producing the text.<sup>19</sup>

### *The Concept of Revelation and Text of the Qur'an*

Islam views that God has established the immortality of the Qur'an both in terms of *lafaz*, organization, as well as guidance so that the basic values of *akidah* and sharia are eternal. That is the principle held in Islam about the eternity of the Qur'an, there is no historicity in it, both in

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<sup>18</sup> Killian Balz, "Submitting Faith to Judicial Scrutiny through the Family Trial: The "Abu Zayd Case", *Die Welt Des Islams*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 1997, p. 55-135.

<sup>19</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Al-Tafkir Fi Zaman Al-Takfir* (Cairo: al-Markaz al-Saqafi al-'Arabi, 1998).

terms of law and its meanings.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, Abu Zaid departs from the historicity of religious texts when talking about the Qur'an. He also denies all possible eternal meanings, or denies every eternity to every meaning and guidance of the Qur'an. Abu Zayd wants to fold the meanings of the Qur'an that the *lafaz* have been shown. Then he also states that the Qur'an is a historical discourse and no contain in which a transcendent meaning that is fixed and substantial. Thus, no substantial elements are remained in the text, for every reading in the historical-sociological sense has own substance exposed in the text.<sup>21</sup>

Abu Zayd used a theory to interpret the Qur'an, as he wrote in his book *Iskaliyyat al-Qira'ah wa Aliyat at-takwil* (*The Problematic of Text Interpretation and Mechanism of Hermeneutics*): "We must accept, as Louis Althusser stated, that none of the readings was objective (all of subjective, depending on the reader of each)." In this way, Abu Zayd consciously tried to divert the essence of meaning which had original clues in the Qur'an in order to immediately develop and progressive according to the spirit of the times. He also cited that a concept from David Hirsch who successfully applied it in literary studies to the concept of productive hermeneutics by Hans-Georg Gadamer.<sup>22</sup>

Under the influence of Western hermeneutic theory, philosophy and epistemology, Abu Zayd examined the essence of the concept of the text which was a fundamental problem in the hermeneutic system because God's revelation had come down with the medium of human language, otherwise it would have been incomprehensible to man.<sup>23</sup> The first, it is caused of making Islamic thought lags behind and ceases from historical circulation, according to Abu Zayd, was due to the theological problem. He explained clearly that the Qur'an was the saying

<sup>20</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Falsafat Al-Ta'wil*...

<sup>21</sup> Sudarto Murtaufiq, "Hermeneutika Al-Qur'an: Kritik atas Pemikiran Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," *Jurnal Akademika*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Al-Mar'ah Fi Khitab Al-Az'mah* (Cairo: al-Markaz al-Saqafi al-'Arabi, 1995).

of Muhammad narrated that he was a Divine Revelation (*Wahyu Illahi*). According to him, the words of God also needed to adapt in the human scope (humanization), because when God wanted to talk to the humans, then He had to speak through human languages.<sup>24</sup> Otherwise, man would not understand what God's wills were. This led to the conclusion of the Qur'an as human-speaking.<sup>25</sup>

The Qur'an was not defined as the Word of God (*Kalamullah*) maintained in *Laubul Mahfuz* in Arabic script. In his book *Mafhum al-Nass*, he stated that the Qur'an was a literary text (*nash lughawi*) which was closely related to a particular culture or racial context, ie, an Arab society.<sup>26</sup> But Muslims emphasized more in divining the dimension, which according to him, it was one of the factors that contributed to the stagnation and rigidity of Islamic thought. He added that the Qur'an was actually "Muhammad reported what he affirmed was the Word of God."

Abu Zayd argued that the Qur'an had human characteristics, because Allah wanted to convey His guidance to mankind. If God communicated in the divine language, the man had not been able to understand his guidance. As the result, according to Abu Zayd, the Qur'an was a human language; the change of the divine text into the human text had taken a place since the first revelation to the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>27</sup>

Abu Zayd states that: "The text, since first revealed and read by the Prophet, has changed from the divine text to the human text, from being *tanzil* (message sent to human) to *takwil* (an interpretation of the message). Muhammad's text understanding shows the early stages of

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<sup>24</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Mafhum Al-Nass: Dirasab Fi 'Ulum Al-Qur'an* (Cairo: al-Markaz al-Saqafi al-'Arabi, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, 'Inquisition Trial in Egypt', *Recht van de Islam*, Vol. 15, 1998, p. 47-55.

<sup>26</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Naqd Al-Khithab Ad-Diniy...*

<sup>27</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Dawair Al-Khanf: Dirasab Fi Khitab Al-Mar'ab* (Cairo: al-Markaz al-Saqafi al-'Arabi, 1999).

interaction between the text and the human mind.<sup>28</sup> Abu Zayd states that the divine text has been transformed into a human text since first coming down to Prophet Muhammad. Because of the text, since the first coming down and read by him, when the process of revelation, it has changed from the divine text to the human text.<sup>29</sup> In addition, Abu Zayd concludes that the Prophet's understanding of the Qur'an was the first phase movement of the text in its interaction with the human mind. The text of the Qur'an is formed in the cultural reality more than 20 years, and therefore the Qur'an is a cultural product because it was central and hegemonic text which was the reference of other texts.<sup>30</sup>

Abu Zayd also assumes the Qur'an is a language text because it sees reality and culture attached to human language. Reality, culture and language are historical phenomena, and each had its own special condition. For these reasons, he argues, the Qur'an is also a historical text. The historicity of texts, reality, culture, and language shows without the slightest doubt that the Qur'an is a human text. In fact, the Qur'anic text always has a dialectical relationship with the Arab society in the revelation, is a tangible thing that implies indirectly. The text of the Qur'an is shaped by the reality of Arab civilization on the one side, but on the other side Qur'anic texts also play a role in the overhaul of civilization through messages or concepts offered from the Qur'an self.<sup>31</sup> So both process are interrelated, cannot be separated. Because of this process, Abu Zayd says that the Qur'an is a cultural product. The basic idea assumes that the inspiration of the Qur'an is God. Nevertheless, it enters the universal reality, the revelation is stretched and manifested by

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<sup>28</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Al-Khitab Wa Al-Ta'wil* (Cairo: al-Markaz al-Saqafi al-'Arabi, 2000).

<sup>29</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *The Quran: God and Man in Communication* (Leiden: Inaugural Lecture, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and R. Nelson Esther, *Voice of an Exile: Reflections on Islam* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Adian Husaini and Abd al-Rahman Al-Baghdati, *Hermeneutika & Tafsir Al-Quran* (Jakarta: Gema Insani, 2007).

cultural intervention with the frame of the language system<sup>32</sup>

Abu Zayd's statement, draws much criticism from his opponents, actually represents the cognitive side of the Qur'anic meaning which can be traced through the semiotic paradigm. The text can be regarded a fiction or oral discourse institutionalization. While the discourse in this case is the activity of sharing opinions or thoughts, the sense of discourse is medium for the dialogue process between various individuals to enrich insight and thoughts in order to find the truth<sup>33</sup>

Abu Zayd has blamed the interpreters of Islamic scholars against the Qur'an for putting forward the metaphysical side to defeat the scientific and objective side to study the Qur'an. Abu Zayd states that faith in the metaphysical being of the Qur'an will hinder a scientific understanding of the Qur'anic text phenomenon.<sup>34</sup> By assuming a human text, like the texts generally, he hopes that the study of the Qur'an can be enjoyed by anyone: Muslims, Christians, or even atheists.

### *Tafsir, Takwil and Talwin*

According to Nasr Hamid, interpretation is another face of the text. The text of the Qur'an has been subject of interpretation since the time of its revelation, and the Prophet Muhammad is the first interpreter. Abu Zayd means more to clarify and the reading is more outward. Abu Zayd emphasizes the concept of *takwil* from the *tafsir*, while the later readings he often uses in the word *takwil*. He further argues that in *takwil*, the role of a reader in understanding and capturing the meaning of texts is more significant than the interpretation. Therefore, the reader must have the consciousness to avoid the submission of the text to his

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<sup>32</sup> Carool Kersten, "Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943-2010)," July, 6th, 2010, <http://caroolkersten.blogspot.co.id/2010/07/nasr-hamid-abu-zayd-1943-2010.html>, accessed 20 April 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Komaruddin Hidayat, *Memahami Bahasa Agama: Sebuah Kajian Hermeneutik* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and R. Nelson Esther, *Voice of an Exile...*

subjective ideological tendencies.<sup>35</sup>

Interpretation, tends to a certain ideological or subjectivity, is referred to *tahwin*. The *takwil*, according to Abu Zayd, is a productive reading based on the epistemological principle of objectivity, while *tahwin* is the ideological-subjective-tendentious reading of the text but Abu Zayd admits that there is no clean reading because no knowledge departs from a vacuum, and the reader is always limited by the horizon of his own readers. However, it also does not mean that readers are introduced to impose their pragmatic ideological interests on the meaning and significance of the text.<sup>36</sup>

### *Meaning and Significance*

Meaning is what replaced by text, while significance is what appears in the relationship between meaning and reader. The meaning in the religious side has three levels: *first*, the initial meaning which is a historical witness, which cannot be searched for interpretation and its significance. *Second*, meaning that can be interpreted using a metaphor. *Third*, meaning that can be expanded on the basis of searching for significance and meaning. The quest for significance opens the reader to uncover the socio-cultural context of the creative process meaning production so that the meaning of the text can continue to evolve.<sup>37</sup>

In the third point, it must be obtained objectively so that the significance can be derived from it more validly. However, significance should not impair meaning. Meanings are based on the text, while significance is based on the reader and the reading process. Significance provides a space for the subjectivity of the reader directed by the objective meaning. The differentiation of the meaning level which Abu Zayd means, on the other hand, it also means that the meaning of a message does not

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<sup>35</sup> Moch. Nur Ikhwan, *Meretas Kesarjanaan Kritis Al-Quran: Teori Hermeneutika Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd* (Jakarta: Teraju, 2003).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Hilman Latif, *Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd: Kritik Teks Keagamaan* (Yogyakarta: eLSAQ, 2003).

necessarily require the withdrawal of a significance, as in the first point of meaning, this is only one of the three points meaning.<sup>38</sup>

### *Humanist Hermeneutics*

After Abu Zayd felt it was necessary to continue his dialectical hermeneutic approaching further in the vertical dimension where the Qur'an was treated as a place of communication between God and man to focus in the horizontal dimension of the Qur'an learning as the experience of spreading messages through the interpretive corpus. Abu Zayd interpreted the horizontal dimension as what contained in the structure of the Qur'an and manifested during the communication process between the Qur'an and its readers. This vertical dimension is the textual dimension of the Qur'an, while the horizontal dimension is the dimension of Qur'an discourse. It is a vibrant and dynamic area, referring initially to the process of revelation known as the Qur'an phenomenon, the discourse to speak. The Qur'anic discourse manifested itself in the context of daily life, so not only didn't speak Arabic where it was revealed, but also affected the recipient's thinking and culture.

As Abu Zayd wrote "the Qur'an in daily life." The Qur'an is so influence in the daily life of Muslims. Abu Zayd traced that influence in the implementation of the pillars of Islam, the culture of Muslim philanthropy, the concern of Muslims towards orphans, about food and drink, etc. Abu Zayd concludes that at the language level, the elements shape thought and society, whether through material language media, or audio visual, either through the form of reading or writing art craft.<sup>39</sup>

Abu Zayd had a goal by bringing back the historical moment of transformative, from non-Muslim society to Muslim society. Abu Zayd saw that efforts to bring back the living phenomenon, the Qur'an as a discourse, although realized by the previous scholars, it had never been

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<sup>38</sup> Eric Donald Hirsch, Jr, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978).

<sup>39</sup> Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Encyclopedia of the Qur'an* (Leiden, 2002).



able to be presented by the scholars. The hermeneutics of the Qur'an are understood in the context of the religious diversity experience as part of a diversity of humanity. Qur'an as a discourse, it necessitates the linking of meaning between the meaning of Qur'an with the meaning of life, where it's considered as the result of dialogue, debate, development, acceptance and rejection.<sup>40</sup>

After giving understanding, Abu Zayd discussed the basis of his humanist hermeneutical constructions, namely discourse versus manuscripts, reconstructions and manipulation of texts. Then, he made the nine characteristics explain the dimensions of the Qur'an as a discourse: polyphonic, dialogue, negotiation, sharia deconstruction, the context of the challenge of modernity, the rethought of traditions, the rethinking of consensus, the rethought of the *Sunnah*, and the rethought of the Qur'an. The whole explanation ranging from understanding, basic construction to hermeneutical characteristic dimensions is an attempt to provide new readings or new offers. As Abu Zayd understood the Qur'an as a discourse from the internal side and not the external side, it means that the Qur'an discourses various issues of human life, from origin, to the world and the way back to them.<sup>41</sup>

The construction of the Qur'an as a discourse is contrast between the Qur'an and the *mushaf*. The first occurs in the event of meaning between Muawiyah and Ali bin Abi Talib. At the time of Ali's reign and the revolt carried out by Muawiyah, Muawiyah proposed a solution that the Qur'an was a mediator in the war, so Ali agreed and the power was taken over by Muawiyah. After being mediated by Amru bin As, Ali's choice had enormous implications it gave space not only to reinterpret but also to manipulate the Qur'an for political purposes. This incident, in other words, affirms the importance of aligning the Qur'an as a living phenomenon to

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<sup>40</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Hermeneutika Inklusif* (Jakarta: ICIP, 2004).

<sup>41</sup> Kusmana, "Hermeneutika Humanistik, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," *Jurnal Kanak*, *Philosophia Sadra*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2012.

avoid manipulation, such as politics, in the event of the arbitration.<sup>42</sup>

In this humanist interpretation, Abu Zayd chose Sufistic interpretation and philosophy because it more opens the possibility of Qur'an meaning and it is in accordance with the principle of Qur'an as a discourse. Compared to a theological or juridical approach, because Abu Zayd's view from the existing history can have implications for close meaning to be explored. After basing the hermeneutical construction on the life dimensions and the openness meaning of Qur'an, Abu Zayd explained the nine dimensions of the Qur'an as a discourse.

*First*, the meaning of the Qur'an is polyphonic, containing many voices represented in direct form as Allah says. This diversity, according to Abu Zayd, is the *fitrah* of Allah. He has a dialogue with humans according to the context conversation. This is certainly meant to strengthen the arrival of the message and also the power to answer the problems of mankind.<sup>43</sup>

*Second*, the discourse of the Qur'an takes the strategy of dialogue. Abu Zayd identified the "katakana" narrative model in which the structure can be "they say" or "you say". But, he limited only three models of dialogue in the Qur'an; dialogue with unbelievers, dialogue with them from Jews and Christians, and dialogue with people because the character of his dialogue has the difference between the three. Examples of non-believers dialogue are firm, to Jews and Christians tended to questions and answers. Perhaps with the study of such a discourse will lead to diversity and harmony in social life and something good.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Rethinking the Quran: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics*, 2004; Ismail ibn 'Umar Ibn Katsir, *Tafsir Al-Quran Al-'Azim* (Cairo: al-Faroq al-Hadisah li al'Tibaah wa al-Nash, 2000).

<sup>43</sup> Maurits S Berger, 'Apostasy and Public Policy in Contemporary Egypt: An Evaluation of Recent Cases from Egypt Highest Courts', *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 25, 2003, p. 720–40.

<sup>44</sup> Carool Kersten, "Islam, Cultural Hybridity and Cosmopolitanism: New Muslim Intellectuals on Globalization," *Journal of International and Global Studies*, Vol. 11, 2010, p. 89–113.

*Third*, in conveying the message Qur'an discourses message according to the reality of the object of its appeal, ranging from areas that can be negotiated and cannot be negotiated. The example case is where the equality of rights between Muslims, Christians and Jews in Medina promoted at the time after the emigration of the Prophet and the Companions.<sup>45</sup>

*Fourth*, in the deconstruction of sharia, is very difficult to raise the significance and relevance of the Qur'an in the building of sharia implementation of four sources namely *fikih*, the Qur'an and *Sunnah*, *ijma*, and *ijtihad*. But they had not yet entered the discourse of the Qur'an, they still in the context of the Qur'anic textuality. The current legal reflection must already lead to respect for the human body and the right to life, gender or equalitarian awareness, respect for minorities in better law paying. By itself, following the discourse of the Qur'an begins in its revelation, the spirit of the Qur'an will certainly lead to improve the implementation of the punishment with these honors.<sup>46</sup>

*Fifth*, the challenge of modernity. Abu Zayd identifies that the challenge of modernity is complex and confusing. This challenge we must admit coming from the West where he classified in three parts, first the challenge of high scientific and technological discovery, the question of rationality and rationalism, and the political challenge that many Muslims were colonized. But questioning the nature of the Qur'an in this context according to Abu Zayd has never been seriously done by Islamic scholars, despite the urgent need.<sup>47</sup>

*Sixth*, it is necessary to rethink the tradition. In order to offer the Qur'an as a discourse, he considered that it is necessary to rethink the *Sunnah* in the construction of the scientific epistemology, in which the *Sunnah* becomes the second guides after the Qur'an. Rethinking is directed

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<sup>45</sup> Sallah Abd al-Fattah Al-Khalidi, *Ta'rif Al-Darisin Bi Manabij Al-Mufasssirin* (Damascus: Dar al-Qalam, 2010).

<sup>46</sup> Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Rethinking the Quran...*

<sup>47</sup> Muhammad Nur Kholis Setiawan, *Al-Quran Kitab Sastra...*

to reverse the process of other science marginalization than sharia such as philosophy, sufism, theology etc., whose impact is still felt until now after decided for the first time, since the twelfth century.<sup>48</sup>

*Seventh* is rethinking the *ijtihad* in the sense of criticizing the old consensus and opening up opportunities for new Muslim scholars to do *ijtihad* in responding the challenges of the times. We have to open the door for *ijtihad* to search for new answers.<sup>49</sup>

*Eighth* is rethinking the *Sunnah* and criticism of the *hadis* as a sign of new interpretive effort emergence because modern scholars' efforts to make new interpretations in order to get relevant answers in modernity.<sup>50</sup>

*Ninth* is rethinking the Qur'an. Abu Zayd here identifies Muslim modernist effort in the interpretation of the Qur'an. He groups them into three trends of Qur'anic interpretation: the interpretation with Islam framework and the science conducted by Ahmad Khan in India led to the emergence of the characteristics of knowledge Islamization, the interpretation of Islam and the rationalism imposed by Muhammad Abduh encouraged the birth using literary approach and social approach, and the interpretation of Islam and politics by Maududi encouraging the interpretation of politics and ideology in a modern context.<sup>51</sup>

After explaining the basis and characteristics of the Qur'an study as a discourse, Abu Zayd concludes that the Qur'an is an alive phenomenon. Because Qur'an hermeneutics are humanistic, it must consider aspects of the Qur'an as an alive phenomenon. The Qur'an cannot be treated as text only, because the message of the Qur'an is delivered in the context of the human cultural struggle during the descent of revelation from the start

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<sup>48</sup> Nur Zainatul Nadra Zainol, "Poligami Menurut Pandangan Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd," *The World Conference on Islamic Thought* (Perak: Kolej Universiti Islam Sultan Azlan Shah, 2012).

<sup>49</sup> Augustus Richard Norton, "Activism and Reform in Islam," *Current History*, 101.658, 2002, p. 377–81, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/200753766?accountid=17242>.

<sup>50</sup> Sallah Abd al-Fattah Al-Khalidi, *Ta'rif Al-Darisin Bi Manahij*...

<sup>51</sup> Abd al-Sabur Shahin, *Qissat Abi Zayd Wa Inhisar Al-'Almaniyya* (Cairo: Dar al-Ictisam, 1995).

of the dialogue process, debate, development, acceptance to rejection. The whole is a discourse of Qur'an recorded in Qur'an own structure and not outside. Taking into account the aspect of its phenomenon, interpreters are required to present the message of the Qur'an closest to human nature as God's creation.<sup>52</sup>

In humanistic hermeneutics, Abu Zayd tried to add some considerations. He considered Gadamer's dialogical hermeneutics and Ricoeur's of subjectivity-objectivity with a semiotic tendency and a literary approach in treating the Qur'an as a discourse. This is in accordance with Ali Harb's criticism and suggestion about the Qur'an as a discourse. He states that the structure of the Qur'an is a discourse recorded or used as God's strategy in conveying a universal message. Characteristic of a dialogical Qur'anic structure, arguing, developing, accepting and rejecting, the Qur'an, in the view of Abu Zayd, makes use of the discourse that existed before and the revelation came down as a matter of conveying the message to humans. Because only with the discourse that becomes their consciousness, the message will be accepted.

## Conclusion

Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was one of the twentieth century Muslim reformer who offers a radical interpretation to the history of the Qur'an. Through his hermeneutical concepts of *takwil* and *tanzil*, he calls for reformation in Islamic thoughts through examining Quranic verses. For Abu Zayd, the Qur'an is a divine text had been transformed into human text since it first came down to Prophet Muhammad and was later interpreted by Muslims. The Quranic text itself is subject of interpretation since its earliest revelation. In so doing, he distinguished the concept of *tanzil* (message sent to man) to *takwil* (interpretation of the message). Muhammad's understanding of the text showed the early stages of interaction between the text and human. Thus, the Qur'an has a human

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<sup>52</sup> Mazlan Abraham and Achmad Yaman, *Penyelewengan Tafsir Al-Qur'an...*

dimension with emphasis on the horizontal factor of the Qur'an. Abu Zayd further argues that the Qur'an was a living phenomenon because humanist hermeneutics of Qur'an must consider the Qur'anic aspect as a living phenomenon. The Qur'an could not only be treated as text anymore, because the message of the Qur'an was delivered in the context of the human cultural struggle during the descent of revelation from the start of the process of dialogue, debate, development, acceptance to rejection. The whole was a discourse of the Qur'an recorded in the structure of the Qur'an itself. Taking into account the aspect of its phenomenon, the interpreters were required to refer to the message of the Qur'an closest to human nature as God's creation. Yet, Abu Zayd hermeneutical approach provoked controversies in many parts of Muslim societies, but his contribution to Qur'anic studies is essential and his call for religious reform opens for further contextualized interpretation of the Qur'an.

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