Expedient Historicity; a Critique of the Thought and Opinions of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Mohammed Arkoun

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Research Article

Abstract

We may consider Abu Zayd and Arkoun as the pioneers of the methodic and detailed idea of historicity of religion and theology in contemporary Islamic thought. Making use of the achievements of humanities and social sciences, especially epistemology, hermeneutics and other new methodologies are the prominent features of the works written by these two authors. However, by a more precise investigation of these two thinkers' works, it seems that there is a kind of expediency or conservatism in the statement and pursuing the logical succession of their opinions. In this article, we aim at dealing with and exploring this very aspect in Abu Zayd and Arkoun's thought. Accordingly, the main question in the present inquiry is as follows: "Does such a conservative aspect exist in the works of these two thinkers?" and, in the next stage, "What are the reasons and causes for it?" The research hypothesis is as follows: "Some evidence, ambiguities and inconsistencies show the existence of such an aspect in those works and the role of mental clichés and psychological backgrounds,

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on the one hand, and social requisites and dilemmas, on the other hand, can be considered as the most important factors." The research approach is text-based and our method is descriptive-analytical. Besides, we have used Leo Strauss's theory, called 'esotericism', to understand those aspects based on the writers' conservatism. Fear of 'persecution' and fanatic reactions, considering some expedient considerations aiming at more gradual influence on the audience, and the effects – even unconscious – of some psychological-mental clichés and images can be regarded as the most important reasons and causes for the existence of inconsistent and conservative aspects in Abu Zayd and Arkoun's thought.

Keywords
Abu Zayd, Arkoun, historicity, esotericism, theology.

Introduction

In his book entitled *Persecution and the Art of Writing,* Leo Strauss proposes the concepts of 'esotericism' and 'between the lines'. Seemingly, Plato was the first philosopher who resorted to this method. This method was also known and used among the Muslim philosophers. For instance, Farabi quotes Plato who claimed that he was exposed to great dangers in the Greek society (Strauss, 1988, p. 21). But why this method of writing was used and what was the necessity for it? Strauss mentions some factors as the reasons for esotericism. The first factor that he mentions is 'fear of persecution'. Most societies in past eras had despotic governments and, in such societies, philosophers could not express their thoughts that were challenging the governments of that time. In those conditions, esotericism was a shield for philosophers to protect their thoughts behind it (Rezvani, 2013, pp. 89-90). Not only was this related to fear of governments, but also – sometimes – under the influence of fear of society and people's reaction (Mezler, 2014, p. 112).

Of course, Strauss mentions some considerations about the reading of the texts, supposing the possibility of using this method in them. The first point to consider is that the explicit denotations and doctrines of the text are prior to implicit or 'between the lines' denotations. In other words, in interpretation of the text, exotericism is prior to esotericism, and the latter must have a foundation in the former; otherwise, interpretation will be entangled in the trap of the interpreter's assumptions and imaginations (Strauss, 1988, p. 143). Consequently, turning to the 'between the lines' method is justifiable when it leads to removal of ambiguity of the text and more precision in understanding it. Nevertheless, it is essential to investigate the whole meaning of the text, on the one hand, and the context wherein the text is formed on the other hand (Strauss, 1988, p. 30). In Strauss's view, there are signs in the texts that lead us to the theory of 'esotericism' and interpreting the text according to 'between the lines', signs such as existence of some inconsistencies

in the text, ambiguity in proposing discussions, and omission of important links in discussions and arguments (Strauss, 1988, p. 31). In this regard, we can refer to the 'unsaid' points of a text. Sometimes, the writer leaves a fact unsaid intentionally and consciously, refraining from explaining it more (Strauss, 1988, pp. 161-162). As an example, in his article entitled *Farabi's Plato,* Strauss believes that Farabi has used this method to communicate something to the addressees (Strauss, 1945, pp. 16-17). Similarly, we can refer to Ibn Rushd (i.e. Averroes) in this regard. Among the lines of Ibn Rushd's thought and works is fixation of the image of consistence between intellect and transmission, or between philosophy and revelation, with which he has dealt in two treatises entitled *al-Kashf 'an Manāhij al-Adilla* and *Faṣl al-Maqāl fī mā Bayn al-Ḥikma wal-Sharī'a min al-Ittiṣāl.* In the introduction to *al-Kashf 'an Manāhij al-Adilla,* the writer refers to the conformity between religious law (*shar'*) and philosophy (*ḥikmat*), and even maintains that Sharia has ordered people (the qualified persons) to learn philosophy (Averroes, 1998, p. 99). Also in the treatise entitled *Faṣl al-Maqāl,* he tries to answer the doubts and objection to the issue of conflict between philosophy and revelation or Sharia (Ibn Rushd, 1979). However, what is not concealed for the sharp-sighted reader is that Ibn Rushd gives a reading of philosophy that finally fulfils his main goal, without covering all the dimensions or aspects opposing his opinion.

Sometimes, this is not out of previous intention, but originated from some type of mental habit which is – itself – the product of mental deposits and effects originated from certain doctrines, or historical-social dilemmas.[1] Accordingly, paying attention to issues such as 'unthoughts' or psychology of knowledge is seen in Arkoun's works and theories, with which we will deal later on.

This study is going to explore in the works and opinions of Abu Zayd

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1. In this regard, see Movahhedinia, 1398 SH, pp. 29-34.

and Arkoun to reveal these unsaid aspects and explain their reasons. The effects of the rooted theological traditions of theology and its ontological and epistemological presuppositions, on the one hand, and social and public considerations and sensitivities on the other hand seems to be the most important causes for this issue. Our method is descriptive-analytical and text-oriented, and paying attention to 'esotericism' and 'between the lines' presents important insights in this regard.

Background

In his book entitled *Text, Power, Truth,* and elsewhere in his discussions, Nasr Abu Hamid Zayd uses the term 'historicity'[1] in regard with religious texts, especially the sacred texts. Making use of Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between 'parole' and 'language', Abu Zayd explains what he means of 'historicity' of the Quran as follows:

> When we speak of the Quranic text as God's Word, it has undoubtedly a 'parole' and is not merely a text whom the 'language' elicit, although it has gotten its expressive ability – in the first place – from the 'language'… We can say that the Quran is a 'cultural production', but the one with a productive capacity. Thus, it is a 'production' that gets form, and, at the same time, by using the laws of producing denotation, it contributes to the change and re-formation in the sphere of culture and language… 'Historicity' in the sphere of texts means the same (Abu Zayd, 2015, p. 145).

For Abu Zayd, although the text of the Quran (like parole) has its own specificity, it is placed in more general contexts and gets meaning

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1. Equal to the Arabic term 'al-Tārīkhiyya' in the Arabic text (Abu ZAyd, 1995, p. 88)

in that framework. 'Revelation' manifested in the form of words has been influenced by the (Arabic) context and culture in its historical composition, both in its lingual and metaphysical dimensions (Abu Zayd, 2004, p. 34).

Therefore, here, the concept of 'historicity' is much broader and more fundamental than what jurists, theologians and even traditional thinkers have stated. Abu Zayd's idea of 'historicity' does not belong to concepts such as reason of revelation, Meccan or Medinan verses, abrogater and abrogated, or general and specific – as traditional scholars including both jurists and commentators meant – (Abu Zayd, 2004, p. 146). Rather, "it belongs to the historicity of the concepts proposed by the religious texts in their words and under the influence of the historical nature of the language of those texts (Abu Zayd, 2004, pp. 141-142). Abu Zayd's method is also clarified in this process. In explaining his method in interpreting the texts, he makes use of the difference between 'meaning' and 'significance' in E.D. Hirsch's hermeneutic theory. 'Meaning' refers to the 'denotation' and 'concept' obtained from the words of the text considering its cultural context. In other words, it is the very concept understood by the initial addressees and contemporaries of the text. On the contrary, 'significance' – while it is inseparable from 'meaning' and is dependent on it – has a 'time' aspect; that is, it is the product of the reading other than the time of the 'text'. But an important point mentioned by Abu Zayd is "if 'significance' is not accompanied by the 'meaning' and does not get its theme of it, the reading loses its state of esoteric interpretation…" and gets into the trap of arbitrary and justificatory interpretation (Abu Zayd, 2004, p. 303).

In the introduction to the Persian translation of *Humanism in Islamic Thought,* Mohammad Arkoun explains what he means by 'historicity':

> From 1960s on, my familiarity with the Muslim people made me
> believe whatever is written, taught and proposed with the aim to

free the Islamic thought from its special dogmatic ties will not be successful until the mythical-historical frameworks and foundations of faith is dissolved – a dissolution successful in Christian faith in 18th century. By dissolution, I do not mean wild elimination; rather, I mean a systematic introduction to the argumentative and cultural contexts in the main literature used by the directors of faith up to now. (Arkoun, 1973, p. 29).

'Historicity' in Arkoun's thought is tied to the concept of 'myth'. These myths have been present both in philosophy and in religion, and there are general similarities among them. The followings are among the most important lines of religious myths: believing in fundamental and essential principle or principles before the human's existence, returning to absolute foundation of existence, the long-lasting importance of great spiritual models and considering revelation as the way for salvation of sinful man. Besides, Arkoun mentions 'Platonic myths' in philosophy. Subjects such as belief in eternal soul with divine essence, fall of the spirit down into the bodies, reduction of the value of material sensible world, and final return of everything to its origin are among these myths (Arkoun, 1973, pp. 579-580). Finally, he concludes that "considering what we mentioned up to now, one can find out the small chance of reason in a society wherein supernatural forces, sacred rites, hereafter expectations and the like govern. If we look at the scene from the angle of mythical thought, even the general-specific dichotomies fade away, because all have been under the dominance of this thought" (Arkoun, 1972, p. 580).

Arkoun uses the term "Quran's discourse", the discourse that has put the dress of sacredness and transcendence on the daily, sudden and

accidental events,[1] and conceals its historicity in amalgamation with the mythical consciousness in a meta-historical guise (Arkoun, 1996, pp. 152-153).

Besides, Arkoun presents a vivid image of the exploration and the method of historical genealogy he has in mind: "Here, we must do what Nietzsche did with his method of genealogy for discovering the origin of Christian ethics… Clearly, the ideas and beliefs attempt to hide their secrets and roots with hundreds of delicate tricks so that they may appear as a natural, unquestionable and axiomatic fact…" (Arkoun, 1996, p. 86).

'Coloring' or attempting to ignore the 'historicity' of religion

Abu Zayd uses the term '*talwīn*'[2] in general about the stream of the contemporary religious discourse that seeks to reform or regenerate religion. According to Abu Zayd's view, the idea or the so-called project of Islamic regeneration started in the Islamic world after Napoleon's invasion to Egypt and with a thinker called Rifā'a Ṭahṭāwī (Abu Zayd, 2015, p. 101). Abu Zayd considers the main goal and motivation of religious reformation and the discourse of Islamic regeneration to be a kind of pragmatism and 'usefulness', meaning 'finding what is useful in heritage that can be used alongside the useful products of European civilization'. This is while there was the dominant presupposition that one can 'transfer the material affair without considering and involving in rational and intellectual backgrounds' (Abu Zayd, 2015, pp. 72-73).

However, Abu Zayd's basic opposition with that trend is for the fact that "Rereading and esoteric interpretations that the discourse of Islamic

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1. In the Arabic texts, we find the terms *al-āniya* and *al-ightibāṭiya,* which show the temporal, eventual and accidental nature governing the origination of the Quranic discourse (Arkoun, 1996, p. 92).

2. An Arabic word meaning 'to paint' or 'to color' something.

regeneration presented of heritage, and still some left-overs present, were merely as innovations that would preserve the main building… like painting and varnishing some old item, while preserving its main building" (Abu Zayd, 2015, pp. 66-67).

Unlike the age of Enlightenment in Europe, when there was critique and critical thinking in a foundational form, this thought gives way to justification and pragmatism. The main concern is compensating for the backwardness and lagging behind the Western civilization and civilizational advancements. Therefore, this effort is made to create consistency between the 'heritage' and tradition and the achievements of the new civilization. And these efforts and attempts lead to 'amalgamation' (Abu Zayd, 2015, pp. 89-91). In the main text of the book, the writer has used the term *talfīq* (meaning 'integration') (Abu Zayd, 1995b, pp. 35, 45), the integration of concepts and ideas with inconsistent and contrasting foundations with justificatory and pragmatist goals.

The axis of Arkoun's discussions and critiques in this regard is the concept of 'intellect' and its various related expressions. To explain the nature and role of intellect in the Islamic thought, he uses expressions such as 'passive reason' and 'Islamic reason'. This is the reason whose only role is a negative passive one "restricted to knowing and understanding what God's Word has described since pre-existence – which is the very reason as the Quran has stated – and restated in the sayings of the commentators and jurists. In this way, the function and role of reason in the aforementioned spheres has been reduced to explanation, serialization, legal formulation and implementation of the practice. In other words, the 'reason' is the servant of God's Word" (Arkoun, 2013, pp. 70-71).

Like Abu Zayd, Arkoun criticizes the contemporary Islamic discourse,[1] whose intellectual roots can be traced from reformatory

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1. "Al-Khiṭāb al-Islāmī al-Muʿāṣir". For more explanation in this regard, see: Arkoun, 1996, pp. 62-64.

movement of 19ᵗʰ century down to the 2ⁿᵈ century AH. Among the most important axes of this discourse are belief in and commitment to theological (doctrinal) ideas such as perceiving the Quran as 'the most perfect manifestation of divine revelation' and looking at the Prophet and his government in Medina as the essential models in individual and social spheres. Based on these intellectual foundations, this discourse is fruitful. "Since the whole truth is found in revelation and in the experience of Medina, the legitimate and acceptable social and historical organization in the contemporary age must be in line with the very system founded by the Muslim community in its early stages, i.e. in the sacred time beyond all times" (Arkoun, 1996a, pp. 108-109).

With is background of the contemporary Islamic discourse, we will find out Arkoun's critique of lack of 'historicity' in this trend better. In explaining his idea, he distinguishes the two concepts of 'historicity' and 'historicism'[1]. Regarding 'historicism', he says, "most definitions presented for this term have been ideological definitions… All these (i.e. different levels of historicism) have only one ideal: justification and reinforcement of religious, moral political and even cultural values through changing the figure of history and entering it in the framework of straight continuous line containing two attitudes to history…" One of them belongs to positive philosophies and believes in linear and gradual progresses from deficiency to perfection. Arkoun calls the other attitude, which is the attitude of the Islamic discourse and exists in all its forms more or less, 'backward movement'. This is because its starting point and its point of reliance are theological principles and its look is towards otherworldly future (Arkoun, 1996a, pp. 194-195).

Esotericism, amalgamation, contradiction

In the introduction of this article, we dealt with esotericism and its

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1. *Al-tārīkhiyya* and *al-tārīkhāniyya* (Arkoun, 1996c, pp. 116-117).

causes and reasons. It seems that both writers have used this method of writing. Nevertheless, in some of their central opinions, they have involved in 'coloring' or justification, of which they have been among the greatest opponents. This contradiction can be justified by resorting to esotericism, and especially the factor for observing social sensitivities and groups with religious bias – among whom these writers either have lived like Abu Zayd or have had serious intention to influence like Arkoun. However, on the other hand, it is essential to consider another probability as well – a factor called 'psychology of knowledge' in Arkoun's works. He says, "The core of my efforts is getting into the hidden depths that can be found in 'basic systems', including myths, religious rites, and inherited beliefs and traditions." Arkoun uses 'basic systems' because he believes that these systems include beliefs, traditions, ideas and images that have been institutionalized in the person since childhood and the person have be nurtured and formed in their context; and "these systems form the sensitivities and the personal mentality and view in evaluation of issues. The effect of these systems in specifying the individual's future path is much higher and more perpetual in what we call his intellectual growth (his education and his masters)" (Arkoun, 1973, p. 81). Accordingly, the person may defend positions or express opinions – without his own consciousness – that can be considered as opposing to his other positions and even the generality of his thought or his logical results.[1]

It seems that both these factors are there, one less and the other more, in the works of these two writers. Abu Zayd has referred to 'esotericism'. In *So Spoke Ibn Arabi,* he regards the 'concealment' method (*sitr*) and the mysterious language used by mystics, on the one

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1. Regarding the role of mental factors, including the experiences of childhood and even the individuals' characters in their intellectual orientation, Erich Fromm has presented a considerable discussion in his book entitled *Escape from Freedom* (See: Fromm, 1941).

hand, as the result of precaution not to mislead ordinary people and inability of the normal language for stating mystical expression and concepts and, on the other hand, as the main factor for safeguard against suppression and persecution of the jurists and the political system supporting them (Abu Zayd, 2004, pp. 108-110). Similarly, in the book entitled _al-Imām Shāfi'ī wa Ta'sīs al-Īdiulūjiyya al-Wasaṭiyya,_ since he deals with the critiques of Abdul-Sabour Shahin, the master in Cairo University, explicitly refers to this fear (Abu Zayd, 1996, p. 24). In this section, we deal with some of those ambiguities and contradictions in the works of Abu Zayd and Arkoun.

One of the most important of these examples is the reading of the Quran offered by Abu Zayd. To prove the 'historicity' of the Quran, he resorts to non- historic terminologies, arguments and theological structures. If this method was used in a polemical form aimed at revealing the internal limits, damages and inconsistencies of the organization of the Islamic theology, our objection was not right. However, there is no sign of this approach in Abu Zayd's statements. As an example, he says in an argument: "If the divine words are actions in the dimension of their realization, how can one say that the Quran, as one of the manifestations of divine words, is old and pre-existent? This mistake is due to not separating the attribute of 'knowledge' from the attribute of 'word'…". Thus, the divine word is placed under the category of action (Abu Zayd, 1995a, p. 129). Finally, he concludes that "If, as we said, the divine word is an action, it is then a historical phenomenon, because all divine actions occur in the created originate, i.e. the historic, 'universe'" (Abu Zayd, 1995a, pp. 126-131). On the one hand, Abu Zayd accepts that it is out of divine wisdom' that God revealed the Quran to the Prophet in Mecca and Medina gradually during 23 years. On the other hand, he maintains that: "the divine origin of these texts is never in contrast to the fact that they are lingual texts with all links of the language to the historical and social time and place… And every speech

about the divine words, out of the circle of language, leads us – intentionally or unintentionally – to the domain of superstitions and myths" (Abu Zayd, 1995a, pp. 148-151).

With this polemical and 'intrareligious' method, Abu Zayd has already accepted the epistemological authority of revelation and even some of the principles of the Islamic theology. In other words, although he has the intention to dispute and persuade the other party, he plays – indeed – in his opponent's filed and, inevitably, tied to his rules. In this way, he himself is entangled in something that he had warned the contemporary Islamic discourse about it. "The failure of the Islamic regeneration in producing scientific consciousness of religion and heritage is the very thing that worked for Salafis to invade incessantly all achievements of the regeneration discourse when the mottos and the masks were removed. This is because they found, in the regeneration discourse, the very old 'Islam', which was quite intact", and had just given way to coloring and amalgamation (Abu Zayd, 1995a, pp. 66, 95).

As another example, consider the following statements:

> The Quran is sacred [and fixed] as far as its words are concerned, but it is continuously changing from the conceptual (exegetical) viewpoint, hence relative… In principle, the text, from the very moment of being revealed – i.e. the Prophet's reading of it – turned from the divine text into human text, because it was understood by the human (the Prophet) and reached from revelation to interpretation… We must not assume – like the religious discourse – that the Prophet's understanding of the text is equal to the essential meaning of the text – supposing such a denotation exists. This is because such an assumption leads to a kind of polytheism, for it identifies the divine intention with the human's perception of it – if it is the Prophet's perception… this assumption leads to the Prophet's divinity and, with his sanctification, it ignores the reality of the Prophet's humanity (Abu

Zayd, 1992, pp. 154-155).

To justify what he means, Abu Zayd even seeks help from the Quran itself. Adducing the verse 97 of surah Baqara and the verses 193-194 of surah Shuʻarā, which denotes the coming down of revelation to the Prophet's heart, he says: "Gabriel did not give the words to the Prophet; rather, he inspired them." From this, he concludes that: "This is why we can regard the Quran revelation, and its literal words from the Prophet… thus, we conclude that revelation is the true words of God, but in its expression and communication, the humans have been allowed to some extent, both in diacritics and in words as well as the composition of sentences." Following this, Abu Zayd's *a priori* purpose and motivation is clarified: "Thus, the concept of revelation and God's words in Islam is not much different from the concept of revelation in Christianity…" (Abu Zayd, 1998, pp. 516-517). According to Muslims, unlike Christians, Jesus has a single human nature. Although he is a divine 'word', he has human nature. In the same vein, we can say that the Quran is divine word, but we cannot consider it outside the historical-human aspects (Abu Zayd, 1992, pp. 276-277).

Another most important contradiction in Abu Zayd's statements is his statement about the very concept of 'Islam' and its role. In principle, he regards religion as a historic affair and rejects the 'unsystematic' distinction between Islam and Muslims, which considers Islam as 'idealistic and imaginary' free from any filth and pollution. This is because this distinction leads to 'fossilizing the past tradition and fixation of the old image and admiring it, more than modifying and criticizing it in the new age' (Abu Zayd, 1992, pp. 26-27). In reaction to Ghazali, who believes that 'people disagree on the text, the exegesis and the esoteric interpretation of the Quran, but the Quranic texts have no discrepancies in their order, their style, their theme and their denotation', Abu Zayd says, "A part of people's disagreement on the

texts of the Quran is due to discrepancies in the texts of the Quran itself, i.e. the discrepancies that make the fantasy of contradiction" (Abu Zayd, 1998, p. 312).

Despite this position, however, he seems to scruple about explicitly criticizing the sacred texts in his works. It seems he always criticizes and rejects the interpretations of the commentators and the inferences of the jurists, but according to Abu Zayd's opinions, do religious texts, apart from exegeses, not have any special apparent lingual and historical denotations? Are religious texts like colorless liquids that get the color of their container? Here, some other inconsistencies, and even 'esotericisms' in Abu Zayd's statements arise: "Religion is a collection of sacred fixed and historical texts, while religious thought is nothing except human efforts for understanding those texts and interpreting and inferring their denotations" (Abu Zayd, 1998, p. 267). How do 'sanctity' and 'historicity' fit together? What is the limits of each and based on what criterion is the domain of each distinguishable from the other? Can we pose any rational, scientific or moral critique on the first group? Is considering them as historic and restricting them to their historical container not a kind of evading their serious criticism and considerate treatment or respectful rejection of them? From some of his statements we infer that he returns to the same exaggerated illusive distinction between Islam and Muslims, a kind of intentional negligence or self-deception called *ta'wīl* (= esoteric interpretation or hermeneutics) that rejects the esoteric interpretations of previous people and gives credit to its own modern esoteric interpretations. The sacred texts always come out as winners. Abu Zayd speaks explicitly of three levels of 'denotation' in religious texts: (a) denotations that are nothing except historical evidence, hence not capable of being 'virtually interpreted' or otherwise; (b) denotations that are capable of being 'virtually interpreted'; and (c) denotations that are capable of being expanded based on recognition of their cultural-social context and their

'significance'. With this motivation for expansion,[1] on some of the Quranic verse – that are under the influence of the realities of the age of revelation – he says these verses or texts may have sought to inflict a damage to the traditional value system, "the damage that reveals the significance hidden behind the apparent meaning, but these evolution-making effects do not emerge except through the process of reality." (Abu Zayd, 1998, p. 305). Accordingly, he esoterically interprets some of the verses of the Quran. For instance, regarding issues such as slavery, People of Scripture, and *jiziya* in Islam, he resorts to the accepted principles of the modern world – which we do not know why religious believers must yield to.[2] He tries to prove that although the 'true Islam' had accepted this idea (i.e. slavery) under the influence of realities of the economic-social system, it did not attempt to establish it; rather, it covered the path to cancel it. Similarly, regarding the verses related to women, he is content with the idea that the Quran has specified a share of inheritance for women as the active economic forces. Finally, he concludes that the Quran's movement "is in the path of passing through the undesirable situation of women and going in the path of equality [of men and women]; and this orientation existed in that time overtly and covertly." (Abu Zayd, 1992, pp. 307-308).

He explicitly says, "Islam is what we make, not what the enemies of truth and freedom and justice have made for us" (Abu Zayd, 1992, p. 49). We

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1. Interestingly, Abu Zayd uses the concept of *ittisā'* (= expansion) for criticizing the exegetical approaches of the discourse of religious regeneration. For him, religious reformers are searching for a reading of heritage that 'is expanded so much that will have room for all European new things' (Abu Zayd, 1995b, p. 9; Abu Zayd, 1995, p. 42).

2. In the beginning of the translation of *The Text, the Power, the Truth,* we see an article written by Ahmad Va'ezi, entitled "Criticism of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd's Statement of the Historicity of the Quran" (in Persian: "Naqd Taqrīr Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd az Tārīkh-mandī Qurān". In that article, we find critiques of the type of the one we quoted from religious believers and from Orthodox views), among them is "Why does Abu Zayd rereads the Quran and the Sunnah with the criterion of reason and modern science as well as its accepted principles (see: Va'ezi, introduction to Abu Zayd, 1394 SH).

must ask Abu Zayd whether he has not caught in the trap of mottos and amalgamation. Wherefrom and how has he obtained the features of the real Islam or its 'true interpretation'? The essence of religions is founded on 'they believe in invisible',[1] and obligation and servitude to God are its most important axes. If we ourselves are to 'make' Islam, what is then the difference between piety and ideology or other epistemological achievements of human? Elsewhere, however, he has commented that "We must produce a scientific awareness of this [Islamic] heritage that sees the heritage in its historical context and recognizes its great achievements – added to the credit of human civilization – and distinguishes them from the achievements contingent upon the time and place contexts" (Abu Zayd, 1995a, pp. 52-53). Here, Abu Zayd introduces religion as a civilizational product in the process of human civilizational evolution. With this view, is there still an insistence on religion as a sacred revelational or celestial matter and referring it to 'divine wisdom'? Even if Abu Zayd does not deal with a foundational critique of theological principles, he can – at least – place those images and presuppositions in the state of suspension or epoché with the justification of not being proved and not being provable. Surprisingly, some of his statements bring this very assumption to the reader's mind: "The Quran calls itself message [= mission]; and message shows a link between the sender and receiver established through lingual symbol or system. Since we cannot do scientific research on the sender in regard with the Quran, it is natural that the way to scientific entrance into the research on the Quranic texts passes through reality and culture…" (Abu Zayd, 1998, p. 69). If one cannot "do scientific research on the sender (i.e. God)", how has Abu Zayd found His 'wisdom'? And even more, how has he arrived at propositions such as the following one: "Allah's Word is, for the prophets, a kind of special revelation that necessitates the

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1. A part of the verse 3 of surah Baqara of the Quran.

existence of an angel. Allah's Word is also a kind of revelation and inspiration for us as humans, but it does not necessitate the coming of an angel" (Abu Zayd, 1998, p. 522). This is while in regard with the esoteric interpretation of the Quran, he speaks on the part of Mu'tazila and resorts to 'imagery', saying: "imagery turned into a weapon with which, on the one hand, they dealt with resolving contradiction in the text of the Quran and, on the other hand, they resolved its contradictions with rational evidence. Mu'tazila, however, were not successful in resolution of that contradiction, because in most cases, they wanted to break the neck of the Quran's verse and take it out of its context and, in this way, make a rational and theoretical denotation out of it" (Abu Zayd, 1998, p. 311). Elsewhere, however, Abu Zayd maintains that the discrepancies of various sections of the Quranic texts are 'illusive of contradiction' (Abu Zayd, 1998, p. 312)

In some of Abu Zayd's statements, his pragmatism and expediency are vividly seen: "Although previous jurists have seriously considered the principle of 'observing the interests of _Ummah_', today's interpreter must understand this principle in a scientific way. Today that the interests of the _Ummah_ do, absolutely, mean the interests of the majority of the _Ummah,_ not the minority, the interpreter who observes the benefits of the minority deserves rejection and denial and his interpretation is inconsistent with the purposes of revelation and goals of Sharia.." (Abu Zayd, 1998, p. 398). The former objections can be posed here as well. If the exegesis is to be non-arbitrary and, in the first place, based on the denotations of text and meaning, how then is it possible to read the text beforehand with the aim to justify today's perceptions of 'interests' of the _Ummah_?

We may well claim that Abu Zayd himself has somehow stated the reason for these contradictions and ambiguities: "All of us somehow feel that God speaks to us. Do not get this statement with religious language. It refers to human's inner experience in art… I mean with

interpretation of this deep experience in literature and aesthetics, we can say when listening to a piece of music, we are having an aesthetic experience and – more precisely – we are receiving revelation. If we want to give a religious tint to this view, it is right to say that Allah's Word has filled the whole existence… I mean to point out the role of religion in globalization and show its function in the new universe and in treating the human's isolation from human, his isolation from existence, and treatment of human's alienation… the more humans' ability in hearing the whisper of the existence, the more able they are in hearing divine words in the Prophet's language. In these statements, perhaps I have used the language of poetry and less discuss in the way a researcher discusses" (Abu Zayd, 1998, pp. 521-522). Is this view of religion as a manifestation of the spiritual truth of existence is the essence of Abu Zayd's thought and the mystery hidden in his esotericisms? – The manifestation that has no meaning without human and void of his existence. Can we say this insight is also a historical, social and psychological phenomenon and the product of centuries, and even thousands of years of humiliating and marginalizing the material life and remitting it to another world of another genus?

This type of ambiguities and contradictions are also found in Mohammed Arkoun's works. He himself has referred to esotericism due to political pressures under the title of '*taqiyya*'[1](Arkoun, 1999, p. 9). In this regard, on interpretation of some Quranic verses, he says, "The intense ideological atmosphere recently created by the fundamentalist movements even in western countries, especially in France, prevented me from publishing any study on this sensitive and difficult subject. This was not due to the fact that my studies nullify or violate an Islamic issue; rather, the mass of those who reject any thinking in today's Islamic societies is so massive that any exploration of this type will

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1. It means dissimulation of one's religious belief (or 'precautionary concealment') to protect oneself from, for instance, persecution.

generate risky misunderstandings" (Arkoun, 1991, pp. 41-42).

As to Arkoun, it seems that the central factor in this regard is the collection of social and pragmatic considerations aimed at not blemishing the public conscience of the Muslims, and with the motivation of offering a secular, moral and humane reading of Islam in the framework of critical rationality and organizing modern sagacity. Meanwhile, there are similarities between Abu Zayd and Arkoun. Also Arkoun somehow distinguishes between Islam and the Muslim or between religion and various readings of religion. He maintains that "The Quranic discourse, just like any other founder discourse, with its story-like structure, opens the way for different probabilities, while the theological and jurisprudential idols with which the 'traditional Islam' is known limit any kind of humanistic expansion" (Arkoun, 1973, p. 31). Arkoun states what he means in this regard in a detailed discussion about the verses 12 and 176 of surah Nisā'. His concentration in these verses is on the term *kalāla*[1]. The summary of his claim is that such verses of the Quran (like verses 180-182 and 240 of surah Baqara) acknowledge the right of any believer to leave, freely, a bequest for anyone whom he wishes. In his view, the position of *kalāla* "creates a new situation and destabilizes the previous system of inheritance in the Arab society". Therefore, "despite the fact that the Quran has explicitly stressed on freedom of bequeathing in the aforementioned verses, we see ourselves before a will that clearly attempts to forbid and limit, or even cancel, that freedom. In other words, the legislators (i.e. jurists) have attempted to create some 'knowledge of inheritance' suitable for the social-economic requisites and conditions of the communities wherein the early jurists lived" (Arkoun, 1991, pp. 52-58). Arkoun refers to a book written by Yusuf Qaradawi who, regarding the women's hijab and considering the verse 59 of surah Aḥzāb, believes that the type of their hijab can

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1. Someone with no father, mother, or children to inherit him/ her.

differ according to differing eras. Arkoun, then, regards Qaradawi's view insufficient and considers it in line with preserving the very traditional 'macro models'. However, he says that "No doubt, such a view and an interpretation is a step forward towards achieving the main purpose of the legislator and adjusting that macro model" (Arkoun, 1996a, pp. 180-181). He considers revelation as having the goal of freeing human and mentions the symbols of 'exile' in Judaism, 'salvation' in Christianity, and 'hijra' in Islam as sample of the live, dynamic and redemptive role of revelation throughout history (Khalaji, ١٩٩٨, p. 141). Here, Arkoun's assumption is that the Quran's macro model is progressive and humane, but it is not precisely clear how and with what criterion he has arrived at such a principle. Is this not a non-historic and mythical look at 'text'? In a more precise statement, how has he arrived at 'the legislator's main purpose'?

Like Abu Zayd, Arkoun offers a phenomenological approach to reading the Quran and maintains that the Quran must be reread through the new methods of humanities and "such texts must be critically investigated outside any presupposition to the effect that the theological origin of those texts are prior." Here, Arkoun's emphasis is on a kind of suspension or making these theological presuppositions epoché as well as rejecting 'theological priority' of these sacred texts (Arkoun, 1996a, p. 202). This is while, elsewhere, he claims that: "In our existing cognition, it is quite evident that God's Word is seen in the Quran just as it is manifested in Torah and Jesus.[1] Therefore, the revelation coming down to Muhammad [PBUH] has appeared to the 'People of the Scripture' once more…" (Arkoun, 1982, p. 56). In an interview with Hashem Saleh, he maintains that: "The Quran takes us directly to God, because it is God's Word... But the Quran needs interpretation." And he refers to Muʿtazila's theory regarding the 'createdness' of the Quran (Arkoun,

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1. Cf. Arkoun, 2005, pp. 23-24.

1991, pp. 84-85). Therefore, while the Quran is God's Word, there is a human medium, i.e. the language with all its requisites and demands, between the human and that word. This is true about God Himself: "There is a difference between God – the Exalted and Glorious – and the image the human makes of Him in a certain historical era… God is not available; He is exalted in proportion to everything…" (Arkoun, 1991, pp. 83-84). Here, the questions arise as follows: "Are propositions such as 'God is Exalted and Glorious' and that He is 'Sublime' as well as phrases such as 'God's Word' not the products of religious and theological reason?" "Is the definite expression of these propositions not the negation of the claim of putting aside any 'theological priority'?" It seems that Arkoun himself has answered these objections: "I do not tangle with the fundamentalist Muslims from an external [extra-religious] position so that they bother themselves and accuse me of westernization or following western method… no, I challenge them with what is there inside the Islamic heritage… one cannot invalidate the contemporary Salafis' statements with the Westerns' philosophical theories. One can just cast doubt on its credit with another part of the Islamic heritage; the forgotten and omitted part…" (Arkoun, 1991, pp. 85-86).

But Arkoun's main goal is offering a modern theology and a secular faith. By modern theology, he means "a theology founded on living and deliberate faith and on the criterion of time. In other words, on the basis of the criterion of deep historicity of reason and values." This 'faith' remains in the form of various manifestations and in various guises (Arkoun, 1991, pp. 41-42). Arkoun continues to state his basic idea more explicitly:

> First, we must throw away all admiring and proud views that Islam can stand up before secularism thanks to its divine exaltation and superiority. Second, we must put aside the ideological images of secularism that claim it is the final and definite time for individual's freedom from all imaginary beliefs.

> If we can do this, we will be able to enter revelation again in a monolithic atmosphere and in that atmosphere… the reason can enjoy both the mysterious religious answers in our societies and the achievements and opening of secularism in its new semantic and meaning-findings (Arkoun, 1991, pp. 76-77).

For Arkoun, "the oneness of the absolute truth", of which the Quran speaks, is a reflection of human's leaning towards the absolute affair and justice that, later on, under the influence of Aristotelian philosophy and logics, got a theological and metaphysical form and turned into a solid static dogmatism (Arkoun, 1996a, p. 64).

Arkoun seeks to extract 'the main mythical core' of the Scripture and its 'redemptive intention' under the cover of historical beliefs, rites and rituals. Nevertheless, in proportion to his main goal, he seeks to assure the believers that "the method we offer for reading the Quran does not separate human from exaltation; rather, it only urges him to pursue this exaltation, which is embodied in various forms, in the historical reality" (Arkoun, 1982, p. 59). Arkoun assures the believers that he does not mean to 'cancel' religion and religious texts; rather, he seeks to 'scientifically understand' them in their historical context. Invitation to freedom of reason from the dominion of 'texts' and their far-reaching authority aims at encountering the nature rationally and free from dominion of the 'text' in the sphere of natural sciences and encountering the social and human realities in the sphere of humanities. To justify his opinion, he adduces a well-known hadith from the Prophet, reading: "You [people] are more aware of your worldly affairs" (Arkoun, 1996c, pp. 21, 25-26). In his view, we encounter not one Islam, but several 'Islams'; the theological Islam, the social Islam, and the historical Islam. Being a Muslim is not to depend on following and relying on some fixed and orthodox model or models of Islam: "I as a Muslim cannot attribute myself to one of these dominant and customary models, because all these models (or 'Islams') have been nullified by the intellectual

modernity I have in mind. I am the voice arisen from inside Islam to say that, today, there are other method[s] for examining the phenomenon of religion" _(Arkoun, 1996b, p. 86).

Elsewhere, Arkoun, somehow nakedly, but – as Strauss states – from another's tongue, presents his key to understand 'between the lines' and 'esotericism'. By referring to a book written by Bernard Lauret entitled _Initiation à la Pratique de la Théologie,_ regarding the way the writer deals with the Christ's Resurrection, he says, "The writer first goes to specify what one can consider as consistent with reason from the 'probability of rightness of history' of the Christ's resurrection. Then, without going to state the point that he wants to substitute the doctrine of resurrection [as a theological and faith doctrine] for the historical event of resurrection, examines the meanings and denotations of resurrection as a doctrine to do a scientific examination without rejecting the knowledge arisen from faith. Such a clear demarcation is not only desired by all scientific researchers, but also considered as a goal by theologians and mystics" _(Arkoun, 1996a, p. 82). He then deals with the 'psychology of knowledge' and considers the mental roots of religious faith: "Psychologists and psychiatrists teach us that faith is in contact with those motivations that are deeper than all other motivations and desires and are resistant against suppression". And finally, he states that "I said all these to open a new sphere before the thought, wherein we can examine the existing problems in former spheres of resurrection and rightness of divine origin of the Quran to go beyond traditional claims of the Christian and Islamic theology at the same time…" _(Arkoun, 1996a, p. 82).

The important question before Arkoun is whether this approach of him does not lead to 'amalgamation', fixation, preserving and reproduction of the same 'old models'. Is Abu Zayd's warning for playing in the ground of fundamentalists not realized? Is the systematic, principled and historical critique of religion not more consistent with

Arkoun's goal than these efforts out of conservativism, which may even be accused of eclecticism and self-contradiction? Are we not able to say that – at least – applying the approach of foundational critique, along with Arkoun's approach, is more reasonable and, based on former experiences (especially the destiny of the discourse of Enlightenment or religious reformation), will lead to more desirable and more real results?

Conclusion

'Historicity' can be considered as the axis of the thoughts of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and Mohammed Arkoun. For these two thinkers, considering the 'historicity' of the nature of religion means understanding and paying heed to its anthropological, psychological, social, and mythical-historical foundations, the necessity to have a scientific and scholarly treatment of the phenomenon of religion, and going beyond orthodox theology and its impairments, especially the religious fundamentalism. Nevertheless, in the opinions and thoughts of these two writers, we find some phrases and denotations that seems to contradict their main claim regarding the fundamental 'historicity'. Our claim is that one can explain these contradictions and ambiguities by considering the 'between the lines' and the method of 'esotericism'. Here, we must take the main and explicit claims of these two writers as the foundation; and, similarly, considering the allusions, metaphors, statement of motivations and goals, examples and some explanations, their 'unsaid' ideas will be revealed from 'between the lines' in their works. It seems that the most important reasons for esotericism in these works are as follows: (1) fear of 'persecution' not just from political or religious officials, but from fanatic Muslims. (2) efforts for creating empathy among Muslims and, consequently, refraining from stating explicit and radical materials and critiques on religious texts and beliefs, aiming at gradually influencing the minds and thoughts of masses and

educated Muslims in Islamic societies. And (3) formulating and creating the faithful moral, humane and updated construction that, free from doctrinal biases and jurisprudential-legal requisites, is consistent with rationality, morality and modern world-life. Another reason, which is more or less seen in the works of both writers, especially Abu Zayd, is some tokens of sediments of traditional identity, theology and even ontology in some of their opinions and statements. In addition to epistemological and logical critiques to the conservative and pragmatist aspect of the thought and view of these two thinkers, that can be attributed to the 'epistemic formality' or a kind of childish look at the addressees, a question is worth reflection. "Does this attitude and approach in the thought and works of these two thinkers pave the way for their basic goal, i.e. some sort of secular faith similar to that of Christianity? Or does it have an inverse result, getting into the trap of religious intellectualism and reinforcing the theological-polemic discourse of fundamentalism?" Abu Zayd was afraid of this result and he, of course, accused the discourse of religious reformation of leading to that result.

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