

Rethinking the Qur'ân in the Context of Contemporary Islam

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"The world has already become, whether for good or for bad, one small village in which no independent closed culture, if there is any, can survive". With this sentence Nasr Hâmid Abû Zayd introduced his inaugural address of 24 May 2004 at the occasion of the acceptance of the Ibn Rushd chair of Humanism and Islam at the University for Humanistics in the Netherlands. The text has been published under the title *"Rethinking the Qur'ân: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics"*.¹ For this Egyptian scholar, who had to go in exile in the Netherlands because of his research on the status of the Qur'ân, *"rethinking the Qur'ân"* is *"re-invoke its living status as a discourse"* (p. 11), *"the Qur'ân being a living phenomenon"* (p. 62). For him, the Muslims have to *"stop reducing the Qur'ân to be only a text"*, because this type of understanding of the Holy Book has brought the Islamic world to follow the hermeneutics of the Pakistani Abû l-A'lâ Maudûdî, and his ideology of resistance, *"which divides the world into two adversaries"*. In his conclusion, he asks what will prevail in the world of the future: *"togetherness or isolation? Are Muslims ready to rethink the Qur'ân or not? Is it possible to consider the open options presented in the Qur'anic discourse and reconsider the fixed meaning presented by the classical 'ulamâ'?"* (p. 63).

¹ NASR ABÛ ZAYD, *Rethinking the Qur'ân: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutic*, University for Humanistics, Utrecht, 2004.

The subject of what Nasr Abû Zayd is saying is twofold: on the one hand, he agrees that the world has already become "*one small village, in which no independent closed culture can survive*", in the sense that we live now in a globalized world, where a particular culture cannot remain independent, global, all-embracing and concerning all aspects of human behavior, with no interaction to the world-wide predominant organization of society. On the other hand, he is saying that we have to rethink the status of the Qur'ân, not any more as a given text, where rules for organizing society are written, ready to be applied, "*a complete code which provides for all areas of life, whether spiritual, intellectual, political, social or economic*", as it is written in the *Preface to the English Translation of the Meanings of the Holy Qur'ân* printed in al-Madîna.² Under these circumstances of reinterpretation, of "*rethinking the Qur'ân*", the Muslim Community will be able to join the international community of nations and choose for "*togetherness*", turning away from "*isolation*", and find a solution to the contemporary crisis it is living in. To clarify this problem, I have first to go back to the initial message of the Qur'ân, and then turn towards the actual situation of the Muslim Community, and bring both together, the actual situation of globalization and the need to rethink the Qur'ân, so that we can understand the kind of reinterpretation of the Qur'ân proposed by Abû Zayd.

To analyze the Qur'ân, at least three different approaches are possible: (1°) the descriptive, simply describing the different themes of the Qur'ân; (2°) the chronological, reading the themes of the different sûra's of the Qur'ân in the context of the events occurring during the life of the Prophet Muhammad; (3°) the historical-critical method, looking for the influences on the text of the Qur'ân, such as the foreign vocabulary – like the use of an Hebrew word such as *Jahannam*, that means "*hell*" –, the link to pre-Islamic biblical or apocryphal stories of the prophets, the analogy of Qur'anic prescriptions with prescriptions of the Jewish Law-system and other subjects of research.

If we use the descriptive approach, and analyze the theme of the 6236 verses of the most used *Reading* of the Qur'ân, the Egyp-

² THE HOLY QUR'ÂN. *English Translation of the meanings and Commentary*, Al-Madinah al-Munawarah, 1410 H. (Hidjra), pp. IV-V.

tian Edition going back to the *Reading* of Hafs and 'Asim (d. 744), we'll soon find out that we cannot quantify the theme of "monotheism", because, out of the 200 verses where monotheism is explicitly stated, monotheism is implicitly present where attributes or names of God are mentioned. And we know that the Tradition refers to 99 "beautiful names of God" mentioned in the Qur'ân: "Say: Call upon Allâh, or call upon ar-Rahmân, by whatever name you call upon Him (it is well): for to Him belong the most beautiful names..." (Q. 17, 110). The name of Allâh is mentioned 2,697 times, and the name ar-Rahmân – the Merciful – is mentioned 57 times, His most important attribute being His "Rahma", God's compassion: "But Allâh is the best to take care, and He is the most merciful of those who show mercy" (*huwa arham ar-râhimîn* – Q. 12, 64b). We can say, that from a descriptive point of view, the Qur'ân brings into the hearts and minds of the Muslims a fundamental conscience of relatedness, of dependence, of committing themselves to the One and self-subsistent God, who is the world's Creator, to whom we can submit in confidence. With the Qur'ân, the faithful will praise Him: "Allâh, there is no god but He – Allâh lâ ilâha illa Huwa –, the Living, the self-subsisting, Supporter of all. No slumber can seize Him, nor sleep. His are all things in the heavens and on earth..." (Q. 2, 255a). The believer can have total confidence in God and "abandon himself to Him". In this sense this verse of the Qur'ân reminds us of Psalm 121: "No, He sleeps not nor slumbers, Israel's guard. The Lord is your guard and your shade...". Many times a day, the Muslim will invoke this God in *al-Fâtiha*, the Opening chapter: "In the Name of Allâh, ar-Rahmân, the Merciful. Praise to be to Allâh, the Lord of the worlds..." (Q. 1, 1-2).

In the descriptive approach, it is clear that the theme of monotheism, understood as the fundament for the act of faith of the believer, in reliance and submission to the most merciful God, is largely prevailing. According to this approach, we find that a 1700 verses have an eschatological content. And that means that more than one third of the Qur'ân refers to human's destiny, the last judgment, retribution, resurrection and afterlife, as we can find in the long passage of sûra 39: "On the Day of Judgment, the whole of the earth will be but God's handful, and the heavens will be rolled up in His right hand (...). The trumpet will be sounded, when all that are in heavens and on earth will swoon, except such as

it will please God. Then will be a second one be sounded, when, behold, they will be standing and looking on! And the earth will shine with the light of its Lord. The record (of deeds) will be placed (open). The Prophets and the witnesses will be brought forward; and a just decision pronounced between them; and they will not be wronged; every soul will be paid in full (the fruit) of their deeds. God knows best all that they do. The unbelievers will be led to hell in groups; until, when they arrive there, its gates will be opened. And its keepers will say: <Did not messengers come to you among yourselves, rehearsing to you the Signs of your Lord, and warning you of the meeting of this Day of yours?>. The answer will be: <True: but the Decree of Chastisement has been proved true against the unbelievers!>. To them will be said: <Enter the gates of hell to dwell therein: Evil is the abode of the arrogant! And those who feared their Lord will be led to the garden in groups, until, behold, they arrive there. Its gates will be opened and its keepers will say: <Peace be upon you – salâmun ‘alaykum! – Well have you done! Enter ye here to dwell therein>. They will say: <Praise be to God, who has truly fulfilled His promise to us, and has given us this land in heritage: we can dwell in the garden as we will; how excellent a reward for those who work (righteousness)!>. And thou wilt see the angels surrounding the (Divine) Throne, on all sides, singing Glory and praise to their Lord. The Judgment will be in perfect justice, and the cry (on all sides) will be: <Praise be to God, the Lord of the worlds!>” (Q. 39, 67b-75).

Actually, another important theme of the Qur’ân is implicitly given in this long quotation: the theme of the Prophets. As we know, patriarchs of the Old Testament, such as Noe, Abraham and Moses, and seventeen others from the Old and New Testament, included John the Baptist – Yahyâ – and Jesus – ‘Isâ –, are mentioned many times in the Qur’ân. 1566 verses are allusions concerning their stories. For the Qur’ân, they are witnesses of the once and for all fixed Divine Decree concerning our human salvation. They proclaim our Destiny, and warn their people to follow God’s path to salvation, His Law. Their message is one, always the same, and subsequently, they were, in their lifetime, already witnesses of the coming judgment and retribution. Understood as such, the theme of the Prophets is linked to that of eschatology. It increases very much the importance of that theme.

If our approach of the Qur'ân is historical, we cannot avoid the conclusion that the message of the Qur'ân is fundamentally biblical. Not only the idea of prophetism and eschatology, but even the concepts used – God's Decree, Retribution, the Hour, the Last Day... –, the description of hell and paradise, fire and garden, the image of the trumpet initiating the resurrection, the Throne of God and the angels praising Him... Some recent research will even link the description by the Qur'ân of the Gardens of Eden (*"Their reward with the Lord are the Gardens of 'Adn, underneath rivers flow..."*, Q. 98, 8a), to the most famous poet of the Syriac Christian Tradition, saint Ephrem, and his poems describing paradise, or at least the Christian tradition in Syriac language.³

However, from what we said, it appears that we cannot reduce the message of the Qur'ân to be influenced by the biblical tradition. This message has his own consistency, his own rationality. And this is becoming even clearer when we adopt the chronological approach. What is becoming increasingly evident, if we read the Qur'ânic chapters starting from the oldest recitations proclaimed at the beginning of the prophecy of Muhammad towards the latest proclaimed in Medina, is that Muhammad confronted his fellow citizens of Mecca with an eschatological message: God rules the world, and this implies rules for human life and the terrible punishment of the Fire for the self-sufficient, the sacrilegious self-aggrandizement of the self-sufficient. God's Decree concerning our human life is fixed, it implies a Destiny of salvation for humanity, and we know the conditions. The conditions are God's Law, His *Sharî'a*, His fundamental Commandments; and under these conditions, in serenity and peace, we can rely on God's promise that we are on *"the Road to salvation"*.

The conditions are explicitly mentioned in the oldest verses of the Qur'ân: *"And what will explain to you what the Ascent is: it is the freeing of a slave, or the feeding, in a day of hunger, of an orphaned near of kin, or a needy man in misery. Moreover, it is to be of those who believe and counsel one another to be steadfast, and enjoin mercy on one another. Those who do this will be on the right hand, and those who deny our revelations shall be on*

³ LUXENBERG, Christoph, *Die Syrisch-Aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, Berlin, 2000.

the left hand, with hell-fire close above them" (Q. 90, 12-20). At the day of judgment they are asked: *"What led you into hell-fire? They will say: <We were not of those who prayed; nor were we of those who fed the indigent. But we used to talk vanities with vain talkers; and we used to deny the Day of Judgment, until there came to us the (Hour) that is certain>; Then will no intercession of any intercessors profit them*" (Q. 74, 42-47). This is the Message the citizens of Mecca were confronted with. And at this point, another theme of the Qur'ân is coming up: in 1132 verses, the Qur'ân is arguing with those who are strongly against Muhammad and his message. They don't believe in that judgment: *"Who is going to tell us what we have to do?"*. The merchants of Mecca are independent-minded. They have their different gods and goddesses who help them in daily life, but none of them is a divine judge. They deny afterlife. They deny the general resurrection. For them, at the best, Muhammad is a story-teller, a poet, perhaps "inspired by the jinn's"; at the worst, foolish, a danger for the organization of their city. But, even confronted with this opposition, Muhammad will continue his message: *"I serve not that which ye serve. Nor will ye serve that which I serve..."* (Q. 109, 2-3); *"Seest thou one who denies the Judgment? Then such is the one who repulses the orphan, and encourages not the feeding of the indigent..."* (Q. 107, 1-3).

The initial Message of the Qur'ân is now very clear: God's Divine Decree is man's Destiny to Salvation, God's Law is man's Path to Salvation. Individuals or societies who are not applying God's Law are in fact self-destructive. As it is said in Kenneth Cragg's book *"Jesus and the Muslim"*: *"To be without Law would be to be without meaning; without destiny"*.⁴ And we now understand what is meant by "Islamic Faith". Wilfred Cantwell Smith put it in this way: *"Infidelity (kufr...) is man's dramatic negative response to the spectacular divine initiative. The positive response (...) is called "Faith" (îmân), and the man of faith (mu'min) is he who accepts, who says "yes". As the theologians subsequently explain, "îmân", Faith, is self-commitment. It means, and is said to mean, almost precisely, "s'engager"..."*⁵.

⁴ CRAGG, K., *Jesus and the Muslim*, Oxford, 1985, p. 225.

⁵ SMITH, W.C., *Faith and Belief, the Difference between Them*, Princeton, 1979, p. 40.

If we go back to the chronological approach of the Qur'anic recitation, we find a twofold radical change in the themes at the time of Muhammad's and his followers' emigration from his hometown Mecca to Medina. The situation of Muhammad has completely changed. In Mecca, he was persecuted, and his companions were poor and humble; the important leaders of the city refused to accept his message. Here in Medina, he becomes the leader of the Community, the *Umma*; he is invited to organize the city according to what he said to be God's Message, abruptly coming over him again and again. Here in Medina, detailed prescriptions are revealed, and not only concerning practical devotions, prayers, fastening, pilgrimage..., but also concerning social life, marriage, property, inheritance – usury is strictly forbidden –, and even punishments for murder, robbery, adultery... The submission to God, faith in His divine Decree, becomes obedience to God's clearly specified prescriptions and His messenger's particular Way of life, his *Sunna*. From the more universal ethical statements of the Meccan period and his fundamental commandments, comparable to the biblical Commandments, mentioned in sûra 17, 23-39, the Qur'ân evolves towards enouncing particular prescriptions. The positive answer of the faithful to God's divine initiative for his salvation, his commitment involving all aspects of life in response to the ethical challenge of the Qur'ân, is now very much evolving towards practicing a clearly defined way of life in a specifically organized society.

On the other hand, as the opposition of the Meccans turns into persecution, the Qur'ân will give the permission to fight: *"To those against whom war is made, permission is given (to fight), because they are wronged. And verily, Allâh is most powerful for their aid! They are those who have been expelled from their homes, in defiance of right..."* (Q. 22, 39-40a). The effort (*jihâd*) to follow God's way, is allowed to become fight (*qitâl*), if needed. And as the Qur'ân states: *"And say not of those who are slain in the way of Allâh: <They are dead>, nay, they are living, though you perceive it not..."* (Q. 2, 154), Muslims will understand that whoever will die doing the effort to follow God's way, he will be rewarded in the gardens of heaven.

People nowadays will ask about suicide-bombing. Watching television, we see young men and women preparing themselves for a suicide attack, with the Islamic profession of faith written

behind them. We have been told that they are martyrs – “*shuhadâ*” (sing. “*shahîd*”) – and that they will be rewarded as soon as they die. So it will be a great surprise to find out that the concept of “*shahîd*” is not used by the Qur’ân in that sense. There is the meaning of being witnesses of righteousness, sincerity and justice, but not of martyrdom as understood in our times. So in the following verses: “*O ye who believe! Stand out firmly as witnesses (“shuhadâ”) to Allâh, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be against rich or poor: for Allâh can best protect both*” (Q. 4, 135); “*O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for Allâh, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety. And fear Allâh; for Allâh is well-acquainted with all that you do*” (Q. 5, 8). The righteous is a witness of the truth of the Scripture, and so of God’s Law: and this brings us back to what we said about eschatology. In fact, Muhammad himself refers to God, as the ultimate witness: “*Say: <What thing is most weightly in evidence?>. Say: <Allâh is witness between me and you>...*” (Q. 5, 19a).

In the context of Medina, when Muhammad was allowed to fight for the survival of his community, it was understood that who was killed in that fight would have the reward of the righteous. And so we can understand that people wanted to join the fight, and throw themselves in the battle, as is told in the Islamic Tradition referred to by Daniel Brown: “*One ‘Umayr was eating some dates when he heard the Prophet (Muhammad) promise paradise to any who died in battle. He immediately flung the dates aside and threw himself into the battle saying: <Is there nothing between me and entering Paradise save to be killed by these men?>. Another Muslim, Âsim, asked Muhammad: <What makes the Lord laugh with joy at His servant?>. Muhammad answered: <When he plunges into the midst of the enemy without mail>. At this ‘Asim threw off his mail coat, plunged into the battle and was killed*”.⁶ This Tradition shows how thin in fact the line is between suicide and martyrdom; but nevertheless, there is still a difference with contemporary suicide actions. The context indeed, is different: the

⁶ BROWN, Daniel, *A New Introduction to Islam*, Oxford, 2003, p. 79.

Islamic Community is now in another kind of crisis than it was the case in the Prophet's time.

Islam and Judaism never defined themselves only from a pure mystical or spiritual point of view. Submission, "*Islam*" has always been seen as obedience to universal and fundamental divine commandments. The eschatological dimension of the message had directly an ethical consequence. The Qur'ân has been understood as an ethical challenge. The faith-commitment has always been understood as an answer to that challenge, and as an effort "*to enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong*" (Q. 3, 110b). The Qur'ân will add that, because of this commitment, the Islamic Community, the *Umma*, is "*the best of peoples*" (Q. 3, 110a). As a consequence of the ethical challenge of the Qur'ân, the Muslim community of Medina started to build up a coherent and global way of life, in coincidence with the Revealed divine Law, breaking radically with the pre-Islamic Mekkan way of life. The very existence of the Islamic civilization of the Abbasid period – the most glorious centuries of Islamic civilization, the ninth and tenth century AD – cannot be understood if there has not been an initial understanding of Religion as obedience to God's Law as Road to salvation for all. It is impossible to think of the great Islamic empires without considering the overwhelming importance of the legal system based on the *'Usûl*, the *Qur'ân* and the *Sunna*, the enormous amount of juridical literature, the jurisprudence of the *Fatâwâ* literature. Muslims were indeed "*Ahl as-Sunna wa l-Jamâ'a*", "*the People constituting a community with a well defined Way of Life*". The different Islamic empires and states were organized and structured by the overwhole system of the *Fiqh*, the Islamic Law-system. It was a coherent system in accordance with Qur'ân and Sunna.

But starting in the seventeenth century, the dynamism of the Western powers has been such that, in fact, the all-embracing Islamic system did not survive as such in most of the Islamic world. The Ottoman empire introduced different codes most of them inspired by the French Law System already in the middle of the nineteenth century. Nowadays, we can find Islamic and Western inspired solutions intertwined in Egyptian, Syrian and Iraqi law systems. If the example of Turkey, where the old system was simply abolished altogether by Atatürk in a kind of sudden and brutal revolution, has been an exception, only very few Islamic

countries were able to preserve a juridical system free from western influence. Reformists saw it as a duty to "modernize Islam", nationalist and socialist movements adapted the organization of Islamic countries in accordance with their Western inspired ideology. As "Islam" was understood to be a global culture, we can see how traditional Muslim culture has eroded in most of the countries of the Islamic world. Not only the material culture such as architecture or organization of transport are affected, but also the organization of the state and civil service, the army, trade and distribution systems, not to mention the international economic and trade organization, even the way people are dressed, have been affected by influences not rooted in the traditional way of life of Muslim people.

We should stop identifying the Islamic world with social and cultural patterns linked to the desert, camels, women completely veiled in traditional dress, Qur'anic punishments of cutting the hand of a thief or beheading the criminals in public. All this is more an exception than a rule. Saudi Arabia's system where the traditional Islamic Law system still prevails, cannot be any more the example of what is happening or what is going to happen in the whole of the Islamic world. When Egyptian people at the beach see women from Arabian origin, in black dress and completely veiled, swimming in the sea, they find this exotic, a "curiosum" rather than an example to be followed, a very particular behavior rather than a universal pattern of Islamic culture. It has been asked by an eminent Dutch scholar in Islamic Law why in Egypt – and in other Muslim countries – they don't apply the Qur'anic prescription to cut the hand of the thief, and the answer is that in this particular case, – but not only that – the traditional Islamic Law-system is simply not applied any more. Some militants accused the late president Anwar as-Sadate of making Egypt a non-Muslim country ruled by a foreign Law – system. Can we conclude with them that Egypt is not any more a Muslim country? I don't think so, because the reference to the Qur'ân is still at the heart of Egyptian legislation. The interpretation of the Tradition and of the Qur'ân is however radically different from the understanding of the Qur'ân still predominant in Saudi-Arabia and some other countries. There is a tendency to take a certain distance towards the text.

Eventually, Muslims do not live any more in what they call *Dâr as-Islâm*, the House of Islam, which is for them, *Dâr as-Salâm*, the House of Peace. Remains of the glory of the great empires and their coherent civilizations are the mosques and madrasa's of Cairo, Istanbul, Lahore, Mashhad, Isfahân, Samarcand...; but the actual Islamic world is indeed a broken world; scattered elements of the once coherent and global way of life of the *Sharî'a*-Law being still in place, but diversified in so many independent and autonomous Nations, where interpretations of this *Sharî'a* are as different and as many as there are Muslim countries.

Until now, we have still not entirely understood how far reaching the consequences are of this crisis of Islamic identity. And in particular when Muslims are in a certain sense "oversea", that means: living in a country without any Islamic background. How can we answer the question what "Islam" does say about "adoption", "the veil", "stoning", "democracy"..., when so many countries with an Islamic background have different legislations about so many subjects? To answer the given questions, we can only analyze the particular legislation of a particular Muslim country. And then we realize that Egypt is not Turkey, and Indonesia is not Morocco nor Pakistan. Muslims in Europe and America or Australia can go to an Islamic Bookshop. But what can they find there? Translations of Islamic handbooks about *Sharî'a*-Law from the thirteenth century AD, with jurisprudence and *fatwa*'s adapted to that century? Or contemporary Egyptian or Saudi literature about the same subjects, discussing the actual interpretation of *Sharî'a*-Law adapted to the particular situation of these two countries... But how can they adapt their Islamic way of life to the predominant non-Muslim juridical environment, where Islamic Law cannot be dominant? Two cultures can indeed not be global and predominant at the same time in a same geographical entity...

This evolution didn't remain unchallenged. If the urban centers such as Alexandria, Cairo, Ankara, Tehran, Karachi or Delhi and other cities were profoundly influenced by a Western way of life, it was not the case in smaller towns, villages and regions less accessible to Western modernity – they are actually cultural enclaves. Traditional Islamic education has never completely been abolished; the impression could prevail that the old coherent pattern of life still existed; prestigious institutions in Cairo, Fez, Qum,

Lahore or Hyderabad never replaced *Shari'a*-Law in the very heart of the curriculum by moral or dogmatic theology. A strong movement of resistance to the alien influence started to be building up in two central regions of the Islamic world: Egypt and the Indian subcontinent. And here comes up the name of Maudûdî, mentioned by Nasr Hâmid Abû Zayd, who is, in my view – and I refer to the article I wrote three years ago: *Islam, Dialogue or Confrontation?*⁷ –, the most important ideologist of resistance towards what he called “*Western life-style*” and patterns of organizing society. Born in 1903 in Aurangabad (Deccan), Sayyid Abu l-A'la Maudûdî moved finally to Lahore in Pakistan after the partition, and developed a strong Islamic ideology – what is called “*political Islam*” – “*on the basis that mankind should order the affairs of its ethical and social life in accordance with the Shari'a that God has communicated through His Prophets [...]. It denies in the clearest terms the light of man to exercise any discretion in such matters as have been decided by Allah and His Prophet*”.⁸ For Maudûdî, “*the Islamic Community, the Ummah, had a civilization of her own*”, while, according to what he wrote in 1934, in “*the Islamic nations of today..., some have surrendered completely to intellectual as well as political subjugation, while others suffer, more or less, from intellectual slavery*” [...]. (Some) have come to believe as correct what the West claims to be correct [...]. Their criteria of truth, veracity, manners, civilization, morality, and humanity are subject to the standards of the West [...]. ...Both in theory as well in practice, western life-style is diametrically opposed to the Islamic civilization.”

At the same time the Egyptian teacher Hasan al-Bannâ' started the Movement of the Muslim Brothers, while one of the most outstanding members of the movement, Sayyid Qutb, described the Western domination over the world as an international system of usury, calling for *Jihâd*, to make the Islamic system of life dominant in the world. According to Maudûdî, the West could not be an example for the world, as the motor of his power is simply not ethical, but economics, trade and material interest, religion

⁷ In *Philippiniana Sacra*, XXVII (2002), pp. 479-496.

⁸ MAUDUDI, S. Abul A'la, *Legislation and 'Ijtihâd' in islam*, in *Islamic Law and Constitution*, Lahore, 1955, p. 72.

being removed to the margin of society, as a personal matter.⁹ For him, in the dominant Western model, God can still exist, but only as a kind of constitutional monarch, far away from the reality of every day life in society. From an ideology in the thirties and the forties, "political Islam" evolved towards militancy in the fifties and sixties, and from militancy to revolution in the seventies and eighties of the twentieth century. But at the end of that century, it failed to overpower most of the regimes of the Islamic world. Exacerbated by this failure, it turned more violent, and ended up in terrorism, but still able to attack what it sees as the symbol of the western dynamism itself, the motor of his civilization: trade and economics and military power, the Trade Center and the Pentagon. Without any sense of contextuality, they want to go back to the situation of the persecuted Muslims in the time of Muhammad, to apply the famous verse of the sword, in Qur'ân 9, 29a: *"Fight those who believe not in Allâh nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allâh and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the Religion of Truth, from among the People of the Scriptures, until they pay the Jizya-tax with willing submission and feel themselves subdued"*.

We know what happened next. The failure of the movement to reinstall a global Islamic legal system turned into a disaster – *"L'échec de l'islam politique"*¹⁰ (The failure of political Islam) –, now that even in the heart of the Islamic world, in Iraq and Afghanistan, everything is prepared to write new constitutions, certainly far from the idea of a reintroduction of *Shari'a*-Law. As Abdelwahhab Meddeb describes in his book *"The malady of Islam"*¹¹, or Bernard Lewis in *"the Crisis of Islam"*¹², the Islamic world is in disarray. On the political level, globalization has started already in the earliest

⁹ ID., *Intellectual subjugation. Why?*, in *West vs Islam*, Delhi, 1991, pp. 2-6.

¹⁰ ROY, Olivier, *L'échec de l'islam politique*, Paris, 1992; ID., *L'Islam mondialisé*, Paris, 2002: *"Aux yeux de l'opinion occidentale, l'islam renvoie souvent une image de solidité, d'identité et de dynamisme. (...) C'est pourtant cette perspective qu'Olivier Roy met radicalement en question. Qu'il s'agisse de formes violentes ou modérées de réislamisation, toujours l'Occident, avec la globalisation, avec l'individualisme, est au coeur du processus"* (page de couverture).

¹¹ MEDDEB, Abdelwahab, *The Malady of Islam*, New York, 2003.

¹² LEWIS, Berhard, *The Crisis of Islam*, New York, 2003.

years of the twentieth century. Social relations have changed profoundly, so that the way of life of people has undergone radical changes. Humanity has in fact been unified economically and in its lifestyle long before we spoke about globalization, 'Awlama, "mondialisation". Bernard Lewis¹³ is right stating that for the first time in history, a particular way of organizing society based on a certain number of basic rights and a system of values, a particular model of civilization, became dominant in the world, despite terrible and tragic resistances.

Muslims who are sympathetic to Maudûdî's ideology consider that we are in the middle of a "war of religions", as they understand "religion" in the sense of a "global pattern of culture", and as they consider that the Islamic civilization is in great danger. In relation to them, Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* has indeed come out. This clash however, doesn't concern Chinese or Buddhist cultures or civilizations, but only *Islam versus the West* or the *West versus Islam*, which is the title of Maudûdî's collected articles written in the thirties. For them, the "West" is involved in a radical confrontation with the whole of the Islamic world. And in that situation, Muslims have to fight to survive. That's the situation we are actually in, according to them.

The consequences of September 11 are such that we can state that *Multiculturalism*, understood as coexistence of global social and legal systems has come to an end. Multiculturalism can only survive in particular areas of life. The Islamic calendar, as much as the Chinese, are marginal and almost exotic phenomena, in the same way traditional dressing is not a universal, but a very particular element of culture. In this context of globalization and modernity, multi-culturalism became a much more ambiguous concept than generally thought. In the contemporary global world, modernity means that universal human values and fundamental principles of moral behavior, such as human rights, individual freedom, democracy and non-discrimination based on sex, culture and race transcend the particularity of particular cultural practices.

¹³ LEWIS, Bernard, *What went wrong? Western impact and Middle East response*, Oxford-New York, 2002.

It seems to me however, that an authentic religion, such as Islam, represent, on the ethical and eschatological level described in the first part of this analysis, an indispensable and essential contribution for humanity; in the performative challenges of his Scriptures and prophecies. When Muslims say that the Qur'ân simply distinguishes "*al-ma'rûf*", what is universally known as good, from "*al-munkar*" – what is universally seen as evil –, as the fundamental basis for humanity, then it is precisely that what is meant. And it is here that a new understanding of "Islam" and "*rethinking the Qur'ân*" comes in. Nasr Hâmid Abû Zayd is right in his statement that "*The world has already become, whether for good or for bad, one small village in which no independent closed culture, if there is any, can survive*". And the condition for surviving is a fundamental re-interpretation of the Qur'ân. Not anymore as a divine text, to be taken as such, with clear prescriptions and rules to be obeyed, but in its more fundamental meaning, as a "*challenge*"; Abû Zayd will say: as "*a discourse*". I would say: Muslims have to approach the Qur'ân in his "*performative language*", opening the human hearts and minds towards an essential, but not material dimension of life. Not as a description of a particular way of life, an "Islamic culture", not changing through the centuries of human activity. This would be a denial of humanity as creating history, where the eschatological promise refers always to the future and not to the past, in the light of the fundamental universal commandments expressed in the early stage of the Qur'anic recitation: "*Say: <Come, I will rehearse what Allâh hath (really) prohibited you: Join not anything with Him; be good for your parents; kill not your children on a plea of want – We provide sustenance for you and for them – ; come not nigh to indecent deeds, whether open or secret; take not life, which Allâh hath made sacred – except by way of justice and law – . Thus doth He command you, that you may learn wisdom. And come not nigh to the orphan's property, except to improve it, until he attain the age of full strength; give measure and weight with full justice. No burden do We place on any soul, but that which he can bear. Whenever you speak, speak justly, even if a near relative is concerned. And fulfill the covenant of Allâh: thus doth He command you, that you may remember. Verily, this is My Way leading straight; follow not other paths: they will scatter you about His Path. Thus doth He command you, that you may be*

righteous!" (Q. 6, 151-153). To be *righteous*, to have the quality of *taqwâ*, righteousness, that is also what is meant to be a Muslim, in submission to God: to perform *the act of Islam* as orthopraxis in answer to the ethical challenge of the Qur'ân.

With their sensitivity for what is good and wrong, *ma'rûf wa-munkar*, going back to the initial eschatological Message of the Qur'ân, and the challenge of the Qur'anic fundamental commandments, the contemporary Muslims can transcend the deep crisis their community is in now, their resentment towards what they call "*the West*", their reluctantness towards modernity, the tragedy of their search for identity, their exclusion of what is outside the *Umma*, their community, and fight against it, and join the international community referring to the fundamental and universal Human Rights, in a modern global society. What is of course needed, is exactly what professor Hâmid Abû Zayd affirms: "*Stop reducing the Qur'ân to be only a text (...)..., moving further toward a constructive method for Muslims, whenever they are, to be actively engaged in formulating the 'meaning of life' in the world in which they live and further develop the spiritual and ethical dimension of their tradition*" (p. 63). □

LUXENBERG, Christoph, *Die Syrisch-Aramäische Lesart des Koran. Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, Berlin, 2000: Recent onderzoek legt daarenboven een verband met syrisch-christelijke teksten, en ondermeer Efrem de Syriër, waarbij die passages anders zouden moeten vertaald worden. In de beschrijving van de tuin met talrijke vruchten en planten zouden de "sprekende ogen" en de "goedbewaarde parels" niet verwijzen naar menselijke ogen, maar naar witte druiven...