

To whom does Islam really belong?

The reformer of Islam Nasr Abu Zayd receives the Ibn Rushd-Prize 2005

This Year's Ibn Rushd-Prize for Freedom of Thought will be presented to one of the most important scholars of Islam of our time. Nasr Abu Zayd, an Egyptian academic who has been living in exile in the Netherlands since 1995, receives the prize for his persistent battle for an independent scientific research of the Qur'an, firmly kept up even at the cost of his personal freedom. Nasr Abu Zayd, who will receive the award personally on Friday, 25th November 2005 in Berlin, was selected by an independent jury.

Not only since September 11th 2001 has the Western world seen Islam mainly in connection with the so-called 'Islamic fundamentalists'. 'Fundamentalism' is, however, a misleading notion, – Islamic fundamentalists do not go back to the foundations of Islam. They are traditionalists, referring to laws and customs handed down through the centuries, not to the Qur'an as such. Unearthing the foundations of Islam is the concern of others.

The Egyptian literary specialist and Qur'an scientist Nasr Abu Zayd criticizes the traditional way of reading the Qur'an as being outdated and calls for a scientifically founded interpretation which places the text into historical context and distinguishes the real meaning from contemporary ideas arising from the spirit of the times. A modern interpretation of Islam is to be developed by applying historic and linguistic methods, since the Qur'an itself is open to diverse interpretations. Such a pluralism of interpretations once existed in Islamic history – before orthodoxy and Islamism made their claim to an absolute monopoly of interpretation. They insist on the clarity of the divine words and reduce them to commandments and bans.

The practising muslim Abu Zayd wants to save the Qur'an from a tradition distorting its religious essence beyond recognition. He wants to revive it, to make it meaningful for the present day. Abu Zayd grew up in modest circumstances in a village in the Nile delta. As a young man, he was close to the muslim brotherhood. "My discourse threatens the Islamist's discourse because it really gets involved with it, because it analyses it, because it exposes the deceitfulness and the manipulative intention of their discourse," he says. "The Islamists do know that I am not an apostate. They know there is not the slightest proof for this reproach in my books."

Der Ibn Rushd Preis für Freies Denken wird am 25. November 2005 zum siebten Mal verliehen. Ganz im Geiste des Namenspatrons Ibn Rushd (1126 - 1198, alias Averroes), dem Philosophen und Vermittler zwischen den Kulturen, widmet sich der Ibn Rushd Fund für Freies Denken dem Recht auf freie Meinungsäußerung und Demokratie in der arabischen Welt. Der diesjährige Preis war ausgeschrieben für einen Islamforscher, der sich um eine grundlegende Reform des Islam und des islamischen Denkens bemüht.

The Egyptian scholar of Islam caused a great sensation in the mid-nineties of the past century, when he was denounced as an heretic and apostate (sb. who forsakes his religion) because of his scientific research.

Because there is no legal way of accusing somebody of apostacy in Egypt, Abu Zayd's opponents made use of the marriage law to silence him. As an apostate, Abu Zayd was to be divorced from his wife: a muslim woman cannot be married to a non-muslim man. The couple were in fear for their lives. Abu Zayd and his wife Ibtihal Yunis, a professor for French literature, finally fled Egypt and have since been living in exile in the Netherlands. There, Nasr Abu Zayd holds the chair for Islamic Studies at the University of Leiden as well as the Ibn-Rushd Chair for Humanism and Islam at the University for Humanistics at Utrecht.

Abu Zayds case is the best proof for the urgent necessity of scientific research about and into the Qur'an: The sharia, the 'islamic right' codified in the Middle Ages and hardly changed since, calls for the death penalty for apostacy, which Abu Zayd is, albeit without reason, accused of. The basis for this is a quotation of the prophet, disputed in the Islamic world. According to this quotation, those who change their religion must be killed. In the Qur'an itself, no such statement world can be found; that is also the reason why this part of the sharia has not been included in most Arabic states' statute books.

Abu Zayd wants to save the Qur'an from political absorption, as it is being practised in many islamic and arabic countries, and as it is practised also by religious fanatics who claim to be referring to Islam just like the inquisitors claimed Christianity to be the reason for their actions. The religious establishment in Egypt, however, seems to feel less threatened by those religious fanatics than by the analysis and interpretation of the Qur'an as performed by a scientist such as Abu Zayd. This is a disturbing situation and a state of emergency.

The Ibn Rushd-Fund endeavours to strengthen the enlightened and liberal tendencies within the Islamic world. With Nasr Aby Zayd, their most outstanding representative will be honoured.

Prof. Abu Zayd will accept the award, worth € 2000 personally on the 25th November 2005 at 5 p.m. in the Goethe Institute, Neue Schönhauser Straße 20, in Berlin-Mitte.

A reception with Arab tea and bakhlava will conclude the celebrations and leave room for personal discussion.