

# Between Muʿtazilism and Mysticism

## How much of a Muʿtazilite is Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd?

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### Introduction

The ideas presented in this paper grew out of a larger inquiry into the position of the Muʿtazila in modern Arabic thought.<sup>1</sup> The starting-point of this research was the concept of “Neo-Muʿtazilism”, a term which is used to denote the modern Muslim interest in classical Muʿtazilite thought and alleged attempts to revive it. “Neo-Muʿtazilism” as an important trend in modern Muslim intellectual life was dealt with for the first time by Ignaz Goldziher, Bernard Michel and Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Rāziq during the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> It later became a well-known phenomenon and somewhat fashionable subject thanks to a long article published by Robert Caspar in 1957,<sup>3</sup> and it has been further discussed by scholars such as Detlev Khālid, Louis Gardet and Ulrich Schoen.<sup>4</sup> In 1997, the first monograph on the subject was published by Richard C. Martin and Mark R. Woodward.<sup>5</sup> Under the title “Defenders of Reason in Islam,” it unites many of the names and arguments brought forward in connection with the so-called “revival” of Muʿtazilite thought. Nevertheless, this book is so vague that the need for a more thorough study on the subject was in no way diminished by its appearance.

In attempting to offer such a study, I became increasingly critical of the concept of “Neo-Muʿtazilism” itself. Without going into too many details, I can say that I did not find in the Arab world a single author or group of authors whom I felt could be defined without reservation as “Neo-Muʿtazilite”. Instead, what I

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<sup>1</sup> *Neo-Muʿtazilismus? Intention und Kontext im modernen arabischen Umgang mit dem rationalistischen Erbe des Islam*, Leiden 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*, Leiden 1920, pp. 315-16, 320-21, 364; Muḥammad ʿAbduh, *Rissalat al Tawhid. Exposé de la religion musulmane*, transl. with an introduction by Bernard Michel and Moustapha Abdel Razik, Paris 1925, pp. lviii-lxix, lxii, lxiv-lxv, lxxxiv, 11 n. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Caspar, “Un aspect de la pensée musulmane moderne. Le renouveau du muʿtazilisme,” *Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Etudes Orientales du Caire* 4 (1957), pp. 141-202.

<sup>4</sup> Detlev Khālid, “Some Aspects of Neo-Muʿtazilism,” *Islamic Studies* 8 iv (1969), pp. 319-47; Louis Gardet, “Signification du ‘renouveau muʿtazilite’ dans la pensée musulmane contemporaine,” in *Islamic Philosophy and the Classical Tradition. Essays presented by his friends and pupils to Richard Walzer on his seventieth birthday*, eds. S.M. Stern, Albert Hourani, and Vivian Brown, Oxford 1972, pp. 63-75; Ulrich Schoen, *Determination und Freiheit im arabischen Denken heute. Eine christliche Reflexion im Gespräch mit Naturwissenschaften und Islam*, Göttingen 1976, pp. 132-38.

<sup>5</sup> Richard C. Martin and Mark R. Woodward (in collaboration with Dwi Surya Atmaja), *Defenders of Reason in Islam. Muʿtazilism from Medieval School to Modern Symbol*, Oxford 1997.

found was a large number of authors from the most diverse intellectual backgrounds, who had chosen, for very different reasons, to speak about the classical Muʿtazilite school in positive terms and to present it, or at least some of its ideas, as a solution to a whole range of modern problems. Upon closer examination, the world-view, arguments and aims of these authors – who rarely ever applied the term “Neo-Muʿtazilism” to themselves – had more to do with the contemporary intellectual trends they were part of (that is, liberalism, Marxism, Islamism, and certain philosophical or other academic traditions) than with the ideas of the very school they referred to as a model for the contemporary Arab and Muslim world. Even in the only two cases which I came across in which an Arab author clearly speaks of himself as a modern Muʿtazilite – Ḥasan Ḥanafī<sup>6</sup> and Amīn Nāyif Dhīyāb<sup>7</sup> –, I remained highly sceptical as to whether it was appropriate to regard these men as examples of a “Neo-Muʿtazilite” type of thought worthy of the name, since these self-designations were accompanied by far too much rhetoric, wishful thinking and deviation from old Muʿtazilite ideas.

Another feature I observed was the relatively limited emphasis placed on theology in the works of the so-called “Neo-Muʿtazilites”. Of course, theological, dogmatic and metaphysical questions played a prominent role in their respective discussions of classical Muʿtazilism. Yet there were modern questions of a political, social, theoretical-philosophical or ideological nature which loomed large behind these discussions and which seemed to be what these authors actually had in mind. The discovery of the school as a model for change and a symbol for modernity by modern Arab intellectuals – not even always Muslims, but sometimes Christians as well<sup>8</sup> – clearly had to be seen as an important phenomenon. Yet its analysis could not be founded upon the notion of a mainly theologically motivated return to a ready-made set of ideas. Instead, this analysis had to take into account the different intentions with which Muʿtazilite concepts were offered as modern models and the respective contexts in which this was done.

### *Abū Zayd: Linking “literary exegesis” with the Muʿtazila*

One example for my argument that we should not be too quick to label someone as a “Neo-Muʿtazilite” is the Egyptian author Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd. He

<sup>6</sup> Ḥasan Ḥanafī, “Mādhā yaʿnī: al-yaṣār al-islāmī?” in *al-Yaṣār al-islāmī. Kitābāt fī l-nahḍa al-islāmīya*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥanafī, Cairo 1981, pp. 5-48, here pp. 13-15.

<sup>7</sup> Amīn Nāyif Dhīyāb, *Jadal al-aḥkār. Qirāʾa fī aḥkār ḥizb al-taḥrīr ḥawla aḥkār al-ulūbiyya wa-l-qaḍāʾ wa-l-qadar wa-l-ʾajal wa-l-rizq wa-l-hudā wa-l-ḍalāl wa-l-naṣr wa-l-jazāʾ*, Amman 1995. See also Dhīyāb’s website [www.mutazela.cjb.net](http://www.mutazela.cjb.net) [consulted 11.05.2007].

<sup>8</sup> I am thinking here especially of the Egyptian scholar Albert Nasri Nader, whose most important works on the school are *Falsafat al-Muʿtazila*, *Falāsīfat al-islām al-asbaqīn* 1-2, Alexandria 1950-51, and *Le système philosophique des Muʿtazila (premiers penseurs de l’Islam)*, Beirut 1956, as well as the Iraqi priest Suhayl Qāshā, resident of Lebanon, and his *Ruʾya jadīda fī l-Muʿtazila*, Beirut 1997.

was described as a modern Mu‘tazilite in the original sense of the word (*mu‘tazilī mu‘āṣir bi-l-ḥaqīqa lā al-majāz*) by his colleague Jābir ‘Uṣfūr in 1991 and as a Neo-Mu‘tazilite by Stefan Wild in 1993.<sup>9</sup> Although Navid Kermani, who closely followed Abū Zayd’s work for a number of years,<sup>10</sup> tries to prove the author’s differentiated relationship to the school,<sup>11</sup> his alleged Mu‘tazilite outlook is often mentioned in relevant contexts and discussions. Not surprisingly, Abū Zayd is presented by Martin and Woodward as one of those modern Muslim authors who write appreciatively about the Mu‘tazila and in an essentially theological context.<sup>12</sup>

What they have in mind is, first of all, Abū Zayd’s MA thesis of 1976, published in 1981, which deals with the concept of “metaphorical expression” (*majāz*) in the Qur’ān according to the exegetical theory and practice of the Mu‘tazila.<sup>13</sup> It is true that Abū Zayd here shows a great deal of respect for the rationalist theology of the school. He owes this respect partly to one of his teachers, the philosopher Ḥasan Ḥanafī who – following his return from Paris in 1966 – fascinated many of his students with his outspoken criticism of the hierarchical structure and “reactionary” nature of classical Ash‘arite thought.<sup>14</sup> It would be wrong, however, to conclude that Abū Zayd subscribes to the theological system of the Mu‘tazila as such. Rather, he praises it in his introduction from a materialistic – or, one might say, vulgar Marxist – point of view, for the socio-political aspirations with which it was formulated: the Mu‘tazilite theories of *qudra* and *ikhtiyār* (that is, man’s ability to act independently of divine determination) are presented by him as a means of overcoming the passive and fatalistic notion of politics advocated by the Umayyad caliphs, who sought to preserve their own power by presenting it, through the notion of divine *jabr* (coercion), as an expression of God’s will. Other Mu‘tazilite positions, according to Abū Zayd, were either directly connected to this set of problems or developed within the same context.<sup>15</sup> This way of presenting the Mu‘tazila and of explaining its origins is a

<sup>9</sup> Jābir ‘Uṣfūr, “‘Maḥmūd al-naṣṣ’ wa-l-i‘tizāl al-mu‘āṣir,” *Ibdā’* 9 iii (1991), pp. 30-47, here p. 33; Stefan Wild, “Die andere Seite des Textes. Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zaid und der Koran,” *Die Welt des Islams* 33 (1993), pp. 256-61, here p. 259.

<sup>10</sup> Navid Kermani, “Die Affäre Abū Zaid. Eine Kritik am religiösen Diskurs und ihre Folgen,” *Orient* 35 i (1994), pp. 25-49; *Offenbarung als Kommunikation. Das Konzept wahy in Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayds Maḥmūd an-naṣṣ*, Frankfurt 1996; “From Revelation to Interpretation. Naṣr Hamid Abu Zayd and the Literary Study of the Qur’an,” in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur’an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki, Oxford / London 2004, pp. 169-92. Abū Zayd’s autobiographical account *Ein Leben mit dem Islam*, Freiburg 1999, transl. from the Arabic by Chérifa Magdi, was narrated by Kermani.

<sup>11</sup> Kermani, *Offenbarung als Kommunikation*, pp. 64-69.

<sup>12</sup> Martin and Woodward, *Defenders of Reason in Islam*, pp. 215-16.

<sup>13</sup> Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, *al-Ittijāh al-‘aqlī fī l-tafsīr. Dirāsa fī qaḍīyyat al-majāz fī l-Qur’ān ‘inda l-Mu‘tazila*, [Beirut 1981] Beirut <sup>4</sup>1996.

<sup>14</sup> Abū Zayd, *Ein Leben mit dem Islam*, pp. 96-99.

<sup>15</sup> Abū Zayd, *al-Ittijāh al-‘aqlī fī l-tafsīr*, pp. 11-42.

common feature in most liberal, modernist and “progressive” Arab works about the school and therefore not unique to Abū Zayd.<sup>16</sup>

Abū Zayd’s originality in dealing with the Mu‘tazila stems from his interests as a linguist and a specialist in Arabic literature with a thorough background in the so-called “literary exegesis” (*al-tafsīr al-adabī*) which was developed at his own faculty at the University of Cairo (previously, the Egyptian University) from the 1930s onwards by Amīn al-Khūlī and a number of his pupils, such as Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalaf Allāh and al-Khūlī’s daughter ‘Ā’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān “Bint al-Shāṭibī”.<sup>17</sup> The basic idea of this school of thought is that the Qur’ān should be regarded as the greatest “literary work” in the history of Arabic language and literature and, as such, be subjected to the same methods of interpretation which are generally applied in the field of literary criticism. When Khalaf Allāh’s PhD thesis caused one of the major scandals about religious questions in modern Egyptian history in 1947, the uproar was mainly due to the fact that the author had denied the historical validity of Qur’ānic storytelling (*qasas*). He had argued that it was not historical facts that God had intended to transmit through the Qur’ān, but a set of religious principles and moral values which are embedded in the Qur’ānic narratives and to be found behind the actual wording of its verses. Central to Khalaf Allāh’s argumentation was the idea of God’s “intention” (*qaṣd*). This term had come into modern usage after the re-discovery of the Mālikī jurist al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388)<sup>18</sup> and was taken up by Khalaf Allāh to support his thesis that God, in his wisdom, had made use in the Qur’ān of certain ideas and forms of expression which were current in the Arabian peninsula at the time of Muḥammad in order to achieve certain psychological effects on the prophet and his immediate followers. In place of the historical accuracy of the Qur’ān, Khalaf Allāh empha-

<sup>16</sup> Some examples are Aḥmad Amīn, *Duḥā l-Islām* 1-3, [Cairo 1933-36] Cairo <sup>6</sup>1961, vol. 3, p. 81; Chikh Bouamrane, *Le problème de la liberté humaine dans la pensée musulmane. Solution mu‘tazilite*, Paris 1978, pp. 8-9, 16-17, 24-26; Muḥammad ‘Imāra, *al-Mu‘tazila wa-mushkilat al-ḥurriyya al-insāniyya*, [Beirut 1972] Cairo / Beirut <sup>2</sup>1988, pp. 29-30, 147-55; Ḥusayn Muruwwa, *al-Naza‘āt al-māddiyya fī l-falsafa al-‘arabiyya al-islāmiyya* 1-2, [Beirut 1978] Beirut <sup>6</sup>1988, vol. 1, pp. 567-68; Muḥammad ‘Ābid al-Jābirī, “al-‘Aqlāniyya al-‘arabiyya wa-l-siyāsa. Qirā’a siyāsiyya fī uṣūl al-Mu‘tazila,” *al-Waḥda* 51 (1988), pp. 65-68.

<sup>17</sup> The most important works to be mentioned here are Amīn al-Khūlī, *al-Tafsīr. Ma‘ālim ḥayātībi wa-minhajuhū l-yazm*, Cairo 1944; Muḥammad Aḥmad Khalaf Allāh, *al-Fann al-qasasī fī l-Qur’ān al-karīm*, Cairo 1950-51; ‘Ā’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, *al-Tafsīr al-bayānī li-l-Qur’ān al-karīm* 1-2, Cairo 1962-69. For further information see Jacques Jomier, “Quelques positions actuelles de l’exégèse coranique en Egypte révélées par une polémique récente (1947-1951),” *Mélanges de l’Institut Dominicain d’Etudes Orientales du Caire* 1 (1954), pp. 39-72; Rotraud Wielandt, *Offenbarung und Geschichte im Denken moderner Muslime*, Wiesbaden 1971, pp. 134-52; Katrin Speicher, “Einige Bemerkungen zu al-Ḥūlīs Entwurf eines *tafsīr adabī*,” in *Encounters of Words and Texts. Intercultural Studies in Honor of Stefan Wild*, eds. Lutz Edzard and Christian Szyska, Hildesheim 1997, pp. 3-21; Issa J. Boullata, “Modern Qur’ān Exegesis. A Study of Bint al-Shāṭibī’s Method,” *The Muslim World* 64 ii (1974), pp. 103-13.

<sup>18</sup> See Maribel Fierro, “al-Shāṭibī,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. New Edition, vol. 9, pp. 364-65.

sized God’s “artistic freedom” in narrating the stories of the Qur’ān in a manner which he considered appropriate in order to achieve the desired results.<sup>19</sup>

This literary approach to the Qur’ān provides the background for Abū Zayd’s interest in the Mu‘tazilite understanding of *majāz*. The term is not treated by him primarily as a theological concept, but as a key to a whole world of linguistic and rhetorical considerations which are intertwined with the theological and, as such, socio-political aims of the Mu‘tazila.<sup>20</sup> The focal point of his study is the question of the Muslim understanding of the relationship between the statements of the Qur’ān and their meaning in the mind of their reader or hearer. As Abū Zayd explains, this question is closely related to the different Muslim understandings of the relationship between the words and the objects they mark (*‘alāqat al-ism bi-l-musammā*).<sup>21</sup> When Abū Zayd discusses the Mu‘tazilite and Ash‘arite theories about the “constitution” or “coining” (*muwāḍa‘a*) of words and language in general, he does not conceal his sympathy for the Mu‘tazilite idea of human “convention” (*iṣṭilāḥ*) with regard to the usage of language, and his distance from the Ash‘arite idea of a pre-fabricated language which reached mankind through divine “instruction” (*tawqīf*). He explains the relationship between these ideas and the respective theories of the two schools concerning God’s attributes (*ṣifāt*), in particular the attribute of “speech” (*kalām*) which belonged, for the Mu‘tazila, to the “attributes of the act” (*ṣifāt al-fi‘l*) as opposed to the “attributes of the essence” (*ṣifāt al-dhāt* or *ṣifāt al-nafs*) and, for the Ash‘ariyya, like all divine *ṣifāt*, to his eternal and essential attributes. These theories, again, were connected to the ideas of the two groups concerning the metaphysical status of the Qur’ān. While in the view of the Mu‘tazila, the Qur’ān was the result of a divine act and, as such, “produced in time” (*muḥdath*) or “created” (*makblūq*), according to the Ash‘arites it was part of the divine essence and, as such, “eternal” (*qadīm*) and “uncreated” (*ghayr makblūq*). For the Ash‘arites, the Arabic language must have been eternal as well, since otherwise their theory of the eternal wording of the Qur’ān would not have made sense.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> For details see Wielandt, *Offenbarung und Geschichte*, pp. 135-37.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. on this subject: Lothar Kopf, “Religious Influences on Medieval Arabic Philology,” *Studia Islamica* 5 (1956), pp. 33-59; Henri Loucel, “L’origine du langage d’après les grammairiens arabes,” *Arabica* 10 (1963), pp. 188-208, 253-81; 11 (1964), pp. 57-72, 151-87; John Wansbrough, “*Majāz al-Qur’ān*. Periphrastic Exegesis,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 33 (1970), pp. 247-66; Bernard G. Weiss, “Medieval Muslim Discussions of the Origin of Language,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 124 i (1974), pp. 33-41; Wolfhart Heinrichs, “On the Genesis of the *ḥaqīqa majāz* Dichotomy,” *Studia Islamica* 59 (1984), pp. 111-40; C.H.M. Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar and Qur’anic Exegesis in Early Islam*, Leiden 1993; Janusz Danecki, “Is Language a Human Creation? Al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Gabbār on the origin of language,” *Hémispheres* 10 (1995), pp. 45-52; Mustafa Shah, “The Philological Endeavors of Early Arabic Linguists. Theological Implications of the *tawqīf-i-ṣṭilāḥ* Antithesis and the *majāz* Controversy,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 1 i (1999), pp. 27-46; 2 i (2000), pp. 43-66.

<sup>21</sup> Abū Zayd, *al-Ittijāh al-‘aqlī fi l-tafsīr*, p. 83.

<sup>22</sup> Abū Zayd, *al-Ittijāh al-‘aqlī fi l-tafsīr*, pp. 70-73, 242-43.



All this, according to Abū Zayd, had to do with the Muʿtazilite and Ashʿarite approaches to the concept of the “semantic meaning” (*dalāla*) of words and expressions and, ultimately, with their respective ways of understanding the Qurʾān. He points out that the Muʿtazila considered not only, like the Ashʿariyya, the knowledge of the rules of the *muwādaʿa* of language, but also at least some knowledge about the “intention” (*qaṣd*) and “state” (*ḥāl*) of the speaker, as a necessary prerequisite for the understanding of linguistic expressions. Without this additional knowledge, the Muʿtazila claimed, there could be no clear idea of the *dalāla* of the words of any speaker, including God. This position, in turn, was linked to the Muʿtazilite theory of the possibility of knowing God rationally, that is without regard to what has been said in his revelation. Unlike the Ashʿarites, who regarded the Qurʾān as the only source of knowledge about God and considered his speech as meaningful only in itself, the Muʿtazilites understood the Qurʾān in the light of their rational conception of God’s qualities and intentions. This is why they assigned a greater role to human reason in deciding where *majāz* could be found.<sup>23</sup>

The emergence and historical development of the concept of *majāz* is described by Abū Zayd in reference to a number of thinkers, such as Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/688), Mujāhid (d. 104/722 or earlier), Jahm Ibn Ṣafwān (d. 128/746), Muqātil Ibn Sulaymān (d. 150/767), Abū ʿUbayda (d. about 207/822), al-Farrāʾ (d. 207/822) and al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/869).<sup>24</sup> Particular importance is attached to the *Kitāb al-Nukat fī ʾiḥjāz al-Qurʾān* by the Muʿtazilite author al-Rummānī (d. 384/994), since he recognised the important psychological function of the Qurʾānic usage of *majāz* in captivating its hearers and readers.<sup>25</sup> At the end of his work, Abū Zayd takes a closer look at the use of the concept of *majāz* by ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025), who had found in it an important tool for solving the contradictions between the literal meaning of a number of Qurʾānic expressions and the dogmatic positions of his school,<sup>26</sup> positions which – as Abū Zayd explains in his introduction – were directly connected to the socio-political interests of the Muʿtazila. Here, it seems, lies the main reason why his research did not turn him into a fully-fledged advocate of the Muʿtazilite theological system. His MA the-

<sup>23</sup> Abū Zayd, *al-Ittijāh al-ʿaqlī fī l-tafsīr*, pp. 83-90, 242-43.

<sup>24</sup> Abū Zayd, *al-Ittijāh al-ʿaqlī fī l-tafsīr*, pp. 93-117. His main sources are the *tafsīr* of al-Ṭabarī, al-Suyūṭī’s *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*, Muqātil’s *al-Ashbāḥ wa-l-nazāʾir fī l-Qurʾān al-karīm* (ed. Shāḥāta, Cairo 1975), Abū ʿUbayda’s *Majāz al-Qurʾān* (ed. Sezgin, Cairo <sup>2</sup>1970), al-Farrāʾ’s *Maʿānī l-Qurʾān* (1-3, eds. Najātī, al-Najjār, and Shalabī, Cairo 1955-73), al-Jāḥiẓ’s *Kitāb al-Ḥayawān*, his *Kitāb al-Uṭhmāniyya*, his *al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, and a number of his *Rasāʾil*.

<sup>25</sup> Abū Zayd, *al-Ittijāh al-ʿaqlī fī l-tafsīr*, pp. 117-22. Al-Rummānī’s *kitāb* was published in *Thalāth rasāʾil fī ʾiḥjāz al-Qurʾān*, eds. Khalaf Allāh and Salām, Cairo 1955.

<sup>26</sup> Abū Zayd, *al-Ittijāh al-ʿaqlī fī l-tafsīr*, pp. 180-239. He draws especially on ʿAbd al-Jabbār’s *Mutashābih al-Qurʾān*, his *Kitāb al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-tawḥīd wa-l-ʿadl*, especially vols. 4 (*Ruʾyat al-Bārī*), 6 (*al-Taʾdīl wa-l-tajwīr*), 8 (*al-Makhlūq*) and 16 (*Iʾjāz al-Qurʾān*), and Mānak-dīm’s *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-khamsa* (ed. ʿUthmān, Cairo 1965), which Abū Zayd treats, in agreement with the editor, as a work of ʿAbd al-Jabbār.

sis, as Abū Zayd recalls in his autobiography, led him instead to the discovery “that the Qur’ān had become the arena of a political and social struggle which was being fought with the weapons of theology, that is with concepts, definitions and dogmas.”<sup>27</sup>

### *Linking mysticism with hermeneutics*

This subject – the different Muslim approaches to understanding the Qur’ān in the light of their specific socio-political and dogmatic agendas – became the *Leitmotiv* in Abū Zayd’s subsequent research, and he linked it to the general problem of the capabilities and limits of man in his desire to understand the Qur’ānic message. From the rationalistic solutions of the Mu‘tazila, Abū Zayd turned to two subjects which show, as he soon came to be convinced, surprising similarities: Islamic mysticism and Western semiotic and hermeneutical thought. In embarking upon a comprehensive investigation of the mystical thinker Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) and his “exegetical philosophy” (*falsafat al-ta’wīl*), Abū Zayd was looking for a deeper theoretical understanding of the principle of *ta’wīl*, and he found it – following a suggestion of Ḥasan Ḥanafī – in the hermeneutical works of authors such as Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Althusser, Ricœur and, above all, Gadamer.<sup>28</sup> The dynamic, relativistic and individualistic approach of modern hermeneutics and Islamic mysticism to the issues of understanding and truth left a great impression on Abū Zayd, and in his autobiography he contrasts it with the “apodictic judgements” of his MA thesis – a form of self-criticism which must be understood as an allusion to the apodictic judgements of the Mu‘tazila as well.<sup>29</sup> He even describes himself here as a proponent of mystical pantheism and as being dissatisfied with the rationalistic image of God as it was held by the school.<sup>30</sup>

Abū Zayd’s findings on Ibn ‘Arabī were presented in a study for which he was granted the PhD degree in 1981. This work, which was published two years later,<sup>31</sup> begins with essentially the same observation as his work on the Mu‘tazila: the interpretations of the Qur’ān offered by Ibn ‘Arabī are closely connected to the situation of his time and the socio-political and dogmatic interests of mystical Islam.<sup>32</sup> Although this materialist and historicist way of understanding Ibn

<sup>27</sup> Abū Zayd, *Ein Leben mit dem Islam*, p. 111.

<sup>28</sup> Abū Zayd, *Ein Leben mit dem Islam*, pp. 115-17.

<sup>29</sup> Abū Zayd, *Ein Leben mit dem Islam*, p. 119.

<sup>30</sup> Abū Zayd, *Ein Leben mit dem Islam*, p. 209.

<sup>31</sup> Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, *Falsafat al-ta’wīl. Dirāsa fī ta’wīl al-Qur’ān ‘inda Muḥyi l-Dīn Ibn ‘Arabī*, [Beirut 1983] Beirut <sup>4</sup>1998. A more recent book on the subject by Abū Zayd which was originally written for a non-specialized Western audience, but which hitherto remains untranslated (p. 15), is his *Ḥakadhbā takallama Ibn ‘Arabī*, Cairo 2002.

<sup>32</sup> Abū Zayd, *Falsafat al-ta’wīl*, pp. 33-37.

‘Arabī might have led Abū Zayd to assume a certain distance from the object of his study, he shows considerable admiration for Ibn ‘Arabī’s “comprehensive philosophical method which lends order to existence and to the text at the same time” and for the exegetical depth of his influential work, *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*.<sup>33</sup> More importantly, Abū Zayd’s occupation with Ibn ‘Arabī led him to the discovery of mystical Qur’ānic exegesis – in addition to the rationalistic approach of the Mu‘tazila – as a second source of inspiration for his own exegetical reasoning. The importance of Ibn ‘Arabī, for him, lies in what he considers his hermeneutical and semiotic method in understanding the Qur’ānic revelation and the world in general. This interpretation of Ibn ‘Arabī, together with one of the most interesting modern critiques of Mu‘tazilite linguistic concepts, can be found in an article published by Abū Zayd in 1986 under the title “Signs in the Heritage”.<sup>34</sup>

This article attempts to make a comparison between classical Arab-Islamic linguistic thought and the arguments of modern semiotics (*‘ilm al-‘alāmāt*) in order to find similarities and possible points of contact between the two approaches. It draws especially on the ideas of the Mu‘tazilites al-Jāḥiẓ and ‘Abd al-Jabbār, the Ash‘arite al-Jurjānī (d. 471/1078) and the mystic Ibn ‘Arabī, and emphasizes, in spite of the differences between their schools of thought, the internal unity and cohesion of the Arab-Islamic linguistic discipline as such – a discipline which is lauded by Abū Zayd for what he calls its “clear semiotic starting-point” in dealing with language.<sup>35</sup> All linguistic thinkers in the classical Arab-Islamic culture, he says, regarded language as a “meaningful system” (*niẓām dāll*) and as part of the epistemological order within which man was entrusted (*mukallaḥ*) with the task of living up to a set of divine instructions and expectations. Basing itself upon the Qur’ān, the entire Arab-Islamic linguistic tradition considered the world as being full of “signs” (*āyāt*) of the existence of its Creator and claimed that man’s ability to fulfil the divine commands was essentially dependent upon his ability to grasp the *dalāla* of these signs and to extract their meaning (*ma’nā*) through a process of understanding or “reading”.<sup>36</sup>

Although Abū Zayd is full of admiration for the ideas of the Arab-Islamic linguists in general, he has certain priorities, and his main sympathies are not on the side of the Mu‘tazila. Admittedly, he still prefers the Mu‘tazilite theory of human “convention” (*iṣṭilāḥ*) to the Ash‘arite theory of divine “instruction” (*tawqīf*) with

<sup>33</sup> Abū Zayd, *Falsafat al-ta’wīl*, p. 18.

<sup>34</sup> Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, “al-‘Alāmāt fī l-turāth. Dirāsa istikshāfiyya,” first publ. in *Anẓimat al-‘alāmāt fī l-luḡha wa-l-adab wa-l-thaqāfa. Madkhal ilā l-simiyūtiqā*, eds. Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd and Siẓā Qāsim, Cairo 1986, pp. 73-132, here used in the reprinted version in Abū Zayd, *Ishkālīyyāt al-qirā’a wa-āliyyāt al-ta’wīl*, Beirut <sup>4</sup>1996, pp. 51-116.

<sup>35</sup> Abū Zayd, “al-‘Alāmāt fī l-turāth,” p. 86.

<sup>36</sup> Abū Zayd, “al-‘Alāmāt fī l-turāth,” pp. 54, 56-57, 101.



respect to the origins of language, and the Mu‘tazilite insistence on the possibility of knowing God rationally to the Ash‘arite position that God can be known solely through revelation.<sup>37</sup> But he has some important reservations concerning the rational approach of the Mu‘tazilites to the concept of *majāz*. The problem, as he sees it, lies in the fact that men like al-Jāhiz and ‘Abd al-Jabbār, who were interested in the description of language as a precise tool of the human mind, shied away from accepting, on the theoretical level, too many different forms of *majāz*. The principal function of language, for both, was information or notification (*ba-yān* according to al-Jāhiz, *inbā’* according to ‘Abd al-Jabbār), and as thinkers who strove for dogmatic clarity, they saw the existence of different levels of linguistic *dalāla* as a disturbing phenomenon. This is why ‘Abd al-Jabbār regarded the tendency of words, being placed together in a sequence, to bring about a semantic or metaphorical change in their meaning (*taḥawwul dalālī* or *majāzī*) as a kind of flaw (*‘ayb*) of language in general. In order to save language from theoretical devaluation, he thus defined human “convention” and the clear “intention” of the speaker as necessary prerequisites for *majāz*. Not even in poetry were he and al-Jāhiz prepared to accept the deviation of an author from the commonly agreed-upon norms of expression, and thus they missed the important individual character of metaphorical speech. In this context, ‘Abd al-Jabbār – always according to Abū Zayd – even neglected certain forms of *majāz*.<sup>38</sup>

The difficulties the Mu‘tazila had with the *dalāla* of language stemmed, as Abū Zayd explains, from what ‘Abd al-Jabbār describes as the breadth (*ittisā’*) of its possibilities. The complexity of language may give it an advantage over other sign systems with regard to the transmission of information, but this can easily become a disadvantage given the liability of linguistic expressions to ambiguity.<sup>39</sup> In order to solve this problem, ‘Abd al-Jabbār defined the rules for the use of *majāz* according to the example of the “analogy from the known to the unknown” (*qiyās al-ghā’ib ‘alā l-shāhid*) and thus restricted it to the allegorical comparison (*mushābaha* or *muqārana*). For him, just as in the case of the analogy between *‘ālam al-ghayb* and *‘ālam al-shahāda*, the two sides of this comparison – the real and the allegorical meaning of a term – showed some similarities, but they were strictly not to be confused with each other.<sup>40</sup> This attempt to explain the workings of lan-

<sup>37</sup> Abū Zayd, “al-‘Alāmāt fi l-turāth,” pp. 61-75.

<sup>38</sup> He denied, for example, the ability of names to bring about a *taḥawwul majāzī* although, as Abū Zayd explains, there are clear examples of the metaphorical use of names, as in the expressions “an issue which has no Abū Ḥasan [‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, i.e. someone who has the ability to resolve difficult questions]” and “no *fatwās* are being issued as long as Mālik [Ibn Anas, i.e. the leading *muftī* of the time] is in town.” Abū Zayd, “al-‘Alāmāt fi l-turāth,” pp. 102-10. References for this and the following are vols. 5 (*al-Firaq ghayr al-islāmiyya*), 8 (*al-Makhlūq*), 15 (*al-Tanabbu‘āt wa-l-mu‘jizāt*) and 16 (*I‘jāz al-Qur‘ān*) of ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s *Kitāb al-Mughnī*, the *Sharḥ al-Uṣūl al-khamsa*, and al-Jāhiz’s *Kitāb al-Hayawān*.

<sup>39</sup> Abū Zayd, “al-‘Alāmāt fi l-turāth,” pp. 87-89.

<sup>40</sup> Abū Zayd, “al-‘Alāmāt fi l-turāth,” pp. 108-10.

guage according to the example of logic prevented ʿAbd al-Jabbār, in the judgement of Abū Zayd, from realizing the distinctive features of linguistic *dalāla*.<sup>41</sup>

A better approach to the problems of metaphorical speech is seen by Abū Zayd in the ideas of the Ashʿarite philologist al-Jurjānī. Instead of concentrating, from a dogmatic perspective, on the question of divine intention, he was interested, as Abū Zayd shows, in a scientific explanation of the “miraculous nature” (*iʿjāz*) of the Qurʾān. This led him, especially in his works *Asrār al-balāgha* and *Dalāʾil al-iʿjāz*, to a philosophy of language in which texts are understood as being much more than the mere sum of the words used. For al-Jurjānī, the *dalāla* of a text stems instead from the “interaction of the meanings of the signs with the meanings of their composition” (*tafāʿul dalālāt al-ʿalāmāt wa-dalālāt al-tarkīb maʿan*), as Abū Zayd puts it.<sup>42</sup> This means that the complexity of language, which had been feared by ʿAbd al-Jabbār, came to be seen by al-Jurjānī as its outstanding feature by which it distinguishes itself in a positive sense from other existing sign systems. Central to his argumentation was the concept of the “arrangement” or “formulation” (*naẓm*) of texts, as it was used with regard to the composition of poetry – a fact which enabled al-Jurjānī to detect the importance of the individual author or speaker and his artistic creativity. At the same time, Abū Zayd sees in al-Jurjānī, especially in his reflections on poetical theory, a remarkable sense for the hermeneutical problem of understanding (*muʿdilat* “*al-fahm*”) on the part of the reader or recipient (*mutalaqqī*) of a text. This leads him to the conclusion that al-Jurjānī not only departed in a fruitful fashion from the linguistic ideas of the Muʿtazila, but that he also came close to ideas which the mentor of modern semiotics, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (d. 1913), was to profess at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>43</sup>

The dogmatic-rationalist approach of the Muʿtazila and the rhetorical one of al-Jurjānī were surpassed, however, by the mystical vision of language of Ibn ʿArabī. It would exceed the scope of the present study to examine Abū Zayd’s comments on the refined linguistic philosophy of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century thinker in detail. What is important is that he regards Ibn ʿArabī’s approach to language as a “semiotic” one *par excellence*. Consistent with the mystical theory that every phenomenon possesses an inner (*bāṭin*) and an outer (*ẓāhir*) side, and with the Qurʾānic idea that God can be known through his signs, Ibn ʿArabī imagined the world, in Abū Zayd’s view, as a constant process of communication and as an “italic text” (*naṣṣ māʾil*) or as a “text in the semiotic sense” in which interpretation (*taʾwīl*), understanding (*fahm*) and reading (*qirāʾa*) belong to the most fundamental elements of human existence. In this context, Abū Zayd also commends Ibn ʿArabī for his awareness that “truth” is something which can be reached only by the “knowing mystic” (*ʿārif*) who possesses the ability to transcend the visible or

<sup>41</sup> Abū Zayd, “al-ʿAlāmāt fi l-turāth,” pp. 105-6.

<sup>42</sup> Abū Zayd, “al-ʿAlāmāt fi l-turāth,” pp. 89.

<sup>43</sup> Abū Zayd, “al-ʿAlāmāt fi l-turāth,” pp. 76, 92-97.

outer surface of things and texts – the Qur’ānic text included – and grasp the inner or essential meaning of all manner of phenomena, without denying the subjective and relative nature of his own, individual truth.<sup>44</sup>

*Maḥbūm al-naṣṣ: Mu‘tazilite concepts, hermeneutical endeavour*

The concept of communication which comes into play here is of central importance in what is generally regarded as Abū Zayd’s most important book, *Maḥbūm al-naṣṣ*, published in 1990.<sup>45</sup> This book depicts the Qur’ān as the result of a communicative relationship between its divine “sender” (*mursil*) and its human “receiver” (*mutalaqqī*), and the sign system or “code” (*shifra*) of human language as God’s chosen medium (*wasīla*) for the transmission of his message (*risāla*). It stresses the principle of *ta’wīl* – which it regards as “the other side of the text” – and the importance of the methods of literary exegesis, especially with regard to the phenomenon of *majāz*. And it tries to show, on the basis of the works of eminent Ash‘arite scholars such as al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392) and al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), that literary and historical approaches to the interpretation of the Qur’ān were nothing strange to Islamic civilization, not even within the Sunni mainstream. For this, Abū Zayd draws heavily on well-known exegetical concepts such as the “causes of revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), “abrogating and abrogated” (*nāsikh wa-mansūkh*), “definite and ambiguous” (*muḥkam wa-mutashābih*), “clear and obscure” (*wāḍiḥ wa-ghāmiḍ*), “general and particular” (*‘āmm wa-khāṣṣ*) and the “relationship” (*munāsaba*) between the different suras and verses – concepts which he discusses in terms of their hermeneutical significance. The idea of human convention (*iṣṭilāḥ*) with respect to the origins of language, and the concept of divine intention (*qaṣd*), are also fundamental to *Maḥbūm al-naṣṣ*. In the Qur’ānic revelation, God employed the language, mythology and religious conventions of a specific people in a specific geographical and historical setting, and he did so with a specific intention. The task of reading the divine message and of transforming it into meaning has been left up to man and is considered, in this book, as a necessary step which cannot be taken but in the light of the constantly changing cultural, socio-political and historical situation.

The question of influences on Abū Zayd in *Maḥbūm al-naṣṣ* is not easy to answer, since he rarely indicates them explicitly. Nevertheless, it should have become clear from the previous discussion whence most of his ideas are derived. Departing from al-Khūlī’s literary approach to the Qur’ān, Abū Zayd has taken up a number of central elements from the Mu‘tazilite linguistic and exegetical

<sup>44</sup> Abū Zayd, “al-‘Alāmāt fi l-turāth,” pp. 81-86, 99-101. All references here are to Ibn ‘Arabī’s *al-Futūḥāt al-makkiyya*.

<sup>45</sup> Naṣr Hāmid Abū Zayd, *Maḥbūm al-naṣṣ. Dirāsa fi ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān*, [Beirut 1990] Beirut 21994. On this book see especially Wild, “Die andere Seite des Textes;” Kermani, *Offenbarung als Kommunikation*; idem, “From Revelation to Interpretation.”

tradition – especially the concepts of *iştilāḥ*, *majāz* and *qaṣd* (although the idea of *qaṣd* had already entered the school of al-Khūlī through the influence of al-Shāṭibī). At the same time, he has developed a critical attitude towards the rigid and rationalist way in which the Muʿtazilites dealt with the Qurʾānic language in order to justify their own dogmatic presuppositions. As an alternative to this narrow form of exegesis, Abū Zayd has turned to the more artistic approach of the Ashʿarite al-Jurjānī with his stress on concepts such as *naẓm* and *iʿjāz*, and his respect not only for the complexity of language, but also for the hermeneutical problem of understanding. Nonetheless, Abū Zayd's hero with regard to the Islamic development of a hermeneutical and semiotic world-view is Ibn ʿArabī, whom he commends for his recognition of *taʾwīl* as one of the principal elements of existence. All this would not have come together in the thought of Abū Zayd without the influence of the modern and mainly Western linguistic, hermeneutical and semiotic tradition to which, especially in the context of *Maḥmūd al-naṣṣ*, two more names must be added: the Russian linguist Jurij M. Lotman, who described art as a form of communication based on the exchange of signs in the form of linguistic and non-linguistic texts,<sup>46</sup> and the Japanese orientalist Toshihiko Izutsu, who analyzed the Qurʾān and its semantic structure with the help of a theory of linguistic *Weltanschauung* and by means of a model of communication between God and man which has left clear traces in Abū Zayd's argumentation.<sup>47</sup>

### *The reading of texts vs. dogmatic shadow-boxing*

The Muʿtazilite influences on Abū Zayd's work, as we can see, are not many, and they rarely have much to do with the strictly dogmatic positions of the school. Instead of striving for a revival of the theological teachings of the Muʿtazilites, Abū Zayd is interested in those linguistic and exegetical aspects of their thought that help him to develop his own hermeneutical theories out of what the Arab-Islamic heritage has to offer. This approach is not only accompanied by a critical attitude towards theology (*ʿilm al-kalām*), which is depicted within the framework of the egoistic struggle between the different groups and sects of Islam for intel-

<sup>46</sup> Jurij M. Lotman, *Die Struktur literarischer Texte*, transl. Rolf-Dietrich Klein, Munich 1972. See also Kermani, *Offenbarung als Kommunikation*, pp. 7-8. One influence on Lotman which may be mentioned here is Claude Elwood Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, Urbana 1949. Abū Zayd translated two of Lotman's articles for the volume *Anẓimat al-ʿalāmāt*, eds. Abū Zayd and Qāsim, pp. 265-81, 314-44.

<sup>47</sup> Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Structure of Ethical Terms in the Koran. A Study in Semantics*, Tokyo 1959 [revised ed.: *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qurʾān*, Montreal 1966]; idem, *God and Man in the Koran. Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung*, Tokyo 1964. See also Kermani, *Offenbarung als Kommunikation*, pp. 18-21; Abū Zayd, *Maḥmūd al-naṣṣ*, p. 57 n. 2; Abū Zayd, *Ein Leben mit dem Islam*, pp. 119-20. As mentioned by Kermani, Izutsu's theories have their roots in ideas professed by men such as Alexander von Humboldt, Leo Weisgerber, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf.

lectual and socio-political domination, and a favourable estimation of the philosophical and semiotic value of mysticism; it also runs contrary to the bold call of modern ideological thinkers, such as Muḥammad ‘Imāra and Ḥasan Ḥanafī, for a return to the “progressive” and “enlightened” political and theological system of the Mu‘tazila.<sup>48</sup> Although he is not always mentioned by name, it is especially his former teacher Ḥanafī who is repeatedly criticized by Abū Zayd for what he regards as his superficial, unrealistic, utilitarian and *salafī* way of rattling on about a return to his favourite aspects of the Arab-Islamic heritage as a solution to all manner of modern problems.<sup>49</sup> In sharp contrast to Ḥanafī’s project of a “revolutionary” renewal of Arab-Islamic civilization through a comprehensive “reconstruction” of its heritage, Abū Zayd stands for a historical and critical “reading” of this heritage in order not only to demonstrate its dependence on historical and cultural factors and to distinguish between its positive and negative aspects, but also to prove its often overlooked variety and plurality.

This concept, plurality (*ta‘addudiyya*), is of central importance especially in Abū Zayd’s more recent works,<sup>50</sup> and it can be seen in connection with his critical stance towards dogmatic theology, known as *‘ilm al-kalām* or *‘ilm al-tawḥīd*. In Islam, there is a tradition of criticism towards the “science of [mere] speech” for the fruitless and potentially destructive quarrels which its representatives pursued over “unsolvable” problems instead of sticking to the clear content of the Qur’ānic message,<sup>51</sup> but Abū Zayd is not part of this tradition. His distance from theological thinking stems less from his suspicion towards dialectical reasoning, than from his belief that it has always been the role of the *mutakallimūn* to support a set of socio-political interests with the help of theological arguments, that is, with a certain interpretation of the Qur’ān. Abū Zayd does not offer such an interpretation himself; he prefers instead to deal with questions of a largely theo-

<sup>48</sup> Ḥanafī, “Mādhā ya‘nī: al-yasār al-islāmī?” pp. 13-15; Muḥammad ‘Imāra, “al-Dirāsa,” in *Rasā’il al-‘adl wa-l-tawḥīd* 1-2, ed. M. ‘Imāra, vol. 1, Cairo 1971, pp. 5-75, especially pp. 10-15. Among ‘Imāra’s works on the school are also *al-Mu‘tazila wa-mushkilat al-ḥurriyya al-insāniyya* and *al-Islām wa-falsafat al-ḥukm*, Beirut 1977.

<sup>49</sup> An explicit critique of Ḥanafī’s thought is Abū Zayd’s article “al-Turāth bayna l-ta’wīl wa-l-talwīn. Qirā’a fi mashrū‘ al-yasār al-islāmī,” first publ. in *Alif. Journal of Comparative Poetics* 10 (1990), pp. 54-109, reprinted in Abū Zayd, *Naqd al-khiṭāb al-dīnī*, [Cairo 1992] Cairo <sup>2</sup>1994, pp. 137-93. Not mentioned, but present, is Ḥanafī, for example, in Abū Zayd’s “al-‘Ālamāt fi l-turāth,” pp. 51-53, and in his “Qirā’at al-nuṣuṣ al-diniyya. Dirāsa istikshāfiyya li-anmāt al-dalāla,” first publ. in *Majallat al-ma’had al-miṣrī li-l-dirāsāt al-islāmiyya fi Madrīd* 1990, reprinted in Abū Zayd, *Naqd al-khiṭāb al-dīnī*, pp. 195-225, here pp. 202-3, 206. The term *salafī* is taken from Abū Zayd’s article “al-Turāth bayna l-tawjīh al-idyūluḡī wa-l-qirā’a l-‘ilmiyya,” in Abū Zayd’s *al-Naṣṣ, al-sulṭa, al-ḥaqīqa. Al-Fikr al-dīnī bayna irādat al-ma’rifā wa-irādat al-haymana*, [Beirut 1995] Beirut <sup>2</sup>1997, pp. 13-66, here p. 53.

<sup>50</sup> See for example Abū Zayd, “al-Turāth bayna l-tawjīh al-idyūluḡī wa-l-qirā’a al-‘ilmiyya,” pp. 64-66, and “al-Tanwīr al-islāmī. Judhūruhū wa-āfāquhū min al-Mu‘tazila wa-bn Rushd ilā Muḥammad ‘Abduh,” *al-Qāhira* 150 (1995), pp. 29-45.

<sup>51</sup> See Louis Gardet, “‘Ilm al-kalām,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. New Edition, vol. 3, pp. 1141-50, especially p. 1148.

retical and methodological nature in order to demonstrate that there is something historical, individual and relative in *every* interpretation. This discourse of plurality and relativity stands in clear contrast to the modern and often ideological Arab-Islamic usage of the term *tawḥīd* which, of course, is used in the first place to denote the “oneness” of God, but which corresponds, on a structural level, with the attempt to bring about a political, ideological and religious kind of unity (*wahda*) and, one might say, uniformity.<sup>52</sup> This discourse of *tawḥīd* has no appeal for Abū Zayd, be it on the modern ideological level or on the level of classical Islamic theology of which the Muʿtazila, of course, is an integral part. It is not surprising that Abū Zayd, in an explicit critique of Ḥanafī’s project for an “Islamic Left”, rebukes his former teacher for underestimating the role of the principle of *ʿadl* (divine justice) in the thought of the Muʿtazilites and for concentrating on the role they assigned to the principle of *tawḥīd*.<sup>53</sup>

### *The createdness of the Qurʾān*

This distance from theological argumentation and the rhetoric of *tawḥīd* can also be detected in what must be considered as Abū Zayd’s most courageous and most important borrowing from the Muʿtazila: his definition of the metaphysical status of the Qurʾān. Although he has always been critical of the idea of an uncreated and eternal Qurʾān which, according to *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ*, denies “the dialectical relationship between the text and the cultural reality,”<sup>54</sup> he avoided, up to and including that study, showing clear agreement with the opposite position, namely, the theory of the “creation of the Qurʾān” (*khalq al-Qurʾān*), for which the Muʿtazila has been blamed time and again through the course of Islamic history.<sup>55</sup> Only in a number of articles which appeared in the 1990s does he take a clear stance on this issue.<sup>56</sup> There, Abū Zayd for the first time openly endorses the notorious Muʿtazilite position. Nevertheless, he gives it a new meaning which removes it from its original theological context which was composed of arguments concerning God’s attributes and uniqueness, and places it within the context of one of his own themes, the historicity (*tārikhiyya*) of the Qurʾān. Classical arguments, such as the claim that the idea of the eternity of the

<sup>52</sup> Some aspects of this phenomenon are described by Tamara Sonn, “Tawḥīd,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, vol. 4, pp. 190-98.

<sup>53</sup> Abū Zayd, “al-Turāth bayna l-taʿwīl wa-l-talwīn,” p. 175.

<sup>54</sup> Abū Zayd, *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ*, p. 42.

<sup>55</sup> On this idea see, with further references, J.D. Pearson, “al-Ḳurʾān,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. New Edition, vol. 5, pp. 400-32, here p. 426.

<sup>56</sup> Abū Zayd, “Qirāʾat al-nuṣṣ al-diniyya,” idem, “al-Tārikhiyya. Al-Mafhūm al-multabis,” first published as “Mafhūm ‘al-tārikhiyya’ al-muftarā ‘alayh,” in Abū Zayd, *al-Taḥkīr fī zaman al-takfīr. Didd al-jabl wa-l-zayf wa-l-khurāfa*, Cairo 1995, pp. 197-230, reprinted in reversed form in Abū Zayd’s *al-Naṣṣ, al-sulta, al-ḥaqīqa*, pp. 67-89; “al-Turāth bayna l-tawjih al-idyūlūjī wa-l-qirāʾa al-ʿilmiyya.”



Qurʾān contradicts the principle of *tawḥīd* and therefore leads to a form of idolatry (*ʔathaniyya*),<sup>57</sup> and the comparison of this idea with the erroneous Christian dogma of the “divine nature” of Christ,<sup>58</sup> are mentioned by him, but they are not at the core of his argumentation. Instead, he takes up these arguments as an additional means of convincing his readers that God cannot have communicated with man outside of history and that the Qurʾān, therefore, belongs to the world of *ḥudūth*, *tārikhiyya* and *zamāniyya*. He even emphasizes that he does not want to discuss the question of the nature of the Qurʾān from a theological (*lābūtī*) perspective, since this would make him party to a controversial dogmatical issue (*qadiyya ʔaqidiyya khilāfiyya*).<sup>59</sup> At the same time, he clearly recognises the fact that with the notion of *khalq al-Qurʾān*, he and the Muʿtazila have different things in mind. Yet he claims that these things – strict monotheism<sup>60</sup> in the case of the Muʿtazila, and the historicity of the divine speech in his own case – are directly bound up with one another, even though the “philosophical” consequences of the idea of the createdness of the Qurʾān might have “escaped the notice” of the school (*rubbamā ghābat ʔan al-muʔtazila*).<sup>61</sup>

## Conclusion

Since the Arab re-discovery of the Muʿtazila in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the work of Abū Zayd certainly constitutes one of the most serious attempts to integrate Muʿtazilite forms of argumentation into modern Muslim discourse. Although this gives a certain legitimacy to the term “Neo-Muʿtazilite”, it should not be applied to Abū Zayd without reservation and without a clear idea of that which it is supposed to represent. As I have tried to show in this paper, Abū Zayd’s exegetical ideas are further removed from the spirit of dogmatic theology and closer to hermeneutical thought and to a mystical approach to religion than a concentration on this term would suggest.

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<sup>57</sup> Abū Zayd, “al-Tārikhiyya. Al-Mafhūm al-multabis,” pp. 72, 74.

<sup>58</sup> Abū Zayd, “Qirāʔat al-nuṣūṣ al-diniyya,” pp. 204-5. This argument can already be found in one of the letters by which the caliph al-Maʾmūn initiated the *miḥna*. See Martin Hinds, “Miḥna,” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*. New Edition, vol. 7, pp. 2-6, here p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> Abū Zayd, “Qirāʔat al-nuṣūṣ al-diniyya,” p. 204.

<sup>60</sup> *Waḥdāniyyat [Allāh] al-muṣṭalaq wa-tafarrudubū l-kāmil*, as he says in his MA thesis. See Abū Zayd, *al-Ittijāh al-ʔaqlī fī l-tafsīr*, p. 245; compare *ibid.*, pp. 70, 79.

<sup>61</sup> Abū Zayd, “al-Turāth bayna l-tawjīh al-idyūlūjī wa-l-qirāʔa al-ʔilmiyya,” p. 33.

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