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A Humanistic Interpretation of the Qur'an?¹

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The presence of great numbers of Muslims in Europe, including The Netherlands, makes it no longer appropriate to view Islam as a non-Western religion. Naturally, Muslims, too, are people who adapt their identity and culture – including their religion – to their circumstances, and simultaneously try to turn these circumstances to their advantage. The fact that Muslims have become ever more visible in The Netherlands has led to public debate on a variety of topics: on forms of cremation and burial, ritual slaughter, honour killing, headscarves, marriage migration and, at the same time, on more abstract questions in the background, for instance the separation of church and state, cultural relativism and the multicultural society.² Over the past few years – and especially since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the appearance of Pim Fortuyn and the murder of Theo van Gogh – Islam itself has become subject of discussion.³ Pim Fortuyn called Islam a backward religion; authors like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Herman Philipse, Paul Cliteur and Afshin Ellian opened a head-on attack on ‘the’ Islam. The following may serve as an example. In response to the objectionable statements by Rotterdam imam Khalil el-Moumni on homosexuality as a pathological deviation, Cliteur, former chairman of the Dutch Humanist Association, states that Muslims view the revealed will of God as the fundamental touchstone of morality. He continues: by reasoning in rigid consistency with this starting point they arrive at the most abhorrent moral points of view. Thus, Cliteur states, they resemble Abraham, who was willing to sacrifice his son Isaac, because God ordered him to do so. This may be consistent from El-Moumni’s point of view, but not, in my view, from the position of a humanist assessing El-Moumni’s claims. What Cliteur obviously forgets here is that a humanist adheres to the position that someone who thinks (s)he must do the will of God, is still, in fact, responsible for what (s)he decides to do. This is not just because humanists attribute personal responsibility to all human beings, whether they wish to carry that responsibility or not. It is also because it is impossible to draw practical consequences from God’s will without being responsible, as a human being, for a certain image of God, a specific theory about and interpretation of divine revelation, just to mention a few points. A humanist, therefore, does not accept El-Moumni hiding behind the will of God. El-Moumni interprets this will. He interprets ‘the’ Islam, just as Cliteur does in his turn. Referring to the views of Abdoellah

¹ The Dutch original of this chapter was published in Duyndam, Poorthuis and de Wit (eds.) 2005: 265-278. That Dutch text was in its turn a written elaboration of the contribution to the debate on Abu Zayd’s inaugural address at Utrecht on May 28, 2004. This chapter is a translation of the 2005 text, with an addition in note 20 and one correction immediately after that note. Translation: Joop Hoekstra.

² Derkx 2004.

³ Fortuyn and Haselhof 2001.



Haselhof and El-Moumni about homosexuality Cliteur writes that they are the 'real Muslims'.

'Liberal Muslims (like Professors Arkoun and Abu Zayd)' are, as Cliteur believes, 'a negligible minority ... The majority of Muslims really believes what is written in the Qur'an'.⁴ Ayaan Hirsi Ali reasons along exactly the same lines in her open letter to Amsterdam mayor Job Cohen in *Trouw* of 6 March 2004.

How do Cliteur and Hirsi Ali know who are the *real* Muslims? How do they know what the Qur'an *really* says? On important points, the disputes among Muslims about the interpretation of the Qur'an are extremely vivid.⁵ Quite haughtily, Cliteur and Hirsi Ali push problems of interpretation and hermeneutics aside. In that sense they are fundamentalists in their own right. In fact, they do not seem truly interested in a serious dialogue with Muslims, because they already know what 'true' Muslims think. They do not appear prepared to test their generalizations in relation to the views expressed by Muslims as discussion partners – or hardly so. They ignore publications, discussions and disputes in Islamic circles about the meaning of Islam. Not only do they ignore the efforts and activities of many Muslim intellectuals, but also of organizations such as Ihsan (the Islamic Institute for Social Activation), the Dutch Muslim Women's Organization Al Nisa and the Yoesuf Foundation. The developments inside the Milli Görüs organization are also worth noting.⁶ There is movement in many areas. Authors like Cliteur and Hirsi Ali, as atheists, intervene in a debate about what is the best or most correct interpretation of Islam and then choose to put down Islam in its least open form as the real Islam. As a humanist, I do wish to take the discussion about the interpretation of Islam among Muslims seriously and in this article I will do so by responding to the inaugural lecture of Nasr Abu Zayd, my colleague at the University of Humanistic Studies, held on 27 May 2004. This address was titled *Rethinking the Qur'an: Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics* and focuses on the human aspect of the Qur'an. Abu Zayd himself writes that this text is a follow-up to the address delivered in Leiden on 27 November 2000, in acceptance of the Cleveringa chair there. This earlier lecture was called *The Qur'an: God and Man in Communication*. In this article I will first restate some of the important points from the Leiden inaugural lecture. Next, I will similarly discuss the 2004 inaugural lecture at the University of Humanistic Studies. In my conclusion I will comment on both lectures, concentrating on the relation between humanism and Islam. In his inaugural lectures Abu Zayd does not only speak of the Qur'an, but for instance also about the *Sunnah*

⁴ Cliteur2002: 87.

⁵ Van Bommel et al. 2003: 25-48; Abu Zayd 2004.

⁶ Van Westerloo 2004.



(the normative teachings and practices of the prophet Muhammad), the *Hadith* (the stories ascribed to the prophet Muhammad), the consensus (*idjmaa*) among the *Ulama* (Islamic religious scholars) and the *qiyas* (deductive analogies). Naturally, these sources of Islam are also important for Qur'an interpretation, but here I will primarily focus on the Qur'an itself, as the source highest in authority.

The communication between God and human beings

In his Leiden address, Abu Zayd tells us that the word 'Qur'an' derives from the verb *qua'ra*, to recite, to declaim aloud and by heart. The prophet Muhammad (appr. 570-632)⁷ first received the texts of the Qur'an through communication or inspiration by the Holy Spirit, and afterwards recited them to his companions. They were not written down for a long time. Also after that, until the invention of book printing, the Qur'an was not normally considered a written text. Even in the daily life of Muslims today, it is felt that the Qur'an is first of all a text which is recited, sung or listened to. The important aesthetic and ceremonial significance of the Qur'an is primarily bound up with being heard rather than read. For Muslims the Qur'an is the word of God, as revealed to the prophet Muhammad in clear Arabic over a period of 23 years. This description, uncontested among Muslims, has three important elements in it: the word of God, the Qur'an, and *wahy*, i.e. revelation or inspiration. It may look as if these three concepts are treated as synonymous phrases in modern Islamic speech, but in classical Islamic theology they differ in meaning, as the linguistic usage in the Qur'an reflects.

Is the *word of God* the eternal and infinite content of the Qur'an, expressed in that text in human language, with its limitations and temporary nature? Or is the linguistic expression part of the word of God? To conceive of God as availing himself of human language calls up many difficult theological issues, lively debated more than a thousand years ago by the Mu'tazilites, the Hanbalites and the Ash'arites. The teachings of the Hanbalites, according to which both the contents and the language of the Qur'an are divine and eternal, have become predominant after centuries of fierce debate and political conflicts in the history of Islam.

Wahy refers to the vertical communication process by which the word of God reached mankind. According to the Qur'an itself, sura 42: verse 51, man can receive the word of God in three ways only: by inspiration (non-verbal communication); by listening in the way of Moses to God speaking from behind a partition such as a bramble bush or

⁷ In this article the Christian calendar is used.



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a mountain; or via a messenger like the angel Djibril (Gabriel), who, with the consent of God, reveals what God wants through inspiration. In the latter manner the *Qur'an* was revealed to Muhammad. The *Qur'an* is the definitive confirmation of earlier revelations by God to mankind (particularly the Jewish Tanakh and the Christian New Testament). *Qur'an* and revelation thus do not coincide.

What does it mean that the *Qur'an* repeatedly emphasizes that it was revealed in *clear Arabic*? According to the *Qur'an* God chose the prophet Muhammad to communicate His message to his people. According to the *Qur'an* Islam is not a new religion communicated to Muhammad to preach to the Arabs, but it is essentially the same message preached by all prophets since the beginning of the world. In the *Qur'an* all prophets are considered to be Muslims. Islam is the absolute submission of the self to God, Lord of the universe. Repeatedly the *Qur'an* emphasizes, as in sura 2: verse 112, that: 'whoever submits his whole self to God and is a doer of good, he will get his reward with his Lord; on such shall be no fear nor shall they grieve'; see also 5: 69.⁸

Although intended for all people, the message in the *Qur'an* is expressed in the Arabic language – in a poetic variant of Muhammad's own Quraish dialect, because God always takes into account the language of the people to whom he sends a messenger (sura 14: verse 4). As a matter of fact, not only did the Arabic of Muhammad's time in part determine the meaning of the *Qur'an*, the *Qur'an* in turn also in part determined the later development of the Arabic language.

Following Abu Zayd we may conclude that the *Qur'an* is one of the manifestations of the word of God, revealed by inspiration to the prophet Muhammad through the intervention of the angel Djibril. We may thus differentiate between four aspects of the *Qur'an*, i.e. its source, its content, its language and its structure. The divine nature of the *Qur'an* is limited to its source. The content, however, is strongly tied up with the language in which the *Qur'an* was written down and that language is obviously culturally and historically determined. If the divine content of God's word is expressed in human language, then the language represents the essentially human dimension of the holy scriptures in general and the *Qur'an* in particular.

Clearly, the *structure of the Qur'an* also shows a human dimension, according to Abu Zayd. The *Qur'an* was not revealed to Muhammad all at once, but in parts. The various portions in which the *Qur'an* was disclosed, often correspond to needs and questions in the community. 'They are

⁸ Abu Zayd's references to the *Qur'an* are to the chapter's number according to the Cairo edition followed by the verse(s) number(s). The translation from the *Qur'an* into English is by Abu Zayd himself, using the A. Yusuf Ali translation as his starting point.



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asking you' is a phrase repeatedly found in the Qur'an, for instance related to wine or gambling, orphan girls, dietary regulations and the spoils of warfare. By answering questions of this kind the legalizing aspect of the Qur'an was gradually phrased, with the word of God answering questions the mind of Muhammad's contemporaries.

Abu Zayd writes that the process of canonization of the Qur'an also shows evidence of human influence on the way in which the word of God reached, and still reaches, humankind. The first act of canonization of the Qur'an was the codification of the official text of the entire Qur'an during the reign (644 – 656) of the third Caliph, Uthman. Because in early Arabic script, with only consonants used, this did not guarantee a uniform rendition by a long shot, the missing vowels were added later on and consonants of (nearly) the same form were differentiated with the help of signs. The Uthmanic canonization involved another important intervention. The numerous traditional fragments of the revelation, big and small, were not put in chronological order, but combined into 114 longer or shorter parts, called suras, and then ordered according to their size, the longer ones first. The human influence which Abu Zayd implies here, was expressed by Leemhuis as follows:

'The precise reasons why certain parts were combined into longer suras can no longer be traced. It is clear, however, that considerations of chronology, content or outward form (rhyme!) played a role. It remains unclear what ultimately determined the adoption of a certain part in a certain sura. In a number of cases it is quite probable that parts were inserted somewhere at random for lack of a better place to put them.'⁹

As Abu Zayd writes, it is clear that this art of reorganizing the text partially destroys the motivation behind and historical context of each fragment of the revelation. The semantic structure of the Qur'an will thus lose part of its relation to the original reality in which it was brought forth. The original content of the word of God in its unknown absoluteness, in other words, before it was expressed in Arabic, is divine and holy, but that does not hold true for its expression in language. The Qur'an which we read today cannot be identical to the eternal word of God.

The meeting between Muhammad and the angel Djibril in which (from a chronological perspective) the first five verses of the Qur'an (96: 1-5) were revealed, is the model of communication between man and God, a model also incorporated in various rituals. In the meeting mentioned Mu-

⁹Leemhuis 2000: 61.



hammad is ordered by Djibril to recite, but it is not clear at first what he must recite. Eventually, Muhammad understands that he must recite what the angel passes on to him. Next it becomes clear to him that recitation in the name of God is most important of all. The mysterious content which he is to recite – inspired by God through Djibril – remains implicit until he is reciting it. Only the voice of Muhammad, after he was spoken to or inspired, turns recognizable and explicit in human language. Through the human activity of the recital the word of God is humanized. In the inspired recitation Muhammad finds himself in the existential sphere between God and man. Entering this sphere and remaining there is a time-bound activity, in which the meeting of God and man has a beginning and an ending. *Wahy* thus implies a time-bound communication process between God and man in which only the voice of a human being externalizes God's word and makes it explicit.

Something similar is also true for a Muslim who recites the Qur'an in an inspired mood, speaking from the heart. One of the five religious duties of any Muslim is the ritual prayer session (*salah*), which has to be undertaken five times a day, preferably in a group. Reciting the Qur'an is the heart of the *salah*. The *salah* can be seen as a daily communication channel between the believer and God, parallel to the one between Muhammad and God through which the Qur'an was disclosed. This is the more acceptable if we take into account that the first meeting between Muhammad, Djibril and God was not just a matter of recitation but also of listening. Before reciting, Muhammad was ordered to listen with care. In Muslim prayer, the reciting of the Qur'an must be matched with careful listening to what is being recited and what is revealed in it. For this reason, the Qur'an must be recited in a voice that is neither too soft nor too loud. If too loud, this would harm the listening aspect.

Reciting and listening to the Qur'an do not only play a role in the *salah*, but also in the *Hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca), during the *Ramadan* (the yearly month of fasting), in the obligatory weekly Friday prayers and in numerous situations in daily life, such as birth, marriage and death, in greetings, in calling out the name of a deceased person, in hushing a crying child, at the beginning and end of meals, a journey or whatsoever else. In this way reciting the Qur'an represents an atmosphere of communication between God and human being for each single Muslim, each Muslim community and the whole Muslim world. Formulae and phrases from the Qur'an thus make out a natural part of the daily life and speech of Muslims throughout the world.



According to Abu Zayd, the vision of the Qur'an which is dominant in the entire Muslim world is the following – and Zayd states emphatically that by this he does not imply the views of radical Islamists, but the generally accepted views among Muslims:

'As a word from God, the Qur'an is the foundation of the Muslim life. It provides to him the way to fulfilment in the world beyond and to happiness in the present one. There is for him no situation imaginable for which it does not afford guidance, a problem for which it does not have a solution. It is the ultimate source of all truth, the final vindication of all right, the primary criterion of all values, and the original basis of all authority. Both public and private affairs, religious and secular, fall under its jurisdiction'.¹⁰

This dominant view is probably one of the most important causes of the polarized conflict which we are watching in the entire Muslim World today. Secularists, following the blueprint of Western points of view, propagate the absolute separation of Islam from the greater world, Islamists try to indoctrinate a badly informed population with slogans such as 'Islam is the solution' and 'Islam is scientifically superior'. In an ideological framework of this kind it is impossible to think rationally or act reasonably.

What the Qur'an represents for Muslims, so Abu Zayd, is neither the islamization of life as a whole, nor the absolute separation of religion from life. The separation of religion and state is essential, but that does not mean that religion only plays a secondary role in social life. The Qur'an as a mode of communication between God and human being teaches us something – so Abu Zayd – beyond 'laws' and 'politics' in the narrow sense of the words. If we interpret the Qur'an literally and canonize the Arabic words in which it was revealed, says Abu Zayd, we lock up the word of God in the historical moment in which it was announced. Such a position induces us to restrict the Qur'an to the first phase of its historical construction, whereas we should be conscious of the dynamics and the way in which the Qur'an has been able to shape the life of Muslims.¹¹ An awareness of the essentially historical character of all religious language can protect us from total immersion in that language against indoctrination and the loss of our human identity. On the other hand we need to understand that we do not hold our identity as human beings in our own, autonomous hands, or that this identity is fully detached from other forms of life on earth or in the universe. Our identity as human beings is divine, as much as the fact that

¹⁰ Abu Zayd quotes from Labib as-Said, *The Recited Koran: A History of the First Recorded Version*, translated and adapted by Bernard Weiss, M. A. Rauf and Morroe Berger (Princeton, 1975): 11.

¹¹ According to a 2004 report by the Islamic University of Europe an important question in interpreting the Qur'an is '*whether an ideal status quo had already been reached at the time of the prophet or whether the Qur'an and the practical example of the prophet only indicated a direction, as it were, on a road which must be travelled by all succeeding generations.*' (Abdellah e.a. 2004: 2) It is clear that Abu Zayd's view accords more with the latter option.



the Divine identity is made human by our observation of it. The Qur'an model outlined by Abu Zayd of the meeting between God and man is well-presented, he says, in the philo-phico-mystical system of the great Andalusian mystic Ibn al-Arabi who lived from 1165 to 1240.

The communication between human beings about the word of God

In his inaugural lecture at the University for Humanistic Studies Abu Zayd, as he himself writes, develops the human aspect of the Qur'an one step further. He now focuses in more depth on what he calls the human aspect of the horizontal dimension of the Qur'an. With 'the horizontal dimension of the Qur'an' he does not only refer to the gradual preaching of the Qur'an's message by Muhammad, the canonization of the Qur'an or the dissemination of its message by means of the corpus of interpretational literature. Abu Zayd implies here the horizontal dimension embedded in the structure of the Qur'an itself, appearing in all clarity during the process in which the Qur'an was revealed. We can only become aware of this horizontal dimension if we change the frame of reference for interpreting the Qur'an and no longer see the Qur'an as a closed written 'text' but as living 'discourse', a 'discussion'.¹² It increases the possibilities of interpretation and re-interpretation if, under the influence of a literary approach, we view the Qur'an as an autonomous text, but it also makes it possible for it to be manipulated in its meaning and structure.

Recently, Abu Zayd writes, I started to realize how the view of the Qur'an as a text reduces its status and denies the fact that the Qur'an today still functions as a 'discussion', an 'exchange of thoughts'. The Qur'an as written text has an enormous influence on Islamic views and cultures, but if we cast our eyes, not on the elite, but on the masses, it is rather the recited Qur'an, and the one listened to, the Qur'an as 'discussion' or 'discussions' which plays the determining role in culture and public life. To arrive at a democratic, humanistic hermeneutics it is not enough that intellectuals, in debate amongst themselves, place passages of the Qur'an in their historical context again and then interpret them in the context of today. Because the Qur'an is closely associated with the 'meaning of life' of millions of people, it is important to return the power over the meaning of the Qur'an to the community of believers, the Ummah. The diversity of religious meanings is part of our human diversity. To link the Qur'an once again to existential questions it is necessary to take it anew for what it is, a continuing conversation, a body of dialogues and debates, of addition, acceptance and

¹² In his lecture Abu Zayd is not too consistent in his use of the word 'discourse', which plays such an important role in his argumentation. The central element in its meaning seems to be that of '(part of an oral) discussion', between different parties and so multi-interpretable. The nature of the discussion may range from a friendly conversation to a verbal political dispute.



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rejection, not just of pre-Islamic norms, practices and cultures, but also of preliminary judgments, presuppositions, claims, etc. Islamic legal experts who rely on the hermeneutic principle that later revelations nullify earlier ones, do not understand mutually conflicting stipulations in the Qur'an can be a positive phenomenon, a diversity which must be kept open as a body of options for the community of believers confronted with an ever changing social order. Theologians and philosophers, too, with their dichotomy of clear versus ambiguous passages in the Qur'an, with the former taking priority over the latter, have no eye for democratic diversity and openness. They think that it is clear without discussion which are the transparent passages and which the opaque, but above all they assume that there can only be a single interpretation which is the right one for all times and places.

The Qur'an recited in the liturgy, in daily life, in social, political or moral disputes, brings with it a certain interpretation reflected in the way it is intoned and applied. The Qur'an is a living phenomenon, much like the music played by an orchestra. The text determined by canonization is like a silent musical score, and no more. To pretend as if this equals the music of the Qur'an is manipulation and abuse of power. The Qur'an must be brought to life. In the eyes of Abu Zayd, the hermeneutics of Ibn al-Arabi and other Sufis would appear to offer the best point of departure for an open, democratic hermeneutics in Islamic culture. The Sufis assume that the Qur'an has different levels of meaning; levels which refer to one another and are not mutually conflicting. Moreover, the Sufis' hermeneutics keeps the Qur'an accessible for all believers, regardless of their education and intellectual powers.

According to Abu Zayd large parts of the Qur'an are reflections and even fragments of discussions, negotiations and conflicts such as took place in Muhammad's time between Muslims among themselves, between Muslims and Arabic polytheists and between Muslims and other monotheists (Arabic Jews and Christians). These discussions, negotiations and conflicts are partly described in detail in the Qur'an and partly left implicit. For a good interpretation of the Qur'an it is thus not only necessary to give meaning to the text in the context of other Qur'an passages but also in the context of historical circumstances and developments which are not described in the Qur'an but which are still organically a part of the book. Furthermore, Abu Zayd states that it is self-evident in his view that recommendations or stipulations from the Qur'an, which served as input to a discussion, negotiation or conflict in the patriarchal Arab cul-



ture of the 7th century need not always be maintained in a (late) modern environment. The Qur'an in itself contains diverging clues and suggestions, which reflect the various contexts in which it came into existence. In addition, there is something else of importance. In the 7th century there were historical developments which the Qur'an responds to, but time has not stopped since then. The Qur'an, in part, provides answers to questions of people from the 7th century, but readers from the 21st century do not live out of time or context either. The Qur'an can be of much significance in modern days, in a society in which the state and organizations embodying worldviews are strictly separated but then it must be read with (late) modern people in mind¹³. For (late) modern persons reading the Qur'an it is important to solve problems of interpretation by themselves through *ijtihad* (personal efforts and independent rational judgment). This fully legitimate practice from the first centuries of Islam ought to be restored. It is disgraceful, so Abu Zayd, to claim that there was enough reflection by wise Muslims in the past, making it unnecessary to undertake this today.¹⁴ Important starting point in all of this should be, and here Abu Zayd follows Muhammad Abdu, that the Qur'an is not a history book, nor a work of science, nor a political handbook, but a book which points out a spiritual and moral direction to people.¹⁵

A humanistic hermeneutics?

Abu Zayd subtitled his inaugural lecture at the University of Humanistic Studies: *Towards a Humanistic Hermeneutics*. Is it justified to call the manner of interpreting outlined here humanistic? Abu Zayd's reflection on the interpretation of the Qur'an brings the human aspect to the forefront and in that sense we have an undeniable case of humanistic hermeneutics here. When Abu Zayd points out the human aspect, he does so primarily as a scientist, as a scholar trying to achieve objectivity. If we think reasonably about the Qur'an and how it should be interpreted, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that there are a number of human aspects to it. Because the Qur'an, through centuries of Islamic tradition, attained such an unassailable, absolute and divine status for many Muslims that the idea never arises that they might critically reflect on it, it is important that these human aspects of the Qur'an are emphasized and made visible. That Abu Zayd does just that, does not make him the lesser Muslim. He uses arguments which must appeal to any right-minded person striving for the truth and in this he harks back to important Islamic thinkers. These are first of all philosophers of the first ages of Islam, before the Hanbalistic vision on the Qur'an had become the overriding tradition,

¹³ Cf. a few interesting passages in Abu Zayd & Nelson 2004: 60 and 100.

¹⁴ Abu Zayd 2004: 27, 36, 45, 47, 48, 50, 57 and 59. See also the reprint in this book. Abu Zayd finds himself in the company of predecessors like Shah Wali Allah, Refa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi, Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Abdu. Also cf. Abu Zayd 1996: 51.

¹⁵ Abu Zayd 2004: 58.



and on the other hand scholars from the Islamic reform movements which developed from the 18th century onwards. The human aspect which Abu Zayd points out converges in the insight that all meaning attached by Muslims to (passages from) the Qur'an in past and present results from human interpretation (*tafseer, ta'weel*). Interpretation is inevitable and therefore hermeneutics (the theory and practice of interpretation) cannot but be important. Muslims who claim to have direct access to the truth embedded in the Qur'an and categorically deny that they interpret the Qur'an, evidently do not feel the need for hermeneutics.¹⁶ Taken in this sense, 'humanistic hermeneutics' is a pleonasm.

There is not a single finding in the Qur'an with a unique and transparent meaning disengaged from human interpretation. For the Arabic sentences in the Qur'an, too, the insight from general linguistics holds true that no single linguistic utterance taken by itself has only one unique meaning. Context decides which interpretation is adequate. This brings us to a second important scientific insight valid for the interpretation of texts, be it *Medea*, the Bible, the Qur'an, *King Lear* or *The Pickwick Papers*. A text (passage) can only be interpreted correctly if its context is taken into account. Any text passage must be interpreted in the light of the text surrounding it and ultimately of the text as a whole. But there are many other types of context. A text can only be interpreted well if the reader or listener knows the language in which it is spoken or written (or translated). This is self-evident. But as Renaissance humanist Lorenzo Valla already emphasized, language is also liable to change. The context of a text also entails that the reader or listener has knowledge of the language as it was used at the moment that text was originally created. A correct interpretation of a text, however, does not only take into account the context of the text as it was produced at one time, but also the context in which the text is recited, read or listened to. The language of the listener or reader can be very different from the language of the original speaker or writer, even if both have a good command of what is termed 'the same' language. The language of Shakespeare (15th/16th century) is very different from the language of Jane Austen (19th century), which again differs from the English of Iris Murdoch (20th century). Interpretation not only fails if the language of the original text is not known, but also if there is insufficient command of the language of the reader or listener. Added to this is the fact that it is not enough for a proper understanding of the text just to know the linguistic context. This element again calls forth a whole series of other contexts. Language is used to communicate about mankind, society, culture and the

¹⁶ Waardenburg 2002: 116.



world and without knowledge of the extra-linguistic context of both the text itself and of the one who produced or produces the text and the one who listens to the text or reads it, interpretation often goes astray. An important claim of Abu Zayd is that the Qur'an at the time of the prophet Muhammad played its role in the midst of discussions, negotiations and conflicts as they unfolded over a period of more than 20 years and that the Qur'an, again and again, (received and) receives its meaning for listeners and readers in the context of discussions, negotiations and conflicts in which they (were and) are involved. The Qur'an is not a text in isolation but a text enclosed, then and now, in a dynamic world in which it may have great significance for humans.¹⁷

The fact that the meaning of a Qur'an passage is always a matter of human interpretation, and that knowledge of the context, in its many senses, is required for a proper interpretation, also makes it clear that Muslims and Islamic authorities who evoke the Qur'an and Allah as legitimization of their views and actions, still have to justify themselves towards their fellow human beings. The more violence is used by a group of people to keep the meaning of the Qur'an outside the realm of discussion, the more it looks as if that group wishes to appropriate the authority of Allah and to use the Qur'an for private human interests. In this light I understand Abu Zayd's remark, that the Qur'an is about the 'meaning of life' for millions of people and that it is therefore important to give the power over the meaning of the Qur'an back to the community of believers and to see the diversity of religious meanings in the Qur'an as part of our human diversity. This diversity does not pose a threat, but rather harbours a great value in an ever changing world. The position chosen – also appearing from other remarks made by Abu Zayd – can be called humanistic, because it emphasizes the unity of mankind and the solidarity of all people as equals. It can be taken as a position of resistance against elitist, undemocratic claims to power and as a stand for the human dignity of *all* people¹⁸.

Because the human character of each interpretation is argued with the help of strong and valid reasoning we can speak of a humanistic hermeneutics and a humanistic Islam here in a deeply fundamental sense. However, it is a good idea not just to look at similarities, but also at the differences between the group of people who explicitly call themselves 'humanists' and those who call themselves 'Muslims'. An important point in the Qur'an is the way in which the person of Jesus of Nazareth (Isa) is discussed. Abu Zayd focuses on this figure with some emphasis. It is quite remarkable that Ibrahim (Abraham), Musa (Moses) and Isa are

¹⁷ In the context of this article it is no more than an aside, but the central claim made by Abu Zayd in his inaugural lecture is that it is important for a good understanding of the Qur'an that it is not to be taken as 'nothing but a text' nor that it is enough to understand the text in its context. According to Abu Zayd it is essential to interpret the Qur'an as *discourse*, a discussion. In the end I do not understand this claim and so cannot agree with it. I can, however, agree to the idea – and maybe this is what he intends – that for a correct understanding it is essential to take the context seriously in all the meanings of that term. This implies that one should not lose from sight that text passages in the Qur'an were, and are, very often part of a discussion in a historical setting.

¹⁸ Cf. Waardenburg 2002: 130



important prophets according to the Qur'an, bearers of a word of God, predecessors to Muhammad. Muslims and humanists seem to be able to agree on the status of Jesus¹⁹.

Both for Muslims and for many humanists Jesus of Nazareth was an exceptionally exemplary man, but he remains a human being who must not be deified and who is thus imperfect and mortal. For both Muslims and humanists Jesus is not God nor the son of God. Of course, it is easier for Muslims than it is for Christians to reject the divine status of Jesus, but Muhammad, too, remains a human being in the Qur'an. In practice the status of Muhammad is so high and

unimpeachable that he approaches the divine status, but the Qur'an is clear in stating that Muhammad is a human being who makes mistakes (Sura 80: verses 1-10) and his mortality is certain. Different from the case of Jesus there is no mention of a rising from the dead or resurrection of Muhammad (other than the rising from the grave of all dead people on Judgment Day).

But what do humanists think of Muhammad as the 'messenger of God' and about the Qur'an as the 'word of God'? In section 4 of his inaugural lecture at the University of Humanistic Studies Abu Zayd writes that there is no discussion about the fact that the Qur'an is the 'speech of God'. I will assume that Abu Zayd, in his writings about Islam, is so used to addressing an audience of Muslims (or of religious scholars who empathize with Muslims) that this must be a 'slip of the keyboard'²⁰. There are around one billion Muslims and that is a great many, but there are even more people who are no Muslims and for whom the Qur'an is only 'the word of God' inasmuch as they put themselves in the position of a Muslim. Here we encounter a difference between many of the people in The Netherlands in 2005 who call themselves 'humanists' and those who call themselves Muslims. For humanists the main point is what is human and common to us all; particular worldviews come second place.²¹ Many humanists know that God is very important, if not the most important aspect in life for a Muslim, but they have no idea of what further to imagine with regard to God. We have seen earlier that the message of Islam is basically the same as the one preached by all prophets since the world's beginning, that the Qur'an views all prophets as Muslims, that Islam is the total submission of the self to God and that the Qur'an reads that 'whoever submits his whole self to God and is a doer of good, he will get his reward with his Lord; on such shall be no fear nor shall they grieve' (2: 112). The absolute submission of the self to good and doing what is good in the conviction that this is ultimately what is best for all people:

¹⁹ Cf. e.g. Pos 1947

²⁰ In the discussion following his inaugural address at the University of Humanistic Studies, on 28 May 2004, he confirmed this, as far as I have gathered. See also section 1. 2-1 of his Leiden inaugural lecture: 'The Qur'an is the Word of God. About this doctrine there has never been disagreement *among Muslims* throughout the centuries' (italics by PD).

²¹ Cf. e.g. Leo Polak in a radio speech of 1931: 'Wake up to the one, verily true truth and reality, valid for all – to the light of eternity *within you*, one in us all – to the universal, the truly *catholic*, that is to say *absolutely valid*, not merely roman, or jewish, or protestant, or muslim, but *human ratio and reason*, to universal, not merely roman, or jewish, or protestant, or muslim *love and justice*.' (Polak 1947: 107).



all of this is endorsed by many humanists as much as by Muslims. What is different then, if God is added? That is what many humanists fail to understand. In a dialogue on the philosophy of life between Muslims and humanists this question is one of the most important ones for many humanists.

A lot of people in The Netherlands calling themselves humanists are atheists in the sense that they do not take the existence of a 'God' into consideration in the daily practice of their lives, inasmuch as they understand what is meant by that expression (which is often not that much). But at the same time these humanists mostly attempt to strive to be good towards themselves and others, and to live morally responsible lives, for example by acting justly.

Both the words of Abu Zayd and various passages in the Qur'an make me wonder what the Qur'an means by the term 'unbelievers'. The fate held out as prospect to 'unbelievers' is dreadful, but who are the 'unbelievers'? On the one hand there are no passages in the Qur'an – as far as I know – which make clear that, by the term 'unbelievers', atheists in the modern sense are intended. They did not seem to exist in 7th century Arabia. When the Qur'an speaks of 'unbelievers', usually polytheists are meant, and sometimes monotheists of other faiths, for instance Christians who believe Jesus to be (the son of) God²². On the other hand it is quite dramatic how often 'believing' and 'doing right' are found together in the Qur'an. So often in fact that they appear to be almost the same. In Sura 5: verse 85 God's reward is mentioned for believers who do good: eternally to reside in gardens underneath which rivers flow. How then, according to the Qur'an, ought the attitude of Muslims to be versus humanists who do not understand what is meant by 'God', but who, in the practice of their daily lives, truly do their utmost to do good?

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²² Cf. Abu Zayd towards the end of his Utrecht inaugural address.



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