

Master Thesis

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Two modern radical exegetes of the Qur'an

The influence of Sayyid Qutb on Abu
Zayd's humanistic hermeneutics

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Radical reform. It is a label which in the academic world of Islamic Studies has been applied to a fair few Muslim thinkers of the contemporary ages. It is a reform we associate with ideas and movements that take Al-Afghani and ‘Abduh’s works further and expand on them, or a reform that is radical in its political zeal and its social consequences. Yet, there are thinkers whose thought we analyze and categorize without using this label, while it indeed may well be applicable.

Well, what do we mean by radical reform anyway? What is reformed in the radical? And wherein lies the radical in the reformist idea? Have we indeed in the academic studies of Islam in the modern world even devised tools and frameworks to answer this question? Radical reform, if we take the term literally, and not as an expression where the radical means “great”, “huge”, “fundamentalist”, “political”, “totalitarian”, should at least point at a reform of the foundations (*usul*), the roots, of Islamic thought and theology. Radical would thus seem to involve the Qur’an, the *hadith*, the sources of Islamic jurisprudence (*usul al fiqh*), at the very least. Reform would entail a transformation of these roots, either a reinterpretation *from them* at the minimum, but if the form would really change, then a reconceptualization *of them* surely. The difference between reform and radical reform would then be, that reform aims to reconstruct Islamic thought by a return to the sources, while radical reform would aim to reconstruct Islamic thought by a transformation of these very sources. Literally, to think of the Qur’an, for example, as the source of Islamic thought that is the focus of this thesis, in an entirely different manner. Not just think *from* the Qur’an differently. But to think *of* the Qur’an in ways that have not been thought of before.

However, who fits this category? Do we even understand this category ourselves and are we asking the right questions to research this category of Islamic thinkers?

This thesis focuses on the thought of the late Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (b. July 10, 1943, Quhafa, Egypt – d. July 5, 2010) about the interpretation and indeed the nature of the Qur’an. His ideas, I contend, are radical to the core. This thesis will show how radical his thought is by a comparison that seems even more radical, and here I mean radical as in “outrageous, grotesque, extreme”. But it is a comparison that is applied to put in practice a methodology that can answer the question, what is radical reform and who is a radical reformer.

And so, the radical comparison is then between Sayyid Qutb (b. October 9, 1906, Musha, Egypt – d. August 29, 1966) and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. At first sight these two major intellectuals in the history of modern Islamic thought seem incomparable, certainly when one takes into account their strongly divergent ideas on Islamic law and the relation between religion and state. And yet...and yet...

§ 1.1. The peculiar case of Sayyid Qutb's influence on Abu Zayd

*“Born on 10 July 1943 in the village of Quhafa near the lower Egyptian provincial city of Tanta, Abu Zayd was a devout student of the Qur’an from a young age, a qari’ and hafiz and was able to recite it verbatim by the age of eight. When he was still a child, Abu Zayd joined the Muslim Brotherhood, and was briefly imprisoned at the age of eleven in 1954. After leaving school and up to the 1960s, he worked as a technician to provide for his family following his father’s death. Nevertheless, he still maintained his sympathies for the Muslim Brothers, and was influenced by the writings of their charismatic leader, Sayyid Qutb, who was executed in 1966.”*¹ (Kermani 2004, page 170).

Having come across this piece of information during a course on Modern Exegesis of the Qur’an at Leiden University, it was this statement from Navid Kermani, who translated into German a biography of Abu Zayd in 1999 (*Ein Leben mit dem Islam*)², that motivated my undertaking to write a thesis on the very question on what this influence from Sayyid Qutb on Abu Zayd was. Upon advice from my supervisor Dr. N. Kaptein, I consequently read the biography of Abu Zayd and saw that this liberal theologian of Islam stated how he was well read in the works of Sayyid Qutb, who has been described as a radical Islamist. He noted how the works had inspired him and how Qutb was a significant figure for Abu Zayd’s own intellectual development. In Abu Zayd’s own words:

*“Around this time, I began to read Sayyid Qutb. In the Shade of the Qur’an (Fi Zilal al-Qur’an) was an extraordinary important book for me. Qutb came to my reflection on religion through his focus on literature. He was a Romantic, lyric, and literary critic. He was part of the school of the literary method of interpretation of the Qur’an, like Amin Al-Khuli and Khalafallah. He was not as academic as them, he was more an Impressionist in his writings and critics. He wrote about stylistic attributes of the Qur’an, and this is an expression of his subjective literary and aesthetic perspective. At the same time, he was concerned with social justice. Both of this appealed to me.”*³ (Abu Zayd in *Ein Leben mit dem Islam* Kermani (1999)), page 43. The passages of *Ein Leben mit dem Islam* quoted in this thesis have been translated from German to English by the author of this thesis, Rashwan Bafati).

*“My relation with the Qur’an as a literary text, as text, whose aesthetics can move the soul, started early. It wasn’t the message of the Qur’an that made this relation happen, but rather the order of speech, its inner music. Already in kuttab did this relation begin. (.....) Even before my studies I had read the books of Sayyid Qutb and his older brother Muhammad, and likewise the dissertation of Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah, who, all of them, busied themselves with the poetry of the Qur’an and have influenced me greatly.”*⁴ (Abu Zayd in *Ein Leben mit dem Islam*, Kermani (1999), page 100.)

“To decode the message of the Qur’an, I practiced textual analysis, which is more than only philology. It treats the Qur’an as a poetically structured text. This does not mean the Qur’an belongs to the category of poetry. It remains a religious text with differentiated functions;

¹ Kermani, N. (2004). From Revelation to Interpretation: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the literary study of the Qur’an’. Chapter 6 in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur’an*, 169-92.

² Abū Zayd, Magdi, Cherifa Ismā‘īl, & Kermani, Navid. (1999). *Ein Leben mit dem Islam*. Freiburg im Breisgau. Herder.

³ Abū Zayd, Magdi, Cherifa Ismā‘īl, & Kermani, Navid. (1999). *Ein Leben mit dem Islam*. Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder. P. 43

⁴ Abu Zayd / Kermani (1999). P. 100

*Sayyid and Muhammad Qutb said, in their earlier writings in the late 40's and early 50's, exactly the same. For them, the Qur'an is a text, that contains ethical, moral, spiritual and judicial messages, but simultaneously there is a beautiful (musical) composition, which facilitates the message, and which touches deeply the reader in aesthetic fashion. They were influenced by the Romantic literary theory and focused on the psychological effects of the text".*⁵(Abu Zayd in *Ein Leben mit dem Islam*, Kermani (1999), page 101)

The crux of Qutb's contribution and influence on Abu Zayd lies in their shared passion for the literary study of the Qur'an – that is, the application of literary analysis to the Qur'an as a text (or not quite a text, as we will see in this thesis) with linguistic, poetic and literary features that are part of its divine inimitability and as living speech in direct contact with the lives of man.

I will approach a comparison of this shared interest as applied by the one and the other. What is the influence of Sayyid Qutb on Abu Zayd when it comes to his exegesis of the Qur'an? And what does Abu Zayd mean with "impressionistic",⁶ a term he frequently uses to describe Sayyid Qutb's literary method. How is Abu Zayd's own method different?

But how to approach this? In order to answer this question and in order to devise a theory and methodology, it is first needed to review the literature that focusses on Sayyid Qutb and Abu Zayd and that focuses on their literary theory.

§ 1.2. Literature review

§ 1.2.1. Literature on the literary theory

Studies on the literary theory as applied to Qur'anic exegesis in the modern world are scarce. Perhaps this is because to understand the literary theory as applied in the Islamic world, one must both be acquainted with Islamic studies and literary studies. Whatever the reason, the literary theory in Islam is not new and has its roots in classical Islamic thought.

This is explained for example in the excellent *Literary structures of religious meaning in the Qur'an* (2000) by Issa J. Boullata. This book is a compendium of articles on the literary theory as applied to the Qur'an and consists both of works both of literary specialists who study the Qur'an in literary fashion, and of scholars of Islamic studies that focus on how the theory has been applied by Muslim thinkers themselves. Crucially, Boullata himself has written an article for this compendium on Sayyid Qutb and his literary approach. It is the only study in this regard, of Sayyid Qutb as a literary theorist on the Qur'an that I am familiar with. The actual content of the theory will be outlined in the following chapter of this thesis, the methodology.

Another article on the literary theory as devised and applied in both the classical and modern Muslim world is written by none other than Abu Zayd himself. In his *Dilemma of the literary approach to the Qur'an* he studies how the theory has evolved and focuses on the institutional, academic and political intrigue that followed Khalafallah's PhD thesis, and indeed, Abu Zayd's own works. Both of these articles will feature heavily in this thesis.

⁵ Abu Zayd / Kermani (1999). P. 101

⁶ Abu Zayd, N. (2003) "The dilemma of literary approach to the Qur'an", *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, N. 23, *Literature and the Sacred*, p. 23

§ 1.2.2. Literature on the literary theory as applied by Sayyid Qutb and Abu Zayd

When it comes to Sayyid Qutb, I have found no articles other than that of Boullata that focus on his literary approach specifically. Indeed, any discussion on his literary method is mostly absent in the most important works on his thought, that have focused instead on his political ideas. One work that does at least mention and briefly discuss Qutb's literary approach is Sayed Khatab's *The political thought of Sayyid Qutb: The theory of jahiliyyah* (2006). His work is an excellent study of Qutb's political thought and idea of *jahiliyya* as it progressed through time in different stages. One of these stages in Qutb's life, Khatab contends, is where Qutb focused on the literary theory and that is the period where Qutb heavily studied the Qur'an by himself and when he was involved in literary arts himself as a poet and writer.

However, as we will see later and as I will argue later, I contend that the literary approach is a theological problem or construct. It deals with essential question like the nature of the Qur'an, the nature of God, of man's methods and sources of knowledge (epistemology) and man's relation to the Qur'an. Khatab's and Boullata's works leave out these essential questions as I see them. This is a feature of most studies on contemporary Islamic thought, as it justifiably is focused more on political and legal aspects, for this is where a lot is happening and indeed what Muslim scholars themselves focus on. I find this a critical limitation however, because it has as its consequence not only the limitation of our understanding of the literary theory as applied by Muslim scholars, but it also limits the possibilities for a comparison between them. It is here that I hope to make my contribution.

An article that comes close to discussing both the literary theory and essential theological and philosophical questions is Soffar's *The Concept of Dialogue: A Study of Fethullah Gülen and Sayyid Qutb* (2009). Simultaneously, it is a comparison that at first hand seems difficult to make, just like my own comparison seems to be. While Soffar mentions the psychological effects of the imagery in the Qur'an on Qutb (and this is a factor of literary theory, as we will see) he does not mention the actual literary mechanism that steers this. His main contribution, instead, is on discussing essential theological questions as compared to one thinker and another, and highlighting an often overlooked feature of Qutb's thought, his Sufism. I will argue later, that if there are similarities between Qutb and Abu Zayd, their application of sufist ideas must certainly be one of them.

Other than this, we can of course study Qutb's literary approach in his own exegetical project of the Qur'an, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*. Written over a span of more than 15 years, Qutb develops a comprehensive theory and philosophy of Islam and human life, inspired by the verses of the Qur'an. I will focus on an English translation of this project, and specifically volume 30.⁷ Other than that, Carré's *Mysticism and Politics: a critical reading of Fi Zilal al-Quran by Sayyid Qutb*, an excellent work we will discuss later, includes translations of extracts of *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* which will also come to pass.

⁷ Qutb, Salahi, Shamis, Salahi, M.A, & Shamis, Ashur A. (1985). *In the shade of the Qur'an : Para - 30. S.I.]:* MWH London.

When it comes to Abu Zayd, his works on the literary approach have of course been studied in depth, for Abu Zayd is the outstanding proponent of the theory in contemporary times. Kermani (2004)⁸ and Sukidi (2009)⁹ both provide for thorough analyses on Abu Zayd's ideas on exegesis. Sukidi focuses on the premises in Abu Zayd's thought that make his ideas humanistic, whereas Kermani delves more into the technicalities of his literary method. Both of them, however, in the articles mentioned in the footnotes, pay no attention to a later development in Abu Zayd's thought – rethinking the Qur'an, from text to living discourse. This is all the more remarkable, since Kermani processed the biography of Abu Zayd, *Ein Leben mit dem Islam*¹⁰ in German, where the exegete clearly and repeatedly mentions this development.

This is in line with a trend in academic discourse regarding the thought of both Sayyid Qutb and Abu Zayd. Either the focus is solely on their ideas on reforming Islamic law. Or, the focus is either on their literary theory (for Qutb, the literature on this is almost non-existent), or on their theology, the philosophical, and theological foundations of their thought. Never the two together. It is here why I see the challenge to contribute to the discourse.

Of course, Abu Zayd himself has extensively written about his ideas, and in his writings there is a comprehensive treatment of both his literary theory and his theology. As far as Qutb is concerned, there are works that have studied Qutb's ideas and theory in depth and in a comprehensive manner, meaning they have focused on multiple elements of Qutb's thought. Carré's *Mysticism and Politics*¹¹ and Khatab's *The political thought of Sayyid Qutb: The theory of jahiliyyah*¹², mentioned before, belong to this category. Carré's chapters are expertly divided to treat the major elements of Qutb's thoughts on different aspects of his theology and political ideology, but lack any treatment of the literary theory. Khatab's work does give a critical account of Qutb's literary theory, its development and how it pervades all of his works. Both works, moreover, give excellent accounts of Qutb's biography.

Second are works, also as secondary sources, that focus on a particular theme of Qutb's thinking. Or they offer a particular perspective that carries a critical contribution to established academic thought. Shepard (1989)¹³, (2003)¹⁴, engages with Qutb's theory of *jahiliyya*, and of Islam as a system and sees a radicalization through time of his thinking. Andrew March gives a political philosophical analysis of this system that Qutb develops¹⁵, and Robert Lee observes in all of this a return to integrity and authenticity which is typical of the postmodern era.¹⁶

⁸ Kermani, N. (2004). From Revelation to Interpretation: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the literary study of the Qur'an'. Chapter 6 in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, 169-192.

⁹ Sukidi, M. (2009). "Nasr Hāmid Abū Zayd and the Quest for a Humanistic Hermeneutics of the Qur'ān". *Die Welt Des Islams, Die Welt des Islams*, p. 163-180, vol. 49, no. 2, 2009.

¹⁰ Abū Zayd, Magdi, Kermani, Magdi, Cherifa Ismā'īl, & Kermani, Navid. (1999). *Ein Leben mit dem Islam*. Freiburg im Breisgau [etc.]: Herder.

¹¹ Carré, O. (2003). *Mysticism and Politics: A Critical Reading of Fī Zilāl Al-Qur'ān by Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966)*. Brill, Leiden.

¹² Khatab, S. (2006). *The political thought of Sayyid Qutb: The theory of jahiliyyah*. Routledge

¹³ Shepard, W. E. (1989). "Islam as a 'system' in the later writings of Sayyid Qutb." *Middle Eastern Studies*, 25(1), 31-50.

¹⁴ Shepard, W. E. (2003). "Sayyid Qutb's doctrine of jahiliyya." *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 35(04), 521-545.

¹⁵ March, A. F. (2010). "Taking people as they are: Islam as a realistic utopia in the political theory of Sayyid Qutb." *American Political Science Review*, 104 (01), 189-207

¹⁶ Lee, R. D. (1997). *Overcoming tradition and modernity: The search for Islamic authenticity*. Westview Press.

Focusing exclusively on the actual applied hermeneutics¹⁷ of Qutb and the epistemology that undergirds it¹⁸, Soffar (2009) compares Qutb to Fethullah Gülen, and their similar and differing ideas on the Qur'an and its interpretation, while Nettler¹⁹ offers an intriguing understanding of Qutb's epistemology that neatly and critically complements Khatab's and Carré's analyses, in noting how the spiritual *yaqin* is a knowledge that is humanely experienced, yet universal, systematic and exclusivist. Then there is the very significant contribution of Boullata, we recall, in a book about the literary structure of the Qur'an²⁰, which is, to my knowledge, the most exhaustive research in the literary approach as applied by Qutb and complements Khatab's work in most definite and substantial terms.

Lastly, Qutb's own works are studied in this thesis, focusing on *Fi Zilal al Qur'an* as I stated before. These sources are important both for the theory behind Qutb's literary exegesis, as well as for the observation of its actual application – we will see how Qutb applied his literary theory.

The lack of an integrated approach (relating the literary approach of these thinkers to their theological and philosophical thought) in the academic status quo is a perfect opportunity to endeavor and find a contribution. In two ways, first, providing for the integrated approach. And second, comparing for the very first time the ideas of these two seemingly divergent thinkers and simultaneously observe what the results are for such an integrated approach. Let me first elucidate my burning questions, before I present my methodology.

§ 1.3. Research questions and hypotheses

The main research question in this thesis is in how far the methodology of exegesis of Abu Zayd has been influenced by the thought of Sayyid Qutb. The initial purpose of this thesis is to understand their methodology on a deeper level by studying them in another perspective (that of a comparison, but also that of an integrated approach that scrutinizes their theological tenets), so as to observe the possible intellectual relations between the two.

Crux of this comparison has to be the literary approach in Qur'an exegesis, as Abu Zayd himself sees in here his relation to Sayyid Qutb. We know of the literary method through Al-Khuli, Khalafallah, Taha Huseyn, Al-Aqqad, Arkoun (I will explicate this in the next chapter), but we would not directly associate Qutb with this trend. This is why the literary approach is the cornerstone of my thesis, and my research questions will revolve around it.

Thus, I outline the questions as follows:

What influence has Sayyid Qutb had on the exegetical methods and thought of Abu Zayd?

¹⁷ Soffar, M. (2009). "The Concept of Dialogue: A Study of Fethullah Gülen and Sayyid Qutb." *Hemispheres*, (24), 5.

¹⁸ Nettler, R. (1994). "A modern Islamic confession of faith and conception of religion: Sayyid Qutb's introduction to the Tafsir, *Fi Zilal Al Qur'an*" *Baqir's Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 21(1), 102-114.

¹⁹ Nettler, R. L. (1996). "Guidelines for the Islamic community: Sayyid Qutb's political interpretation of the Qur'an." *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 1(2), 183-196.

²⁰ Boullala, I. (2013). Sayyid Qutb's Literary Appreciation of the Qur'an. *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qu'ran*, p. 354.

What are their ideas on the literary method and how do they (differently, or similarly) apply it?

What are their ideas on epistemology, meaning, by which faculty of knowledge do they approach the Qur'an in the first place?

What are their ideas on the nature of the Qur'an and on predetermination and the relation between man and the Qur'an?

In very basic and concise terms, I aim to understand what Abu Zayd means, when he defines Sayyid Qutb's literary method as "impressionistic".

My hypotheses are as follows:

The impressionism of Sayyid Qutb's application of his literary method, is caused by his understanding of the Qur'an as uncreated. And it is caused by his theory of predetermination, which leaves no room for human agency, and by his epistemology, which, while indeed humanistic and spiritual, leads to *yaqin*, a unitary, communal truth. This *yaqin* is true for every individual that approaches the Qur'an in the right spiritual way (or is psychologically free to do so). His literary method emphasizes the *affective, emotive* attributes of the literary structure of the Qur'an.

Abu Zayd's thought is distinctive from that of Sayyid Qutb because of his understand of the Qur'an as created, his theory of human free will and absolute individual agency, and his epistemology, that indeed is humanistic and spiritual, but foremost rational. It leads to a humanistic understanding of the Qur'an that is pluralist, dependent on each and every individual who approaches the Qur'an in a rational way. Going further than 'Abduh and Rida, his thought is radical, in the sense that the human being is an inextricable part of the Qur'an. Not as society, not as context, not as social milieu, but as an individual. There are as many Qur'ans as there are human beings who converse with the Qur'an and listen to it. Abu Zayd's literary method emphasizes the communicative attributes of the literary structure of the Qur'an. And his literary method is expressionistic. The meaning of the Qur'an lies, literally, in the expression of the interpretation of an individual.

In whatever way that Sayyid Qutb influences Abu Zayd's exegetical method, it likewise must be grounded in the theological tenets of epistemology, the nature of the Qur'an and predetermination. I hypothesize that their ideas on these tenets converge at some points and it is this convergence that explains any similarity that their literary approaches may have. I anticipate that it is Sufi epistemology where they converge. And I hypothesize that they must think the same in some regards on the nature of the Qur'an as well, although I cannot at this point suggest how.

Chapter 2. Frameworks, tools and methods of the comparison

In this chapter I present the frameworks, tools and methods applied in my research and I justify their use.

§ 2.1. The literary theory of the Qur'an

The late Abu Zayd himself is the author of an excellent article that presents the features of the literary theory, and how the theory has developed through the centuries.²¹ Indeed, it is in this article that Abu Zayd sees Sayyid Qutb as an exponent of the literary method, “however rather impressionistic”.²² Application of the literary method can be found throughout both the classical as modern history of Islam, with Khalafallah, Al-Khuli the renowned modern names, and al-Jurjani a classical figure who has inspired Sayyid Qutb the most out of the literary theorists.²³

However fascinating, I shall not revisit the tumultuous and rather poignantly epic development of theory, for Abu Zayd has already done that. Instead, I will summarize its content, its focus and its main problems.

The literary theory, as Abu Zayd explains, in classic Islamic theology was applied to understand and either confirm or negate the source of the inimitability of the Qur'an, considered an article of faith for Muslim orthodoxy. Well now, is it the event of the revelation, the content of the Qur'anic message, or the style that one should believe to be inimitable? Or is it not so much solely the wording itself, but the psychological effects it causes where the miracle of the Qur'an lies? Throughout history, all of these possibilities have been propagated, or negated by Muslim theologians and in due course the literary method or approach has been developed.

It can be summarized as follows. This method, or approach, studies the Qur'an as a literary text, with literary attributes. Attributes like poetry, a linguistic dialectic with the context in which it was revealed, performative qualities in the syntax and structure which may be or may not be persuasive and affective. Consequently, the literary approach sees these attributes as inextricable bound to and indeed constituent of the meaning of the Qur'an. So doing, in this perspective, interpretation or *tafsir*, will have to apply literary studies. For without knowledge of the literary systematics, linguistic and communicative systems, man cannot derive the meaning of the Qur'an.

These literary aspect can signify the following, according to both the classical as modern theologians:

- The literary attributes are constituent of the inimitability of the Qur'an. Thus, God has purposefully revealed His message in a human language to reach out to human kind in their context and environment. Meaning is subjected to this relation between God and man in context.
- Only the content of the Qur'an is constituent of the inimitability of the Qur'an (for example, eschatological passages or ethical wisdom). The literary attributes say

²¹ Abu Zayd, N. (2003) p. 8-47

²² Ibid. p. 23

²³ Boullata, I. (2013) p. 243

nothing about the meaning, do not determine the meaning and the content and meaning of the text is universal. The language in the Qur'an is no human convention.

- The literary attributes are constituent of the inimitability of the Qur'an and are furthermore affective, emotive. They influence the psyche of the human being, they are persuasive and touch the human soul. This as well is a sign that God takes into account the human being in his daily life and context.

The literary approach is controversial, because a particular application of it can presuppose that human understanding is an inextricable part of the meaning of the Qur'an. Presuppose, in other words, that the meaning of the Qur'an is subject to change. That God's Word is subject to change. And if God's word is subject to change, God, or His Will is subject to change. This theory is related to the question of the created or uncreated Qur'an. It is possible still, to apply the literary method from a position of the uncreated Qur'an. Typically such an application will focus on the affective, performative qualities. Perhaps this is a start to explain what Abu Zayd means by "impressionistic".

In most concise terms, the literary approach deals with the question whether the meaning of the Qur'an, or a particular *sura* or *aya* is codetermined by its literary style in terms of aesthetics and/or its linguistic and semantic aspects in terms of communication. What does it mean when the Qur'an repeats words a dozen times in a particular *sura*? If the Qur'an has been revealed in the span of more than twenty years, should we take into account the semantic changes that words may have had in that period? And do words mean the same, when they are portrayed to be spoken by God in some chapters, but portrayed to be spoken by the Prophet Muhammed or indeed by the believers in others? The word "photo" does not mean the same as the word meant 20 years ago. Then it was a piece of paper, now it is a file on a mobile phone. Paper and file used to mean about the same thing, it certainly does not anymore. And we all have gone through lessons in literature and had to read and interpret poems. When the Qur'an is poetic, by what means must a Muslim interpret it. Must he take into account the alliteration, repetition, symmetry or asymmetry? Or should he just read and is the meaning not determined by any of this? This is the literary theory. And apparently, Abu Zayd has been influenced in this regard by Sayyid Qutb. How?

§ 2.2. Shepard's typology and Lee's Search for Islamic authenticity. The framework of postmodernism

To approach this comparison of the literary method of both Qutb and Abu Zayd, it is needed to ask questions that touch upon their views on the Qur'an, its nature, its relation to God and mankind. We have already seen however, that these questions are either absent in the academic literature, or they are not dealt with in integral and comprehensive manner together with the literary theory. Add to this that Qutb and Abu Zayd have not been systematically compared before. What causes this lacunae?

An explanation that I propose in this thesis and which in turn leads to my chosen methodology, is that in our studies on Islamic reform or modern Muslim thought, we tend to focus on legal and political trends amongst Muslim thinkers, and the Muslim world. This in itself is quite important – because a lot is happening in these spheres. That in itself is not the issue. The issue, I find, is more that in our focus, we are still steered by typologies (perhaps because they fit so well with a legal or political focus) that exclude any kind of dialogue between thinkers who in the said typology seem miles apart from each other.

In Shepard's words and typology²⁴, Sayyid Qutb is a radical Islamist, and Abu Zayd either a modernist or radical modernist. How could these figures ever be comparable? The reason why the possibility of a dialogue or intelligible debate through Shepard's typology is excluded, is as follows.

It is a typology where there are but two determinants on the axis. One, how much Islam does one want in public space. Two, how traditional should this Islam be. It asks but two questions related to a sociological approach that queries how much religion should be distributed (secular, totalist - political), and by whom (traditional, individual – legal authority). Thinking solely from the sociological construct of modernization, it does not ask any fundamental questions. And without these questions, one can hardly hope to compare thinkers that through this prism seem worlds apart.

A typology like this, which, I reiterate, I think is at the foundation of prevalent academic discourse, cannot make such a comparison intelligible, because it simply does not touch upon conceptions of the Qur'an, of epistemology and of the relation between the Qur'an and God, conceptions that are vital for research in Qur'anic exegesis and the literary theory.

Instead, I would, in the spirit of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, approach the category of radical reform through some "basic forgotten questions".²⁵ Abu Zayd, whom I propose is a radical reformist *par excellence*, argued that reform is hindered by an aversion of dealing with foundational theological questions like that of the created or uncreated Qur'an. An aversion of reforming theology itself. The Qur'an itself. Our relation to God itself. Likewise, I feel that to understand the reform of Islamic thinkers in contemporary times better, we should try to understand their theology. How they conceive of the Qur'an, and of the relation between God and man in their idea of cosmology. To ask in how far their legal thinking compares to others does not suffice to understand what is reforming and/or radical about their thought.

As such, this thesis aims to argue for the urgency on the one hand, and indeed the efficiency and fruitfulness for academic thought on the other, of providing for an academic method and framework that probes and researches the theology in depth of contemporary Islamic thinkers. My contribution to Islamic Studies, then, is in the modest and not even remotely spectacular devising of such a method and to showcase simultaneously its results by a comparison which seems outrageous at first sight.

Not only Abu Zayd is important for my method, but also questions asked and dealt with by Robert Lee²⁶, who makes comparisons of seemingly disparate thinkers intelligible, and which by the comparison itself makes us learn about what is essential about the thought of Muslim thinkers. In his book, he reflects upon established labels such as modernism and traditionalism, by asking fundamental questions like how Muslim thinkers conceive of a human being, his freedom and agency, his relation to God and his integrity and authenticity. Whereas Abu Zayd focused on one forgotten question (the nature of the Qur'an), Lee presents more and through his analysis a dialogue becomes possible between disparate thinkers as Iqbal and Sayyid Qutb.

²⁴ Shepard, W. (1987). Islam and Ideology: Towards a Typology. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 19(3), 307-335.

²⁵ Abu-Zayd, N. (2003). "The Dilemma of the Literary Approach to the Qur'an." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, (23), 8-47. Page 34 further.

²⁶ Lee, R. D. (1997). *Overcoming tradition and modernity: The search for Islamic authenticity*. Westview Press.

His approach is guided by the perspective of postmodernism, or post materialism. As John Voll succinctly describes this framework, it aims to understand contemporary thought through the question of how to defend or reinstate endangered lifestyles, or how to put reformed lifestyles in practice. Moving away from the ideal-types charged with discourse around problems of distribution, it concerns “*the grammar of forms of life*”²⁷. Lara Deeb is someone who has picked up on this as well, and I hypothesize that if Sayyid Qutb and Abu Zayd are similar in their thought, it is predicated on their shared interest in reforming the grammar of life.

Postmodernism deals with questions about the purpose of life and the integrity and authenticity of its patterns and processes.²⁸ One important element herein is a changing sense of values, but also a turn to subjectivism. Termed post materialism²⁹, it moves away from the discourses on distribution, and redefines what people want out of life, transforming basic norms governing politics, work, religion, family and sexual behavior. It is a tendency to spend more time thinking about the meaning and purpose of life and, as I understand it, claiming a personal, subjective relation with religion or values that is contradictory to objectivist relations with religion or values. To understand this tendency, we must ask different questions.

§ 2.3. Essential questions of theology. Epistemology, nature of the Qur’an and predestination

I will now outline *how* I approach the question and *what I will do* with the corpus. My thesis is an analysis of Qutb’s and Abu Zayd’s methodology of Qur’an interpretation. I will analyze not their *tafsir* itself (although it is included in this thesis, it is not the subject and for both thinkers, certainly for Abu Zayd, actual exegetical work is lacking) but their ideas on how Muslims have to engage with the Qur’an and interpret it.

This means my approach is necessarily theological and philosophical. Because it studies Qutb’s and Abu Zayd’s conceptions of the relation between mankind and the Qur’an. I will study the theological and philosophical elements of their own writings, as well as critically research and probe the secondary literature on these Islamic thinkers for those theological and philosophical elements.

The literary theory is a theological problem. And so, in the vein of Abu Zayd, I propose a set of theological questions. To understand the mechanisms of the literary theory and to compare one literary approach to another, these are the questions I deem vital:

- What is the author’s epistemology
- What is the author’s idea on the nature of the Qur’an? Is it created, or uncreated, and how does the Qur’an relate to humankind
- What is the author’s idea on predetermination

²⁷ Voll, J. (2007) "Contemporary Sufism and current social theory." Chapter 15 in *Sufism and the 'Modern' in Islam*. Edited by Martin Van Bruinessen, Julia Day Howell, I.B. Tauris, London.

²⁸ Voll, J. (2007) p. 295

²⁹ Ibid. p. 296

Chapter 3. Sayyid Qutb and his *tafsir al-haraka*. Dynamic *yaqin*

We have come now to the actual corpus of this research and the analysis. In order to answer in how far Abu Zayd's Qur'an exegesis has been influenced by Sayyid Qutb, I will outline their literary approach to the Qur'an, both in theory and their actual application of it. As I have stated before, the literary approach is a theological problem; it concerns questions about the nature of the Qur'an, of revelation and man's relation to this revelation. My analysis therefore dissects Qutb's and Abu Zayd's ideas on core theological issues that are related to Qur'anic exegesis, via the set of questions I have proposed in the previous chapter.

Finally, their actual literary theory of the Qur'an comes to the fore, which, I hypothesize, should exhibit and be inextricably linked to the aforementioned theology and philosophy and intellectual and social-historical setting and embeddedness. I will pay attention to both their theory, and actual exegetical excerpts of their works in this analysis.

Without further ado then, we start with Sayyid Qutb. He proposed a dynamic exegesis of the Qur'an, which he calls *tafsir al-haraka*. What are its elements and what was the purpose of this endeavor, which took shape in his *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*?

§. 3.1. Qutb's epistemology

If the literary method informs intellectuals *where* meaning is situated (determined by the content of the text, or the style and literary aspects of the text, or in the interaction between these aspects and the interpreter external to the text), its application is naturally concerned with epistemology – *by what means, how* do intellectuals approach and gather meaning? Are there traditions to be followed in explaining a text, do we use our rationality and reasoning, or is meaning something empirical, something to be experienced?

One of the defining differences between Sayyid Qutb and Abu Zayd is their epistemology. For Qutb, knowledge about the meaning of the Qur'an and knowledge of religion and the relation between the divine and the natural world is something to be spiritually experienced, literally, to be tasted (*dhawq*).³⁰

Epistemology immediately says something about the nature of the Qur'an. Modern Muslim thinkers will conceive of the Qur'an as a revelation from God, hence, it will be revealed in a way that is epistemologically reachable. It will have rational or scientific elements if religion is a rational ('Abduh) or scientific (Ahmad Khan) thing. It will have spiritual or experiential elements if religion is a spiritual or experiential thing (Qutb, Nursi, Gülen). The Qur'an will have both if it is revealed to a human being as a whole (Abu Zayd). This means there will be an overlap in Qutb's and Abu Zayd's conception of the nature of Qur'an, for at least part of it is something to be spiritually experienced in actual being, in reality, according to both.

Consequently, whatever theory of the literary method is applied, it will argue that the Qur'an has literary aspects which are intelligible through traditional conventions, intelligible to our reason, or intelligible through our spiritual experience. Or all of them. This means that epistemology is a cornerstone of the literary theory to the Qur'an.

Sayyid Qutb developed his epistemology at a time where his society, that of Egypt during British rule and early independence, rapidly changed. His ideas for reform built on an epistemological premise that distanced itself from three trends. First, from the thought of the traditional 'ulama and Muslim authoritative voices in the villages that he called *jahili* (backward).³¹ This, in fact, is the first time Qutb coined this term, inspired by al-'Aqqad who he was close to in his writings. Much in the vein of 'Abduh, he warned against *taqlid*, following traditions in a changing world, and advocated a dynamic Islam, which I will outline later.

Also, Qutb distances his epistemology from that of what he saw as the inhuman and denigrating materialism of Communism and Capitalism. These systems (which he was also to call *jahili* in his later writings) ignored the spiritual essence of human beings, by reducing it to a private affair, and by subjecting religion and faith to science, positivist rationalism and materialistic thought.³² These systems tried to explain everything in the world according to science and rationalism only. This had even pervaded Muslim thought, he warned, for example in the works of Sayyid Ahmad Khan.

³⁰ Carré, O. (2003). *Mysticism and Politics: A Critical Reading of Fī Zilāl Al-Qur'ān by Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966)*(Vol. 85). Brill. p. 55

³¹ Khatab, S. (2006). *The political thought of Sayyid Qutb: The theory of jahiliyyah*. Routledge. p. 45

³² Carré, O. (2003). p. 37

Third, although Qutb agreed with ‘Abduh that the Qur’an was not a book of history or scientific facts, and agreed with ‘Abduh’s reform that sought to revive the spirit of the Islam of the *salaf*, Qutb distanced himself from the intellectualist and rationalist reform that ‘Abduh’s Salafism entailed.³³ It is interesting to note that Abu Zayd distances himself from ‘Abduh as well, especially in Abu Zayd’s own conceptualization of the Qur’an as the spoken Word of God, rather than a book (*mushaf*). We will see later how this is manifested in similarities between Qutb’s and Abu Zayd’s conception of the Qur’an, inspired by Sufism. For now, it is sufficient to point out that Qutb’s epistemology is indeed inspired by Sufism amid these three trends, as he sought to preserve the religious of religion, like Abu Zayd later would as well, in the ongoing onslaught, as he saw it, of subjecting religion to science and rationalism.

Qutb reiterated that truth can also be accessed through rationalism and science, as long as it does not contradict the language of the Qur’an. It is this language, which he calls existential language, that contains truth about our existence, religion and faith, and the natural order of the world, and that can only be known and experienced by the seat of faith, which for him is the heart.³⁴ Moreover, the silent page of the Qur’an, which for him is the universe, the natural world and all that is manifested therein, also termed *ayat allah* by Qutb, speaks with the same language, and can hence also only be known through the heart.

What exactly is this knowledge according to Qutb, and how is it attained? It is a knowledge that is natural to the essence of the human being, human nature, *fitra*,³⁵ which is in harmony with the universe as it is guided towards and in harmony with the creative Will of God that permeates the natural world, man’s spiritual and animalistic nature together, and that unites the sacred and the mundane, the spiritual and the material. This creative Will of God is dynamic, yet unitary (*tawhid*). It changes and answers to the needs of every era and context, but it does not transform itself.³⁶

Human nature, or *fitra*, is the creative Will of God manifested in mankind as spirit, and when human nature is in harmony with nature itself and God, it will achieve peace, progress, it will be dynamic, and it will seek and find knowledge. Through the only language and epistemological faculty that is comprehensive and in touch with the Will of God, namely the spiritual, which, because it is dynamic and creative, is experiential (an experience). Qutb calls this *dhawq*, literally the taste of truth, God’s favor.³⁷ It can only be achieved or experienced when the *fitra* maintains its dignity. And because this dignity lies and is guaranteed by the harmony with the creative Will of God, once this Will does not govern, or is not manifested in man’s actions or beliefs, *dhawq* is impossible for people who are ruled by men, who do not believe in God, and who do not practice their religion in a dynamic manner. Should a person live in a society where men rule over men (the tyranny, as he sees it, of Nasser, or the rule of communism and capitalism), he should retreat and isolate himself (into the protective shade of the Qur’an) where he could possibly attain this knowledge.

³³ Carré, O. (2003). p. 38

³⁴ Carré, O. (2003). p. 49 and Khatab, S. (2006). p. 88

³⁵ Carré, O. (2003). p. 56

³⁶ Carré, O. (2003). p. 58

³⁷ Carré, O. (2003). p. 73 and Nettler, R. (1994). “A modern Islamic confession of faith and conception of religion: Sayyid Qutb's introduction to the Tafsir, Fi Zilal Al *Baqir'an*” *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 21(1), 102-114.

This spiritual knowledge is intuitive. It is an intuition inspired by both the silent and spoken pages of the Qur'an (nature and the Qur'an itself). It is a language that speaks to and with individuals at the core of their being, their actual existence, not their minds, and brings these individuals to existential unity with the Will of God, with the Qur'an itself. The meaning of the Qur'an, in other words, can only be tasted, spiritually experienced.³⁸

This spiritual knowledge, moreover, leads to, what Qutb calls, *yaqin*, existential, epistemological "certainty", to actual truth.³⁹ Whatever is experienced in this existential language is universally true. It becomes axiomatic. Dynamic, yes, for the Will of God is exactly that, but universal. According to Qutb, although truth changes and is in touch with social context and milieu, what an individual experiences in tasting the Qur'an is necessarily the same as what another person would. The experiential knowledge is universal, it is a unitary vision that is necessarily shared by everyone. It is at once a very particularistic knowledge, because it is only experienced in actual existence, in reality, in a specific circumstance, but also a communal and universal knowledge. True for everyone.

Qutb experienced this knowledge himself. And his reform is radical in this way; he wants this intuition for everyone, to receive the Qur'an day by day in this spiritually dynamic way as did the first generation of Muslims guided by their Prophet.⁴⁰

§ 3.2. Qutb on the nature of the Qur'an

The most defining characteristic of Abu Zayd's reform of Qur'anic exegesis, is his reconceptualization of the Qur'an from a text to a living, dynamic discourse, to active speech, a perpetual revelation. He went beyond Arkoun, who saw Islamic thought as a discourse, and Abu Zayd's later work is dedicated to arguing that the Qur'an is an organic living entity, a constant living phenomenon in the daily lives of Muslims. No one else of the school of the literary theory of the Qur'an had conceived of the Qur'an in this way. Sayyid Qutb, most strikingly, had the same conception of the Qur'an and if there are indeed objectively verifiable influences by Qutb on Abu Zayd's thought, the idea of the Qur'an as a living phenomenon must be one of them.

We already observed how Qutb argued that the Qur'an was not a book of history, or scientific facts, to be, as he says, coldly investigated by reason or science. The Qur'an for him is creative existential and dynamic language. The spoken Word of God that speaks every day, to everyone, and constantly reveals itself. The revelation, thus, is not a onetime occurrence, but perpetual and dynamic.⁴¹

Dynamic, as the Qur'an, through its emotive and existential language, speaks and is in dialogue and conversation with the situational needs of people, responding to them, informing them and being informed by them. A manifestation of the creative Will of God, it will, necessarily in Qutb's idea of unicity, correspond to the dynamism of the lives of people, because the harmony is perpetual as well. Its rulings change according to time and place. Its language changes according to the people it speaks to.⁴²

³⁸ Nettler, R. (1994). p. 108

³⁹ Ibid. p. 108

⁴⁰ Nettler, R. (1994) p. 110

⁴¹ Carré, O. (2003). p. 78

⁴² Ibid. p. 83

Mankind is the other side of the text, according to Qutb. The universe speaks its language, people speak theirs, and there is a consonance between them – in the Qur'an.⁴³ Furthermore, the Qur'an is a personality, an empathetic personality that tends to the emotions of people⁴⁴ through its verses and sura's, each and every one of them being a personality itself. The personality of a verse or of the Qur'an as a whole imprints itself on the personality of human beings, of people whose *fitra* is unadulterated and has retained its dignity. Man finds himself in the Qur'an and this identification is only possible by the very personal and human characteristic of its language.

Qutb believes that the meaning of the Qur'an lies in the interaction between Qur'an and man, just like Abu Zayd. At the very least, Qutb's *tafsir* is hermeneutical. He calls his exegesis *tafsir al-haraka*, dynamic tafsir.⁴⁵ The meaning of the Qur'an, furthermore, lies not in a rationalistic interpretation, but in the spiritual, active, dynamic engagement with the Qur'an, in the genesis of the intuition, *dhawq*, which is always active. Only in the application of the Qur'an in our daily lives, do we know its truth, says Qutb.

Being personal, empathetic, dynamic and perpetual, thus, being inextricably intertwined with the human *fitra* in the *dhawq*, the Qur'an pervades daily life, permeates it thoroughly, becomes manifested in the actions of people, whether it be memorization, prayer, recitation, but also indeed in society. As much as the Qur'an leaves its imprint on the individual, it leaves its imprint on society. For the individual achieving *dhawq*, whose *fitra* is in harmony with the creative Will of God, is but part of the whole organic *umma*. We already saw that the truth was universalistic for Qutb, and this is where this leads to.

This imprint in society, which is something necessary, not possible, but inevitable, is carried by Qutb's idea of the uncreated Qur'an. And therein lies the most fundamental difference with Abu Zayd. Sayyid Qutb is adamant that the Qur'an is uncreated.⁴⁶ It is divine and it is constantly miraculous. Meaning may change, but that is because the essence of the creative Will of God is dynamic itself, a love for change, and thus changes in the responses uttered in the Qur'an to a changing environment are in accordance still with this Will and indeed steered by it. Only then can the Qur'an transform society, but it is never transformed, it is never created. The theological mechanism that Qutb uses to explain this fixed dynamism, is what Carré calls occasionalism, as we will see shortly.

Now, if the human being is an inextricable part of the Qur'an, if the personality of the Qur'an is codependent on the personality of people and of society, and the meaning of the Qur'an can adapt, and change, but never transform, never become something other than ordained by the creative Will of God, it means the meaning of the Qur'an as known by *yaqin* and experienced in *dhawq* is dynamic, yes, but fixed and uncreated as well. The dialectic between Qur'an and the individual, which is very human, for personality and empathy charge and guide it, and which is also subjected, in Qutb's eyes to the laws of history and context (and Muslims must therefore study this context), only allows for a limited intersubjectivity. The direction of the dialectic is uncreated, it is divinely ordained and in harmony with the creative Will of God.

Hence, the nature of the Qur'an is both a point of conjecture and a point of differentiation when it concerns the influence of Sayyid Qutb on Abu Zayd. Abu Zayd's rethinking of the

⁴³ Ibid. p. 46

⁴⁴ Khatab, S. (2006) p. 93 and Boullata, J. (2013) p. 367

⁴⁵ Carré, O. (2003). p. 44

⁴⁶ Carré, O. (2003). p. 37

Qur'an as the spoken living phenomenon that shares its existential nature with mankind in direct, dynamic dialogue is, we could say, "Qutbian", certainly not rationalist or anywhere near the conceptions of the Qur'an as a text, while literary, still a text of Al-Khuli and Khalafallah. However, Abu Zayd advocated the idea of the created Qur'an, fully in line with the rationalist school of the Mu'tazilites. Qutb herein is Ash'arite.

§ 3.3. Qutb on predetermination

Carré observes how Qutb's stance of the question of free will, the agency of man, and divine predestination is in favor of the Ash'arite doctrine of predetermination as well.⁴⁷ This is no coincidence, of course. The Qur'an is uncreated for Qutb, because it has the same essence as the creative Will of God and is therefore determining rather than determined. Yet, how can Qutb maintain his idea of dynamism, *haraka* in Islamic thought, in the Will of God, in the Qur'an and in his proposed exegesis, when he at the same time adheres to the theory of divine predestination?

This is because he upholds the theology of occasionalism. Occasionalism is a theory that was developed in Islamic philosophy to counter the idea that God's Will was calculable, predictable according to reason, for all actions were a chain of cause and effect, God's Will being the primary cause. The Occasionalists rejected this rational predictability of God's Will, by upholding that every act is created on the spot through miraculous intervention. An act does not owe its existence to a chain of causes and effects, it only owes its existence to the Will of God, a Will that perpetually creates. Again, and again, and again.

Sayyid Qutb, as an activist, was of course concerned with human responsibility. The issue of divine predestination is therefore all the more delicate. He rejected any recoiling, withdrawal from the world and wanted Muslims to assert themselves. His solution was the idea of *tawhid*, a harmony between the nature of man, *fitra*, and the Divine Will. If the essence of a human being is unadulterated (for which the social-political circumstances need to be right, need to assert the rule of God rather than the rule of man over man), its will, its actions will be in harmony with God's Will. Islam is a religion of will, not of doctrine. An action is thus willed both by God and the individual, but only created by God, to whom solely, Qutb iterates, belongs agency and to God alone.⁴⁸ Qutb categorically denies human agency, and yet, not human will, which is faith for him.

This Occasionalism also means that the Will of God creatively engages with differences in time and place. The predestination that Qutb envisions is dynamic, a miracle that is not regulated by laws of casuistry. It creatively engages with human psychology that is subjected to the social context. It creatively engages with the needs of people. It therefore always changes, without ever becoming something other than the Will of God.

The Qur'an, then, and its meaning respond to and are informed by social context. They respond to and are informed by human psychology. They respond to and are informed by the needs of people. But it never transforms. It is always the Word of God, an expression of the Will of God and it is therefore civilizing and it seeks to imprint its personality on mankind and society. This is an ontological movement. Existence is movement, according to Qutb. This will inevitably happen.

⁴⁷ Carré, O. (2003). p. 68

⁴⁸ Carré, O. (2003). p. 73

And so, how in tune with human perceptions and psychology it may be, the meaning of the Qur'an is always determining, and never totally determined by the human being. Qutb allows for intersubjectivity, because the very nature of the Qur'an is a personality for him. Abu Zayd, we will see later, upholds an intersubjectivity extremis. With him, Qur'an finds meaning in man. With Qutb, man finds meaning in the Qur'an. Qutb hermeneutics remains that, hermeneutics. It is not humanistic, contrary to Abu Zayd we will see.

Yaqin, then, is determined. No wonder Qutb could explain how this knowledge would necessarily be shared by everyone who experienced the existential language of the Qur'an. The meaning of the Qur'an is axiomatic, for Qutb, for it is predestined and it is uncreated. With Qutb, in exegesis, man partakes in the divine. With Abu Zayd, in exegesis, the divine partakes in humanity and literally becomes human.

§ 3.4. Qutb and the literary theory of the Qur'an. An impressionist approach

Enter, then, this literary approach of Sayyid Qutb. What are its defining elements and characteristics and how are these elements and characteristics informed by Qutb's theology and philosophy?

Let us summarize a few attributes of the nature of the Qur'an in Qutb's eyes. Unlike Rida and 'Abduh, who saw the Qur'an as a rational and educative message, Qutb saw the Qur'an as therapeutic, psychological and experiential.⁴⁹ He sees the Qur'an, in other words, as empathetic, as personal and as inextricably linked to the psychology of people and their daily experiences. Each verse is a personality and the Qur'an as a whole is so too. Each verse speaks in a personalized way, the Qur'an is a living being that evokes unique reactions and sentiments.⁵⁰ The Qur'an is a revelation to the hearts, and speaks, says Qutb, therefore with existential language, reachable by human intuition. The Qur'an wants to touch a chord, not to explain.⁵¹ The Qur'an therefore is affective and existentially sensitive, speaking to the heart and emotion. Its influence is sensitive and emotional. And it touches the intimate being (*wijdan*), making an impression, and in response to human experience with which it is in direct contact, it evokes things.

It is in this search for the enchanted Qur'an, Khatab says, that Qutb develops his literary theory.⁵² What is the mechanism behind this continual effect on the minds and hearts that the Qur'an has? It is this effect, also, that Qutb sees as the inimitability of the Qur'an. Khatab states that Qutb took the literary theory further than anyone before him.⁵³

He developed his theory in two books. *Al taswir al-fanni fi Al-Qur'an* (Artistic portrayal in the Qur'an) (1945) and *Mashahid al-Qiyama fi al-Qur'an* (Scenes of the Day of Resurrection in the Qur'an). But *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* develops the theory further and is at once the application of it. The Qur'an, he says, has an effective method of using language (the *wujdani* language we had earlier described). Reading or hearing the Qur'an, one transcends to a higher

⁴⁹ Carré (2003), page 28.

⁵⁰ Carré (2003) p. 30

⁵¹ Carré (2003) p. 45

⁵² Khatab (2006) p. 83

⁵³ Khatab (2006) p. 84

level of reality. Khatab states that in Qutb's eyes, the Qur'an text offers life with its motion, not a description of life.⁵⁴ How does the Qur'an do this, according to Qutb?

There are multiple distinctive tools in the Qur'an that Qutb defines through his literary method. The first is *taswir fanni*, artistic portrayal or representation. Let me present Qutb's own words on *taswir fanni*:

"Taswir is the preferred tool in the style of the Qur'an. By palpable fancied images, it designates intellectual meanings, psychological states, perceptible events, visual scenes, human types, and human nature. As for events, scenes, stories, and sights, it renders them actual and immediate, pulsating with life and movement. When it adds dialogue to them, it brings into full play all the elements of imaginative representation in them." (Sayyid Qutb as quoted in Boullata, I. (2013))⁵⁵

For Qutb, the Qur'anic style and message has the performative, affective quality to vivify the images in the interpreters mind and soul, so that whatever images or events may be described in the Qur'an actually impress upon the reader their actual presence. The Qur'an literary comes alive and is helped by the rhythm and sounds of words and other literary aspects.

Another tool, is the Qur'anic language of persuasion, *al-mantiq al-wijdani*, existential language, or, as Boullata calls it, emotive logic.⁵⁶ Language that awakens feeling and aims to directly reach one's intuitive insight, one's emotion, and ultimately one's soul. In other words, the heart that is the cornerstone of faith, as we have seen with Qutb. The seat of *yaqin*. Indeed, if *yaqin* is spiritual truth according to Qutb, *al-mantiq al-wijdani* is the language that conveys it.

Finally, there is the tool of dialectical portrayal. This presupposes that meanings change along with who speaks and who is spoken to in a Qur'anic verse, and the particular thrust or atmosphere of the dialect or dialogue impresses ethical or spiritual truths upon the individual interpreter. The Qur'an portrays *namadhij insaniyyah*, which are human personalities, types of personalities, with which the Qur'an entertains a dialogue. This dialogue, furthermore, has a literary style, for example, rhetoric, repetitions, admonitions, warnings, explanations, guidance, etc.⁵⁷ The personality types, or literary characters and roles, if you will, are categorized as believers on the one hand, and unbelievers on the other. And when it comes to the unbelievers, the types vary from people who reject the message, run away from it, deny it through arrogance, self interest. Or they run away out of fear, or they support all parties and are therefore neutral to the message. The dialogue then with a certain type, evokes pedagogical lessons and emotional reactions.

Qutb emphasizes through his theory of these images that there is a harmonious relation between arts and religious purposes.⁵⁸ These play a role in his *Mashahid al-Qiyama* (scenes of resurrection). The descriptions of eschatology in the Qur'an elevate humankind through its persuasive imagery. The Qur'an makes these scenes perpetually present and visible to all human beings at all times.

⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 84

⁵⁵ Boullata, I. p. 356

⁵⁶ Boullata, I. p. 357

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 85

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 86

Through these mechanisms, the Qur'an engages the human soul, activating the depth of human conscience and the spirit it is seeking to reform. It does this by continually engaging both the practical side of life and the power of the soul.

There is a relation between arts and Islam for Qutb.⁵⁹ The Qur'an presents Islam as a dynamic way of life. Qur'anic scenes become life itself, not merely the story of life. In all the Qur'anic scenes the expressive form always links aesthetics with religion. Thus, Qutb:

*“We realize that the Qur'anic expression united the aim of religion with the artistic aim in every scene presented in the Qur'an. We come to realize that the splendor of the Qur'anic style is the influential instrument in the Qur'an, reforming the human soul and giving it the Islamic character. Religion and aesthetics are twin in the human soul.”*⁶⁰

This is the imprinting of the personality of the Qur'an on the personality of the individual, and for Qutb eventually, on society. It is through its literary aspects that the Qur'an achieves this in Qutb's eyes.

And now we come to perhaps the most defining and crucial feature of Qutb's literary method. It is developed in its most thorough version in *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*. That is the coherent unity of each of the Qur'anic *suras* and of the Qur'an as a whole, structured by literary aspects, which give the *sura* and indeed the whole of the Qur'an a personality, make the Qur'an a living entity.⁶¹

*“Hence, whoever lives in the shades of the Qur'an notices that each of its suras has a distinctive personality, a personality that has a soul with which one's heart lives as though with a living soul possessing distinctive features and traits. It has a main topic or several main topics tightly bound to a special theme; it has a special atmosphere enveloping all its topics and helping it to deal with them from specific angles to achieve harmony among them accordingly; it has a special musical rhythm which, if it changes in the course, changes for a specific consideration related to the topic. This is a general characteristic of all the suras of the Qur'an”*⁶² (Sayyid Qutb as quoted in Boullata, I. (2013), commentary on *sura al-Baqarah*).

For Qutb, every chapter has a theme (*mihwar*) around which its meaning resolves. It is undergirded by either one or multiple topics (*mawdu'at*) that are connected to the theme. An atmosphere (*jaww*) and musical rhythm integrates these topics and connects them to the theme and in so doing, the chapter gains a personality, that has a soul (*ruh*) and is perceived by the reader to be an actual living being. This is how *mantiq al-wijdani* or existential language works.⁶³

Sayyid Qutb does not stop here, however. He believes that the Qur'an as a whole has a coherent unity, just like it has a unitary message. It is marked by a universal, Islamic conceptualization of existence, the basic message of the Qur'an on doctrine, outlook and aspirations. Faith in God is the basis of it, the basis of the Islamic way of life, the basis of its

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 95

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 95

⁶¹ Boullata, I. (2013) p. 362

⁶² Boullata, I. (2013) p. 362

⁶³ Boullata, I. (2013) p. 362

ethics and economics, the basis of every act the believing Muslim undertakes anywhere.⁶⁴ In other words, the Qur'an, as a personality, moves towards an objective, towards a goal. The themes in all the *suras* are united in producing one Qur'anic message, which, for Qutb, is the Islamic conceptualization of existence. It is the Qur'an's *hadaf* (goal, purpose). The Qur'an itself is thus a personality, vivid, a living entity in direct contact with mankind, affecting their emotions and knowledgeable about their context.

Why is this so important? Qutb believed that the *mushaf* as it is codified is the predestined correct order of the Qur'an and its chapters. The goal and meaning of the Qur'an is thus bound to this structure. This is not to say that Qutb thought of the Qur'an as a book. On the contrary, the Qur'an is speech and only speech according to Qutb and it always speaks. But, it does not change fundamentally, it is determined solely by the Will of God, and not by the interpretation of mankind. Its nature is like that of the universe, God's book to see, for Qutb⁶⁵. Unchangeable. Moving, yes. Dynamic, yes. Answering and seemingly, personally moved by the circumstances of the people. Yes. But without transformation.⁶⁶

So, the meaning of the Qur'an imprints itself on the human soul though its literary aspects which are solely affective for Qutb and which are facilitated by the vivid imagery in the Qur'an that makes it feel the Qur'an is a perpetual presence, and by the dialectic portrayal of types of personalities and the dialogue with them. This imprinting then, must be what Abu Zayd meant with Impressionistic. This is quite contrary to Abu Zayd's literary theory, where human rationalist interpretation imprints upon the Qur'an its meaning. What moves this impressionistic approach?

As an extension of God and his Creative Will, the Qur'an is deterministic, which means that any interpretations of the Qur'an, or rather, any experiences of its meaning through *yaqin* evoked by the affective literary aspects of the Qur'an couched in emotive language, will be determined predominantly, or even solely by God. Different truths are then not possible due to the unitary nature of God. Truth may be dynamic and changing, as indeed this literary method acknowledges in the primacy of emotional language which is in tune with the psyche of human beings and their surroundings (context, which changes). God is not schizophrenic, Qutb may have thought, so the *yaqin* experienced by one person must necessarily be so experienced by the other. God cannot reveal one truth, then another if revelation is part of His essence. Note how the terminology used by Qutb, although very close to humans and individuals, is loaded by words as evoked, imprinted, inspired. It is, after its premises which seem hermeneutical and at times even humanistic, eventually a one way street. The Qur'an imprints its truth by communicating in human language and through human imagery. But the truth stays solely divine.

This correlates to the uncreated nature of the Qur'an that Qutb advocates. If the meaning stays divine, the Qur'an does as well. We see absolutely no discussion in Qutb's works whatsoever about literary inquiry into the linguistic code of the Qur'an. This is because a linguistic code is created, a convention. Human language, and thus, human understanding, would become a co-creator of the Qur'an. Qutb evades this, by restricting the intersubjectivity of the relation of man and Qur'an and meaning in this relation to the Qur'an being informed by the personality of people and their needs, not by their reasoning, and on the other hand informing

⁶⁴ Boullata, I. (2013) p. 366

⁶⁵ Boullata, I. (2013) p. 367

⁶⁶ Ibid.

the personality of the people through imagery and portrayal – through persuasion and style that is to be intuited, not rationally gathered. Epistemology is thus directly linked to all of this.

Hence, it is the theology of Qutb, and then his ideas on the nature of the Qur'an, epistemology and predestination, that informs the impressionism of his literary theory.

Before we move on to Abu Zayd, however, I note two crucial influences that Qutb may have on Abu Zayd.

First, his conceptualization of the Qur'an as a living phenomenon, as spoken Word, as a dialogue, a living entity with a personality, immanent and in direct contact with man. Abu Zayd's rethinking of the Qur'an follows this idea, to the letter.

Second, and this is truly fascinating, Sayyid Qutb's concept of dialectic portrayal. Abu Zayd develops exactly that concept which even contains the types that Qutb described.

Chapter 4. Abu Zayd and his humanistic hermeneutics. Dynamic *ta'wil*

§ 4.1.1. Abu Zayd's epistemology part one. Reason.

As with the section on Qutb, this paragraph aims to answer two interrelated questions. With what faculty of knowledge can the meaning of the Qur'an be approached? And where lies the meaning of the Qur'an, where can it be found?

Apart from how Abu Zayd's answers to these questions may or may not be inspired by Sayyid Qutb and how they influence his literary approach to the Qur'an, asking these questions brings with the added critical academic engagement with development in Abu Zayd's thought. Interestingly, when we ask these two interrelated questions to Abu Zayd, we see a true development in stages of his thought, which I am not sure whether the academic world has taken due note of. Or at least, I am not sure whether studies have been explicit enough in outlining this development and study its consequences.

Abu Zayd maintains a comprehensive epistemology inspired by Ibn 'Arabi, which means that the meaning of the Qur'an and the relation between the divine and natural world can be approached both through philosophy, spiritual experience and reason. As a neo Mut'azilite, rationalism is for him the dominant epistemological faculty to obtain knowledge.

The development in Abu Zayd's epistemology is interrelated with the development in his views about the nature of the Qur'an, which for him is created and always a product and a producer of culture, but in the first stage of his stage a book, *mushaf* and only in the latter stages is it speech, *qir'a*. This will be outlined in the following paragraph. First, however, how can one approach meaning and truth, according to Abu Zayd?

Whatever the stage is of Abu Zayd's thought, the meaning of the Qur'an is always found through the rational engagement of a human agent with the Qur'an, whether it is text or speech. This means that the meaning of the Qur'an is created by and is found in human interpretation, an interpretation, furthermore, that is active, a movement, and of which the human being has total agency. This engagement is not predetermined, nor are its results. Reason (*al-'aql*), thus advocates Abu Zayd, is the epistemological tool with which to engage the Qur'an and indeed the world. *Ta'wil* is the movement of reason to find the meaning of the Qur'an.⁶⁷ Importantly, the Qur'an finds its meaning in this hermeneutic act – the meaning is revealed by the encounter with the rational mind of an interpreter.⁶⁸

The added significance of Abu Zayd's epistemology, is that the meaning of the Qur'an, or a verse, differs from and for one reader to another.⁶⁹ A reader's personal and cultural horizon determines the meaning of a verse.⁷⁰ An interpretation (and meaning lies in interpretation for Abu Zayd) is never absolute. It is always relative (*fahm nisbi*)⁷¹

⁶⁷ Sukidi (2009) p. 206

⁶⁸ Sukidi (2009) p. 207

⁶⁹ Kermani, N. (2004) p. 173

⁷⁰ Kermani, N. (2004) p. 173

⁷¹ Kermani, N. (2004) p. 173

The human being is the other side of the Qur'an, for Abu Zayd, as with Sayyid Qutb. However, through his agency, the human being leaves its imprint on the Qur'an when he rationally interprets a text. Whereas with Sayyid Qutb, the Qur'an, which is a personality and living being, and is engaged with its other side, the human being, leaves its imprint on the human being and indeed on society, where agency has one direction and source.

This critical engagement, this rational interpretation and agency of the rational mind is possible through different human aspects of the Qur'an. Abu Zayd finds three human aspects of the Qur'an and they correspond to the development of his intellectual life and thought.

Now where is the meaning of the Qur'an found? The first place where the rational mind finds meaning in the Qur'an, is in its understanding of the historical context of the verses. Being revealed, *munajjamun* (in stages through history), the verses are in constant dialogue with the needs of a particular time, and its content is informed by this historical context. The rational movement that Abu Zayd looks for here, is one that critically sees how the meaning of the Qur'an is related to a particular context, and from this vision, extract the significance of the verse for our own times.⁷²

The second place where meaning is found in the Qur'an, through the rational mind, is its language and literary style and structure. This is where Abu Zayd's literary approach makes its entrance. Being revealed in a human language, to purposefully indeed communicate with human beings, the meaning of the Qur'an is related to and structured and created by human conventions. The language in the Qur'an is a human convention, as language always is. And the language changes. The Qur'an informs the conventional language by changing it, but it is also informed by the changes in language. A word that can be found in the first few verses of the Qur'an, may not have the same meaning if the word is found in the later verses, because the language has changed over a span of twenty two years. Hence, it is necessary to apply linguistic science and semantics to understand the meaning of the Qur'an.

It is also necessary to apply literary science, because the language with which the Qur'an speaks contains literary structures akin to human literary forms. We will delve into these later. But so far, Abu Zayd thus explains how the meaning of the Qur'an, through the rational mind, is found in historical analysis, linguistic analysis and literary analysis.

§ 4.1.2. Abu Zayd's epistemology part two. Aesthetic experience.

However, crucially Abu Zayd in the last stage of his thought re-thought the Qur'an – from a book, to speech, the spoken Word. Kermani notes how this indeed was a later development of his thought⁷³, and it is primarily through a biography of Abu Zayd which has been translated by Kermani into German, as well as Abu Zayd's *Rethinking the Qur'an* that we can learn about this development. Inspired by Ibn 'Arabi, Abu Zayd expanded his epistemology.

What helps understand this development is an interview I conducted with the widow of Abu Zayd, Dr. Ebtehal Younes. As an academic in French literature and culture, it is only the biographical input that concerns me here and which has critical value.

⁷² Sukidi (2009) p. 207

⁷³ Kermani, N. (2004) p.175

“One of the important elements of Abu Zayd’s thought is that he sees truth as subjective and personal. Between rationalism and sufism, what would you say was the most important faculty of knowledge for Abu Zayd?” (Rashwan Bafati)

“Both rationalism and sufism were important. His academic career was basically a quest: What is the Qur’an? You can see a development. First he studied the Mu’tazilite thought for his MA thesis. He wanted to know all of this. This is where rational thought was important. But for his PhD, he studies Ibn ‘Arabi and sufism became important. Ibn ‘Arabi was the biggest love of his life. He published his PhD on Ibn ‘Arabi and later a book on him. For him these two epistemologies are equal, complimentary.” (Dr. Ebtehal Younes in interview I conducted with her. See appendix for full transcript.)

Eventually, Abu Zayd arrived at an epistemological position of inclusivity. It was during his many visits to the library of the University of Pennsylvania that he came to this philosophy.⁷⁴ Influenced by Gadamer, Heidegger and the philosophy of existentialism, he explains his epistemology and very briefly his conceptualization of the Qur’an:

“It, by this question of the vision between I and the existence (Abu Zayd’s definition of existentialism), provided new grounds for the question of hermeneutics. We lived together, Ibn ‘Arabi and me. The world between reader and text. You have to know all the sources and methods of knowledge to really understand the Meccan revelation.” (Abu Zayd in Abu Zayd, Magdi, Kermani, 1999).⁷⁵

On the Qur’an and epistemology:

“It has to be read, to be (emphasis added by Rashwan Bafati). Its existence is dependent on the contact with the reader (and thus the meaning as well). To exist, it must be read. Ibn ‘Arabi and Gadamer said truth changes along with the person that approaches it. Even God’s truth changes along this line. What God is objectively, we cannot know, human knowledge of God is subjective – and thereby dynamic. And different from individual to individual. Truth is in the dialectic meeting between subject and object. Gadamer calls this intersubjectivity. For Ibn ‘Arabi, truth is what the individual understands. He was a mystic, a sufi. Truth is only in the experience of extreme subjectivity.” (Abu Zayd in Abu Zayd, Magdi, Kermani, 1999).⁷⁶

I would like to add here, that not only does the Qur’an need to be read, to exist. It, for Abu Zayd, needs to be attentively listened to, it needs to be recited.⁷⁷ This theory is explicated in his *Rethinking the Qur’an* and will be explained in the following paragraph. But for his epistemology it is important to note, in his later works, Abu Zayd believes *“the meaning of the Qur’an (...) first finds place in its recitation.”* (Abu Zayd in Abu Zayd, Magdi, Kermani, 1999).⁷⁸ He comes close here to Qutb, in stating the experience of the Qur’an, which for Abu Zayd needs to be physical and ritualistic (for example in prayer, but also, thus, recitation), generates meaning. The Qur’an has an inner voice, but it only comes to be, it only exists when it is listened to. It is aesthetic and this will have consequences for his literary approach which will be treated at the end of this chapter.

⁷⁴ Abu Zayd, N., Magdi, C., Kermani, N. (1999) p. 116

⁷⁵ Abu Zayd, N., Magdi, C., Kermani, N. (1999) p. 116, 117

⁷⁶ Abu Zayd, N., Magdi, C., Kermani, N. (1999) p. 117

⁷⁷ Abu Zayd, N., Magdi, C., Kermani, N. (1999) p. 19

⁷⁸ Abu Zayd, N., Magdi, C., Kermani, N. (1999) p. 19

Abu Zayd was inspired by Ibn ‘Arabi’s inclusive idea of epistemology, meaning all sources of knowledge, rational, spiritual, scientific, even from other religious sources, are equally viable sources to interpret the Qur’an.⁷⁹ He notes how the Sufi’s regarded the Qur’an to have four different semantic levels of its verses; outward (*zahir*), inward (*batin*), limitation (*hadd*), and upward (*matla’*). These semantic levels are in constant overlap, and they do not exclude each other. To understand these levels, and thus the multiplicity of meaning in the Qur’an, one can apply different epistemological tools (ratio, intuition, science, tradition, etc). It makes the Qur’an accessible to all the believers, regardless of their intellectual approach, says Abu Zayd.⁸⁰ His explaining of how Ibn Rushd saw different, yet equal when significance is concerned, modes of semantic expression (poetic, addressing the masses; argumentative, addressing the theologians, philosophical or rational, addressing the philosophers) drives home his point: it is the recipient’s engagement with the text, in whichever and by whatever means, that produces the meaning of the Qur’an, and it can do so because the nature of the Qur’an, as we will see soon, contains semantic multiplicity.⁸¹ It is through listening, *sama’*, which is the inextricable other side of the Qur’an as spoken Word, as recital, that man can find meaning, as it is attentive to this multiplicity.⁸² And thus Abu Zayd in his later works expands his epistemology to include this intuitive listening which is very similar, yet crucially different, to Sayyid Qutb’s *dhawq*. It is an experience, but in contrast to Sayyid Qutb, the experience is moved by the agency of the individual. And the meaning that is experienced is not unitary, but open, diverse, relative. This is how Abu Zayd describes this experience.

“Religion without the physical experience of rituals is nothing more than a construct, a vessel of thought. What is important is the inner voice, which is a concrete voice. Aesthetic experience is vital for religion. God becomes present in revelation and recitation. God is in existential unity in the recitation with humans, people experience God. In this unio mystika, the reciter becomes one with what is recited. (.....). Richness of meaning is only experienced in recitation.” (Abu Zayd in Abu Zayd, Magdi, Kermani, 1999).⁸³

The importance of *sama’* as the other side of the Qur’an as God’s speech, as a discourse (we will explain this in the second paragraph) lies in the following. Abu Zayd states that only with this conception of the Qur’an and this way of experiencing the meaning of the Qur’an, can the Qur’an be reconnected to the question of the meaning of life, and can the Qur’an be a part of the daily life of Muslims. It is a human life, and if the Qur’an is to be relevant for it, it must be engaged with a humanistic hermeneutics that is wholesome (both rational, spiritual and intuitive). Unlike Qutb’s *dhawq*, which leads to a unitary vision, experienced by and in direct contact with human beings and changing through context and therefore dynamic, but not changing from one person to another, Abu Zayd’s epistemology necessitates empirical diversity of religious meaning.⁸⁴ Only then does it connect with the meaning of life. Meaning needs to be relative, if it is to be relevant. Human understanding thus imprints itself upon the Qur’an. The meaning of the Qur’an is formed by the expression of the interpretation of the individual, whether its interpretative act was rational, or spiritual in attentive listening.

⁷⁹ Abu Zayd, N. (2004) p. 16

⁸⁰ Abu Zayd, N. (2004) p. 17

⁸¹ Abu Zayd, N. (2004) p. 18

⁸² Abu Zayd, N. (2004) p. 18

⁸³ Abu Zayd, N., Magdi, C., Kermani, N., (1999) p. 19 – 21.

⁸⁴ Abu Zayd, N. (2004) p. 11

§ 4.2. Abu Zayd on the nature of the Qur'an

When we delve into the thought of Abu Zayd on the nature of the Qur'an, we truly discover how he indeed is a radical reformer. He has focused his life's work on the human aspects of the Qur'an and in the course of the development of his thought he has reached an idea that not only reforms Islam, but reforms one of its very pristine sources, the Qur'an. The meaning of the Qur'an, for him, is found in the interpretation of or experiential listening to its verses. But what is crucial, is that for Abu Zayd, the agency in the interpretative or experiential act lies solely with the human being. This agency belongs to every individual, and is therefore diverse. The meaning of the Qur'an is open ended. The human being creates the Qur'an in an existential sphere where God and man meet. This leads to an intersubjectivity extremis. There are as many Qur'an's as there are individual interpreters.

Two interrelated aspects define Abu Zayd's rethinking of the Qur'an. One, that the Qur'an has human aspects. And two, that human beings are the other side of either the text, or the spoken recital, depending which stage of his thought is considered.

The concept of the nature of the Qur'an has developed itself in stages in Abu Zayd's thought, just as his epistemology has done. What is a consistent factor throughout the development, however, is that Abu Zayd is adamant that the Qur'an is created. As it manifests itself in the natural world, the natural world literally transforms the Qur'an. This is in striking contrast to Qutb, for whom the Qur'an is dynamic, moved by and moving the context, and as a personality in direct contact with human beings, but never transformed. It is a divine attribute.

For Abu Zayd, the Qur'an is a divine act. And acts are created and consequently are existentially interrelated with the natural world, and thus changeable by and changing the natural world. When Abu Zayd says the Qur'an is a human text, or in later stages, human voice, he means no less than that humans beings share in the creative act of the Qur'an – co-create the Qur'an with God - and are thus an inextricable part of the revelation. The human aspects of the Qur'an, which for Abu Zayd are its historicity, its nature as interpretation from the very beginning (not *tanzil*, but *ta'wil*), its language and linguistic code, its literary aspects and inner music of its aesthetic nature are created by humans. Their history informs the meaning. Their rational understanding informs the meaning. Their language as a human convention informs the meaning. And their active listening and engagement through rituals informs the meaning. Furthermore, human beings have collected the verses and codified it in a *mushaf* and this collection is also a human act that changes the Quran's nature.

Abu Zayd first defined the Qur'an as a historical text. I will not explicate this in elaborate terms, this is not the stage where Abu Zayd actually reforms Islamic thought. Like 'Abduh, and Fazlur Rahman, he states that the Qur'an exhibits a response to the factual reality of its time.⁸⁵ The meaning of the Qur'an here lies in the interaction between the text and the historical process. This process is steered by intercommunication, a complicated dialogue in a discursive and argumentative way with the needs of people in their respective time.⁸⁶ This communicative aspect of the Qur'an will return later in Abu Zayd's literary theory.

⁸⁵ Abu Zayd, N. (2010) p. 282

⁸⁶ Abu Zayd, N. (2010) p. 287

Then he defined the Qur'an as a sphere of existence, or a channel of communication, where God and man meet without being one.⁸⁷ It is here that we are introduced to the core ideas of Abu Zayd on the nature of the Qur'an. Abu Zayd believes that the first interpretation, the very first *ta'wil*, was that of the Prophet Muhammed right at the moment when he received the revelation⁸⁸. Exactly at that moment the Word of God and man meet in a sphere of existential unity, where human understanding literally is part of the being of the revelation, of the Qur'an. Abu Zayd notes how he prefers the idea that the angel Gabriel revealed himself to Muhammed in human form, rather than the awesome, terrifying ringing of a bell of a Prophetic tradition⁸⁹, and analogously conceptualizes the very Qur'an itself as revealing itself in human form – in human language, and as a human dialogue that through its human aspects can inform the rational mind and society, and at the same time is informed by it. The idea that what the Prophet Muhammed received was the first interpretation, rather than a revelation that would subsequently be interpreted by those who came after the Prophet, is to my understanding and familiarity with Islamic thought radical – a true reconceptualization of one of the roots of Islamic thought.

It all stems from his insistence to define the Qur'an as recital, favoring the lexical meaning of *qara'a* (to recite). The Qur'an was never dealt with as a written text in the daily lives of Muslims in the early period of Islam. Abu Zayd, interestingly like Sayyid Qutb, wants to revive that experience of the Qur'an of the early Muslims.⁹⁰ When the Qur'an is speech, and not a book, it is essentially language, and, equally essentially, human language. And this is what Abu Zayd focuses on and it is with this focus that he stands out from other modern Muslim exegetes. He will first focus on the technical linguistic aspects of the language in the Qur'an. And later he develops his thought on the affective aspects of the language. These two aspects are integrated in his literary theory – in Sayyid Qutb's theory, the linguistic aspects are absent.

With language being the essence of the Qur'an, this means, says Abu Zayd:

“The content, however, is strongly correlated with the linguistic structure, which is culturally and historically determined. In other words, if the divine content of God's Word has been expressed in human language, it is the domain of human language that represents the essential human dimension of all scriptures and the Qur'an in particular.” (Abu Zayd, 2000, p.4)⁹¹.

The dynamic is as follows. The language in the Qur'an is subject to lexical, rhetorical rules of Arabic and therefore changes. The meaning of the Qur'an is influenced by language, and it influences language. It has a dialectical relationship with the culture and reality to which the text belong and which it embodies – and because it embodies this reality, it can change this reality, and is also changed by this reality.⁹²

Through a linguistic system, or code, (*shifra*), the Qur'an as a text behaves as a kind of organism that is symbiotic with the interpretation of man and is dependent on the context.⁹³

⁸⁷ Abu Zayd, N. (2000) p. 1

⁸⁸ Sukidi (2009) p. 188

⁸⁹ Sukidi (2009) p. 201

⁹⁰ Abu Zayd, N. (2000) p. 2

⁹¹ Abu Zayd, N. (2000) p.4

⁹² Sukidi (2009) p. 170

⁹³ Kermani, N. (2004) p. 173

This is because the language is a human convention. A word that can be found in the first few verses in the Qur'an and in the last few verses may not have the same meaning, because the convention has changed – the semantic has changed. The meaning of the Qur'an, therefore, is a semantic problem. It is important to note this, because this idea of a linguistic system and the semantic nature of the Qur'an is something Sayyid Qutb disregards entirely. It has a major influence on the difference of their literary method, which otherwise, as we will see, seem strikingly similar.

And finally, he defined the Qur'an not as a text, but as spoken Word, a recital with literary aspects. Abu Zayd expands his idea of the Qur'an as the Word of God in existential unity with human understanding by defining it as a living phenomenon, as a living, constant, perpetual discourse. What this adds, is that not only is human rational understanding (*ta'wil*) an inextricable part of revelation, but also recitation and *sama'* (listening attentively).

The Qur'an needs to be recited to exist and needs to be spiritually experienced in the daily lives of Muslims. *Wahy* is temporary, but the Qur'an remains a living phenomenon by the voice of man, by the recitation that externalizes God's message.⁹⁴ It means listening is part of the essence of the Qur'an and it precedes recitation, just like it does in prayer. It manifests itself in heart felt action of comprehension and it is intimate. The recitation of the Qur'an is at the heart of all kinds of Islamic rituals. There is a continuous act of communication through worshipping, and this is the essential relationship between God and his creatures. This is very much along the lines of Qutb's thinking. The Qur'an causes daily encounter between divinity and humanity. And it is this daily encounter, this discourse that is Qur'an.

The discursive elements of the Qur'an can be found through a literary interpretation of the text, which we will focus on later. Here I want to state that for Abu Zayd it is clear that the Qur'an was in perpetual discourse with human beings and their needs, and as such was relevant to their search for the meaning of life. Abu Zayd's wants the restore this nature of the Qur'an, which neither means islamization of politics, for this destroys the Qur'anic nature, but it also does not mean the compartmentalization of human being to one sphere and religion to another, which Islamic modernists, secularists and Islamists are causing by their conception of the Qur'an as a dead silent text.

§ 4.3. Abu Zayd on predetermination

Belief has to have room for all manifestations of truth and all expressions of truth.⁹⁵ Abu Zayd as inspired by Ibn 'Arabi's ideas on Islam as a religion of love. In the cosmological order that Abu Zayd sees, there is no exclusion and everything is united.

In the Qur'anic perspective, every living being is part of a whole, without losing its agency, identity or individuality.⁹⁶ The human being is part of a family, the family belongs to a society, the society is part of history, and history is part of the cosmology. The sun, the stars, earth and the mountains are not only elements of nature. They are signs of God as well and moreover, they are signs in a semiotic sense. God speaks through them.⁹⁷

Man has a relation to nature in this cosmic, harmonious order. It has both the ability and potential to understand and recognize the semiotics of the universe, and most importantly,

⁹⁴ Abu Zayd, N. (2000 p. 8

⁹⁵ Abu Zayd, N., Magdi, C., Kermani, N., (1999) p. 130

⁹⁶ Ibid. p. 127

⁹⁷ Ibid. p. 127

mankind has the freedom to play its part, as it wishes, through individual agency, in this order, as long as man is thankful for this mercy of God.⁹⁸ Man, through his being, is another musical note in this harmony of speech. Everything is God's speech and a sign of God, including every single individual human being and every single human interpretation or worldview. There is no relation of power between these signs. There is only dialogue and conversation and co-creation.⁹⁹

In other words, for Abu Zayd, God speaks through diversity. Pluralism is a divine sign, as much as it is the intellectual effort of the human agent. Agency lies with the human individual and there is no predetermination. This means knowledge of the Qur'an or interpretations of it are neither predetermined.

§ 4.4. Abu Zayd and the literary theory of the Qur'an. An expressionist approach

As we have seen, in contrast to Sayyid Qutb, Abu Zayd's epistemology and concept of the Qur'an are marked by comprehensiveness and inclusivity. Both reason and spirituality play a part for Abu Zayd and the Qur'an is both a human linguistic system and a living phenomenon as discourse. This is further manifested in Abu Zayd's idea of predetermination and his cosmology of a world of possibilities where agency lies with the human being. For Qutb, the harmony in the universe may be changing and dynamic, but the Will of God does not transform and it determines everything, also *yaqin*. They have different ideas on the nature of the Qur'an as created or uncreated.

However, they show striking similarities as well. Abu Zayd's *sama'* shares many aspects with Qutb's *dhawq*. Furthermore, they both define the Qur'an as the spoken, active Word of God, and not as a book, and argue for its dynamism, both trying to revive the experience of the early generation of Muslims. They both believe the Qur'an is a living phenomenon, a living entity that behaves in organic manner and ties itself with the daily lives of Muslims. They both feel that there is no Qur'an without the human being.

The literary theory of Abu Zayd will consequently, I hypothesize, be both similar to and different from Qutb's literary approach. Abu Zayd's approach, just like his general theology and philosophy, is one of multiplicity and inclusivity. As such, two parts can be distinguished. One, the part that concerns itself with the linguistic aspects of the Qur'an as approach through literary analysis. Two, the part that concerns itself with the affective, stylistic aspects of the Qur'an through literary analysis.

§ 4.6.1. Qur'an as language

Two aspects feature in Abu Zayd's theory of the Qur'an as a linguistic system. First is the communicative aspect of the Qur'an. Abu Zayd explains how the Qur'an consists of a multitude of messages that revealed in a process that lasted 23 years. This continuous process of communication proceeds as follows:

“Muhammad reacted to the first communication in a specific manner which is addressed in the second communication. When after the second communication Muhammed proclaimed his

⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 128

⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 130

mission to the people of Mecca, there were different responses that the third communication addresses and so on and so forth. The communicate process contains all the possible elements of communication; argument, discussion, persuasion, challenge, and dialogue – a dialogue that was mostly exclusively centered on a small audience, at times a larger one”. (Abu Zayd, 2000, p. 287).

The particular aspect of the communication, its form, depends on the audience, the reaction to earlier revelations and to the situation of Muhammed and his community. There is a process of dialogue or a very complex form of communication between the divine and humans.¹⁰⁰

Not to be mistaken with dialectic portrayal that we have seen with Qutb and we will indeed see with Abu Zayd as well, what Abu Zayd stresses here is that the meaning of the Qur’an is determined by this communicative process – it matters, for the meaning, in what form the communication (argumentative, persuasion) takes place and for what reasons. These forms determine the lexical and semantic dynamics. Words do not mean the same in every form of communication. What Abu Zayd also stresses here, is the historical context. And this touches upon the other aspect of Abu Zayd’s literary approach to the Qur’an as a linguistic system.

As explained by Dr. Ebtehal Younes:

“Where there any unfinished projects of Abu Zayd?” (Rashwan Bafati)

“Yes. His life project was the interpretation of the Qur’an, but not following the order of the mushaf. He wanted to reconstruct, restore the chronological order. Because some meanings and expressions of later verses do not have the same meaning as earlier verses. He wanted to reinterpret the Qur’an via the chronological order”. (Dr. Ebtehal Younes in the interview I conducted, see appendix for full transcript).

The idea of the Qur’an as a human linguistic code was extremely important for Abu Zayd. Not only is it a cornerstone of his humanistic hermeneutics, because it states the Qur’an is a human convention (because of its language). But it also means Muslims have to apply linguistic analysis to interpret the Qur’an, study how the language has changed, what relation verses and the communicative aspects have to and with semantics. Note how Abu Zayd wants to restore the chronological order. For Sayyid Qutb, the *mushaf* is the divine order, and his literary approach therefore is therefore circumscribed by his philosophy of the nature of the Qur’an. Abu Zayd’s theory is more open, but, importantly, also determinedly rationalistic. Although Abu Zayd believed in inclusive epistemology, I feel that since this restoration of the chronological order to apply semantic analysis was his major goal, rationalism and reason was for Abu Zayd paramount.

Nevertheless, his literary approach concerning what he saw the literary, stylistic and affective qualities of the Qur’an are heavily influenced by Sufism, Ibn ‘Arabi, and indeed, most fascinatingly, Sayyid Qutb.

¹⁰⁰ Abu Zayd, N. (2000) p. 288

§ 4.6.2. Qur'an as discourse and aesthetics

“Around this time, I began to read Sayyid Qutb. *In the Shade of the Qur'an* was an extraordinary important book for me. Qutb came to my reflection on religion through his focus on literature. He was a Romantic, lyric, and literary critic. He was part of the school of the literary method of interpretation of the Qur'an, like Ahmad Al-Khulli and Khalafallah. He was not as academic as them, he was more an Impressionist in his writings and critics. He wrote about stylistic attributes of the Qur'an, and this is an expression of his subjective literary and aesthetic perspective. At the same time, he was concerned with social justice. Both of this appealed to me.”¹⁰¹ (Abu Zayd in *Ein Leben mit dem Islam* Kermani (1999), page 43).

“My relation with the Qur'an as a literary text, as text, whose aesthetics can move the soul, started early. It wasn't the message of the Qur'an that made this relation happen, but rather the order of speech, its inner music. Already in kuttāb did this relation begin. (.....) Even before my studies I had read the books of Sayyid Qutb and his older brother Muhammad, and likewise the dissertation of Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah, who, all of them, busied themselves with the poetry of the Qur'an and have influenced me greatly.”¹⁰² (Abu Zayd in *Ein Leben mit dem Islam*, Kermani (1999), page 100.)

“To decode the message of the Qur'an, I practiced textual analysis, which is more than only philology. It treats the Qur'an as a poetically structured text. This does not mean the Qur'an belongs to the category of poetry. It remains a religious text with differentiated functions; Sayyid and Muhammad Qutb said, in their earlier writings in the late 40's and early 50's, exactly the same. For them, the Qur'an is a text, that contains ethical, moral, spiritual and judicial messages, but simultaneously there is a beautiful (musical) composition, which facilitates the message, and which touches deeply the reader in aesthetic fashion. They were influenced by the Romantic literary theory and focused on the psychological effects of the text”.¹⁰³ (Abu Zayd in *Ein Leben mit dem Islam*, Kermani (1999), page 101)

From the quotes of Abu Zayd above, we can gather that Abu Zayd was indeed influenced by Sayyid Qutb, and his influence was in his application and theory of the literary method of Qur'an exegesis. Two major influences can be identified.

The first revolves around the literary tool of dialectic portrayal, or *namadhij insanniyah* that we have seen with Qutb. Just like Qutb, Abu Zayd observes that the Qur'an portrays dialogue and conversations between multiple voices in the Qur'an and that the speaker and the one spoken to are not always the same. Abu Zayd's own writings on dialectic portrayal show a striking resemblance to those of Qutb.

As Abu Zayd states, the Qur'an is polyphonic, not monophonic.¹⁰⁴ It is not always God Who speaks in the Qur'an. Sometimes it is the Prophet Muhammed, or a “they” or Gabriel, or the believers, unbelievers, etc. It is the idea of Abu Zayd, as with Sayyid Qutb, that the voice that speaks in the Qur'an determines the thrust or atmosphere of the verse, and the ethical, spiritual, legal or other kind of meaning that is to be gleaned from it. Verses can be

¹⁰¹ Abū Zayd, Magdī, Cherifa Ismā'īl, & Kermani, Navid. (1999). *Ein Leben mit dem Islam*. Freiburg im Breisgau, Herder. P. 43

¹⁰² Abu Zayd / Kermani (1999). P. 100

¹⁰³ Abu Zayd / Kermani (1999). P. 101

¹⁰⁴ Abū Zayd, N. (2004). p. 18

informative, can convey a dialogue or in fact be a direct dialogue, it can be an admonishment, an argument or a negotiation.

What is important, is that Abu Zayd, like Qutb, designates types of personalities. Believers, unbelievers and in Abu Zayd's case, Jews and Christians. The crux of the matter is, that this literary tool of portrayal, voice and typology of speakers or recipients determine the meaning of a verse. The context of the verse is important. But more importantly, the dialectic portrayal presents the content of the verse as something realistic, happening here and now, and whether it is through persuasion (Qutb) or through the invitation to apply rational thought or listening carefully with one's heart (Abu Zayd) a meaning that has significance to the interpreter of the Qur'an can be generated.¹⁰⁵

The other major influence that Sayyid Qutb may have had on Abu Zayd, although this seems more to be inspired for Abu Zayd by Ibn 'Arabi, is the later focus on the aesthetics of the Qur'an and how it has a performative quality that affects the human soul. This also brings into the equation the question in how far Sayyid Qutb himself was inspired by Sufism, something Carré definitely thinks and Nettler also suggests. Abu Zayd believed that the Qur'an and its verses had a deep voice or musical tone that affects the interpreter on a deep spiritual level, through the aesthetic attributes of the literary style and wording of the Qur'an, especially when it is recited.¹⁰⁶ We have already seen how these aesthetics work for Abu Zayd in the discussion of his views on the nature of the Qur'an and epistemology. But allow me here to present his thought on *sura Al-Rahman*, a sura which has a repetitive verse that queries which of the favors of God does man deny.

“As a teacher, I held an experiment with my students. We focused on the 55th sura which contains a verse “Which of the favors of your Lord do you deny” that like a refrain is constantly repeated. This repetition disrupts the syntax and causes difficulties for the interpretation. We asked to leave out this repetitive question. But this was impossible. The chapter lost its allure, all its urgency, intensity and penetration and so doing its richness of meaning. It was simply not the same chapter anymore, even if the repetitive verse seemed redundant. The meaning of the Qur'an first finds place in recitation” (Abu Zayd in Abu Zayd, Magdi, Kermani, 1999, p. 19).

The Qur'an, says Abu Zayd, is able to become part of the daily lives of Muslim through its ritualistic and aesthetic appeal and pervasiveness. It has literally formed daily life, as verses of the Qur'an are recited when people are greeted, on special occasions during the day, or at prayer. The Qur'an in this way, very much in the vein of Sayyid Qutb, is a living entity in direct communication with man. In this way, it becomes relevant to the question of the meaning of life. Where Qutb and Abu Zayd differ, however, is that the Qur'an and the individual interpret both define, in equal measures of agency, this purpose of life. Meaning in this way lies in the expression of an individual's interpretation.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 23

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 15

Chapter 5. Conclusion. Humanism as a divine system. And humanism as a choice. Abu Zayd, the humanist of Islam

Both figures see the literary aspects of the Qur'an as part of its inimitability. This means that for both Qutb and Abu Zayd, the human being (interpreter) is an inextricable part of the Qur'an itself. There is no Qur'an without the human being. They have an intersubjective relationship. The Qur'an lives, is a living phenomenon, organic and intelligent and in constant, continual, dynamic contact with the human being and reality.

It is perhaps through their willingness to formulate a "grammar of forms of life", through the prism of postmodernism that we have discussed in my section on methodology, that they reconceptualize the Qur'an in order for it to have direct relevance to the daily lives of people and to the purpose of life. Both Qutb and Abu Zayd criticize modern Muslim intellectuals for objectifying the Qur'an to but a book, merely a *mushaf*, that is to be appropriated either by the state or some institution, or is to be seen as a historical or scientific work. They also criticize figures who want to objectify religion and merely deal with the question how and how much religion should be distributed in society. Both of them seek a personal relation to the message. This is a shared concern they have. But how do their methods and ideas compare?

With Sayyid Qutb's literary theory, he focuses on the affective qualities of the literary attributes of the Qur'an. God is involved with the psyche of the human being, his dignity and his creative potential. God, through his Speech, plays in to the imagination and intuition of man, using pedagogical methods in the text of the Qur'an. Whether it is through dialectic portrayal or *taswir al-fanni* or the existential language of the Qur'an (*mantiq al-wijdani*) that reveals the coherence and unity of the message, the literary tools Qutb describes and observes have performative qualities and impress upon the recipient meanings, vivid images and perceptible realities and events. Man experiences through the Qur'an divine presence, here and now. It is through *dhawq* that man experiences this, the unity in these images and this leads to *yaqin* which is dynamically related to the context, but which is not different from one individual to another. *Yaqin* is a truth that is impressed upon the human soul by the affective aspects of the literary tools in the Qur'an and it is universal and particular at the same time. The human being has no agency herein. *Yaqin* furthermore is predetermined, in unity with the cosmological system that Qutb describes. This is what Abu Zayd means with impressionistic.

Abu Zayd's literary method on the contrary is expressionistic. This means that truth for him lies in the expression of the individual, in the expression of every individual interpretation. Interpretation is human agency, a human effort. Mankind is an inextricable part of the Qur'an, constitutes the Qur'an. Qutb shares in this idea with Abu Zayd. However, the meaning of the Qur'an is co-determined and co-created by mankind, in Abu Zayd's thought, and not merely by the context or social milieu, but by every single individual that interprets the Qur'an. Truth, or meaning, and indeed God, is manifested there where human rationality expresses itself creatively about and regarding the meaning of the Qur'an.

This is possible because the Qur'an has literary, communicative and linguistic attributes that make it possible for it to steer and form society, but they also make it possible to be steered and formed by society. The Qur'an is affective as well and through this attribute it is part of the daily lives of people, in their prayers, their rituals and in recitation. The Qur'an is a living phenomenon, not just text, but recitation, a human activity. The first recitation of the Prophet Muhammed already was interpretation, and this is why the Qur'an manifests itself in reality

only as interpretation. There is only *ta'wil* and simultaneously, this *ta'wil* is the other side of the text. The Qur'an invites people to human reflection because of its literary and linguistic aspects, by speaking in the language of humankind, by being relevant and dynamic. This is how the Qur'an remains relevant for the question of the meaning of life. And this is what the Qur'an is about, not about becoming a political or legal instrument for ideological purposes.

Both figures focus on the human being and intersubjectivity. But ultimately, Qutb's impressionism makes him a radical Islamist of humanity. Whereas Abu Zayd's expressionism makes him nothing less than a radical humanist of Islam.

Abu Zayd wanted to write a chronological *tafsir*. This explains their differences. First, the idea that the Qur'an is still the Qur'an when its verses are rearranged. This is connected to Abu Zayd's idea of Qur'an as a human creation, of human free will and no predetermination. Second, it is related to Abu Zayd's focus on semantics, and therefore, rational interpretation. His purpose of such a rearrangement was to discover the meaning of words in their historical contexts, as otherwise we would not be able to understand the semantics in the Qur'an. Because over a span of more than twenty years, semantics have changed. This highlights that, although spiritual knowledge was important for Abu Zayd, his emphasis was on rationality and the emphasis of his literary method, concurrently, was on the linguistic and communicative aspects.

Sayyid Qutb wrote his exegesis based on the already formed *mushaf*. For Qutb, this order was divinely determined and it is in this order that the *mantiq al-wijdani* is displayed. It reiterates predetermination, but also the mechanism of *yaqin*. Truth is an impression, however in touch with humans it may be, it does not allow for human agency.

Chapter 6. Limits, scope and further questions

My main hypotheses that I aimed to prove, revolved around the question whether theological ideas determine literary exegesis and whether they are important in explaining any similarities and differences in comparison. My thesis has indeed proven this to be true. The epistemological tenets of Qutb and Abu Zayd's theology and philosophy determined their particular method of the literary theory. So did their view on the nature of the Qur'an and predetermination.

What is more valuable than these hypotheses, however, is that through a comparison like this, a comparison which asks these fundamental questions through the cautious and not so pronounced framework of postmodernism, a dialogue has become possible between seemingly disparate thinkers. We have seen that Qutb has influenced Abu Zayd, but such a statement would seem absurd if we hold to traditional typologies of movements and thinkers in modern Islamic thought. Although Shepard is certainly right in typifying Qutb as a radical Islamist and hypothetically typifying Abu Zayd as a modernist, or radical modernist – this typifying doesn't really say anything about how they compare as regards their literary exegesis.

There are, however, some important limits on the validity and scope of my thesis. First is the absence of research in Arabic sources. Although I have here merely focused on theory and methodology of Muslim thinkers, it remains extremely valuable and important to study Arabic sources when we study exegesis. Indeed, it would have been all the better if I actually included passages of *tafsir* by these figures and analyzed and compared them. Perhaps my initial research in methodology, rather than application, can inspire others to take this step. Or indeed, I could do so myself in a bigger project, for example a PhD.

I hope to have contributed to the following problems and questions, or at least have opened or triggered debate in them:

Academic contribution to content:

- A new perspective on Sayyid Qutb's thought that analyzes his literary method, something that Sayyed Khatab already noted. I build on his findings by relating Qutb's literary method to his theology and his idea of predetermination and the created or uncreated Qur'an and his idea on spiritual knowledge, that is collective and not individual
- A critical contribution to Olivier Carré's book on Qutb's *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* that is excellent in its analysis of the theology of Qutb, but pays no attention whatsoever to the literary method of Qutb
- A first comparison between Sayyid Qutb and Abu Zayd, aiming on the literary method and their theology as a whole, a comprehensive study, and does not solely aim on their ideals on Islam and state and reform in Islamic
- An analysis of the relevant parts of *Ein Leben met dem Islam*, in so doing introducing the work to the academic world
- An outlining of Abu Zayd's theology, after his works about his literary method have already been vastly and thoroughly studied by others

Academic contributions to discourse:

- The proposal to use the concept of postmodernism in analyzing both Qutb and Abu Zayd
- The introduction of a set of questions, that each on their own are not new, but as a set have not been applied, or have not been applied enough to the work of modern thinkers in Islam
- Complementing Shepard's typologie with the type of postmodernism
- A call to appreciate contemporary Islamic thinker theologically and philosophically and a call to define Qutb and Abu Zayd as Islamic philosophers and to see Islamic philosophy as something contemporary, and not just of the classical times
- A call to enter discussions between contemporary western and Islamic philosophers and to study both in comparison to each other

I propose a broadening of the scope of my own thesis in comparing the thought of Abu Zayd and Sayyid Qutb with western philosophers. In the summer of 2017, Leiden University created a new bachelor degree, called: Philosophy, Global and Comparative Perspectives, thought by Douglas Berger, who is the new Professor that holds the chair of Comparative Philosophy at Leiden University. Much recognition of original philosophical contributions in the Muslim world and by Muslim thinkers is needed. The idea of *haraka*, a dynamic God, Will of God, or law and exegesis may be such an original contribution and it is interesting to compare it with thought that seems similar to it, for example Bergson's *elan vital*. I myself would like to know if the philosophy of existentialism is important for the thought of Abu Zayd and Sayyid Qutb and their literary theory.

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Appendix.

Interview with Dr. Ebtehal Younes. These are notes, therefore not neatly displayed and containing spelling mistakes.

Two sides of the influence that Sayyid Qutb had on Abu Zayd:

- He read all the books, but he preferred the Qutb before return from America
- Abu Zayd favoured literary approach, disciple of Al Khulli, and he saw Qutb as a disciple of Al Khulli
- When Nasr was a child, he was part of the Muslim brotherhood, so of course he read Qutb
- Liked the literary period
- Like other scholars: Al-Khulli, Khalafallah

Other interpretations, 3 trends:

- Rational trend (ibn rushd, 'afghani, 'adbuh)
- Literary trend (taha huseyn etc)
- Sufi trend (ibn 'arabi)

Createdness Qur'an

- Via interpretation > humanist interpretation, main focus on the human being
- Later theory > Qur'an not as a text, but as a discourse, a dialogue, as speech
- This could also have inspired Abu Zayd, Qutb had the same idea, but he was not the only one

Signs of God, whole universe is speech of God

In Abu Zayd humanistic approach, how does Qur'an compare to other religious texts (purpose of life etc), could you do without Qur'an, according to Abu Zayd?

- Wrote on Ibn Tufayl > rational mind can reach God without revelation. But I don't think it was his idea we can leave the Qur'an out. Interpretation of the Qur'an was his focus, he worked with the Qur'an
- Western influences, GADAMER
- Did not do comparative science of religion

Humanist interpretation of the Qur'an, is this his main goal, or does he also have political, legal, goals

- The legal goals are part of it necessarily, its what the theologians focus on, but Abu Zayd always thought legal verses were few
- The spirit of the Qur'an, if we went further, progressive, spirit is progressive
- Opening the way in the spirit of the Qur'an to go further

Politics and islam

- Very secular
- Independence of religion as well, independence of Al-Azhar
- Kind of mirror image to Qutb > all the crises of religion are related to appropriation of islam by politics / Qutb sees the crises when this is NOT done

How does this go together with the idea that all of the universe is word of God?

- Yes, signs of God, but man has reason

- Separates between divine and human development (Qutb probably sees these as united)

Truth - subjective, personal
Rationalism and sufism,

Knowledge of the heart as opposed to knowledge of the mind
His academic career was basically a quest: what is the quran
Ma thesis - mutazili (ratio)
Phd - ibn arabi (sufi)
Ibn arabi biggest love of his life.
Published phd and later a book

For him these two epistemologies are equal (qutb distances himself from rationalists),
complimentary
Would he criticize abduh: no, great revolution, great for his time, but cant import the, for pir
time
Abu zayd always has in mind context
Did see abduh is apologetic always a reaction
Abu zayd says we have to go further. Salafi are doing this.

Who did he write to? What did he consider to be his audience?
- academic, he is a professor of course
- but, trying to reach normal people
- against fact that knowledge has to be in small circle
- everyone has the right
- but also, why should he simplify, the reader has to make an effort

He was very independent > not to be with one government, or political party or trend
Also critical against intellectuals who supported a regime

Young boy, muslim brotherhood, countryside, its different from cairo, small village
- activities
- poor villages
- when he was independent, to obey orders is not his personality, he became critical of
mbrotherhood

How important is literature for him?
Would you learn more about quran, islam, god, if you read literature, any literature?
- no, literary approach is all
- cant ignore the Quran
- he has a humanistic approach, but for the Quran. He is a humanist of islam
- quran most important book for a civilization

Are there unfinished projects?
- life project, interpretation but not following the order of the mushaf (so wanted
chronological order) why?
- because some meanings and expressions of later verses do not have the same meaning as
earlier verses > literary method > linguistic code > language changes

- this opposite to Qutb
- reinterpret quran via chronological order

Has ebtahal younes continued his work?

- he wanted teamwork
- foundation in his name
- continues his work
- beyond mafhum al nass, the quran from text to discourse.
- his development, and the application of his method by people
- young scholars is his main goal, from all over the world

You cant see abu zayd as disciple of Qutb. In literary approach, yes, very important. And yes, an influence.