



THEME 1: The Debate on Values

Collection of materials

Islam

Tf 161/1 Fundamentalism

That the Koran represents praiseworthy moral principles has already been stated within the framework of the religious aspect. Alongside these it also contains declarations and rules of guidance to the faithful which go against human rights and cannot be accepted. In the following some of these passages in the Koran are quoted. Since the Koran – as the expression of divine will – is also the highest guiding principle for interior Islamic laws, the latter are of an enormously binding nature on Muslims.

Intolerance towards heathens (idolaters)

17 *"The idolaters have no right to visit the mosques of Allah while bearing witness to unbelief against themselves, these it is whose doings are null, and in the fire shall they abide."* (KORAN, Sura 9,17)

36 *"And as for those who disbelieve, for them is the fire of hell; it shall not be finished with entirely so that they should die, nor shall the chastisement thereof be lightened to them: even thus do We retribute every ungrateful one."* (KORAN, Sura 35,36)

19 *"...then as to those who disbelieve, for them are cut out garments of fire, boiling water shall be poured over their heads. 20 That will cause whatever they have in their stomachs, and likewise their skin to melt. 21 And for them are designated clubs of iron. 22 Whenever they want to escape from it out of anguish, they will be brought back there, and (it will be said to them): »Taste the anguish of hellfire.«"* (KORAN, Sura 22,19)

4 *"So when you meet in battle those who disbelieve, then smite the necks until you have overcome them, then make them prisoners*, and afterwards either set them free as a favour or let them ransom themselves until the war terminates."* (KORAN, Sura 47,4)

*In other translations we read: *"...cut off their heads and after the battle shackle the rest."*

Intolerance towards Jews and Christians

51 *"Oh you who believe do not take the Jews and the Christians for friends; they are friends of each other and whoever amongst you takes them for a friend, then surely he is one of them; surely Allah does not guide the unjust people."* (KORAN, Sura 5,51)

29 *"Fight those who do not believe in Allah, nor in the latter day, nor do they prohibit what Allah and His Apostle have prohibited, nor follow the religion of truth, out of those who have been given the Book, until they pay the tax in acknowledgement of superiority and they are in a state of subjection. 30 And the Jews say: »Uzayir is the son of Allah; and the Christians say: The Messiah is the son of Allah; these are the words of their mouths; they imitate the saying of those who disbelieved before; may Allah destroy them; how they turned away! 31 They have taken their doctors of law and their monks for lords besides Allah, and also the Messiah son of Marium and they were enjoined that they should serve one God only, there is no god but He."* (KORAN, Sura 9,29-31)

Intolerance towards apostates (renegade Muslims)

137 *"Surely as for those who believe and then disbelieve, then believe again and then again disbelieve and then increase in disbelief, Allah will not forgive them nor guide them in the right path."* (KORAN, Sura 4,137)

Incitement to murder and violence

190-193 *"And fight in the way of Allah against those who fight against you, and do not exceed the limits, surely Allah does not love those who exceed the limits. 191 And kill them wherever you find them, and drive them out from whence they drove you out, and persecution is severer than slaughter, and do not fight with them at the Sacred Mosque until they fight with you in it, but if they do fight you, then slay them; such is the recompense of the unbelievers. 192 But if they desist, then surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. 193 And fight with them until there is no persecution, and religion should be only for Allah, but if they desist, then there should be no hostility except against the oppressors."* (KORAN, Sura 2,190-193)

33 *"The punishment of those who wage war against Allah and His Apostle and strive to make mischief in the land is only this, that they should be murdered or crucified or their hands and their feet should be cut off on opposite sides or they should be imprisoned; this shall be as a disgrace for them in this world, and in the hereafter they shall have a grievous chastisement."* (KORAN, Sura 5,33)

Lack of equality for women

221 *"And do not marry the idolatresses until they believe, and certainly a believing maid is better than an idolatress women, even though she should please you; and do not give (believing women) to idolaters until they believe, and certainly a believing servant is better than an idolater, even though he should please you."* (KORAN, Sura 2, 221)

228 *"... and the men are a degree above them (women), and Allah is Mighty, Wise."* (KORAN, Sura, 2,228)

34 *"Men are the maintainers of women because Allah has made some of them to exceed others and because they spend out of their property; the good women are therefore obedient, guarding the unseen as Allah has guarded, and as to those on whose part you fear desertion, admonish them, and leave them alone in the sleeping-places and beat them; then if they obey you, do not seek a way against them, surely Allah is High, Great."* (KORAN, Sura 4,34)

11 *"Allah enjoins you concerning your children: The male shall have the equal of the portion of two females..."* (KORAN, Sura 4,11)

Islam

Tf 161/2 The Koran and text-critical research

The flourishing of the natural sciences, liberal thought in economics and politics and the transformation into an industrial society are the essential characteristics of the second half of the nineteenth century. This period - the so-called first modern - saw in the Arts and in the theology of Europe the development of new methods that have since been used for research in the Old and New Testaments. In the first half of the twentieth century, first the Protestant and then after a certain delay in time the Roman Catholic theologians, too, set about working on a so-called de-mythologizing of the Bible. This method does not intend to relegate the Holy Scriptures all together into the realm of myths, but to arrive at to the original meaning of the divine revelation by following back the mythical elements of the Bible to what was originally intended.

It looks as if this step in Koranic research has still to be taken. Certainly the chances of this happening in Islamic countries do seem to be very slim at the present time.

At the Dutch University of Leyden the Islamic scholar Abu Zayd is at least making an effort to demonstrate that the Koran must always be freshly interpreted. He - like many other critical thinkers - has not been spared death threats.

In the following we quote extracts from an article by Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, which was published in the German weekly paper "Die Zeit" on 23rd. January, 2003:

"Does God only speak Arabic?"

"As a Muslim citizen of Egypt I have experienced again and again with great fear and apprehension how the meaning of Islam has been manipulated. My life has been accompanied since the sixties and seventies by different interpretations of Islam that were hardly reconcilable with one another. In the sixties the dominant religious discourse emphasized Islam as being a religion of social justice. Prominent scholars of the Al-Azhar University, the authoritative theological high court of justice in Egypt, occupied themselves with two great topics: Islam and socialism and then Islam and Arab nationalism. The concept of Jihad was also propagated and we were urged to fight imperialism and Zionism. With the adoption of a liberal economic policy in the seventies Islam turned into a religion that protected private property. When the peace process between Egypt and Israel began in 1978 Islam became a religion of peace..."

So I became aware of the fact that the interpretation of the Koran was never an innocent undertaking. I arrived at the conviction that first of all the concept of the text itself must be examined. I wanted to define the essence of the text to be interpreted and examine the rules that guided the studies. If it is not clear up to what point the text is suited to exegesis and where the limits of interpretation lie, the text can be made to speak as mouthpiece of any ideology..."

Does God speak Arabic? What does it mean when the Koran repeatedly emphasizes that it was revealed in "a simple Arabic"? If you follow the Koran, then Islam as a message is not a new religion that was revealed to Mohammed to be preached to the Arabs, but essentially the same message that all the prophets have preached since the creation of the world. Although universal and valid for all people, the message of the Koran is expressed in simple Arabic because God takes into consideration the language of the people to whom He sends His Messenger. "We sent no messenger unless it be in the language of his people, so that he might enlighten them."

Therefore it is not likely that the Koran exclusively represents the word of God and that this word is tied to the Arabic language. If this assumption were to be followed, the word of God would be confined to the Koran alone and would therefore exclude previous scriptures from precisely the very right to express the word of God in their own original languages. This would automatically lead to Arabic being considered a holy language.

We can differentiate between the three aspects of the Koran: its content, its language and its structure. It should be indisputable that the attribute of the divine falls only to the source of the Koran. The Koran was originally handed down by oral tradition. It is explained everywhere in Islamic literature that during every single revelation the Holy Spirit first conveyed verses to the Prophet, which Mohammed then later recited to his companions. These verses or passages were combined in chapters and partly laid down in writing, according to Islamic sources. After the death of the Prophet these chapters were collected, put in order and finally written down in book form.

As the Koran was revealed bit by bit, in instalments so to speak, it responded to the needs and demands of the community. Since it provided answers to the questions of the community, the Koran gradually developed its legal character and in this way it reflected the dialectic relationship between God's Word and human interests. The canonization of the Koran also created a new order of the verses and chapters in the form that is customary up to the present day, a form that no longer corresponds to the chronological order. Various texts, which had been revealed on different historical occasions, were collected in one single text. Thus the recited Koran was transformed into a readable book, the kitab.

Nonetheless the original contents of the Word of God in its incomprehensible absoluteness – I mean before it was expressed in Arabic – are sacred and divine, even if their manifest expression is neither sacred nor divine. It makes no difference whether one follows the doctrine of the Mu'tazalites of the "creation of the Koran" or not – the conclusion is still the same: The Koran that we read and interpret is in no way identical to the eternal Word of God.

The Koran is a „message“ that God revealed to men through the Prophet Mohammed. Mohammed is the Messenger of God and himself a man. The Koran states this quite clearly. A message establishes a communicative connection between a transmitter and a receiver by means of a code. Since God as transmitter of the Koran cannot be the subject of scientific examination, the analysis of the cultural-historical context of the Koran provides the only access to the discovery of the message.

The analysis of such facts can lead to a scientific understanding of the Koran. There is no need for further proof that the Koran is the product of a culture.

The message of Islam would not have had any consequences at all if the men who were the first to receive it had not been able to understand it. They understood Islam in the circumstances in which they lived, and through their understanding and their application of Islam their society changed. The interpretation of the first generation of Muslims and of the following generations should not, however, be in any way considered definite or absolute. The text of the Koran allows an infinite decoding process. In this process the original meaning should not be ignored or simplified, because this meaning is decisive in showing the direction of further interpretation of the text. When you have the direction, it is much easier to follow the sense of the text in the social-cultural context of the present time.

The Koran, which has before been decoded in the light of its historical, cultural and linguistic context, must of course be reinterpreted yet again in the code of the cultural and linguistic context of the interpreter. The consequence of this is an abundance of interpretations, an endless process of interpretation and reinterpretation. Without this process the message degenerates, and then the Koran can continue to be the object of political and pragmatic manipulation.

As paradoxical as it may sound, just when the message of Islam is supposed to be valid for the whole of mankind independently of time and place, an abundance of interpretations is unavoidable. Even if the text is a historical fact of divine origin, its interpretation is still absolutely human." (ABU ZAYD, January 2003)