THE CASE OF ABU ZAID AND THE REACTIONS IT PROMPTED FROM EGYPTIAN SOCIETY

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THE CASE OF ABU ZAID AND THE REACTIONS IT PROMPTED FROM EGYPTIAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to explore Egypt’s reaction to scholar Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid during the mid-nineties when his promotion was denied and marriage annulled via court ruling vis-à-vis the period around 2010 when he began frequenting Egypt and appearing on television prior to his death. First, the thesis will discuss Egypt’s climate in the mid-nineties, its academic legal framework, and how Abu Zaid’s case fit into this overall landscape. Egypt’s volatility at that time created an inauspicious atmosphere for Abu Zaid to present or debate his research findings. Secondly, the thesis will focus on the two works that sparked the Abu Zaid’s predicament, first *Imam Shafie and the Establishment of the Moderate Ideology* and second *A Critique of Religious Discourse*, while also examining their implications and the reactions they provoke.

The next two chapters explore reactions to Abu Zaid during the mid-nineties, followed by a look at the period around 2010 prior to the scholar’s death. The first part of this exploration will focus specifically on the reactions of Abu Zaid’s supporters and detractors and their underlying implications. The following chapter will examine the period around 2010 when Abu Zaid seemed to enjoy greater acceptance from Egyptian society. The reactions of supporters and detractors that resulted following Abu Zaid’s death in 2010 will be explored in the final chapter which introduces the thesis conclusion. The conclusion will attempt to respond to the thesis argument that Egypt’s reaction to Abu Zaid witnessed a slight improvement in 2010 vis-à-vis the much bleaker mid-nineties reaction, and how this reflects the nation’s willingness to engage reformist voices of Islam.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would have never come to fruition if not for the support and patience of my mentor professor Paul Heck. I would also like to acknowledge the sacrifices my family made to provide me with the time necessary to conduct this research, Roshdy, Mary and Louisa Loza.
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INTRODUCTION

Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid was a promising Egyptian scholar whose work in Arabic and Islamic studies carried him to places as far as the United States and Japan, where he taught and conducted research before settling at the University of Cairo in the late eighties. In 1993 however, his career took a precarious turn when an academic committee, headed by professor/TV preacher Abd al-Sabur Shahin, prepared a report that denied him academic promotion, questioned his faith, and dubbed his research “cultural aids,”¹ for what it perceives as its destructive impact on society. Abu Zaid’s production included two important works, the first titled’ Imam Shafie and the Establishment of the Moderate Ideology critiques the work of seventh century Muslim scholar Imam Shafie. The second, a Critique of Religious Discourse, believed to be the main reason behind Shahin’s negative report, is a critique that highlights a number of the contemporary religious discourses’ pit falls in Abu Zaid’s view. The Shahin report was later leaked to the press, sparking a frenzy of media interest into its implications within a broader radical trend in mid-nineties Egypt. Matters escalated further when Shahin began proclaiming Abu Zaid’s apostasy from the pulpit, and his fellow empathizers launched a lawsuit against the scholar seeking to annul his marriage, on the grounds that he is no longer a Muslim. Islamic law does not permit a Muslim woman to be married to a non-Muslim man. After a legal back and forth of rulings and appeals, finally in August of 1996 Egypt’s Supreme Constitutional Court annulled Abu Zaid’s marriage to wife Ebtehal, setting a precedent that sparked wide ranging reactions from Egyptian society.

¹ Abd al-Sabur Shahin, “Recession of Secularism at Cairo University,” in Recession of Secularism at Cairo University, ed. Abd al-Sabur Shahin (Cairo: Etisam, 1993), 5–6.
A few months prior to this final ruling, Abu Zaid left Egypt with his wife for the Netherlands where he taught Arabic and Islamic studies in addition to the research that he conducted at Leiden University. After winning a number of international awards like the prestigious Franklin D. Roosevelt Freedom of Worship Medal (2002) which enhanced his image inside Egypt, Abu Zaid started frequenting his homeland more often from 2003 onwards. A formal invitation in 2008 from the Library of Alexandria and other cultural venues, prompted Abu Zaid’s lecturing debut inside Egypt where he appeared to be re-integrating into the Egyptian cultural scene. During that time, the scholar also started appearing on television allowing Egyptians to see Abu Zaid express himself on a number of issues and recount his mid-nineties ordeal for the first time. Abu Zaid’s noticeable media presence at the time signaled a newfound tolerance toward the scholar inside Egypt, which was not there during his heated mid-nineties ordeal. A 2009 incident, in which Kuwait’s government denied Abu Zaid’s entry despite its issuance of a visa, substantiated this new Egyptian reaction toward the scholar further. Following Kuwait’s rebuff, Egypt’s media reacted by grilling Kuwait’s officials and covering the story extensively in a rally of support for Abu Zaid. Egypt’s warmer response was unfortunately cut short by Abu Zaid’s sudden death in 2010, after having contracted meningitis while on a trip to Indonesia. Many liberals reacted to Abu Zaid’s untimely death as a great loss of a much needed voice for religious reform. Egypt’s wistful reaction to the scholar’s death, evident in the outpouring of obituaries mourning the scholar’s loss demonstrated this increased tolerance that existed alongside the vituperative naysayers, who jeered at Abu Zaid’s unexpected demise. Egypt’s improved reaction toward Abu Zaid in the years prior to his death and at the time of his passing signal a modest increase in the nation’s willingness to engage reformist voices of Islam, when compared to the much more hostile mid-nineties scenario.
CHAPTER I

ABU ZAID’S POSITION IN A DEEP-ROOTED EGYPTIAN PHENOMENON

Abu Zaid’s case is in no way anomalous to Egypt society, a number of other twentieth-century intellectuals have also experienced similar challenges due to their perceived departure from religious orthodoxy. Egyptian sharia judge Ali Abdel Razik (1888–1966) confronted similar obstacles in 1924 for authoring Islam and the Foundations of Governance, which argued that the Muslim leadership position of caliph (a ruler with dual temporal and religious authority) was essentially man-made. Abdel Raziks’s book threatened the Egyptian King Fouad’s ambition to revive the position and become caliph himself. Like Abu Zaid, Abdel Razik was declared a heretic by court ruling, in addition to being removed from his post.

Egyptian literary icon Taha Hussein (1889–1973) found himself in the public attorney’s office after publishing Pre-Islamic Poetry in 1926 and concluding that Arabic poetry deemed pre-Islamic was probably in fact written after Qu’ranic revelation1. Hussein, who was a role-model for Abu Zaid, was removed from his teaching post, prompting the resignations of the University’s president at the time, Lotfy al-Sayid.

Abu Zaid’s own mentor, Amin Al Khuli, was barred from teaching Islamic studies for supervising a PhD dissertation that assessed the Qur’an from a literary stand point. Abu Zaid’s case is therefore part of a deeply rooted socio-cultural phenomenon, with the distinction that his mid-nineties context was more hostile than that of pre-1952 dissenters like Abdel Razik and Hussein.

Prior to the 1952 revolution, Egypt functioned as a parliamentary monarchy that enjoyed greater multicultural diversity, in addition to a thriving liberal political scene that made dissent much less dangerous than it was in Abu Zaid’s volatile late-twentieth-century context. Abu Zaid actually noted with irony the University of Cairo’s more supportive stance toward Hussein, in contrast to the abandonment he believes he experienced. Despite this discrepancy, Abu Zaid found solace in his linkage to other Egyptian thinkers who, like him, were persecuted for their ideas by governmental or religious authorities. In Abu Zaid’s time however, repressive academic measures had become institutionalized in the nation’s universities. The presence of a violent, radical, socio-cultural element particularly hostile to intellectuals also made his context much more precarious than that of the aforementioned dissenters.

ABU ZAID IN HEATED MID-NINETIES EGYPT

Abu Zaid’s presence in a hostile mid-nineties Egyptian climate played a major role in shaping the nation’s reaction to him. A radical sociocultural element that manifested itself through violence and expressed an open hostility to government, artists, and intellectuals created an inauspicious atmosphere in which to debate or present his ideas. According to one survey taken in 1993, when Abu Zaid presented his research, violence between the regime and Islamist militants took the lives of 231 people that year alone, creating a cycle of violence that advanced from rural areas into the capital, where targeted killings of government officials and intellectuals with a similar outlook to Abu Zaid took place.

Assassinations against government figures like the speaker of the People’s Assembly, the lower house of Egypt’s Parliament, in 1990 was followed by that of secular intellectual

Farag Fouda in 1992, an event Abu Zaid viewed as a product of the same radical cultural currents that hounded him for his secular-leaning ideas. Fouda was gunned down outside his Cairo office one month before Abu Zaid presented his research, a clear indication of the serious danger to the scholar’s life. Abu Zaid’s compromised personal safety limited his ability to defend his ideas in front of Egyptian society, at the same time that his adversaries were screaming his apostasy from the rooftops. Abu Zaid’s hampered ability to express himself meant that Egyptians heard a great deal more from his detractors, and were therefore predisposed to react to him in a negative way. At that time a radical religious discourse also developed and was used to justify acts of violence, increasing the risk to Abu Zaid’s life. According to this line of thinking, religious radicals saw assassinations as an enactment of God’s will, a perspective that was evident during the 1993 trial of Fouda’s killers.

During this trial, the testimony of the prominent sheikh Mohamid al-Ghazali depicted Fouda’s killers as enforcers of God’s will. The fact that Fouda debated al-Ghazali a few months earlier indicates this radical discourse’s unforgiving stance toward liberal thinkers like Fouda and Abu Zaid. The influence of this radical discourse could also be seen in the confiscation of books by liberal Muslim reformers from the Cairo International Book Fair, until Egypt’s President Hosni Mubarak intervened personally to bring these books back to the exhibition. Loud declarations of apostasy were not only directed at Abu Zaid; they also affected scholars at Al-Azhar (Egypt’s foremost center of Islamic learning and oldest school of theology) and members of the Egyptian government.


4. Ibid., 33.
Egypt’s regime responded to this religious assault on its legitimacy by combating militants, but while turning a blind eye to the radical discourse that motivated them.\(^5\) It also reached out to the more cooperative Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which returned the goodwill by supporting the regime publicly and condemning acts of terror. Abu Zaid’s chief detractor, Abd al-Sabur Shahin, who had strong MB affiliations, played the role of intermediary at that time between the MB and Egyptian regime. This role added to Shahin’s already considerable clout as a popular preacher and ruling party committee member, an advantage he used to counter Abu Zaid. Shahin was quoted shouting to Egypt’s interior minister that he feared Abu Zaid’s ideological terrorism more than the acts of overzealous youth\(^6\). In addition to Shahin’s incitement against Abu Zaid in the centers of Egyptian power, the University of Cairo’s refusal to approve Abu Zaid’s promotion dealt an even more serious blow to his public image and ability to positively engage Egyptian society.

Abu Zaid saw the university’s decision to disregard two positive reports from the Arabic Department and go with Shahin’s negative assessment as capitulation to the political pressures of the time. The University of Cairo’s substantial weight inside Egyptian society, which was effectively pulled from under Abu Zaid by refusing him promotion, played a definitive role in discrediting his academic standing and turning public opinion against him. The university’s position also added credence to the negative image Shahin promoted of Abu Zaid as an anti-Islamic figure, a stigma likely to prompt a hostile and even violent reaction against Abu Zaid during this time fervent religious radicalism.\(^7\) A number of deeply rooted institutional

\(^5\) Abu Zaid, “Productive Words,” 37.
\(^6\) Ibid., 24.
\(^7\) Ibid., 33.
constraints on Abu Zaid also bolstered Shahin’s ability to exercise power in the university and guide society’s reaction to Abu Zaid.⁸

STATE INTERVENTION, LEGAL CONSTRAINTS, AND THEIR EFFECTS ON ACADEMIC INDEPENDENCE

Abu Zaid’s bitter experience of the mid-nineties was also the result of the Egyptian state’s heavy intervention in academic life, in the form of laws and arrest campaigns over a span of some forty years that effectively enervated academic independence. Prior to Egypt’s 1952 revolution, university academic committees entrusted with evaluating research and professional advancement were selected from each college’s board members. These committees enjoyed some degree of autonomy, since they were composed of specialists in each field, from within the departments themselves or from affiliated universities. That situation changed after 1952, when the revolutionary Committee of Higher Learning started interfering in academic affairs with the issuance of Law 623 of 1953, stipulating the appointment of Permanent Academic Committees.⁹ This new law made the appointment of academic committees subject to presidential decree and expanded their authority to include approval of sabbatical leaves and promotions. Faculty demonstrations against the law, which came at a time when the nascent military regime was still consolidating its power, succeeded in triggering the law’s annulment. Five months later, however, the regime returned to launch what it dubbed a campaign of “academic cleansing,” which expelled forty-five faculty members from the University of Cairo’s ranks. Bolstering this move was law 508 of 1954, which assigned faculty promotion

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⁹ Ibid., 76.
decisions to the Supreme Council of Universities, deeming the approval of the relevant college’s board members nonbinding. The authority to promote faculty members was thus handed back to the revolutionary regime and its’ Supreme Council of Universities, which answered to the Ministry of Higher Education. Abu Zaid viewed this stage as the midpoint in an orchestrated legislative scheme designed to stifle the autonomy of Egyptian academia.

By 1972, law 49 was decreed, stipulating in its seventy-third article the formation of periodically appointed Permanent Academic Committees, like the one Abd al-Sabur Shahin headed, answerable to the Supreme Council of Higher Education. By 1977, regime intervention expanded into student life and activities, in what were notoriously known as the statutes of 1977. This legislative bundle placed extensive regulations on the formation of student unions, impeding activism and providing the regime’s security apparatus with far-reaching powers inside university campuses. This policy of academic cleansing continued well into September of 1982, with the firing of sixty faculty members, in addition to a wider campaign of arrests. Even law 49’s stipulations that academic committees be appointed periodically, was largely ignored by a regime that ignored the very laws it had decreed. All these draconian measures placed the careers of faculty members like Abu Zaid under the control of regime-appointed Permanent Academic Committees like the one Shahne led, and which dubbed the scholar’s research heretical. Shahin’s presence on these regime-appointed committees was instrumental in ensuring the denial of Abu Zaid’s academic promotion. In this heavily restrictive environment, the free flow of ideas in faculty ranks became constricted, resulting in research departments where new ideas were seldom welcomed, as Abu Zaid was to discover.

ABU ZAID IN A DORMANT ACADEMIC ESTABLISHMENT

All this political meddling in academia translated into a characteristic “agedness” of academic committees, which according to Abu Zald increased cronyism and deteriorated the
quality of scientific research. “Those elderly committee members became walking deities who use their influence to intimidate younger professors. The result was that professional advancement became a function of relationships and not academic rigor”\textsuperscript{10}. For Abu Zaid, only a small minority of these academic committee members could be identified as genuine scholars; he felt that corruption was the rule rather than the exception.

In this Augean stable, corruption also spread to the University and its effects reached many. Values antithetical to scientific ethics and research dominated. Education was transformed to cramming and research to duplication. This trend is multiplied when a student who is only taught to regurgitate information becomes himself a professor.\textsuperscript{11}

The fact that Abu Zaid functioned within an aging, besieged academic system, at a time when religious radicalism exerted increasing influence, clearly impeded his ability to present his ideas in a fair and disinterested academic environment. Shahin’s prowess and political clout also influenced the university’s decision to follow the recommendations of his committee’s report, and ignore two others praising Abu Zaid’s work. All of these elements positioned Abu Zaid in an inauspicious climate antithetical to free thought and pluralistic debate. The implications of Abu Zaid’s research findings and the delicacy of the subject matter also impacted Egypt’s response toward the scholar, whose critique of a figure like Imam Shafie must have raised many eyebrows inside Egyptian society.

\textsuperscript{10} Abu Zaid, “Productive Words,” 77.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 78.
CHAPTER II
ABU ZAID’S CRITIQUE OF IMAM SHAFIE

Abu Zaid’s choice to critique Imam Shafie (767–820 CE) in his work *Imam Shafie and the Establishment of the Moderate Ideology* increased the possibilities of a negative backlash from Egyptian society due to a number of factors. A radical sociocultural element in Egypt at the time made the presentation of new ideas that might be taken as irreverent a dangerous matter that could place one’s life in jeopardy, as was the case for the late Farag Fouda. Abu Zaid’s critical and detached scientific tone also added to the shock of traditionalists, accustomed to Shafie being treated like a larger-than-life, saint-like hero. Shafie’s impact on Egyptian Islam and his stature as the founder of one of the four great schools of Islamic jurisprudence, made any criticism of him difficult for Egyptian society to accept.

Shafie jurisprudence continues to play a prominent role in modern Egypt, the country where he taught and lived, leaving behind shrines and books honoring his name and legacy. The head of Egypt’s oldest center of religious learning, Al Azhar, is a Shafie scholar. Shafie is celebrated at Al Azhar as a great voice for moderation, and the school takes pride in tracing its lineage to him. While Shafie’s revered stature in Egypt increased Abu Zaid’s risk of a negative societal reaction, Egyptian society’s unfamiliarity with the critique of a religious figure proved to be an even more significant dynamic that Abu Zaid attempted to address in the introduction to his critique.

In a clear effort to head off the sharp reactions he expects from a society alien to the idea of critiquing religious figures, Abu Zaid introduces his work by differentiating between man-made religious thought, whose findings are open to critique and query, and divine revelation, which any believer must wholly accept. Abu Zaid reminds readers repeatedly of
Shafie’s human identity, which means that critiquing his ideas and treating them like any other man-made body of writing is religiously permissible. Abu Zaid also looks at some of Shafie’s influences, like his tribal loyalties or the Arab-Persian tensions of his time, to emphasize his humanity and his susceptibility to a variety of sociocultural factors that influence his work and make it a legitimate subject of critical examination. For Abu Zaid, these factors must be unraveled in order to get an unblemished look at Shafie’s jurisprudential vision. Abu Zaid’s effort to defuse tension in the conciliatory introduction to his work was not able to compensate, however, for Egyptian society’s unfamiliarity with what he was doing.

The very notion of critique is rarely, if ever, addressed by contemporary Islamic religious literature, which is more inclined toward spiritual guidance. Abu Zaid’s incorporation of modern disciplines like sociology and semiotics separated his work even more from a literary mainstream that tended to romanticize Islam’s history as a paragon to be emulated. His investigation of sociocultural factors as possible sources of bias struck many as an attack against Shafie’s jurisprudential findings, which are widely regarded as certainties. Wrote Abu Zaid, “Many do not realize the historical, sociological, economic and political factors that caused a certain stream of religious thought to rise to a position of authoritative control. A change in the aforementioned factors could have engendered the ascendance of one school at the expense of another stream of religious thinking.”1 Abu Zaid initiates his investigation of Shafie’s project by looking at Shafie’s role in elevating the Sunnah’s legislative authority, making it a legal source with equal authority to the Qur’an, another of Shafie’s innovations that is seldom questioned by contemporary Egyptian society.

ABU ZAID AND SHAFIE’S ELEVATION OF THE SUNNAH’S LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

For Abu Zaid, Shafie’s lofty title as “victor of the Sunnah”\(^2\) indicates his recognition for elevating the Sunnah’s legislative authority and turning it into a major source of legal rulings. This title is also an acknowledgement, for Abu Zaid, that Shafie revolutionized Muslim perceptions of the Sunnah and positioned it in a new light. This new light is evident for Abu Zaid in how Shafie starts calling the Sunnah the “fall into amazement,”\(^3\) a linguistic expression that denotes revelation/inspiration, used to describe the Prophet’s interactions with the angel Gabriel. By branding the Sunnah with such an otherworldly expression, Abu Zaid believes that Shafie is consecrating it to advance his objective of elevating its legislative authority. Shafie also goes about increasing the Sunnah’s authority and transforming it into a source of legislation by strengthening its links to the Qur’an.

Shafie interprets the Qur’an’s use of the term “wisdom”\(^4\) as a reference to the Sunnah and sees the Qur’anic ordinance to obey the Prophet as a scriptural directive to Sunnah adherence. This is done while adding the customs of the Prophet’s time to the Sunnah’s scope, in Shafie’s grand effort to utilize the Qur’an as the base upon which he constructs his Sunnah elevation project. For Abu Zaid however, Shafie’s effort to elevate the Sunnah’s legislative authority and equalize it to that of the Qur’an has a number of disquieting implications. The most fundamental of these is that the Sunnah is essentially a body of writing handed down

\(^2\) Abu Zaid, Imam Shafie, 7–8.

\(^3\) Ibid., 39.

\(^4\) Ibid.
through generations by human transmitters who trace certain sayings to the Prophet. The Qur’an, on the other hand, constitutes the divine utterances of revelation as they were passed down from the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad. Shafie’s placement of God’s Word in the Qur’an on an equal footing with the Sunnah’s human transmitters is an intellectual leap worthy of pause, for Abu Zaid, who writes:

The Sunnah is not a legal source and it is not revelation. It is simply an interpretive body of clarification to the Book’s corpus. Even if one avers the validity of the Sunnah, it cannot be a stand-alone source of legislation and it cannot add to the original text anything it does not already possess.\(^5\)

Abu Zaid’s above reference to an original text or the Book denotes the Qur’an, Islam’s primary and supreme text, which he believes cannot be likened to any other. Abu Zaid disputes Shafie’s argument for the Sunnah’s legislative authority based on the fact that it departs from the original Muslim view of the Sunnah as a secondary text, which cannot add anything new to Qur’anic revelation. Another challenge Abu Zaid notes in Shafie’s Sunnah elevation lies in the numerous contradictions within its corpus. Shafie addressed this challenge by creating a system of criteria to select between contradictory accounts of transmitters of the Sunnah. This table, prepared by Shafie specialist Joseph Lowry, does a great job of outlining the criteria Shafie uses to select between contradicting testimonies in the Sunnah’s corpus.

Table 1. Shafie’s Criteria for Ranking Contradictory Hadiths

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If hadiths seem contradictory and a choice must be made, the following criteria are applied to choose the valid hadith:</th>
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<tr>
<td>More like the Qur’an.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better attested, based on character, scholarship, and volume of its transmitters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holds when compared to underlying points in the Qur’an.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More like other Sunnah.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closer to what is known by scholars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analogy or <em>Qiyas</em> are utilized to derive meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conforms to the majority view of the Prophet’s companions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


For Abu Zaid however, Shafie’s system goes out of its way to impose a unity that the Sunnah does not possess.

In his effort to uphold the Sunnah, Shafie downplays Sunnah incongruities and attributes them to the differing vantage points of transmitters; he also supports the credibility of the long-winded transmission process by portraying the Prophet’s companions who participated in it as free from human weakness. Abu Zaid believes that all these problems with Shafie’s argument do not deter him from his most “pressing concern and overarching purpose”⁶, to elevate the Sunnah’s legislative authority. On this point Abu Zaid charges that Shafie’s desire to elevate the Sunnah overrides his objectivity and colors his jurisprudential opinions in the direction of this objective. Shafie’s ideological bent was also evident for Abu Zaid in his approach to scriptural exegesis, an incredibly tightly controlled interpretive apparatus recognized by many as the contemporary standard.

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Shafie’s highly regimented exegetical system is defined by Joseph Lowry as the “finite number of textual arrangements employed by God to express legal rules”\(^7\). In this system that is characterized by an obsessive dependence on scripture, Shafie defines four and sometimes five modes in which the Qur’an and Sunnah interact in order to allow humans to derive scriptural meaning. The first mode is that of the standalone Qur’anic text that provides a lucid, self-sufficient legal rule that leaves no room for doubts about its meaning. The second mode of Shafie’s exegetical system is that of the Qur’an and redundant Sunnah, which he sometimes defines as two separate modes depending on how the Qur’an and Sunnah interact:

The Sunnah “can echo the Qur’an, expressing an identical rule with non-essential details, or it can supplement the Qur’an supplying the essential details of a general obligation found therein”\(^8\). The third mode is that of the standalone Sunnaic text followed by the fourth mode human interpretation, which comes at the end of Shafie’s exegetical hierarchy, and operates under the assumption that scripture addresses every human problem imaginable. For Shafie, every possible human problem, past, present, and future is discussed in scripture, however latent it may be.

Shafie’s view of scripture as an all-encompassing paradigm troubles Abu Zaid because it facilitates human manipulation of theology by forcing theology into tasks beyond its redemptive mission. The first example in Islam’s history of this trend of human manipulation of theology started in 657 for Abu Zaid, with the famous Battle of Siffin. Siffin, for Abu Zaid, marks a notoriously negative precedent, because it allowed for the Qur’an’s exploitation in an arbitration process between two fighting armies. In this paramount battle, Ali Ibn Abi Talib, the

fourth caliph and Prophet’s son-in-law, led an attack against Mu’awiya, the Syrian governor who had ambitions to become caliph himself. “A body of Syrian cavalry rode out between the battle-lines with open copies of the Holy Koran tied to the heads of their lances. They cried out, ‘The word of God. Let the word of God decide between us and you. . . . Let the book of God decide between you and us’”9.

Mu’awiya’s men attached copies of the Qur’an on their lance-heads to symbolize their acceptance of what God’s Word will decide in this military dispute, a ploy for Abu Zaid that manipulated scripture by diverting it from its redemptive mission, forcing it into a temporal battle for political power. At Siffin, the two armies utilizes a Qur’an-based arbitration process which allowed humans to bend scriptural passages according to their military goals and worldly ambition, a gross devaluation of God’s Word for Abu Zaid. Abu Zaid believes that Shafie’s universally adaptive view of scripture exacerbated Siffin’s negative precedent by allowing humans to incorporate scripture into any task they please, basically providing license for humans to manipulate God’s Word. Abu Zaid argues that Shafie himself falls into the errors that Siffin initiated, by bending God’s Word according to his own sociocultural preferences.

For Shafie, who hails from the Prophet’s tribe of Quraysh, progeny and language were important sources of pride, a dynamic that Abu Zaid believes skewed his jurisprudential opinions in favor of Quraysh’s hegemony. Shafie’s loyalties manifested themselves in an ample number of his positions, according to Abu Zaid. Shafie’s affirmation of the Qur’an’s Arabic purity while others argued that it possessed Persian idioms, and his glorification of the Qur’an’s Qurayshi dialect and insistence that prayers be made in Arabic, are all indications of Shafie’s

ethno-linguistic leanings for Abu Zaid. Even on the prickly topic of political power, Shafie’s acceptance of a Quraysh caliph who ascends by the sword evinces this clear tribal bias. As Joseph Lowry and Abu Zaid agree, “Shafie offers a theory of divinely sanctioned ethno-linguistic superiority” that manifests in Arab-Persian tensions which often overlap into theological disagreements.

Shafie’s discord with the Persian Imam Abu Hanifa presents a good example of how something like Arab-Persian tensions or ethno-linguistic loyalties can overlap onto the wider debates of that time. Shafie for example makes no secret of his salient dislike for the science of dialectical theology, a field that took a dialectical approach to elaborating and establishing the various schools of theology, where the Persian Abu Hanifa was quite active. Lowry, who notes Shafie’s possessiveness of the Arabic language, cites this latent tension in Shafie’s ridicule of Abu Hanifa’s Arabic oratory and his belief that native Arabic speakers were “inherently better qualified” to grapple with the intricacies of the language. “Certainly during Shafie’s lifetime it would have been persons of Persian descent who, in Iraq, did most of the pioneering work in Arabic grammar and lexicography. Shafie may well have been troubled by the fact that “Persians played the leading role in . . . the internationalization of Arabic.” Lowry essentially confirms Abu Zaid’s view that Shafie was impacted by the characteristics of his time, like ethno-linguistic pride or Arab-Persian tensions for example. Although Abu Zaid’s findings may

seem like nothing more than an innocuous analysis of a seventh-century Muslim scholar, Egypt’s negative mid-nineties reaction to Abu Zaid was very much a function of the implications his work posed for contemporary Egyptian society.

IMPLICATIONS AND REACTIONS OF ABU ZAID’S SHAFIE CRITIQUE

Abu Zaid’s dispute of something like Shafie’s view of scripture as an all-encompassing paradigm, presents serious challenges to the theological foundations on which modern political Islam is based, namely that scripture possesses the solution to any human problem imaginable—past, present, and future. This universally versatile view of scripture eases its manipulation, according to Abu Zaid, by allowing its incorporation into any task that humans deem fitting. This excessive versatility essentially provides fertile grounds for humans to employ scripture in an infinite number of ways for the advancement of their worldly goals and selfish aspirations. The 657 battle of Siffin is an example of how humans can manipulate scripture when given the opportunity, something Shafie’s totalitarian view of scripture serves very well.

Abu Zaid’s discussion of the theological legacy of the Battle of Siffin and how Shafie’s totalitarian view of scripture added to that, also shows contemporary readers that a scripture-based form of government is a human innovation rather than divine ordination. Abu Zaid’s findings severely discredit advocates of a theology-based political project that is centered on Shafie’s view of God’s all-encompassing Word. A bitingly negative reaction from Islamists and their followers could therefore be expected toward a work that decimates the foundations of their scripture-based political project. Abu Zaid’s contentions with Shafie’s efforts to elevate the Sunnah’s legislative authority, also challenges contemporary Islamists who depend on the Sunnah as the primary legal source that will regulate society.

For Islamist groups like the MB, who repeatedly publicize their desire to rule according to God’s Word, the Sunnah represents a major source of legislation; in fact the contemporary
concept of Islamic law or Sharia governance is primarily based on Sunnah rulings. Abu Zaid’s strong argument against Shafie’s Sunnah elevation project essentially discounts the main legal source that advocates of political Islam hope to tap into, in their quest for scripture-based government. Abu Zaid’s investigation demonstrates to readers that the Sunnah’s legal authority was the result of Shafie efforts rather than an explicit Qur’anic directive. Islamists, as well as their sympathizers in Egyptian society, were bound to react negatively toward research that downgrades the legal authority of the Sunnah, the main legal source for their scripture based governance.

Abu Zaid’s critique of Shafie’s Sunnah elevation stems from his belief that, contrary to contemporary Egyptian assumptions, Shafie’s project is essentially human thought that can be critiqued and improved upon. The need to critique Shafie’s human words becomes even more pressing for Abu Zaid when they become bulwarks of the perennial stagnation in the contemporary Islamic religious thought and discourse. That is why Abu Zaid also looks at the scholar’s own influences to show his essential humanity that is naturally influenced by sociocultural characteristics of time and place.

Abu Zaid’s discussion of ethno-linguistic loyalties or the presence of Arab-Persian tensions that influenced Shafie adds two important caveats to Abu Zaid’s research. First, it provides tangible evidence that Shafie was a human being like the rest of us, who was in no way immune to the sociocultural biases of his time. And second, after establishing Shafie’s humanity, his conclusions, like Shafie’s highly regimented system for scriptural exegesis, or his totalitarian view of scripture, become nonbinding human innovations that can be questioned and then accepted, rejected, or altered.

Shafie’s jurisprudential prowess and connection to Egyptian Islam, which translated into a deep reverence among the Egyptian populace, increased sensitivities toward Abu Zaid’s
conclusion that Shafie’s ideas can be reviewed and updated. Many saw Abu Zaid’s conclusion as an attack against Shafie’s jurisprudential findings, which many regard as certainties. These certainties of Shafie’s, which casual believers equate to Islam, led the many Egyptians unfamiliar with the idea of critiquing religious figures to see Abu Zaid’s work as an attack against religious authority in society. This sentiment was further cultivated by a radical sociocultural element in Egypt at that time that portrayed Abu Zaid as an anti-Islamic figure, spurring an array of negative societal reactions. Egypt’s negative reaction to Abu Zaid’s conclusions also stems from their potential to revolutionize Muslim perceptions of how Islam is defined and articulated in the twenty-first century. The second work in Abu Zaid’s research portfolio, A Critique of Religious Discourse, prompted an even more shrill societal reaction due to its calls for change and scathing critique of Egypt’s contemporary religious voices.
CHAPTER III

ABU ZAID’S CRITIQUE OF RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

The shock waves from Abu Zaid’s *Critique of Religious Discourse* were largely a result of its scathing critique of religious figures who command great respect and influence inside Egyptian society. While Abu Zaid’s critique is essentially an effort to deconstruct Egypt’s contemporary religious discourse, it also indicates the scholar’s apprehensions about the characteristics and tendencies of this discourse, which appeared to him to be monopolizing Islam for itself and taking it in an inauspicious direction. In his book, Abu Zaid also examines a number of misconceptions he believes the religious discourse promotes to enhance its reach inside Egyptian society. Concepts like Islam’s definition of its core texts (scripture), the notion of divine sovereignty, and the general tendency to distort modern concepts, which Abu Zaid calls ideological scrambling, are all examples of how this discourse misleads believers to bolster its power. Abu Zaid also touches upon the scholarship of Hasan Hanafi (b. 1935), the Egyptian Islamic thinker recognized as the spearhead of a burgeoning reformist movement dubbed the Islamic Left, which he categorized as religious thought, not discourse. Abu Zaid’s work exposes a religious discourse he believes uses Islam instrumentally to serve itself, and in that process also enforces Islam’s separation from modernity.

A ringing example of the discourse’s exploitation of Islam, for Abu Zaid, took place in the mid-1990s, with its participation in the faith-based pyramid scheme of companies that embezzled millions under the guise of Islamic investments.

“The massive—historically unprecedented—scam conducted in the name of Islam could not have reached this magnitude without a religious discourse that buttressed myths,
fantasies, and rejects intellect,” Abu Zaid wrote. This excerpt from Abu Zaid’s critique refers to a religious discourse that prepared the ground for these pyramid scheme companies to take advantage of Muslims. Abu Zaid’s main detractor, Abd al-Sabur Shahin, worked as a consultant for one such company. Abu Zaid sees Shahin’s efforts against him as retribution for his critique’s mention of these mega-scams in which Shahin was involved. Abu Zaid’s inferences, however, cannot discount the fact that Shahin’s opposition was largely motivated by his animosity toward Abu Zaid’s secular outlook and modernist approach to exegesis.

A far-reaching criticism that Abu Zaid makes against the religious discourse is that it has corrupted the original definition of what constitutes a “text” in Islam, thus impeding change. According to Abu Zaid, early Muslims defined the Islamic “text” as the very rare and lucid elements in the Qur’an that cannot possess more than one meaning or interpretation. Everything outside this minute area of scripture, defined as “text,” was fair game for the interpretation of scholars. This rarity of texts was so challenging that, according to Abu Zaid, over time, different groups of Muslims devised varying strategies to identify these undisputedly lucid elements of Islamic scripture. Muslim mystics known as Sufis dealt with this challenge of rare texts by engaging God Himself to derive meaning from his Word, while Imam Shafie developed interpretive tools to do the same thing. The contemporary conservative Islamic discourse, however, has expanded this definition to include the whole Qur’an and Sunnah, Islam’s entire scriptural corpus, marking a major shift in the term’s original definition, according to Abu Zaid. After this dubious expansion takes place, the discourse then summons the jurisprudential principle that “there can be no interpretation in what constitutes a text,” effectively removing

Islam’s entire scriptural corpus from the field of interpretation and bringing modern exegesis to a standstill. Abu Zaid sees this contemporary shift as a stratagem to obfuscate modern exegesis, which could yield findings that compromise the conservative discourse’s monopoly over Islam that it bolsters through its hyperbolic assertions of textual authority. The conservative discourse is therefore entrenching stagnation in religious thought to support its claims of owning the absolute truth. This stagnation enforces Islam’s separation from modernity by depriving Muslims of forming a more rationalist comprehension of Islam that is more adaptable to modern norms and challenges, for Abu Zaid.

The manipulation of theology in conservative Islamic discourse is also used to keep itself politically relevant, for Abu Zaid, through Islam’s concept of divine sovereignty. After tracing the roots of divine sovereignty in Islam to the seventh century rule of the Ummayyads, Abu Zaid found that this concept’s contemporary definition drew from the scholarship of Muslim Brotherhood (MB) ideologue Sayid Qutb (1906–1966). Abu Zaid examines the development of Qutb’s thought and how he adjusts his vision of Islam’s priorities from social justice and then to this concept of divine sovereignty or God’s rule, which gradually becomes central to Qutb. For Qutb, society’s submission to divine sovereignty constitutes the precondition that allows it to start along the path to social justice. Once society has declared its submission to God’s sovereignty, the next step is to appoint a group of knowledgeable religious figures to articulate God’s word and execute it. Qutb divides society into two parties: those who accept God’s sovereignty are called God’s party, while those who do not uphold it are labeled the party of Satan. For Abu Zaid, Qutb does a lot more than “reject intellectual and political
pluralism and oppose democracy”—he flat-out rejects the modern nation-state model as a whole.

This sweeping rejection for Abu Zaid cannot be assessed without considering Qutb’s brutal detention in the 1950s under the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser, who came to power after a military coup that ousted Egypt’s King Farouk in 1952. After an initial period of complicity, Nasser turned against the MB, ordering a vast arrest campaign of MB membership ranks in 1954 after their failed assassination attempt against him in the town of Alexandria. Qutb was among those imprisoned by Nasser at the time, and Qutb’s divine sovereignty discourse, for Abu Zaid, “is directed to the July revolution’s regime of the 1960s and to Nasser in particular. In fact, this concept of divine sovereignty was summoned to fight it.”

Qutb’s concept of divine rule, according to Abu Zaid, was a byproduct of this conflict between the MB and Nasser’s regime. Abu Zaid actually sees the struggle between the MB and Nasser as competition over who possesses this concept of divine sovereignty and thus represents God in Egyptian society.

These tensions one witnesses between the regime, its institutions, and the full array of religious factions and streams is not an ideological struggle about differences in ideas or beliefs. It is a struggle around the rightful ownership of divine sovereignty, with regards to the management of society. It is about who is speaking in the name of this divine sovereignty and is therefore protected by its legitimacy. It is a struggle between political forces that hold similar ideas about power, control, and authority.

A less distant example of manipulating divine sovereignty for Abu Zaid came in the early eighties, when Egyptian president Anwar Sadaat passed a bundle of constitutional amendments delimiting presidential terms and proclaiming Islamic law the principle source of


3. Ibid., 77.

4. Ibid., 84.
legislation. This move to present government as the enactor of God’s will, for Abu Zaid, is indicative of a regime that craves representing divine sovereignty and basking in the legitimacy it affords. When the religious discourse complies with, and promotes this vision of government, it is essentially branding human rulers as God’s emissaries on earth, which is a gross misrepresentation of egalitarian Islam in Abu Zaid’s view. This manipulation of divine sovereignty, for Abu Zaid, serves the conservative religious discourse by keeping it politically relevant to any head of state seeking the strong legitimacy that theology can afford. The pitfall of this scenario for Abu Zaid is that any state-led injustice will likely be interpreted as God’s doing, since the state is ruling in God’s name. When believers see God’s government committing injustice, it will surely take a toll on their faith in God and belief in his perfect justice.

The conservative religious discourse’s deliberate distortion of modern ideas, which Abu Zaid dubs ideological scrambling, has a direct impact on buttressing Islam’s separation from modernity. The prominent Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi’s description of the Western worldview is an example of this tendency to distort modern concepts, for Abu Zaid. Qaradawi’s statement that God in the Western mindset is like a clockmaker who created the world and then left it exemplifies this scrambling process, designed to deter Islamic society from adopting modern ideas while also disorienting intellectual opponents, according to Abu Zaid.

The fact that the clock-maker analogy is applied to Western thought in its entirety is insignificant to the religious discourse, which does not prioritize scientific precision. What is important is the hateful connotations that the word Western prompts within a reality that suffers and continues to suffer from Western Colonial domination. . .What is important for this discourse is to increase its reach by entrenching its concept of divine sovereignty, which attaches everything to God and rejects human aptitude.5

5. Abu Zaid, Critique of Religious Discourse, 35.
This sweeping rhetoric reduces European secularism to an antireligious, godless movement. Secularism becomes a terrible danger that threatens Islam’s role in society. Marxism and secularism are often lumped together to mean the same thing, amounting to an overarching atheism and materialism imported from international Zionism or a Christian crusade, according to Abu Zaid. Abu Zaid believes that all this confusion in terminology clouds Muslim perceptions of their contemporary realities and obstructs their ability to form a rational comprehension of theology that can cope with modern norms and challenges. A sincere, open societal debate about these concepts is threatening to the conservative religious discourse because, according to Abu Zaid, it exposes believers to modern ideas like religious pluralism and freedom, which compromise its theological monopoly and allow believers to think independently and investigate religious truths. The basic goal of this ideological scrambling, for Abu Zaid, is to obstruct any change that may weaken the status quo, in which the conservative religious discourse enjoys a monopoly over Islam that translates into great power and influence over society.

In the other direction, of integrating Islam and modernity, Abu Zaid notes the reform efforts of Egyptian scholar Hasan Hanafi. Abu Zaid sees Hanafi, who taught him as a student, as an important reformist thinker with strong inclinations toward consensus building. However, Hanafi’s more traditionalist approach differs greatly from Abu Zaid’s inclination toward modern research tools. Unlike Abu Zaid, Hanafi’s theological research does not incorporate historical analysis, aspiring to regenerate Islam from within the tradition itself. According to


7. Ibid., 50–55.
Abu Zaid, Hanafi is so obsessed with appearing traditional that his motto should be “renewing the tradition is the solution.” ⁸ Abu Zaid here is echoing the Islamist motto, “Islam is the solution,” to denote Hanafi’s circumspection and relative conservatism. Whether regarding Hanafi’s Islamic Left or the much broader religious discourse, Abu Zaid’s critique held a number of implications that provoked a wide range of reactions from religious voices and the many who follow them inside Egyptian society.

IMPLICATIONS AND REACTIONS TO ABU ZAID’S CRITIQUE OF RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE

The main concern of Abu Zaid’s critique is to expose a religious discourse that he believes uses Islam instrumentally to further its power and influence inside Egyptian society. This instrumental use of theology takes place through a number of channels, like the discourse’s role in the mega-scams of the mid-1990s, for example, where Islam was enlisted in the pursuit of material wealth. Abu Zaid’s exposure of the conservative discourse’s role in scamming Egyptian investors posed an unprecedented moral challenge to the spotless image and relative immunity that established religious voices enjoy inside Egyptian society. Religious figures were sure to react defensively to this challenge, which threatened to weaken their revered status and strong influence inside Egyptian society. In addition to the discourse’s participation in shady business activities, Abu Zaid also highlights a number of misconceptions that it promotes to maintain its monopoly over Islam and hence increase its power and influence. An example of that is how the religious discourse ensures its closeness to political authority, according to Abu Zaid, by presenting Sayid Qutb’s concept of divine sovereignty as a divine ordinance to believers.

Abu Zaid charges the religious discourse with utilizing Qutb’s divine sovereignty concept to add religious legitimacy to political authority and allow humans to rule in God’s name. This stratagem, which allows the discourse to stay politically relevant, risks attributing matters of human error to God and ultimately weakening the faith of believers, who are forced to try to square their government’s failings with their religious beliefs. Abu Zaid’s charge was certain to spark negative reactions among religious figures whom he depicts as acquisitive power grabbers, with no compunctions about using Islam to remain in the political limelight.

The manipulation of this religious discourse also plays a central role in distancing Islam from modernity, through what Abu Zaid calls ideological scrambling. This tendency to deliberately distort modern concepts clouds Muslims’ perceptions of their contemporary reality, for Abu Zaid. It also confronts believers with the dilemma of physically living in modernity, while remaining spiritually dependent on religious thought from centuries past. Abu Zaid believes that the discourse adopts this practice to obstruct the spread of more pluralistic modern ideas that could threaten its monopoly over Islam. Abu Zaid’s criticism that the discourse is estranging Muslims from their modern reality must have been exceedingly unsettling for conservative religious figures, as it depicts them as obstacles along Egyptian society’s and Islam’s path to modernization.

Nothing, however, prevents Muslims from formulating a modern interpretation of Islam more than the contemporary definition of Islamic text, which for Abu Zaid blocks possibilities for modern exegesis. The contemporary broad definition of text as the Qur’an and the Sunnah, which essentially excludes Islam’s entire scriptural corpus from the field of interpretation, serves the religious discourse by entrenching the current stagnation in religious thought on which conservative Islam bases its theological monopoly. The end result is a perennial stagnation that limits chances for a modern reading of scripture that is more adaptable to
modern norms and challenges. Dormancy in exegesis can decrease Islam’s relevance to the lives of believers, because it presents an outdated theological vision that departs from modern realities. Abu Zaid’s view that the sweeping conservative definition of text distances Muslims not only from modernity, but also from an authentically modern view of Islam was certain to anger clergy members whom the scholar accuses of manipulating theology to safeguard their theological monopoly. Abu Zaid sees the most fundamental difference between his vision and that of the conservative religious discourse as being that for him, Islam and modernity can coexist, while the conservative interpretation views Islam and modernity as antithetical to one another. Hanafi also believes in Islam’s ability to coexist with modernity, but Abu Zaid found Hanafi’s Islamic Left to be a movement too timid to catalyze the change needed for the formulation of a modern vision of Islam.

Despite Abu Zaid’s criticism that the Islamic Left is too desperate for consensus, the Left’s commitment to function within the tradition’s classical framework has helped it engage Egyptian society by addressing it on traditional grounds. Abu Zaid’s use of modern disciplines like semiotics—often viewed as Western—actually compromised his authenticity as an Islamic voice and reduced the prospects for a positive societal response to his work. However, the reactions of religious voices, or Egyptian society in general, was not a priority for Abu Zaid, whose main purpose was to expose a religious discourse that used theology instrumentally and a reformist movement too conservative to catalyze real change. Abu Zaid’s overall conclusion is that Islam comes out as the greatest loser due to the timidity of reformers and the aggression of a manipulative, self-serving conservative religious discourse that is willing to increase its power at Islam’s expense. The violently defensive reaction to Abu Zaid on the part of Islamic conservatives was seen clearly in Shahin’s assessment of Abu Zaid’s work, which will be discussed in the following chapter.
CHAPTER IV

SHAHIN’S REPORT, ITS IMPLICATIONS, AND OTHER USEFUL MATERIALS

As a whole, the report by the academic committee led by Abd al-Sabur Shahin weighing Abu Zaid’s research portfolio was marked by a pejorative tone that departed from the technical parlance of academic language. It was also extremely terse for a report being prepared for the grave task of evaluating a professor’s professional advancement. Abu Zaid’s 111-page study on Imam Shafie was reviewed in fewer than 150 words, an indication perhaps that the scholar’s work did not merit serious consideration. The report begins by listing Abu Zaid’s production, which contained, in addition to his work on Imam Shafie and *A Critique of Religious Discourse*, a collection of published academic articles not covered by this study. It then initiates its critique by ridiculing the Shafie book’s physical appearance:

> It is a booklet made up of 111 small sized and light pages. It is also light from a scientific standpoint. The book’s title implies that the researcher is celebrating Shafie, when in essence it is defaming him. It is a condemnation of Shafie’s misleading ways in mediating between Cognition and Scripture. And Shafie took the side of scripture at the expense of cognition and he put his tribe first at the expense of Islam. And the researcher goes on to repeat what he stated in past studies about the meeting of Saqifa and Qurayshi hegemony over Islam and Muslims. The whole of Islam’s history is a conspiracy carried out by the Caliphs from Quraysh.¹

The stunning brevity of Shahin’s review of Abu Zaid’s study does nothing to advance his argument that the scholar takes a conspiratorial view of Islam’s history. Shahin’s irked reference to Saqifa—a meeting at which Muslims debated the Islamic community’s leadership following the Prophet’s death (632 CE)—demonstrates his discomfort with the historical analysis Abu Zaid incorporates into theology. For Abu Zaid, Saqifa shows that Islam’s first

generation debated to choose a new leader after the Prophet’s death, indicating that there was no
divine ordinance on this subject. Shahin completely disapproves of Abu Zaid’s analogy, matter-
of-factly and without explication, dismissing the inquisitiveness one expects from an academic
assessment. To conclude the report’s Imam Shafie section, Shahin quotes Abu Zaid’s invitation
for Muslim scholars to “liberate themselves from the text” and comprehends that statement as a
bid for Muslims to discard scriptures. “Abu Zaid did not specify what is meant by this so called
liberation and the boundaries of these texts that are of a special ideological nature? And what he
wants from the Muslim community after it disposes of the Qur’an and Sunnah to the sidelines”.

While an invitation to liberate oneself from the text can sound problematic to scholars,
for common religious believers this phrase can be downright offensive. Shahin utilizes the
phrase’s strong impact to induce a certain negative reaction he expects from readers toward Abu
Zaid. Shahin’s interest in affecting social reactions can also be seen in the press leak of a report
that advances his negative view of Abu Zaid. On the above reference to “liberation from the
text,” Abu Zaid later clarifies that this phrase denoted the man-made portions of the Islamic
tradition. Liberation from the text for Abu Zaid constitutes the ability to question and go beyond
Shafie’s interpretive methods, for example. It can also mean a departure from contemporary
inclinations toward literalism, or the near total dependence on jurisprudential rulings from the
past, which he calls “worshiping the text.” When Abu Zaid’s academic phrases like
“worshiping the text” or “liberation from the text” are removed from their context and placed


into the broader public through Shahin’s leaked report, the chance of misinterpretation becomes very high. Religious sensibilities are very liable to be offended by the detached language of academia, and so the leaked report on Abu Zaid was not well received by the public.

While the Shahin report’s brevity on Abu Zaid’s Shafie book doesn’t do much to uncover the dynamics of this disagreement, the report’s assessment of the *Critique of Religious Discourse* is much more outspoken and illuminating.

**SHAHIN AND ABU ZAID’S CRITIQUE OF RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE**

Before a discussion of Shahin’s report on Abu Zaid’s *Critique of Religious Discourse*, the reader must keep in mind the negative connotations associated with the word “secularism” (*almaniya*) inside Egyptian society. Egyptians were swamped for many years with the Islamist message that secularism denotes atheism, which is antithetical to the Islamic polity. The stigma is so strong that Egypt’s liberal political parties have dropped the term “secularism” and opted for “civil state” (*dawla madaniya*) to avoid controversy. Well aware of this stigma, Shahin uses the term “secularism” consistently, interchanging it with “atheism” in a later book, to stimulate the negative reactions these terms usually prompt. It is also possible that Shahin uses the term “secularism” excessively to ward readers away from reading Abu ZaId’s books. A second possibility is that Shahin sincerely believes that secular individuals are closet atheists. More intriguing is that despite this array of negative social attitudes toward secularism, Abu Zaid not only uses the term openly in his work but also incorporates it into his vision of Islam, with a boldness that infuriated Shahin:

> Secularism at its core represents the actual and scientific interpretation of religion. It is not what the naysayers allege it to be, an atheism that will separate religion from society and life. The religious discourse intentionally and with crafty, dubious, awareness
muddles between the separation of Church and State—or the separation of political authority from religion—and separating religion from society and life.5

For Shahin, Abu Zaid’s view that Islam and secularism can coexist is either a matter of ignorance or an underhanded attempt at subversion. Again Shahin makes no effort at countering Abu Zaid’s argument or exposing the error of his logic. Shahin only begins to temper his rejection with a counterargument and explanation when addressing Abu Zaid’s criticism of a contemporary mindset inclined toward the “unseen” world of myth, rather than science. The “unseen” is a cornerstone of any faith for Shahin, who sees Abu Zaid’s reservations around a mythological mindset to be a denial of religious truth. As a Muslim believer, Abu Zaid believes that faith well-rooted in scientific inquiry is more resilient than faith predisposed toward myth. For him, science can improve each Muslim’s comprehension of their faith, while adhering to the Qur’an’s directives toward cognition, comprehension, and wisdom. Intellectual discernment has strong roots in the Islamic tradition; the problem for Abu Zaid, however, is in the contemporary tendency to neglect this aspect of the faith. Among Shahin’s more pressing anxieties about Abu Zaid was his alleged praise for Salman Rushdie’s novel The Satanic Verses, which caused a major uproar in the Muslim world.

He triumphs with enthusiasm for Salman Rushdie’s novel, The Satanic Verses despite its notoriously corrupt babblings. He probably did not even read it and he does not know what literary rot it contains emanating from the decaying bowels of the deviant infidel who wrote it. And despite all of this he continues his departure from all measures of objective criticism, ignoring the ethics of academic writing, even dismissing it altogether when he contrasts Salman Rushdie to the situation of Naguib Mahfouz’s novel, Children of the Alley.6


In his *Critique of Religious Discourse*, Abu Zaid mentions creative works such as Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* and others, not to review their literary value as Shahin alleges, but to note the heated reactions they provoked from Muslim societies. Abu Zaid also identifies the conservative discourse’s central role in rousing the masses against such books and advocating censorship, thereby highlighting the discourse’s characteristic insecurity. Abu Zaid believes this stance stems from the discourse’s weak construction, in addition to its impatience with freedom of expression and the arts generally.

Even if there was a contradiction between their view of religious dogma and certain literary works or artistic creations, does that mean that religious dogma is so weak and prone to collapse and defeat? Doesn’t this vision that is built on constant fear signify that the weakness and desperation lies in the religious discourse’s very construction?\(^7\)

Abu Zaid also goes on to recommend that religious leaders avoid conducting literary reviews that place them outside their area of expertise and do nothing to advance religious pedagogy. He contrasts the conservative Islamic discourse’s hyperbolic reaction to the *Satanic Verses* to that of the Catholic Church, which did nothing to try to stop the public viewing of controversial art like Martin Scorsese’s 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Abu Zaid attributes this hypersensitivity in the Islamic discourse’s leaders to an inherent weakness he believes stems from the instrumental use of theology. Shahin also took issue with the similarities Abu Zaid draws between the discourses of the “official” and seemingly moderate Al Azhar University and the more stringent advocates of political Islam like the MB and others.

Both the moderate and more extreme sides of the Islamic discourse, according to Abu Zaid, have no scruples about throwing the apostasy label on their adversaries. The moderate Al

Azhar, for example, had issued many fatwas (religious opinions) labeling the regime’s opponents apostates during the mid-1990s. Both sides of the aisle also accept the jurisprudential principle that permits Muslims to correct social evils by their own hands; the difference between the two discourses, for Abu Zaid, lies in their sense of timing. On this point, Abu Zaid cites an example made by the celebrated twentieth-century Egyptian scholar Sheikh Al Ghazali to illustrate the moderate discourse’s gradual approach to implementing its vision of Islam in society. Ghazali points to the many years the Prophet waited before finally demolishing the idols surrounding the Qaba (Islam’s holiest site), only two years before his death at age sixty-one, as indication that social evils can be corrected gradually. Abu Zaid differentiates the more radicalized discourse as a mindset eager to change what it views as social evils now, while the stream labeled moderate is willing to be more patient.

On the whole, however, Abu Zaid emphasizes the similarity between the “moderate” and “radical” Islamic discourses. Another place he sees this is in the previously mentioned deep-seated animosity toward the arts. Al Azhar’s role in the confiscation of Egyptian Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz’s novel Children of the Alley is an example of this trend. The fact that in 1994 Mahfouz was stabbed in the neck by an Islamist radical for the same novel that the moderate Al Azhar banned, evinces this similarity for Abu Zaid. “By utilizing the language of assurance, affirmation, and assertion the imaginary line many believe separates between the moderate and extremist discourses dissolves”. Abu Zaid’s view that the moderate and radical discourses have more in common than they would like to admit, is understandably troubling to many, including Shahin, who is among the discourse’s most influential figures. Abu Zaid’s


9. Ibid., 47.
critique of both the radical and moderate Islamic discourses, which basically constitutes contemporary Egyptian Islam, shows a bewildering inattention to his stand, at odds with a substantial portion of Egyptian society. If anything, Abu Zaid’s sweeping critique reveals his lack of interest in how Egyptian society reacts to his work. As a serious researcher and scholar, Abu Zaid’s first priority was to create new scientific knowledge others could challenge and build upon, and society’s reaction was the least of his concerns. This quintessential lack of interest in populist appreciation among scholars probably worked against Abu Zaid’s chances of prompting a positive reaction from Egyptian society. After all, as a researcher his job is to challenge society with new ideas, not entertain it. Shahin’s umbrage, however, doesn’t explain the vituperative escalation he spearheaded against the fellow Cairo University scholar. To get a closer look at how Shahin views Abu Zaid, the introduction of Shahin’s 1993 book: *Recession of Secularism at Cairo University* proves to be a helpful resource. In that book’s introduction, Shahin doubts Abu Zaid’s faith and lumps him into a broader secular camp with the recently assassinated intellectual Farag Fouda.

**SHAHIN AND HIS DOUBTS ABOUT ABU ZAID’S FAITH**

Shahin’s committee report clearly gestures to Abu Zaid’s apostasy by accusing him of “rejecting what constitutes crucial theological knowledge.”\(^\text{10}\) The phrase “crucial theological knowledge” denotes a jurisprudential concept referring to the dogmas, creeds, and beliefs that make one a Muslim believer. According to the religious discourse in which Shahin is well versed, any person who rejects these doctrines becomes guilty of apostasy, an offense punishable by death. While the Qur’an does not explicitly list what beliefs make one a Muslim,

\(^{10}\) Shahin, “Recession of Secularism,” 23.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 13.
these articles of faith were formulated and debated by Muslim scholars over the centuries to
better articulate their faith. Consider Egypt’s volatility at the time and the assassination of
secular Egyptian author Farag Fouda just months earlier over similar allegations, and Shahin’s
comments take a much graver tone.

Fouda was killed after debating a panel of prominent Islamist figures, including the
respected Sheikh Mohamid Al Ghazali, about the civil versus religious state models. Later, at
the trial of Fouda’s assassins, Ghazali testified that the gunmen were enacting God’s decree.
Despite Abu Zaid’s vulnerability in the wake of Fouda’s death, Shahin doesn’t hold back from
saying that like Fouda, Abu Zaid is an apostate and a terrorist too.\footnote{11}

This does not mean that we limit the battle to this Abu Zayd’s case, Abu Zayd is only
an individual within a group, or a comrade inside a cell, and his problem in reality is
that he wanted to be a leader in his group. He wants to be the philosopher that others
heed in the group. Maybe the days will return to their former hue and the secular stream
will flourish, therefore raising him in the ranks to become another Farag Fouda. . .Why
not? Since that goal failed the comrades returned to mourning and lamentation. The
funeral is hot and the dead one is a . . ."\footnote{12}

At the end of this excerpt from the introduction of Shahin’s book \textit{The Recession of
Secularism at Cairo University}, the scholar refers to the old Arabic proverb stating that “the
funeral is hot and the dead one is a dog,” without finishing the entire proverb. While Shahin
stopped just short of stating that Fouda died like a dog, his message seems to be that like Fouda,
Abu Zaid’s life is also worthless and expendable. These sorts of threats by religious figures are
often presented to the public as a kind of tough spiritual guidance to nudge the deviant
individual into repentance. Shahin’s vituperative tone reveals that for him, Abu Zaid’s
predicament is much more than an academic debate that went sour. It is an intense battle

\footnote{12. Shahin, “Recession of Secularism,” 8.}
between secular forces represented by Fouda and Abu Zaid versus advocates of political Islam like Shahin and other like-minded religious voices.

It is ironic to note that Shahin’s view of secularism is very much in line with Abu Zaid’s description of the conservative (moderate and radical) religious discourse on more than a point. Like the religious discourse Abu Zaid describes, Shahin takes it upon himself to define certain red lines, like secularism, that if crossed represent an exit from Islam and the loss of one’s humanity. It is clear that for Shahin, both Fouda and Abu Zaid have lost their Muslim identity and with it their human dignity. Abu Zaid and Fouda’s secular outlook doesn’t only constitute a betrayal of God for Shahin—it also means a betrayal of country.

The Marxists don’t need to conceal the real meaning of the word. For their Marxism basically means atheism, the same atheism meant by the term secularism. It is the same corner they found themselves in after the system fell on their heads like a rock on the heads of pigs in rubbish dumps, they have clearly lost their minds.

When Shahin wrote about a system that fell in the above excerpt, he was referring to the fall of the Soviet Union, which enjoyed substantial influence in Egypt during the 1950s. For him, Abu Zaid is a remnant of this influence, whose loyalties are to foreign powers and not to his own homeland. In a country like Egypt, which suffered for centuries from the effects of colonial domination, Shahin’s words do hold some resonance. By casting serious doubts about Abu Zaid’s faith and patriotism, Shahin is effectively demonizing the scholar and fueling a hostile societal response toward him. By describing him with pejoratives and unrelated terms like “atheism,” “secularism,” and “Marxism,” which he mistakenly interprets as the same thing, Shahin also blocks the possibility for real debate. Even more intriguingly, Shahin’s confused


terminology is very much in line with Abu Zaid’s description of the conservative Islamic
discourse’s favored strategy of ideological scrambling, mentioned in his *Critique of Religious
Discourse*. For Abu Zaid, Shahin’s cacophony of terms represents an orchestrated attempt to
obstruct any possibility of real debate. The cover of Shahin’s *The Recession of Secularism at
Cairo University* also speaks volumes about the dynamics of this conflict and how it all
reflected on society’s reaction to Abu Zaid.

On the book’s cover there is a caricature of a pudgy, bright red Abu Zaid standing with
a stoic expression on his face. Behind Abu Zaid is a portrait of Shahin, looking erudite with a
dashing suit and tie, trimmed beard, thick glasses, among a group of authors who contributed to
his book. The stunted Abu Zaid stands like an intellectual dwarf in the presence of giants who
outnumber him by five to one. Abu Zaid the loner is holding a fountain pen as he stands beneath
the thoughtful gaze of Shahin and his statuesque colleagues. This illustration communicates the
nature of this secular/religious divide for Shahin, whose book cover sends a message that Abu
Zaid or secularism is inherently small in value, knowledge, and popularity. The bright red color
of Abu Zaid’s entire image shows Shahin’s view of him as a devilish, ungodly figure, with less-
than-human depth or complexity. Shahin utilizes Abu Zaid to parody his view of secularism as
the very personification of evil. When thousands of Egyptians see this image, it enhances the
already negative preconception they possess of secularism and its proponents. By mocking Abu
Zaid’s physical appearance with a sensational image that depicts him as comic relief, Shahin
also fosters a public image of Abu Zaid and his ideas as frivolous, foolish, and insignificant.
This illustration affectively smears Abu Zaid’s image as a scholar and human being, reducing
possibilities that society will grant him serious attention or respond positively to his ideas.
Shahin’s attack against Abu Zaid is based strongly on his own worldview as well as his
perception of the scholar’s secular outlook. As this study observes more of Abu Zaid’s critics
and supporters, a similar pattern appears where criticism and praise are inextricably connected to their worldview.
CHAPTER V

ABU ZAID’S DETRACTORS AND SUPPORTERS DURING THE CLASH OF THE MID-NINETIES

This chapter is divided into two sections dedicated to exploring the reactions that Abu Zaid prompted, and their implications, during the cultural clash of the mid-nineties in Egypt. The first section will look at reactions from Abu Zaid’s detractors; reactions from his supporters will be addressed in the second section. A common feature on both sides of this disagreement is that each side is keenly aware of the message it wants to send to Egyptian society to try to gain public support. This strong desire to express a certain message to society is also evident in how both sides published works documenting the support it received. Both Abu Zaid and Shahin chose to document society’s support to leave a record of its position for future generations to learn from and perhaps emulate. This desire for documentation shows the weight each side placed on this conflict, which is centered on Islam’s contemporary definition. Another commonality on both sides of this conflict was to view the opposing side as part of a larger group or ideology, rather than as individuals, which adds credence to the view that Abu Zaid’s case was simply one manifestation of a larger struggle between secular and religious forces inside Egyptian society. A closer look at reactions from both sides of this conflict can provide a better understanding of the broader Egyptian societal reaction to Abu Zaid and his work.

ABU ZAID’S DETRACTORS DURING THE CULTURAL CLASH OF THE MID-NINETIES

Shahin published a compilation of articles to document the support he received, in a book titled: Recession of Secularism in the University of Cairo. This book included the
previously discussed Shahin academic report, in addition to commentary from some of Egypt’s most eminent Islamic figures. In this work, Shahin’s supporters showed a keen awareness of their commentary’s impact on public perception. Their sharp tone of ridicule, which echoed that of Shahin’s report, sent a strong message that Abu Zaid’s work and person were unworthy of society’s serious consideration. This resentful tone among Abu Zaid’s detractors also underlined the impassioned nature of this disagreement, which for them resembled a cosmic battle between Islam and its opponents. While Abu Zaid’s detractors criticized him from varying angels, there can be no doubt that for them, his ideas constituted a real menace to society that needed to be neutralized. Everything from books, sermons, and finally litigation was used by Shahin and his colleagues to frustrate any possibility that Egyptian society would even entertain Abu Zaid’s ideas. The bipolarity of this clash was even evident among the most composed of Shahin’s supporters, the doctor-turned-television-preacher Mustafa Mahmoud, whose TV program was very much at odds with Abu Zaid’s view of the world.

Mahmoud’s popular TV program, titled *Faith and Science*, about modern scientific marvels believed to be latently present in the Qur’an, was strongly at odds with Abu Zaid’s view of scripture. Abu Zaid believed that presenting the Qur’an as a book of science weighs down scripture with unrelated labors beyond its ultimate purpose of guiding humans along the path to salvation. This distance between Abu Zaid and his detractors on fundamental issues, like scripture’s role in the world, was also tangible in Mahmoud’s reaction to a controversial analogy Abu Zaid drew in his *Critique of Religious Discourse* between Islam and Christianity.

A fundamental distinction between Islam and Christianity is that while Islam does view Jesus Christ as God’s word, it identifies Jesus the man as human—born of woman—rather than divine. The Muslim tradition’s identification of Jesus Christ as God’s word, much like the Qur’an is God’s word (Holy Qur’an Nissa 171), leads Abu Zaid to consider that like
Christianity, the divine word in Islam reaches humans by becoming more human like them. In Christianity, the Virgin Mary carries God’s word in her womb much like in Islam, the Prophet Muhammad carries God’s word through the Qur’an and the Arabic language to the human race. “In both cases the divine turned into something more human, or God anthropomorphized”.¹ For Abu Zaid, Islam’s religious thought recognized this dynamic by confirming the humanity of Christ. Abu Zaid feels that therefore, similarly, the Qur’an should be looked at as God’s word in human form. This human dimension of the Qur’an is discounted completely by the contemporary religious discourse, for Abu Zaid, when it declares that the Qur’an is uncreated and primordial.

Abu Zaid believes that the common Muslim belief that the Qur’an is primordial and uncreated parallels the same position that Islam criticized in Christianity for worshiping a son of man. In Abu Zaid’s view, Christianity’s failure to recognize Christ’s human fallibility is very similar to how Islamic religious thought ignores the human dimension in the Qur’an, by declaring it an uncreated attribute of God. This human aspect of revelation is for Abu Zaid the thing that bridges the distance between humans and God, allowing communication between omnipotent, infinite, God and his finite human creation. Assertions that the Qur’an is uncreated discount revelation’s historical reality for Abu Zaid and reduce it to its metaphysical roots. Religious thought’s neglect of this dynamic freezes scripture’s vitality, according to Abu Zaid, and prevents Muslims from grasping the historical realities of God’s word. It also alienates Muslims from their modern reality, where a historical understanding of theology is the norm for contemporary believers, who are more inclined toward a rationalist, realistic comprehension of God.

¹ Abu Zaid, Critique of Religious Discourse, 207.
The Qur’an is a mode of communication between God and humanity. When we take the historical aspect of that communication as divine, we lock God’s Word in time and space. We limit the meaning of the Qur’an to a specific time in history. Far better—and more faithful to the Word of God—to ferret out that dynamic within the Qur’an which has been able to shape the lives of Muslims over centuries as they have wrestled with the question, “How can I be a good Muslim in a changing world?”

However, much like the Shahin report’s impatient conclusions, Mahmoud sums up Abu Zaid’s view of the human dimension of the Qur’an thusly: “God’s greatness appeared in the Qur’an as it did in Christ, but since the Qur’an was revealed in an Arabic tongue it becomes human and therefore prone to reproach and discussion like any other human text, that may be right or wrong.” This impetuous rendition of Abu Zaid’s analogy and lack of reference to his actual words, which becomes a homogenous trait of Shahin’s supporters, underlines the fact that Mahmoud and other Shahin supporters had no interest in real debate. Their main focus was to deter Egyptians from reading Abu Zaid’s books by portraying them as frivolous ramblings unworthy of consideration. Mahmoud simplifies Abu Zaid’s discussion of the human dimension of the Qur’an to the point of distorting the scholar’s analogy, which starts by noting common ground between Christian and Muslim views of God’s word.

For Mahmoud, Abu Zaid’s argument against the Qur’an’s uncreated nature can only lead to one conclusion, namely that the Qur’an is man-made and not the word of God. Mahmoud doesn’t provide an explanation to support this alarming statement, moving on to mock Abu Zaid’s analysis of the Qur’an’s 644 CE canonization process under Caliph Uthman. Mahmoud is clearly irked by Abu Zaid’s analysis of that event, where Uthman destroyed six


other copies of the Qur’an in varying dialects to ensure the conformity of a standardized Quraysh copy. He makes no effort, however, to clarify why the scholar’s analysis is so anathema to him, and parrots Shahin’s rhetoric about Abu Zaid’s connections to “an ancient communist tribe” trying to reclaim the glory days of secularism. There is no counterargument, no exploration of evidence from Mahmoud, only blanket statements about Abu Zaid, the failed researcher who denigrates the Qur’an.

The perceptive sheikh Mohamid al-Ghazali, however, makes more of an effort and uncovers a significant chronological error in Abu Zaid’s Imam Shafie research. Ghazali notes in a 1993 article for Egypt’s Islamist People newspaper that Abu Zaid mistakenly claimed that Shafie was employed by the Ummayyad Caliphate, which actually ended in 750 CE, seventeen years before Shafie was even born. Abu Zaid acknowledged this mistake later as a misprint that he subsequently corrected in the book’s following edition. Ghazali, like Mahmoud, also rejects Abu Zaid’s account of Caliph Uthman’s (r. 644–655 CE) canonization process, but goes through the trouble of adding some explanation as to why he believes there had always been only one Qur’an:

> History knows only one Qur’an whom the Arabs from Yemen understood. Even if they were from the south of the gulf and the people of Medina north of them and around them understood it too, if they came from the north of the gulf, so what are these other dialects that these other Qur’ans were revealed in? The author must be drunk in the midst of a blundering frenzy.


Abu Zaid cites the prominent Imam Tabari (838–923 CE) as his source of information on Uthman’s canonization process, while al-Ghazali neglects to cite sources. Ghazali’s short-lived attempt at a civil discussion ends abruptly after he dubs Abu Zaid “drunk,” a harsh slur within a religion that forbids alcohol. Ghazali’s remark about Abu Zaid’s drunkenness points to what he believes is the scholar’s incomplete Islam, a charge that implies the scholar’s apostasy, making him a persona non grata surely unworthy of debate and possibly even undeserving of life itself. For Abu Zaid however, Ghazali’s harsh and threatening language is no accident, he sees it as a way to block debate, part of a previously discussed phenomenon of calculated misinformation that he calls ideological scrambling.

The Islamist-leaning journalist Fahmy Huweidi departed slightly from the general approach of Shahin’s supporters who based their criticism primarily on theological matters, by confronting Abu Zaid on both temporal and religious grounds. In a January 1993 article for Egypt’s Al Ahram newspaper, Huweidi attacked Abu Zaid’s character by accusing him of leaking Shahin’s report to the press in order to coerce the university into approving his academic promotion:

The bottom line is that public opinion was pushed in the middle of this academic affair. It was up to the professor to appeal the committee’s decision through the legal channels, but he insisted on enflaming public opinion against the University and destroying the temple in a Sampson-like manner.7

Abu Zaid counters by arguing that the details in Huweidi’s articles indicate that he was the one leaked this report through Shahin. “It is impossible to imagine that a person would leak a report that makes him look inept, especially at a time when the final committee decision had not yet

7. Fahmy Hweidi, “Recession of Secularism at Cairo University,” in Recession of Secularism at Cairo University, ed. Abd al-Sabur Shahin (Cairo: Etisam, 1993), 104.
been made,” Abu Zaid wrote. While most of Huweidi’s criticisms of Abu Zaid were temporal in nature, his tone turned much more theological when he explained that the scholar’s hardships were well deserved due to his unfettered Qur’anic questioning. Huweidi also shares with Shahin and Mahmoud the perception that Abu Zaid is an agent of a broader secular camp, in addition to Huweidi’s deep suspicion of modern concepts like human freedom for example, which he believes should work within the parameters of the prevailing social order. These reactions from Shahin’s supporters presented a wide range of implications for Abu Zaid’s impact on Egyptian society.

REACTIONS FROM ABU ZAID’S DETRACTORS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

In line with the tone of Shahin’s report, Shahin’s supporters were characterized by their biting ridicule toward Abu Zaid and his scholarship. These religious figures clearly wanted to show the public that Abu Zaid was not an opponent they took seriously, as was evident in their refusal to cite his work directly. This omission may have also been an attempt to keep Muslims away from his books to deter them from even considering his ideas. By depicting Abu Zaid’s person and scholarship as ridiculous and outlandish, these religious figures also ensured a risk-free negative societal reaction. By depicting the scholar as outlandish beyond reason—echoing the book cover of Shahin’s work discussed in the last chapter—they can justify to followers their refusal to debate such a ludicrous figure. A debate might also compromise the negative reactions Shahin’s and his colleagues’ desire by prompting observers to investigate Abu Zaid’s ideas, which could lead to reactions outside their control. Ridicule is therefore a great way to

avoid debate and deter readers from engaging Abu Zaid’s ideas, hence ensuring a negative reaction from Egyptian society.

The only figure among Shahin’s supporters to drive a negative societal reaction based on an objective error on Abu Zaid’s part was Sheikh Mohamid al-Ghazali, when he remarked on Abu Zaid’s inaccurate Imam Shafie chronology. Unfortunately, however, Ghazali’s failure to cite sources or go into a detailed explication makes his argument nearly impossible to analyze. Apart from this chronological error, Ghazali forestalls any inkling of a real debate by calling Abu Zaid “drunk.” This allusion to Abu Zaid’s incomplete Islam or apostasy poses a very serious threat to his personal safety. A mere few months before Abu Zaid’s case erupted, Ghazali condoned the late Farag Fouda’s assassination over similar apostasy allegations. Ghazali’s apostasy insinuations during a time of surging radicalism fostered a stridently negative societal reaction that could have easily turned violent. The accusations against Abu Zaid following the questioning of his faith by Ghazali and others impeded his ability to defend his ideas and respond to his accusers. Abu Zaid’s limited capacity to defend himself provided Egyptian society with a one-sided account of this case that portrayed the scholar in an exceedingly unfavorable light, hence reinforcing a negative societal reaction toward him.

Huweidi, on the other hand, departed from Ghazali’s theological attack, opting for a more temporal derision of character that was, however, not devoid of theological references. Huweidi’s criticism of Abu Zaid as the university blackmailer, coercing it to accept his academic promotion, was bound to have more impact on middle-class Egyptians who were likely to view apostasy allegations as too fanatical. Huweidi’s character-centered attack shows his desire to influence sectors of Egyptian society that the impassioned religious rhetoric of his colleagues was unlikely to impress.
Mustafa Mahmoud’s response to Abu Zaid’s analysis of a human dimension of the Qur’an, however, represents a very natural representation of popular religious sentiments. Abu Zaid’s analogy, which finds common ground between Christianity’s concept of Christ and the Islamic concept of the Qur’an, is rarely made in Islamic religious discourse, or any religious discourse for that matter. Most religious discourses tend to depict their own theology as inherently unique, supreme, and dissimilar to anything else. The parallels Abu Zaid draws between Christianity and Islam can offend religious sentiments that are more accustomed to the idea that their theology is more original than any other. Mahmoud’s offense at this analogy can also be attributed to the discrepancy between detached academic language and the more paternalistic tone of religious discourse. A negative reaction from Mahmoud and his followers is therefore quite understandable considering the preconception most religious believers possess, that their theology is incomparable to any other.

ABU ZAID’S MID-NINETIES SUPPORTERS

Similar to Shahin’s effort to document society’s support of his position, Abu Zaid recorded the solidarity he received in a book titled Productive Words on the Case of Abu Zaid. This extensive work included the scholar’s analysis of his own case in addition to a compilation of articles from a number of recognized liberal Egyptian intellectuals. Abu Zaid’s motivations to publish such a work were identical to those of Shahin, namely to leave a record of his stand for future generations to learn from and maybe emulate. Abu Zaid’s supporters who conceptualized this case as either an assault against freedom of expression or a misunderstanding of Islam also showed strong awareness of societal reactions. This sensitivity to societal reactions could also be seen in their refraining from delving too deeply into the details of Abu Zaid’s scholarship, a dynamic that helped engage the Egyptian public. A garrulous discussion of convoluted theological concepts would not be as appealing to
newspaper readers as a case that actually impacts them personally by threatening their civil rights. This aversion to the heavy details of Abu Zaid’s research also served him by staying clear of problematic academic phrases like “liberation from the text” and others, that risk offending religious sentiments and adding credence to the apostasy allegations of his detractors. Abu Zaid’s supporters were also keen on exposing Shahin’s moral shortcomings and biases in order to discredit the negative report that degraded Abu Zaid’s reputation, part of their overall effort to deliver a lucid message of solidarity with the scholar that encourages other members of Egyptian society to do the same. There was also a strong sense of indignation among Abu Zaid’s supporters regarding the unprecedented court ruling that annulled his marriage, a clear sentiment in the commentary of Egyptian economist Galaal Amin.

In an August 1993 article, Amin held Egypt’s intellectual elite partly responsible for the prevalence of the radical sociocultural element that targeted Abu Zaid. The Egyptian intelligentsia’s partial patronage by an oppressive regime had compromised its independence, according to Amin, and drastically reduced its social impact. This missing role that Egypt’s intellectuals historically played by invigorating society with new ideas left a vacuum, for Amin that a radical religious discourse aggressively filled, with the help of a passive central government.

The unwillingness of the ruling regime—headed at the time by Sadaat’s long-serving successor, President Hosni Mubarak—to confront the radical element that led the charge against Abu Zaid has emboldened radical voices further and expanded their societal influence at an alarming pace, according to Amin. Amin believes the Egyptian government should have asserted itself by standing up for Abu Zaid’s freedom of expression and blocking this case from reaching courts and making a mockery of legal proceedings. If anything, this case for Amin is indicative of a regime that is intimidated by domestic terrorism as well as the stringent religious
discourse that promotes it. The Mubarak regime’s failure to even question religious figures like Shahin about his role in the previously mentioned pyramid scheme is indicative for Amin of “a government on vacation.”

Egyptian journalist Khalid Montasser also wonders whether Shahine’s regime connections prevented his being questioned regarding the faith-based pyramid scheme companies where he worked in the mid-nineties. Montasser found it duplicitous\(^9\) that despite Shahin’s position in a regime negotiating a major deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), he continually condemned the international banking system as anathema to Islam. According to Montasser, Shahin, who was a member of the ruling National Democratic Party’s (NDP) Religious Affairs Committee, stated that dealing with conventional banks in God’s eyes was like committing incest with one’s mother at the foot of the Kaa’ba, Islam’s most holy site. Montasser’s reproach points to Shahin’s knack for converging political power and shady business dealings, hardly the qualities of a spiritual leader.

Unlike Amin and Montasser, who chose to keep their writing simple by avoiding the details of Abu Zaid’s ideas, Egypt’s foremost classical Arabic poet, Ahmed Abdel Muuti Hegazy, lightly touches upon his ideas, in addition, to indicating his belief that this case represents a microcosm of the broader Egyptian sociocultural context.

The problem that matters to Abu Zayd is the differentiation between that which is divine and temporal in theology. Many of us confuse the two and observe any speech about religion to be holy revelation. In this situation thought becomes futile, in effect


prompting a crisis between a stagnant text that interacts with a fluctuating world. In this condition both society and theology end up losing.\textsuperscript{11}

Hegazy defended Abu Zaid’s differentiation between human religious thought, which is prone to criticism and improvement versus immutable revelation. He reads Abu Zaid’s case as a microcosm of what he believes mid-nineties Egypt is going through, due to the ascendance of a radical sociocultural phenomenon. For Hegazy, a loud fanatical minority that is opposed to freedom of expression is overriding the majority will in Egypt, and intimidating it into silence. The University of Cairo’s decision to ignore two positive reports on the scholar’s work and follow Shahin’s negative report is evidence for Hegazy that an undemocratic minority is overriding the majority in academia too. This endorsement of the Shahin report on Abu Zaid is not only evidence of a dictatorial minority but also an indication of deteriorating academic values. Wrote Hegazy: “If doctor Shahin has squandered scientific values in the report he wrote, has he really upheld dogma by acting in such a manner? No, it is not of Islam for a Muslim to declare the apostasy of a fellow Muslim because he differs with him in opinion. That is called terrorism.”\textsuperscript{12}

Despite the disappointing ruling dissolving Abu Zaid’s marriage, Hegazy believes that the public outcry following the verdict confirms that the majority of Egyptians respect freedom of expression. Pioneering journalist Mustafa Amin departed from the general line among Abu Zaid’s supporters to shape this case as a civil rights issue. In Amin’s view, this case constitutes a gross misunderstanding of Islam itself.


\textsuperscript{12} Hegazy, \textit{Productive Words}, 81–82.

Four years before his death in 1997, Amin wrote an article supporting Abu Zaid where he noted the intimate, untouchable character of religious faith. Religion’s staying power for Amin is evident in historical facts like the mighty Soviet Union’s inability to squash it, due to its inherently intimate nature inside the hearts of believers. That is why it is presumptuous for humans to question one another’s faith, according to Amin. Amin believes that the Shahin report’s intrusion into Abu Zaid’s faith departs from Islam’s tolerance and shows that contemporary Islam is moving in an unfavorable direction.

Our religion welcomes freedom of opinion and rejects bigotry and fights segregation and exposes the unjust and their injustice. . . . We cannot rightly guide people with fraud and unjust allegations. Only God can say who is an apostate. No one has the right to seize the Heaven’s sovereignty and decry his own whimsical judgments.  

Like Amin, famed Egyptian author Gamal Al Ghitany also found the Shahin report’s intrusiveness difficult to fathom. Ghitany was stunned at how an academic committee assigned to assess research can shift its focus toward confessional matters that are none of its concern. “At this point, we should be righteously disturbed and question what the difference is between declarations of apostasy that pertain to a professor, a thinker, or intellectual and other declarations of apostasy initiated by radical armed groups that confront society as a whole,” Ghitany wrote.

For Ghitany, Shahin’s view of Abu Zaid is no different than that of the radical militants who terrorize society, for what they perceive as its communal apostasy. Ghitany wonders, if an academic committee gives itself the right to question a person’s faith, then what is to stop

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powerful individuals or institutions from doing the same and interfering into the personal space of Muslims, to impose their view of Islam. Shahin’s invasiveness may portend more intervention into people’s personal rights under the guise of theology or social order.

Veteran journalist Ibrahim Eissa is similarly disturbed by the radical implications that this case poses for Egyptian Islam. In an April 1993 article, Eissa launched a theological argument against the annulment verdict, which for him contradicts Islam’s fundamentals. For Eissa, this ruling ignored the fact that the Qur’an leaves punishment for apostasy to the afterlife and indicates the ascendance of a bellicose religious discourse, only interested in spilling the blood of its adversaries. Writes Eissa, “What is this obsession with blood all about? And this burning desire inside those people who want to kill a Muslim man who declares that, ‘there is no God but Allah and Mohamid is his Prophet.’”

Eissa supports his argument by citing the findings of prominent Muslim scholar Mohamid Selim Al Awaa. According to Al Awaa, many mistakenly interpret the Quran’s Repentance chapter to mean that punishment for apostasy comes during one’s life on earth. This chapter, according to Al Awaa, was regarding the hypocrites who converted to Islam and then reverted to their earlier beliefs, at a formative time in the Islamic polity when leaving Islam resembled a modern-day army defection. In a modern context where Islam has risen to a position of prominence, such a legal ruling should not hold, according to Al Awaa. Based on Al Awaa’s findings, Eissa concludes that the ruling to annul Abu Zaid’s marriage due to his apostasy constitutes the defeat of core Islamic values like mercy and tolerance, by a judgmentally strident religious discourse.
REACTIONS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS AMONG ABU ZAID’S SUPPORTERS

As the previous discussion shows, a noticeable common goal among Abu Zaid’s supporters was to present his case as a civil rights issue or a misunderstanding of true Islam. All of Abu Zaid’s supporters without exception make a point of not delving too deeply into his ideas, to keep their message as strong, simple, and appealing as possible. This dynamic indicates their keenness to guide society toward supporting Abu Zaid, which they go about in a number of ways.

Galaal Amin, for example, presents Egyptians with an alternate view of Abu Zaid as the victim of a radical sociocultural phenomenon that is antithetical to free expression. Amin also points to the regime’s negligence in protecting Abu Zaid’s freedoms, which Egypt’s laws supposedly uphold. This civil rights angle that Amin and other Abu Zaid supporters articulated was calculated to arouse public empathy for and interest in the scholar. By delivering this case as a solid civil rights issue in simple journalistic language, Amin brought Abu Zaid closer to Egyptians and increased his chances of positively engaging society through broader debate. Amin also uncovers reasons for Shahin to be biased, such as Abu Zaid’s attack on the pyramid scheme investment companies in which Shahin was involved. This information raises doubts about the impartiality of Shahin’s report and disputes the negative way he depicts Abu Zaid to Egyptian society.

Like Amin, Montasser also uncovers reasons to doubt Shahin’s moral character and his negative depiction of Abu Zaid. Montasser does that by exposing Shahin’s duplicity in cursing conventional banks while the regime he worked for was negotiating a major deal with the IMF. He also challenges Shahin’s spotless image to caution Egyptian society against reacting uncritically to his report’s claims against Abu Zaid.
Hegazy, on the other hand, touches upon Abu Zaid’s ideas which he believes Shahin’s report distorted, in addition to delivering a heartening message to Egyptian society during one of its darkest moments. Hegazy’s message is that despite the prevalence of radical acts and rhetoric, this mindset represents a minority inside Egypt. For Hegazy, the tolerant majority of Egyptians should therefore openly express their commitment to freedom of expression. Hegazy is essentially encouraging Egyptian society to react with solidarity toward Abu Zaid even in presence of this radical sociocultural element that promotes a combative brand of Islam.

While Hegazy views Shahin’s role in Abu Zaid’s case as an example of his deficient religious as well as academic values, Mustafa Amin and Ibrahim Eissa viewed the Shahin camp’s pursuit of Abu Zaid as a problem in their understanding of Islam.

Eissa and Amin sent a strong message that no one has the right to monopolize Islam for itself and use it as a tool to hurt others. In light of this radical element’s dominance, Muslim believers should therefore diversify their theological knowledge and not be deceived by this radical discourse which presents itself as Islam. A healthy dose of skepticism and curiosity is actually helpful to enhance society’s capacity to resist radicalism and form a more temperate, rational approach to issues like the case of Abu Zaid’s promotion. In conclusion, it becomes apparent that Abu Zaid’s supporters stood by him out of a belief that this stand was for the common good of society.

As Al Ghitany mentioned, a proactive stance toward this case is another way for Egyptians to safeguard their personal rights and capacity to form a personal understanding of God. Unequivocal support for this embattled scholar also denotes the rejection of a radical religious discourse whose expansion holds even more repressive ramifications for society as a whole. For Abu Zaid’s supporters, society must react with solidarity toward the scholar to protect its civil freedoms and also preserve Egyptian Islam from the permeation of a radical
sociocultural trend eager to monopolize Islam for itself. Despite the support that Abu Zaid received from Egyptian intellectuals, the surging radicalism of the time which compromised his personal safety lessened his ability to defend himself and at least counter the negative image that his adversaries were painting of him.

The systematic vilification of Abu Zaid and his limited ability to express himself bolstered his adversaries’ success in demonizing him and cultivating a negative reaction from Egyptian society. As a result of this siege and subsequent court ruling, Abu Zaid left Egypt with his wife Ebtelah for the Netherlands, where he taught Arabic and Islamic studies at Leiden University. From the year 2000 onward, Abu Zaid started gaining more international recognition, which enhanced his image inside Egypt and prompted his invitation to conduct a string of lectures and TV appearances in his homeland by 2008. During that time, the scholar was allowed for the first time to make his case in front of Egyptian society. This thesis argues that Egypt’s reaction to Abu Zaid during that period marks a slight improvement from the nation’s passionately negative mid-nineties reaction. This more welcoming Egyptian response, which will be discussed in the following chapter, became more evident after an incident in 2009 when the scholar was prevented from entering the nation of Kuwait.
CHAPTER VI

A GRADUAL PREVALENCE

A slight shift in the Egyptian public’s reaction to Abu Zaid started to take shape from 2003 until the time of his death in 2010. This change was stimulated by a number of factors that combined to improve the scholar’s reputation and academic standing inside Egypt. International awards and recognition of Abu Zaid, in addition to a new focus on religious reform in the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, 2001, increased attention to the scholar’s research and his mid-nineties stand for academic freedom. At this time a number of Egyptian intellectuals picked up on this dynamic and started calling for Abu Zaid’s return to Egypt’s intellectual arena; finally, in 2008, he was invited to lecture in Egypt after years abroad. This more tolerant Egyptian attitude toward Abu Zaid was also evident in his increased televised appearances, in addition to the strong support he received after an incident in 2009 when he was denied entry into the nation of Kuwait. What first prompted the increasing acceptance of Abu Zaid inside Egypt, however, was the international recognition he received, which transformed him from a well-established scholar in the Arab world to a celebrated global figure.

Prior to Abu Zaid’s mid-nineties academic promotion fiasco, he received a number of awards in Egypt and the wider Arab world, such as the 1993 Cultural Achievement Award from Tunisia’s president, which bolstered his status inside the Arab academic community. In the years following Abu Zaid’s 1995 departure to the Netherlands, and more importantly after the events of September 11, the scholar’s work began attracting more attention as part of a broader global interest in Islamic religious reform. One year after the events of September 11, Abu Zaid was awarded the prestigious Freedom of Worship Medal, one of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Four
Freedoms Awards presented by the Roosevelt Study Center in Middleburg, Netherlands. At the award ceremony, Abu Zaid made a thoughtful acceptance speech in the presence of legendary awardees like South Africa’s Nelson Mandela about the injustice of branding Islam a terrorist ideology in a post–September 11 world where the socio-historical factors that determined Islam’s contemporary definition are seldom considered:

Islam is not a static, non-dynamic, or fixed set of rules. It is not a violent terrorist religion by nature. Any religion could be misused, politicized and manipulated to serve certain ideology. The Qu’ran, the holy book of Islam is silent; it does not speak by itself but people speak it out. As the Word of God to Man, its understanding and interpretation reflect the human dimension of religion. It is then unacceptable to ascribe to Islam whatever problems Muslims might have in their socio-historical existence.¹

As the shockwaves from September 11 continued to reverberate around the world with a surge in rhetoric anticipating a broader clash between Islam and the West, based on Samuel P. Huntington’s clash of civilizations theory, a number of Arab media outlets also started to show interest in Abu Zaid’s reformist message. Abu Zaid’s message of civilizational dialogue had great appeal during this time of tension between Islam and the West. A number of Egyptian intellectuals took note of this dynamic in 2003 and started calling for Abu Zaid’s return to the Egyptian cultural arena.

This renewed effort by the people to incorporate me back into the academy came after I had been on a number of TV programs in Lebanon as well as in Egypt. The Egyptian people were beginning to question the charges leveled against me. Apparently, on TV I did not come off like an apostate at all.²


More international recognition—including being appointed to Leiden University’s Cleveringa Honorary Chair in Law, Responsibility, Freedom of Religion and Conscience (2000–2001) and receiving the 2005 Ibn Rushd Award granted by Germany’s Ibn Rushd Fund for Freedom of Thought—echoed well inside Egypt, resulting in a 2008 invitation for Abu Zaid to lecture again in his native land. Abu Zaid returned to lecturing in Egypt in May 2008 at the American University in Cairo, with a lecture titled “Art and Taboos.” In that lecture, the scholar discussed the religious discourse’s opposition to visual arts, which for Abu Zaid departs from the Qur’an’s illustrative storytelling techniques. In December of that year, at the invitation of Youssef Zidan, director of the manuscript center at the Library of Alexandria, Abu Zaid conducted four lectures as part of the library’s resident scholar program. Abu Zaid’s presence in some of Egypt’s most respected cultural venues reflected a new Egyptian reality that not only allowed him to express his ideas, but seemed to also acknowledge his intellectual contributions. Abu Zaid was brimming with pride at the pleasure of lecturing in his native tongue, as he highlighted the need for teachers to take students into the intellectual kitchen rather than serving them ready-made meals, in his final Library of Alexandria series lecture titled “Redefining the Qur’an.” Abu Zaid’s advice to Egyptian academics reflects his continued interest to connect with Egyptian society, also evident in his repeated televised appearances which brought him in contact with millions of Egyptians viewers for the first time.

3. Nasr Abu Zaid, “Art and Taboos, a Lecture by Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid at the American University in Cairo,” YouTube, posted May 13, 2010, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-3zwKJMeDM&list=FL_QT6hTQU1-Mr-O8OX8IC0g&index=15](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-3zwKJMeDM&list=FL_QT6hTQU1-Mr-O8OX8IC0g&index=15) (accessed March 13, 2013).

TELEVISED APPEARANCES

Abu Zaid’s 2005 appearance on one of Egypt’s most-watched state-owned television programs *El Beit Beitak*, with famed TV announcer Mahmoud Saad, marked a major shift in the scholar’s capacity to cultivate a more personal engagement with Egyptian society. Abu Zaid spoke about his struggles to go from a two-way-radio technician working for the Ministry of Communication inside the Egyptian police’s headquarters to a university professor. In this interview, Abu Zaid also spoke about personal matters like his late university entrance at the age of twenty-five due to his filial obligation to support his family financially after his father died, when he was in his early teens. Abu Zaid also recounted to Saad how he had to struggle against cronyism to land a university position, despite graduating at the top of his class. This interview and others allowed Egyptian society to see a more human side of Abu Zaid that people could relate to. The many Egyptians who experienced cronyism and class prejudice first-hand empathized with the scholar’s struggles to become an academic. This humanization process that Abu Zaid underwent in front of TV cameras appears to have played some role in improving Egypt’s response to the scholar at this time. Arab and international media outlets also showed their interest in Abu Zaid by providing him with extensive air time and hosting him as the main guest of entire programs.

In 2010 the Qatar based al-Jazeera news channel hosted a question-and-answer session between Abu Zaid and viewers. Abu Zaid answered a number of questions about Islam’s


relationship to the West and the role that globalization can play in bridging this divide. Viewers called in from all over the Arab world, and were especially receptive to Abu Zaid’s commentary about the need for regeneration inside Islam’s tradition. That same year, Abu Zaid was hosted by the Lebanon-based al-Hurra news channel in an extensive 80-minute interview program, which covered his entire life and took calls from a number of his supporters, including his wife Ebtehal. During that program the announcer also asked Abu Zaid about the irony in the fact that his main detractor, Abd al-Sabur Shahin, confronted some troubles akin to his own after publishing a book titled *Father Adam*, which proposed an Islamic view of Darwinian evolution. While noting his disapproval of Shahin’s findings in that work, Abu Zaid said he believes that like any author, Shahin should not be persecuted for writing a book. Whether on al-Hurra, al-Jazeera, or Egypt’s state-run television, these outlets provided the scholar with unprecedented access to Egyptian society that allowed him to articulate his views like never before. This increased media presence also allowed Abu Zaid to counter the negative image that his detractors promoted of him during the clash of the mid-nineties, when his ability to express himself was severely limited. An incident in December 2009 when the scholar was denied entry into Kuwait demonstrated further this shift toward a more welcoming Egyptian attitude toward Abu Zaid.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbdBrVED2m8&list=FL_QT6hTQUl-Mr-O8OX81C0g&index=22 (accessed March 13, 2013).

THE KUWAIT INCIDENT

Upon his plane’s landing in Kuwait, Abu Zaid was informed by airport authorities that despite having a visa, he could not enter the country due to security considerations. Abu Zaid travelled to Kuwait to give a lecture at the invitation of Kuwaiti intellectual Talib al-Mawla. Even after Abu Zaid’s return to Cairo, al-Mawla insisted that the lecture take place at its scheduled time from Cairo via teleconference. A few days later, Abu Zaid was invited by the Egyptian Press Syndicate to hold a press conference on this incident. Conference panelists who came to support Abu Zaid noted their pleasant surprise that Islamist journalist Mohamid Abdel Qudus, who represents the syndicate’s Freedom of Expression Committee, had helped organize the event to show solidarity with Abu Zaid. Also present at the conference was long-time friend and colleague Gaber Asfour, who said he was glad for Abu Zaid’s safe return, lest he face an assassination attempt like the one confronted by Egyptian Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz in 1994. What is even more pressing than Kuwait’s rebuff, for Asfour, is that Arab intellectuals united to counter extremism in the name of Islam. “We will continue fighting such fundamentalists who claim to represent Islam and want to monopolize its definition . . . We must stand against them not just as secular intellectuals but also as Muslim intellectuals,” Asfour said at the press conference.

The Egyptian media’s support for Abu Zaid following his return from Kuwait was evident in TV programs grilling Kuwaiti officials about the incident, which many viewed as an indignity to all Egyptians. It later emerged that Kuwait’s rebuff was part of a deal between

Kuwait’s government and its Islamist majority parliament. According to al-Mawla, who had invited Abu Zaid to lecture, the Islamist parliament agreed to spare the government a no-confidence vote in exchange for blocking the scholar’s entry. Egyptian society’s strong solidarity with Abu Zaid following this 2009 incident is a far cry from Abu Zaid’s mid-nineties situation, when the scholar’s safety, mobility, and capacity to express himself was seriously compromised. This sharp contrast from the mid-nineties led some onlookers to wonder whether the Mubarak regime had given a politic green light in favor of the scholar. Abu Zaid made a point of rejecting these suspicions at the press conference: “The intellectual must maintain his independence even if the politician adopts his point of view. An intellectual should always be the guard of certain values, he must be cautious about coalescing with the politician, which would transform him into a guard dog of political power.”

Toward the end of the press conference, Abu Zaid himself noted that in 2009 there was more solidarity with him than fifteen years prior, when his academic promotion was denied. Abu Zaid attributed this shift in society to the improved flow of information. This statement acknowledges the fact that the new space he was provided to express his views was instrumental in improving Egyptian society’s reactions to him.

IMPLICATIONS OF EGYPT’S 2009 REACTION TOWARD ABU ZAID’S DEATH

Egypt’s warmer 2009 reaction to Abu Zaid was engendered by a number of factors that essentially provided him with more space to express himself inside Egyptian society. Esteemed international recognition like the 2002 Franklin D. Roosevelt Freedom of Worship Medal and others elevated Abu Zaid’s academic profile and public image inside Egypt, sparking the

interest of cultural venues like the Library of Alexandria and the American University in Cairo. As Abu Zaid himself notes, there were also some efforts among intellectuals to reintegrate him into the Egyptian cultural arena from as early as 2003. Abu Zaid’s ability to lecture in Egypt and communicate his ideas more freely in 2008 marks a substantial shift from the scholar’s mid-nineties situation. During the mid-nineties the serious risks to the scholar’s life constrained his ability to communicate his ideas to Egyptian society and defend himself against the apostasy allegations, hence cultivating negative societal reactions at that time. Another factor that was instrumental in this positive shift in Egypt’s reaction to Abu Zaid was his increased media presence.

Abu Zaid’s well-received appearances on Arab and Egyptian television programs from 2003 onward allowed him unprecedented access to Egyptian viewers. While Abu Zaid explained some of his ideas, research, and mid-nineties experiences, he also spoke about his life journey and struggles as the orphaned son of a poor family with a dream to enter academia. Egyptian society’s first-hand experience of Abu Zaid’s views and opinions strongly discredited his detractors’ claims of his apostasy. On TV, Abu Zaid came across as a Muslim scholar looking to regenerate Islam through a rationalist theology that is more compatible with modern norms and challenges. This shift in Egypt’s reaction became more evident in the emphatic solidarity he received following his 2009 denied entrance into Kuwait. Abu Zaid’s support at the time, which also included an Islamist figure, denotes a higher level of tolerance inside Egyptian society that is a far cry from his mid-nineties siege. The presence of more independent media outlets in the mid to late 2000s was also instrumental in providing Abu Zaid with a new space in which to communicate his ideas inside Egyptian society. Abu Zaid’s increased media prevalence also impacted Egypt’s reaction to his death in 2010.
CHAPTER VII

REACTIONS TO ABU ZAID’S UNEXPECTED DEATH IN 2010

Abu Zaid’s sudden death in November 2010 shortly after a trip to Indonesia prompted a variety of reactions from his supporters and detractors alike. Supporters reacted to his untimely death after contracting meningitis as the loss of an important Muslim scholar whose contributions were never given adequate recognition in his homeland, while detractors responded by promoting the idea that his sudden death was divine punishment due to his deviant writings. These two vantage points will be discussed in two sections of this chapter. The first focuses on reactions to Abu Zaid’s death from his supporters and their implications, and the second section will cover the same topics for his detractors.

REACTIONS FROM ABU ZAID’S SUPPORTERS

Abu Zaid’s unexpected death was particularly upsetting to Egyptian liberals who had great hope in the scholar’s capacity to catalyze religious reforms that could ease Islam’s transition to modernity. Disappointed reactions stemmed not only from the scholar’s importance to religious reform, but also from his commitment to defending causes like women’s and minority rights in Egypt on Islamic grounds. These dual roles that Abu Zaid played as a courageous scholar and, to a lesser extent, outspoken activist increased the sense of loss and even shock that many felt after his death. Some interlocutors, like Coptic activist Magdy Khalil, were so taken aback by Abu Zaid’s loss that they started suggesting that the scholar was assassinated. While Khalil’s view is anomalous, it is indicative of the shockwaves that followed the scholar’s passing, not only in liberal circles but among the vulnerable members of Egyptian society he defended. Abu Zaid’s death also came at a time when he was becoming a forceful
voice for religious reform in Egypt, making his passing particularly disheartening to advocates of a more liberal view of Islam.

While a substantial portion of press coverage on Abu Zaid’s death was superficial and regimented, the frankness expressed by authors who knew Abu Zaid personally proved an indispensable source for comprehending the reaction that his death prompted from Egyptian society. A common feature among Abu Zaid’s supporters was to grasp the scholar’s death as part of a broader sociocultural trend of dwindling liberalism and surging religious bigotry inside Egypt that manifests itself in a variety of ways. Abu Zaid’s supporters were also clearly intent on setting the record straight on the scholar’s experience and on giving the tribute that they believed Egyptian society owed Abu Zaid due to the way it mistreated him in life and death.

Longtime friend and colleague Gaber Asfour notes this maltreatment with irony as he recounts how the print media outlets that facilitated Abu Zaid’s vilification during the mid-nineties were in 2010 lamenting the scholar’s loss. Asfour was referring to state-run newspapers like Al Ahram, whose extensive obituary section on Abu Zaid he felt constituted too late a tribute to be of real value. Asfour wrote:

> And now I see both the regime and opposition newspapers racing to celebrate the man. These are the same newspapers that facilitated his detractors’ efforts to cast doubts about the man’s faith. On the other side of the debate there are the satellite channels and internet websites of bigotry that continuously declare their jeers and taunts at Abu Zaid’s death. Even though the man is now with his creator...but they know nothing of values.¹

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Toward the end of the above excerpt, Asfour refers to the religious satellite TV channels that touted Abu Zaid’s death as divine punishment. These channels, known for their affinity to Saudi Arabia’s puritanical brand of Islam known as Wahabism, ignored the conciliatory comments made by Al Azhar’s grand mufti, Ali Gomaa, about Abu Zaid’s death. Gomaa, who is regarded as one of Sunni Islam’s top religious authorities, said he hoped Abu Zaid would be rewarded by God for his scholarship. This discrepancy between Al Azhar’s more tolerant official position and those Wahabi-leaning religious channels is indicative, for Asfour, of the chaos in religious discourse as well as the decline of liberal values in Egyptian society. Asfour sees a direct connection between Abu Zaid’s difficulties as a scholar and Egypt’s bygone liberalism, which he believes was engendered by a number of historical factors.

According to Asfour, Egypt’s military defeat in 1967 weakened liberal forces because it discredited the modern nation-state model. The Islamist stream also presented this loss to the public as God’s punishment for the nation’s departure from authentic Islam. A bundle of constitutional amendments spearheaded by Egypt’s second president, Anwar Sadaat, also contributed to the decline of liberalism in Egypt. Sadaat’s 1981 constitutional amendments stipulated Islamic law as the principle source of legislation and limited presidential terms, a significant development for Asfour that steered Egypt in a theocratic direction by portraying human government as the enforcer of God’s Word. This erosion of liberal values and ideas inside Egypt was coupled with a surge of a radical religious discourse that manifested itself in Cairo University’s reaction to Abu Zaid’s academic promotion and much later death.

Cairo University’s refusal to commemorate the scholar’s passing speaks volumes about the contraction of liberal ideals inside Egyptian academia; the university even rejected a request

from Asfour to postpone the swearing-in ceremony of new professors so they could attend Abu Zaid’s funeral. In light of its exceedingly rigid contemporary posture, Asfour laments the university’s bygone reputation as a bastion of liberal ideas, which he believes was one of the sources of tension between Abu Zaid and Shahin during the mid-nineties.

Asfour recounts the historical tensions that existed between the more liberal Cairo University of past eras and the ultra-traditionalist Dar-al-Ullum, where Shahin was educated. This contrast was evident in the thinkers that each school produced, for Asfour. Two of Islamism’s most influential figures, MB founder Hasan al Banna and the organization’s ideologue, Sayid Qutb, graduated from Dar-al-Ullum. Cairo University produced liberal icons like Taha Hussein and others. Asfour believes that this rivalry, which contributed to the escalation of Abu Zaid’s case in the mid-nineties, also denotes the tensions between liberal and theocratic forces in Egypt.

Egyptian political scientist Amr Shoubki agreed with Asfour that the scholar’s loss was part of Egypt’s fading liberal past. Shoubki, who learned about Abu Zaid from two Syrian friends who like him were forced to flee their homeland to escape persecution, comprehends the scholar’s volatile experience as part of a broader phenomenon of fading liberal values, like pluralism and others in the Arab world. This phenomenon, for Shoubki, manifested itself during the mid-nineties through Shahin’s academic committee, which he likened to medieval priests who utilize theology to increase their reach in society and in the process, are taking the country hundreds of years backward. Shoubki, who became a parliament member following Egypt’s 2011 revolution, mourned the loss of Abu Zaid as the loss of another Egypt, which allowed this scholar who is the son of a poor family to become a university professor with international

acclaim. Shoubki comprehends Egypt’s negative reactions to Abu Zaid in the mid-nineties or in 2010 as result of a perennial ignorance that should be addressed by engaging the rationalist path to theology that the scholar forged.

Another writer who noted Egypt’s crucial need for Abu Zaid’s intellectual contributions was Wael Abdel Fatah, who was indignant at Cairo University’s barefaced abandonment of the scholar. Abdel Fatah, who knew Abu Zaid personally, marveled at the late scholar’s unreciprocated affinity for Cairo University, an institution Abdel Fatah calls a breeding ground of ignorance for its refusal to recognize this scholar after a life of rigorous academic achievements. Abdul Fatah counters Cairo University’s slight by recounting the kudos given to Abu Zaid by the renowned reformist Islamic thinker Hasan Hanafi during a 2004 symposium at the Swedish Cultural Center in Cairo.

During that symposium, Hanafi recognized that Abu Zaid was actually more audacious than himself in his inquiries, to the point that he suggested his own approach should have been more like Abu Zaid’s, according to Abdel Fatah, based on an audio recording of the event. Hanafi, who also taught Abu Zaid, explained his discreet approach to reform as a strategic necessity due to the scarcity of reformist voices. According to Adel Fatah, Hanafi said that if the regime or Islamists wanted to, they could get rid of Egypt’s entire reformist stream in one night of arrests. That is why discretion was necessary, especially in the Arab world, where it seems reform is always starting from scratch, for Hanafi.

Journalist/screenwriter Bilaal Fadl was most disturbed most by the reactions of religious TV channels that actually mocked the scholar’s disease and subsequent death. Fadl sees the heartless attacks against Egyptian thinkers like Abu Zaid and others, even during the very solemn moments when they have left this world, as an indication of the superficiality of contemporary religiosity. This shallowness was evident even during Abu Zaid’s life, in how religious voices intentionally distorted his academic phrases to incite society against him, according to Fadl. A good example of that was Abu Zaid’s famous saying that the Qur’an was a cultural product, which his detractors misrepresented as another way of saying the Qur’an is man-made. Fadl explains Abu Zaid’s technical phrase as a description of the natural interaction between revelation and human society. The real problem for Fadl, however, is that Abu Zaid’s adversaries were completely unwilling to even consider Abu Zaid’s ideas.

IMPLICATIONS AND REACTIONS AMONG ABU ZAID’S SUPPORTERS IN 2010

A prevalent reaction among Abu Zaid’s supporters was to give him credit for a life and career in which they believe he was treated with great injustice. All of Abu of Zaid’s supporters agree that the scholar was never given the opportunity to fulfill his potential as a viable voice for religious reform in Egypt. There was also a frank bluntness among those who were close to Abu Zaid, like Abdel Fatah and Asfour, as they exposed the double standards to which Abu Zaid was subjected. An example of that was Asfour’s reference to the flip-flopping of the Egyptian media, as well as Cairo University’s abandonment of him. This desire to give Abu Zaid recognition was also prevalent in Adel Fatah’s recounting of the substantial kudos that Hanafi bestowed on Abu Zaid. This keenness among Abu Zaid’s supporters to recognize his

contributions, and also provide a sincere account of his sacrifices underlines their desire to remain true to his legacy while also informing Egyptian society of his fundamental worth as a scholar and human being.

Another common feature in the reactions of Abu Zaid’s supporters was a wistful remembrance of a more liberal Egyptian past when greater tolerance prevailed in society. The scholar’s death was viewed by a number of these figures, like Shoubki and Asfour, as the erosion of a more open Egypt where dissent was accepted and social mobility was possible. In contemporary Egypt, however, dissent in religious matters is becoming increasingly taboo, denoting the superficiality Bilaal Fadl mentioned, which became apparent with the jeers of religious voices that continuously declared that Abu Zaid’s death was divine punishment for his apostasy, and discouraged Muslims from wishing mercy on his soul (a customary way that Muslims mention a deceased person).

ACRIMONIOUS REACTIONS TO ABU ZAID’S SUDDEN DEATH IN 2010

Shortly after Abu Zaid’s death, a number of religious TV channels made a concerted effort to counter media coverage that portrayed the scholar’s death as the loss of a great Muslim thinker. This shows that as in the mid-nineties, in 2010, Abu Zaid’s detractors were keen on influencing society’s reaction to the scholar’s passing. There was also an increased sense of urgency among Abu Zaid’s detractors, which was most likely a reaction to the print media’s extensive coverage of the scholar’s work and legacy. Al Nass TV channel, known for its Wahabist leanings, was disturbed by the positive comments Egyptian TV announcer Mahmoud Saad⁶ made about Abu Zaid’s passing. In his eight-minute tribute to Abu Zaid, Saad called him

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⁶ Al Nass Channel, “Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid, Shame, Depravity and a Disgraceful Close,” YouTube, posted October 10, 2010,
a refined Muslim thinker who contributed to religious thought, prompting the chagrin of Al Nass channel’s announcer Khalid Abdullah. After repeating what he called Saad’s “disastrous” comments about Abu Zaid, Abdullah read from an ambiguous article about the low turnout at the scholar’s funeral.

According to Abdullah’s reading, the people of Quhafa, the village where Abu Zaid was born and that would also be his final resting place, did not attend his funeral services for fear that the curse that killed the scholar would befall them too. Abdullah also kept calling the meningitis that took Abu Zaid’s life a mysterious disease, to cultivate the notion that the scholar’s passing was the result of a supernatural intervention; he also noted with approval the absence of government officials at the funeral, which was for him understandable due to the “question marks” that surrounded the late Abu Zaid. Abdullah went on to censure Saad, in addition to an Al Azhar University professor named Amna Nosseir, for acknowledging Abu Zaid’s contributions to religious thought. For Abdullah, Nosseir and Saad’s positive remarks could only be a result of their ignorance of the blasphemy in the scholar’s books. To emphasize this point further, Adullah conducted a telephone interview with Hasan Akl, whom he identified as a theology professor from Al Azhar University.

From the very start of this interview, Akl made a point of avoiding the customary Muslim invocation of mercy on the scholar’s soul. Instead, Akl referred to the late Abu Zaid as the one who was given what he delivered.\(^7\) This expression that Akl used indicates that for him Abu Zaid did not die as a fellow Muslim believer. Akl also agreed with Abdullah that Saad

\[\text{http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DTfOVYNkZZg\&list=FL_QT6hTQU1-Mr-O8OX81C0g\&index=112}\] (accessed March 14, 2012).

\(^7\) Al Nass, “Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid.”

\(^8\) Al Nass, “Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid.”
should not comment on religious issues that he is not qualified to address, in addition to advising Egyptians to respect the court ruling that declared Abu Zaid’s apostasy in the mid-nineties. For Akl, Abu Zaid deserved to be branded an apostate due to the dangerous tendencies in his books, including his failure to write the full expression of peace every time when identifying the Prophet. Muslims customarily say the expression, “Peace be upon him,” following any mention of the Prophet Muhammad’s name, as a sign of reverence.

Akl said that after reading Abu Zaid’s work titled *The Concept of The Text*, he came to the conclusion that the scholar’s “goal is to remove sanctity from the Qur’an and deepen this idea of historicity.” Abu Zaid also “goes on to resolve these issues by saying that the Qur’an is a cultural product” Akl said. Akl comprehends Abu Zaid’s view of the Qur’an as cultural product quite unforgivingly, as a rejection of its divinity, making him a nonbeliever, for Akl.

Al Hikma channel, which is similar in orientation to Al Nass, allotted a 30-minute segment to discussing the significance of Abu Zaid’s death. In a televised interview format, the channel’s recently resigned head, Hosaam Abdel Warith, questioned Sheikh Mazin Al Sirsany on the implications of Abu Zaid’s passing. While they both agreed that Abu Zaid had never been maltreated in the first place, Sirsany considered the scholar’s difficulties a direct result of his deep hatred for Islam, in addition to his covert role in a Shiite conspiracy to undermine Sunni doctrines. Shia Islam is the second-largest Muslim denomination and is based primarily in Iran; it is known for its deep reverence for the Prophet’s family, which according to Shia doctrine was cheated out of its right to lead the Muslim community.

Sirsany went on to equate Abu Zaid with other dissident religious thinkers who reject the Sunnah’s corpus, such as Ahmed Sobhy Mansour. Mansour, who currently lives in the United States, founded a religious reform movement centered on the supremacy of the Qur’an and rejection of the Sunnah corpus, making him a deviant from the path of Islam, for Sirsany. Sirsany also defended the death penalty for those who deviate from Islam, a procedure he finds no different than capital punishment in the criminal codes of Western nations. For Sirsany, who kept referring to Abu Zaid as the one who perished, the scholar’s death was a way for God to rescue his people from the likes of this scholar: “He is saying the Qur’an was produced by humans . . . and that revelation is part of the evolution of satanic verses that came down to Muhammad,” Sirsany said, without providing a source or explanation of how he reached this conclusion.

Sirsany also comprehends Abu Zaid’s use of the term “text,” which denotes scripture for the scholar, as an indication that the “Qur’an is a worthless product of its climate.” After making these alarming statements about Abu Zaid, Sirsany chose to change the subject to shelter Muslims from Abu Zaid’s ideas, which may present challenges to their faith.

The religious TV channel Azhari, named after Al Azhar University, was no less passionate in its rejection of the late Abu Zaid. Al Azhar University, however, disassociated itself from this channel, which is believed to be partly owned by Libyan investors. Azhari TV announcer Tuhamy Montasser announced Abu Zaid’s death with a bantering tone that expressed relief at the scholar’s demise:

Nasr Abu Zaid is gone, he’s out of here! Dr. Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid is dead at the age of sixty-seven. You all know his story that we mentioned a week ago, when he was suffering in a hospital. His mind has stopped he lost his ability to speak. If you recall, Dr. Nasr presented a study to become a professor and Dr. Abd al-Sabur Shahin accused him of apostasy and atheism because he subjected the Qur’anic text to criticism and scorn; saying it is permissible to remove, remodel, and substitute the Qur’anic text according to the changing times that we live in. Because there are verses in the Qur’an that have become anachronistic, he was hit with a virus in his brain, in his mind, so it
stopped, his memory too was erased, spoiled, crashed! He lost his speech, lost his
ability to move, so they resorted to hiding all these things by not allowing him
visitors.  

According to Tuhamy, Abu Zaid’s death resembles the death of a character in the Qur’an named
Nimrod, who died after a fly entered his nose and pierced through his brain; Nimrod’s death
was divine punishment for his flamboyant lifestyle. Tuhamy utilizes scripture to vilify Abu Zaid
and also enforce the notion that he died from a mysterious disease of supernatural origin. Sheikh
Selim Abdel Gileel, also from the Azhari channel, replied to a viewer’s question about the
permissibility of wishing mercy on the soul of a person declared an apostate by court ruling.  

Abdel Gileel understood that the caller, who did not mention a name, was referring to the late
Abu Zaid. Abdel Gileel confidently declared that for that particular case, the invocation of
mercy would not be a proper Islamic mode of conduct. The caller ended her call by thanking
Abdel Gileel profusely and wishing there were more people like him in Egypt’s mosques, to
teach Muslims the right way to do things.

REACTIONS TO ABU ZAID’S DEATH AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS AMONG DETRACTORS

It is clear from the reactions of Abu Zaid’s 2010 detractors that they continued to view
him as a threat even after he had passed away. Abu Zaid’s detractors were somewhat similar to
their mid-nineties counterparts in their almost phobic fear of the scholar’s ideas. In 2010,
however, Abu Zaid’s posthumous demonization took place with much more forceful and


graphic language, primarily on the screens of televisions. Tuhamy’s explicit utilization of Islam’s scripture to vilify the scholar on theological grounds also constitutes an even more aggressive use of theology than in the mid-nineties. Impassioned efforts like Abdullah’s diatribe against TV announcer Mahmoud Saad, or Sirsany’s claims that Abu Zaid denied the divine origin of scripture, indicate a pressing desire to deter Egyptian society from engaging Abu Zaid’s ideas through his books. This desperation to distance Egyptian society from Abu Zaid’s ideas was also clear in how his death was depicted to viewers as divine action enacted through a mysterious disease.

Despite some similarity in tone with their mid-nineties counterparts, Abu Zaid’s 2010 detractors come across as more alarmist and unfettered. This heightened desperation is a likely reaction to the substantial coverage that Abu Zaid’s death received in much of the print media, which dedicated entire pages to the scholar’s life and legacy.

All of Abu Zaid’s detractors, both in the mid-nineties as well as in 2010, were clearly interested in neutralizing his capacity to engage Egyptian society. After his death the main focus seems to have been to discourage Muslims from reading his books. The sheer ferocity with which they attack this deceased scholar who can no longer defend himself expresses their view of the scholar as someone unworthy of the dignity that comes with death. As was the case in the mid-nineties, Abu Zaid’s 2010 detractors have totally lost touch with his humanity, viewing him primarily as a conspirator against the God they represent. Despite their harsh and sometimes triumphant rhetoric, Abu Zaid’s detractors clearly observed Egypt’s more tolerant posture toward the scholar in 2010 when compared to the siege he was under during the mid-nineties. The conclusion to this thesis will attempt to assess this dynamic further, by consulting a live interview with Abu Zaid’s widow, professor of French literature, Ebtehal Younis.
CONCLUSION

This thesis conclusion is based on an interview with Professor Ebtehal Younis, Abu Zaid’s widow. Younis was at the heart of Abu Zaid’s tumultuous journey from the mid-nineties, when their marriage was annulled via court ruling, to his passing in 2010. This interview took place at the couples’ suburban home a few kilometers outside of Cairo in September of 2012, two years after Abu Zaid’s passing and a year after Egypt’s 2011 revolution. Younis’s account of Abu Zaid’s situation in the mid-nineties compared with the years prior to his death in 2010 will be integrated into the thesis conclusion, to elicit a firsthand testimony of Egyptian society’s reaction to this scholar.

A Cairo University professor of French literature, Younis currently runs a foundation she formed in 2011 under Abu Zaid’s name, dedicated to research in Islamic studies. Younis believes that Egypt’s reaction to Abu Zaid did improve from the mid-nineties to 2010. The picture in the mid-nineties, however, was not as bleak as many people assume, according to Younis. “People think that in the mid-nineties the whole of Egypt was against Abu Zaid, which is not true—the truth is that we were targeted by a loud minority,”1 Younis said. Even during the worst of that decade, Younis believes many average Egyptians found the logic of the court ruling awkward, even laughable at times. She recalls how a nurse asked by reporters about this case said that it might have been better for the court to leave them together so that Abu Zaid’s Muslim wife (Younis) could lead him back to God. Younis’s anecdote reveals her belief that Abu Zaid also had support outside the ranks of intellectuals, among average citizens who

viewed the separation ruling as nonsensical. The court ruling also alerted Egyptians to the fact that this kind of state intervention can happen to anyone.

“The Egyptian people discovered a disastrous loophole in Egypt’s law’s called hisba, which can separate two spouses,” Young said. She was referring to the twelfth-century Islamic concept of hisba, which allows a Muslim to seek the state’s intervention to counter the violation of Islamic precepts in society. According to Ebtehal, one of the positive ramifications of Abu Zaid’s case was that a team of lawyers contested hisba’s constitutionality in Egypt. As a result of these efforts, a hisba case can only be launched by the attorney general’s office. What is somewhat similar to hisba and continues to take place are legal cases motivated by the offense of religious sensibilities. Younis was recently involved in a court case launched against a Muslim cleric named Abu Islam who had publicly burned the Christian Bible. “This is offensive to me as a Muslim, because so much of Islam is based on the Christian tradition,” Younis said. For Younis, however, Abu Zaid’s situation in the mid-nineties was quite different from her current experiences with religious bigotry or radicalism.

“Abu Zaid’s detractors resorted to removing sentences from his work outside of their context and to using mosques to promote their message in a setting where many people are illiterate, a factor they used to their advantage,” Younis said. The fact that Abu Zaid was working within an academic framework where arcane terminology constituted the habitual parlance also played a role in this dispute, but in Younis’s opinion, it would be an exaggeration to say that the scholar’s language marginalized him. While acknowledging Abu Zaid’s mid-nineties experience took place within a much more restrictive landscape where little or no information outlets existed outside state control, Younis still believes that popular sentiments

were not squarely set against them. For Younis, the court ruling dissolving the couple’s marriage was instrumental in increasing tensions for her family during the mid-nineties, when Wahabi influence was at its peak, even reaching into Al Azhar University. Younis believes the picture changed for Abu Zaid once he started gaining more media access around 2003, a result of the personal initiative of colleagues like famed TV announcer Mahmoud Saad:

Media access made a huge difference, and before appearing on Egyptian television, Abu Zaid first appeared on a number of Arab media outlets like al-Jazeera and others. The difference came in the reactions of average people. People saw that he had no horns gaping out of his forehead or smoke coming out of his nostrils and that he wasn’t this devilish figure the Islamists had portrayed him as. People could see a regular, simple human being with baby-like features who expresses himself with a simplicity that allows him to enter peoples’ hearts.³

This sharp change that Younis notes was evident in the number of calls for and against Abu Zaid in his question-and-answer session on the al-Jazeera news channel in 2010. She recalls how friends from as far away as Morocco informed her that the scholar’s televised appearances were changing popular perceptions of him. This increased media presence thus had solved one Abu Zaid’s most pressing problems as an intellectual, namely to reach and engage his society. “He used to tell me, I can’t explain to every concerned citizen that I am not an apostate. The TV screen did that,” Younis said. Even that very fortunate development that facilitated Abu Zaid’s re-entry into Egyptian cultural life was for her truly random. According to Younis, TV announcer Mahmoud Saad asked Egypt’s minister of information at the time about Abu Zaid’s appearance on state television, and he approved. “If it was someone else at that moment the answer could have been no, there was no official state policy to reincorporate Abu Zaid on the cultural scene, it is a lot more random than people think,” Younis said. Abu Zaid was also very conscious of his independence as a scholar, according to Younis, so much so

that he constantly steered clear from political affiliations of any sort. Despite this randomness in
the decision-making process at the time, Younis finds that Abu Zaid’s well-received
appearances on Arab TV channels like al-Jazeera and others are what opened the doors of
Egyptian state television for him.

Regarding the vituperative and sometimes unkind reactions Abu Zaid prompted both in
the mid-nineties and at the time of his death, Younis is unfazed and dismissive.

Do you know Taha Hussein? Do you remember the people who accused him of
apostasy? I don’t think so, this same analogy can be applied the Shahin/Abu Zaid
dispute. It is clear that people are still interested in Abu Zaid well after he passed away,
because his ideas are relevant. Those people that jeered at his death are backward
individuals that you can’t really have a rational discussion with. They are against
history and progress, I would much rather have a chat with a working-class average
Egyptian, who is more likely to exercise common sense than they are.4

Younis also argues that Egypt’s more open 2010 reaction to Abu Zaid is evident in his
lingering impact on Egyptian society even after his death. The same academic phrases that Abu
Zaid pioneered in Egypt that were used to allege his apostasy are becoming more common in
Egypt, according to Younis. Abu Zaid’s impact for Younis can be seen in the fact that fewer
people are shocked by expressions like the “historicity of the text” and “renewal of the religious
discourse.” Most of Abu Zaid’s research and life history is available online at a website titled
_Rawaq Abu Zaid_, in addition to a number of groups on social media sites like Facebook with
fans in the hundreds. A documentary film on Abu Zaid was also shown in February 2013 at the
American University in Cairo. All this activity for Younis indicates Egyptian society’s
increased openness toward Abu Zaid, which was confirmed by the warm reaction she received
after forming the Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid Institute.

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“What surprised me most was the number of people who actually read his work from all walks of life. When I first started a Facebook page under the Abu Zaid Institute I got 700 members in a month. And those members are actually people who have read his works and are interested in discussing them,” Younis said.

This Cairo-based NGO project run by Younis is dedicated to supporting research in Qur’anic studies. The institute’s activities include a library, an active website, and an annual prize in Qur’anic research. Younis even finds the electoral wins of political Islamists that Abu Zaid opposed in Egypt as no indication that his ideas were defeated. “Abu Zaid used to advocate for the political participation of Islamist groups although he differed with their ideas. He believed that politics would have a sobering effect on their lofty rhetoric and confront them with the harsh realities of governance,” Younis said. The plunging popularity of Islamist groups like the MB in 2012 is indication that he was right about letting the Egyptian masses try out the rule of these self-proclaimed enforcers of God’s Word. The most common reaction Younis believes she got from the people she spoke to about Abu Zaid was that he taught them to think, without providing ready-made answers. For her, the scholar’s impact continues, and Egypt’s reaction to him has steadily improved from the time of his mid-nineties promotion fiasco and beyond his early death in 2010.


