



Political Islam Online

Interpreting the Quran – New Voices



Sayyed Wild-Abah

Writing Friday in *al-Sahrq Al-Awsat*, columnist *Sayyed Wild-Abāh* introduces us to *Abdelwahab Meddeb*. *Meddeb*, of Tunisian origin and currently a professor at the University of Paris-X Nanterre, is a controversial poet and researcher and produces a weekly television program, “Cultures of Islam.” His most controversial book, “The Malady of Islam”¹ was published in French after 9/11. In it, *Meddeb* identified Islam as a religion of “inertia, intolerance, violence and isolation.” This month he published a sequel: “Escaping the Curse: Islam between Civilization and Barbarism”² in which he purports to provide the cure for the malady.

Meddeb’s theory on the nature of the Quran, which is discussed in his book, is that the Quran is not “eternal,” *i.e.*, it did not always exist with God before God revealed it to man. Rather, in his view, the Quran was created by God in the seventh century using a human, Mohammed, as his instrument. *Meddeb*’s book may appear on the surface to simply address a unique theological argument. The debate over the nature of the Quran, however, has significant interpretational consequences of the text, for efforts to establish a more harmonious relationship between Islam and the rest of the World and to combat extremism.

Meddeb argues that believing the Quran to be eternal, as most Muslims do, accords the Quran a false god-like attribute and has made it impossible to subject the text to contextual analytical criticism. Under *Meddeb*’s approach the Quran loses its rigidity and instead becomes inspirational and subject to re-interpretation which, as in the case of Christianity and Judaism, is essential for Muslim theology to adapt to changing times.

Wild-Abāh describes *Meddeb*’s approach as “abolishing the idolatry of the Quran,” by de-sanctifying the idol image espoused by those who believe in the eternality of the book, an attribute reserved to God alone. *Wild-Abāh* acknowledges that such a position is not new, having previously been embraced by other thinkers such as *Mohammad Arkoun*³. *Wild-Abāh* notes however that those espousing such reform have been disappointed after engaging in a losing battle against an Islamic establishment dominated by fundamentalism and traditional movements who have not kept pace with the advancement of human knowledge.

Wild-Abāh contends that many thinkers⁴ (mostly writing in French) who follow the teachings of *Arkoun* are now advocating reform towards what is being called an “Enlightened Islam”⁵ in an effort to counteract “an extremist fundamentalist Islam.” *Wild-Abāh* categorically dismisses the reformists’ attempts to de-sanctify the Quran. He asserts that they are based on an erroneous, superficial interpretation which is bound to fail. Nevertheless, *Wild-Abāh* looks at the issue of reform, which he still considers necessary, from a different perspective.

Wild-Abāh points to liberal groups formed during the second and third *Hijri* century known as the “*Mu’tazilah*⁶ and “*al-ash’ariyyah*”.⁷ For those groups, reason played an important part in formulating doctrine. Likewise, *Wild-*

¹ « La Maladie de l’Islam » Edition : Le Seuil – 2002

² Only published in French as : « Sortir de la Malédiction: L’Islam entre civilisation et barbarie » Edition : Le Seuil – 2008

³ *Mohammad Arkoun* was born in Algeria in 1928. He is well known for his modernistic and humanistic approach to Islam.

⁴ ‘*Abdelmejid Al-Sharfi*, *Malik Chebl* and *Rashid Benzin*

⁵ Known in French as “Islam des Lumières” after *Malek Chebl*’s 2006 book « Manifeste pour un Islam des Lumières »

⁶ The “*Mu’tazilah*” is an ideology which emerged in the second *Hijri* century. To counteract the prevailing rigid thoughts of the time, followers of the creed believed that proper reason and instinct are capable of intuitively distinguishing between right and wrong and advocated the concept of “justice” as one of their main beliefs.

⁷ Followers of the “*Mu’tazillah*” built their ideology on the concepts of reason, *Sufism* and philosophy which took precedent over theologically established principles.

Abāh suggests that, rather than attacking the sanctity of the Quran, thinkers should question past human interpretations, which were never considered sacred. For such an approach to succeed, he explains, it must come from within the culture and employ modern theories and understanding to renew the Islamic “narrative identity” as expressed by Paul Ricoeur.⁸ *Wild-Abāh* states that such attempts at reinterpretation were undertaken by respected Muslim philosophers.⁹ The essential concept of these philosophers is that early interpretations of the Quran were influenced by historical factional biases and prejudices, which were codified in the “*Hadith*”. They advocate for hermeneutical¹⁰ reading of the Quran free from such influences. He ends by reiterating that any attempt to question the nature of the Quran undermines the essence of faith and is therefore bound to fail.

Wild-Abāh brings to the public’s attention an important philosophical debate and challenges Quranic interpretations that have remained static for millennia. [PI Online](#) views such efforts at constructive reform as valuable, regardless of which theory is used to accomplish a more harmonious integration of Muslim thoughts into the modern world. *Wild-Abāh*’s current article, however, attempts to address too many topics at once and therefore cannot address any in detail. The result is somewhat confusing. With such a wide Islamic audience, a future article or a series of more simplified articles by the author in which he addresses the different philosophical approaches to reforming Quranic interpretation would help the population at large understand the process and its value.

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⁸ The concept of “narrative identity” by Paul Ricoeur, one of the main developers of modern hermeneutics, explains the relationship between history and identity, by offering narrative models of life as one of the foundations of a society. Ricoeur however insists that narrative identity is not the main concept in ethical behavior.

⁹ Pakistani Fadl Al-Rahman, the Iranian ‘Abdolkarim Sourush and Moroccan Taha ‘Abdelrahman.

¹⁰ Hermeneutics is the theory and methodology of the interpretation of texts, particularly scriptural ones.