



# REPORT OF THE International Symposium on: Social, Ethical, Political and Policy Implications of Interpretations of Islam's Foundational Text: The Qur'an

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# **SOCIAL, ETHICAL, POLITICAL, AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF INTERPRETATIONS OF ISLAM'S FOUNDATIONAL TEXT: THE QUR'AN**

**Report of the Symposium organized by the  
*Center for Dialogues: Islamic World-U.S.-the West***

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SOCIAL, ETHICAL, POLITICAL, AND  
POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF INTERPRETATIONS OF  
ISLAM'S FOUNDATIONAL TEXT: THE QUR'AN

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## **DIRECTOR'S PREFACE**

In November 2010 when the NYU Center for Dialogues convened its symposium on the “Social, Ethical, Political and Policy Implications of Interpretations of Islam’s Foundational Text: the Qur’an,” I could not have predicted the powerful transformations that have taken place across the Muslim world these past few months. As these events continue to unfold, analysts and journalists have repeatedly raised the question: what role will Islam play? How will Islam influence the governments and societies that blossom from these revolutions? These questions relate in a direct way to the central question and challenge of the symposium: what are the practical implications of contemporary interpretations of Islam’s foundational text, the Qur’an?

Believed by Muslims to have been revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century, the Qur’an constitutes the root of Islam – the foundation upon which the Islamic religion (as it is practiced in various forms today) was built. Far from being a purely religious text, the Qur’an lays the groundwork for ethical, political, and social foundations of society. Unlike Catholicism, there is no one person in Islamic tradition with the ultimate authority to mandate how the Qur’an and its ethical, political, and social injunctions should be interpreted. Religious schools of thought that vary widely in their theoretical and theological approaches to the Qur’an have been established throughout the Muslim world, not only across the Arab Middle East and North Africa, but also in Central Asia, South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and China.

Despite the relative freedom of interpretation permitted by the lack of a central authority, various groups and individuals throughout history have tried to claim that authority and have prohibited different interpretations, sometimes violently. Today Muslims and non-Muslims alike are faced with the challenge of Muslim fundamentalists who claim to speak on behalf of all Muslims and who view the world through the narrow lens of an interminable clash of civilizations between the West and an Islamic East.

The symposium on the “Social, Ethical, Political and Policy Implications of Interpretations of Islam’s Foundational Text: the Qur’an” was conceived as a forum for progressive Muslim intellectuals to discuss and disseminate their methods of interpreting the Qur’an and reflect upon the positive, practical implications of their work. By initiating an intra-Muslim debate, the NYU Center for Dialogues sought to illuminate the work of a number of innovative Muslim scholars who have found new and constructive meanings in the Qur’an that widen the traditional boundaries of Islamic exegesis.

The symposium’s agenda was divided into two sessions. In the first session, participants discussed the critical differentiation between normative Islam and historical Islam, as well as the methods they employ in interpreting the Qur’an as a historical text. This discussion naturally segued into the second session, in which participants explained how they apply contemporary interpretations of the Qur’an to challenges facing the Muslim world today – challenges such as curricular reform and Islamic fundamentalism.

There are several individuals who deserve acknowledgement and thanks; this symposium would not have been possible without them.

First and foremost I would like to thank the symposium's participants: Robert Lee, Professor of Political Science at Colorado College (United States); Andreas Christmann, Senior Lecturer of Contemporary Islam at the University of Manchester (United Kingdom); Abdelmajid Charfi, Professor Emeritus of Arab Civilization and Islamic Thought at the University of Tunis (Tunisia); Adel Rifaat and Bahgat El Nadi, political scientists published together under the pseudonym "Mahmoud Hussein" (Egypt); Amin Abdullah, Professor of Islamic Studies at Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga (Indonesia); Dale Eickelman, Professor of Anthropology and Human Relations at Dartmouth College (United States); and Stefan Wild, Professor Emeritus of Semitic Languages and Islamic Studies at the University of Bonn (Germany). The participants' outstanding presentations at the symposium are evidence of their rigorous research, and their firm commitment to both challenge previously held assumptions and broaden the field of Qur'anic interpretation for a new generation.

As the idea of this symposium was forming in my head, I was fortunate to have the encouragement of Ambassador Heidrun Tempel, then Special Representative for Dialogue among Civilizations at the German Federal Foreign Office and now Deputy Head of the German Mission in Jakarta. It was through Ambassador Tempel that we were able to secure the generous grant from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany, which made this symposium possible. I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to Ambassador Tempel and to her colleagues: Stephen Buchwald, Julia Fugel, Elmar Jakobs, and the rest of the staff at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany and the Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations.

Finally, I would like to thank the indefatigable NYU Center for Dialogues staff, most especially Helena Zeweri, until recently an Assistant Research Scholar; Reema Hijazi, Assistant Research Scholar; Joanna Taylor, Junior Research Scholar; and Liz Behrend, Consultant. They all dedicated a significant amount of time during and after office hours to ensure the success of this symposium and I am very grateful for their outstanding work and proud to have them as colleagues. Finally, as has been the case with many other reports produced by the Center since its inception eight years ago, my thanks go to Shara Kay. We are fortunate to have her as our editorial advisor and we appreciate her intellectual and stylistic rigor.

The publication of this report comes at a significant moment in the history of the Muslim world. Over the past two months revolutions have overthrown old, despotic regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and there have been widespread protests across the region demanding change and reform. As is already being seen with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Islam will be an integral part of the discussion as these countries form new governments. We hope that this report, in its various translations, will serve as a valuable resource for the region's emerging leaders and policymakers, as well as its citizens, and will aid the region in deciding how to best consider Islam in relation to government and civic life.

March 3, 2011

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mustapha Tlili', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mustapha Tlili  
Founder and Director  
Center for Dialogues  
Islamic World - U.S. - The West  
New York University

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The international symposium on the “Social, Ethical, Political, and Policy Implications of Islam’s Foundational Text: the Qur’an” was convened on November 10, 2010 in New York, New York, by the New York University Center for Dialogues: Islamic World - U.S. - the West. This symposium brought together an international group of scholars to participate in an intra-Muslim debate on the methods and practical implications of contemporary interpretations of the Qur’an.

Founder and Director of the NYU Center for Dialogues, Mustapha Tlili, opened the symposium by reminding the audience of the troubling Islamophobic events, in particular the demonstrations against the “ground-zero mosque,” that shook New York and the United States in the final months of 2010. Now more than ever, Tlili stated, there is a need for intra-Muslim debate and dialogue with the two-fold aim of challenging the misconceptions of Islam in the West and encouraging Muslim-majority countries to face the problematic realities of their own societies.

Before the start of the first session, Professor Emeritus of Arab Civilization and Islamic Thought, Abdelmajid Charfi, briefly reflected on the important legacy of Algerian scholar Mohamed Arkoun who had intended to participate in the symposium but sadly passed away in the fall of 2010.

The participants in the first session explored the critical distinction between normative Islam and historical Islam, and discussed the methods they employ to interpret the Qur’an as a historical text.

Professor of Political Science at Colorado College, Robert Lee, presented the ideas of the late Mohamed Arkoun. According to Lee, Arkoun was primarily opposed to what he titled “Islamic Reason,” or the monopolistic hold of Muslim governments, the *ulama*, and Islamist movements on Qur’anic interpretation. In contrast to these groups, Arkoun believed that the Qur’an is an open and dynamic text and he argued that it should be submitted to analysis from a variety of different literary, anthropological, sociological, and historical perspectives. For Arkoun, the entirety of the Qur’an can not be understood as containing a singular meaning. Instead, the “truth” of the Qur’an can be found in the “plurality of meanings” yielded by critical interpretations of the text.

Following Professor Lee’s presentation, Senior Lecturer on Contemporary Islam at the University of Manchester, Andreas Christmann, presented the ideas of Muhammad Shahrur who was unable to attend the symposium for health reasons. Often compared to Protestant reformer Martin Luther, Shahrur argues in his work that political leaders and the *ulama* have monopolized interpretations of the Qur’an and have used religious institutions and practice in a way that poses the “least resistance to political tyranny.” However, according to Christmann, Shahrur firmly believes that Islam can and should be reformed and that it can provide a necessary “third way” between radical fundamentalism and secular nationalism. He envisions an Islam that is entirely depoliticized, but forms the moral force of politics and society as a sort of “civil religion.”

The last speaker in the first session, Professor Emeritus Abdelmajid Charfi, approaches the Qur'an from a historical perspective. He argued that the historical context in which the Qur'an is read and interpreted has immense implications for the ways the text is understood. For Charfi, the differing interpretations that have emerged throughout history necessarily suggest that the Qur'an does not and could never have one singular meaning or "truth." Charfi summarized his subsequent arguments in three main points:

- Muslims interpreting the Qur'an today need to acknowledge the limits imposed by traditional exegesis.
- The relationship between exegesis and jurisprudence should be reversed. In other words, traditional exegesis should not inform contemporary interpretations of the Qur'an, but instead contemporary interpretations of the Qur'an should pave the way for new forms of exegesis.
- Finally, Charfi argued against a strictly linear interpretation of the Qur'an as the revelations were assembled according to length and not according to a continuous narrative.

The panelists in the second session focused on how they combine theory with practice to address challenges the Muslim world is facing today.

Political scientist and author, Adel Rifaat presented on behalf of "Mahmoud Hussein," the pseudonym under which he publishes with co-author Bahgat El Nadi. In their most recent book *Penser le Coran* (Grasset et Fasquelle, 2009), the authors seek to expose the historicity of the Qur'an using the original sacred texts, especially the testimonies of the Companions of the Prophet, in order to prevent radical fundamentalists and other literalists from claiming that historicity is imposed on the Qur'an by foreign intellectual traditions. Rifaat cited three main examples of this historicity:

- The Qur'an distinguishes God from his Word. God is eternal but his Word is time-bound and dependant upon the context in which it is revealed.
- God is constantly in dialogue with the Prophet and the Companions and He allows for explanation based on the context of the situation.
- Finally, God does not weigh each of his revelations equally. What God says in one verse is occasionally abrogated in a later verse.

Amin Abdullah was unfortunately unable to attend the symposium because his request for an entry visa to the United States was rejected. His ideas were presented by a member of the NYU Center for Dialogues staff. As a professor of Islamic studies at the Universitas Negari Islam Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta, Abdullah has spearheaded many curricular reform efforts including moving oversight of his Islamic University from the Ministry of Religion to the Ministry of Education when he was the university's president. Abdullah explained that many Islamic universities in Indonesia are now required to integrate multidisciplinary approaches into their courses, including using social science methodologies to interpret the Qur'an and other sacred texts. He acknowledged, however, that many departments still remain rooted in traditional methodologies and practices.

Abdullah argued that the main project for the field of Islamic Studies today is eliminating misunderstanding and mutual suspicion between Islamic Studies, Islamic Thought and Islamic Religious Knowledge.

In his closing remarks, Mustapha Tili underscored the need for a stronger dialogue between the West and the Muslim world. He encouraged universities and scholars in the West to realize the implications of this dialogue and to engage their peers in the Muslim world in order to continue the long, and too often obscured, history of intellectual cross-fertilization between the Muslim world and the West.

## OPENING SESSION

### Opening Remarks: Mustapha Tlili, Founder and Director, NYU Center for Dialogues (U.S.)

Mustapha Tlili, the symposium's organizer, welcomed participants and remarked on the particular importance and timeliness of the event. This past summer, the Qur'an was to be burned by an obscure pastor of a non-denominational church in Florida until President Obama and other U.S. administration officials personally intervened. Even more recently, New York City witnessed huge demonstrations for and against the so-called "Ground Zero" mosque. Misunderstandings about the Muslim faith abound in the West. Meanwhile, Muslims themselves, in the U.S. in particular, do not seem to agree on what being Muslim is about. Those who speak in their name are often driven by a quest for power, and project conflicting images of Islam and different understandings of its holy texts.

The absence of a central authority in Islamic theology and tradition heightens the anxieties of Muslims and non-Muslims alike regarding Islam, Tlili explained. History tells us, however, that the search for a universally recognized truth has been part of Islamic tradition since the advent of the faith more than 14 centuries ago. To Tlili's mind, if you strip Islamic history of its competition for political power, what remains can all be articulated in terms of interpretation of the faith, its tenets, and its underpinning fundamental texts – above all, the Qur'an.

What makes the current moment unique, Tlili continued, is the weight and challenge of globalization, which requires the Muslim world to confront its realities – to look in the mirror of modernity and answer the question of how to be Muslim in the 21st century. In the "flat world" of today – in contrast to the times of Al-Mu'tazila<sup>1</sup> and Al-Muwahiddin<sup>2</sup> – information is transmitted globally in an instant. The Muslim world can no longer hide certain truths, he said, about its lack of economic development, education, women's rights, freedom of expression, rule of law, and regard for our shared humanity.

Tlili claimed that while Islam may have a bad name in today's world, it's not all the fault of its enemies. Islam, for him, is what Muslims make it to be and, thus, the importance of this symposium: how we interpret the Qur'an is not simply a matter of piety. It has real implications on how Muslim-majority societies, whether those of yesterday or today, build states, economies, ethical systems, legal systems, and relationships with the non-Muslim world. The science of Qur'anic interpretation has evolved through the centuries. But, if we admit that it, as any science, relies on intellectual tools and categories, we should not – Tlili said – hesitate to apply the modern human and social sciences to its interpretation. In fact, this is, according to Tlili, the most important challenge that the Muslim world faces today.

Tlili then paused to mourn the deaths of two major thinkers who had planned to attend the symposium: the first, his former teacher, dear friend, and colleague, Mohamed Arkoun (1928-2010), who passed away two months ago, and the second, the other giant of modern Islamic thought, Professor Nasr Abu Zayd (1943-2010), who passed away last spring. Tlili hoped the symposium would pay homage to their lives, their intellectual struggles, and to the extraordinary importance of the body of rigorous research they left behind. He also

acknowledged two other important absences: the Syrian thinker, Muhammad Shahrur, author of the seminal book, *The Book and the Qur'an: A Contemporary Reading*, who was prevented from coming for health reasons, and Mohammad Amin Abdullah, the eminent Indonesian scholar of Islam and of the Qur'an, who was denied an entry visa to the U.S.

Tlili concluded by stating that as intellectuals, the participants' foremost duty was to rigorous and clear thought. Piety serves its purpose, he said, but critical intellect has a different function – one in which the sacred becomes an object for rigorous and clear examination. With everything that we know in the world today, must Islam be simply the Islam of piety? Or can it be the Islam to which Abdelmajid Charfi, Mahmoud Hussein, Amin Abdullah, Muhammad Shahrur, and the late Mohammed Arkoun and Nasr Abu Zayd apply the tools of critical thought? He submitted that this is the preeminent question facing the symposium and the Muslim world today.

### **In Memory of Mohamed Arkoun: Abdelmajid Charfi, Professor Emeritus of Arab Civilization and Islamic Thought, University of Tunis (Tunisia)**

Dr. Charfi, Professor Emeritus of Arab Civilization and Islamic Thought at the University of Tunis (Tunisia), spoke in memory of Mohamed Arkoun as a respected colleague and valued friend. Charfi described his difficulty in preparing this speech, both because of the close nature of his friendship with Arkoun, and because of the erudition of Arkoun's work.

Charfi knew Arkoun for four decades and they often met in Paris and at academic conferences in Europe and the Middle East. When Arkoun would visit Tunis, Charfi welcomed him as a houseguest. Drawn together by intellectual affinity and a shared love of long walks, they enjoyed frank discussions on a range of personal and professional matters. Charfi learned to recognize the fragility and anxiety Arkoun hid beneath his intellectual brilliance.

Charfi described how Arkoun's background and personal experiences informed his friend's academic perspective. Arkoun acquired French nationality after Algerian independence, when he was dismissed from his university post in Algeria on the grounds that his teaching was subversive. The benefit of this experience, Charfi postulated, was that it gave Arkoun the opportunity to combine intimate knowledge of both Islamic and Western cultures. Despite living in France, Arkoun always identified as Kabil, Algerian, and Maghrebi. Moreover, his encounters with authorities from the Front de Libération Nationale in Algeria taught him to remain aloof from political rhetoric. Instead, he adopted an overview of the problems in Maghrebi societies and sought to analyze their underlying causes. Because Arkoun avoided taking a public position on such political matters, he was often reproached for lacking compassion. Yet, as Charfi witnessed, Arkoun was consumed by the topics he studied and believed that his work was capable of effecting change.

Charfi commented on the difficulty of discussing Arkoun's work due to its richness and depth. Leaving more in-depth treatment to presenters later in the symposium, Charfi said he would limit his comments to a few aspects of Arkoun's work. He first noted Arkoun's brilliant speaking ability in three non-native languages: French, English, and Arabic, which

he learned relatively late in life (at the age of 17). He then outlined Arkoun's primary contributions to the history of Islamic thinking.

Above all, Charfi said, Arkoun was adept at deconstructing established dogmas and critiquing seemingly self-evident beliefs. Even if one disagrees with his concepts, or finds them destabilizing, one cannot remain untouched after reading an Arkoun text, Charfi observed, for Arkoun's approach encourages readers to think critically for themselves.

Arkoun employed ideas from the modern social sciences and also developed his own concepts, many of which – Charfi said – have become indispensable for understanding religion in general and the Qur'an and Islam in particular. Some of these original concepts have been popularized, such as *demythication*, *demystication* and *demythologization*, as well as *unthought* and *unthinkable*.<sup>3</sup> Other concepts have met with objection. For example, Arkoun's admonitions to transgress and displace certain theological constructs previously regarded as sacred have been widely resisted. Notably, Arkoun believed that religious texts must be re-interpreted in a new light to overcome the early official closing of the *mushaf* – the standardized collection of Qur'anic verses in a single volume.

Charfi concluded by summarizing the implications of Arkoun's approach beyond its importance to Islamic studies alone. Arkoun's assessment of the need to criticize and question everything is relevant, Charfi said, in a modern world characterized by dehumanization and the creation of docile consumers. Regardless of whether we agree with Arkoun's own ideas, he continued, believers and nonbelievers alike must take responsibility for developing their own intellectual and spiritual potential. Charfi suggested that this is where Arkoun has often been misunderstood. Olivier Carré, for example, compared Arkoun to Sayyid Qutb in his "fundamentalist" fixation on original texts and in his claims about the performative nature of prophetic religious discourse.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, both Qutb and Arkoun see the Qur'an as unique in being highly performative and all-encompassing. However, Carré attacked Arkoun for rejecting positive rationalism and questioning the original text as a product and source of religion.

## **SESSION I – NORMATIVE ISLAM VERSUS HISTORICAL ISLAM: A Critical Distinction of Our Times and the Modern Epistemological Tools that Make It Possible**

Tlili introduced the session, crediting modern epistemological tools with making possible the critical distinction between normative and historical Islam, a distinction found in the work of both Arkoun and Charfi. Tlili introduced Robert Lee, Professor of Political Science at Colorado College, as eminently qualified to present Arkoun's work. Lee is immersed in the intellectual world of Islamic civilization, Middle Eastern societies and Islamic intellectual movements. From this perspective, and as a translator of Arkoun's work, he has much to say about Arkoun.

### **The Ideas of Mohammed Arkoun: Robert Lee, Professor of Political Science, Colorado College (U.S.)**

Lee began by claiming that he was ill-suited to speak on Arkoun's behalf. As a student of the politics of the Middle East, he said, he lacked the insight to Arkoun's work that philosophers, anthropologists, semioticians and historians of Islam have. However, he has read much of Arkoun's writing, heard him lecture, translated one of his books, written about the political implications of his work, and enjoyed his friendship.

Lee defended Arkoun against claims that he was an uncommitted scholar; despite Arkoun's postmodernist terminology, his passion and the volume of his output belied a deeply felt commitment.

Lee explained Arkoun's opposition to what he called "Islamic Reason," the application of methodologies, based on Greek logic, which contributed to rigid orthodoxies in Islam. Arkoun decried the monopolization of religious interpretation by modern governments, the *ulama* – Muslim leaders classically trained in Qur'anic interpretation – and Islamist movements, all in the service of their respective political projects. Though he sympathized with reformers, he also criticized them for failing to address the root of the problem: the repression of innovative thought in the Muslim world. Because of these positions, some perceived Arkoun to be against Islam itself, and few Muslim-majority countries welcomed him to speak or sell his books.

It is more difficult to understand what Arkoun was for than what he was against, Lee said. Lee believed him to be an idealist, motivated by faith in the truth of his ideas and in their ability to resurrect a unified Muslim consciousness, or perhaps even a unified human consciousness.

Arkoun expressed this idea through the term *remembrer*, which Lee translated as "putting back together." Arkoun hoped his ideas could help make the "Muslim consciousness" whole again, and inclusive of all believers. Arkoun extended his inclusiveness to the "Peoples of the Book"—meaning Muslims, Jews, and Christians—who he saw as fundamentally united in belief.

Asking how Arkoun's treatment of the Qur'an fit into his objective of "putting back together" Islam, Lee pointed to the critical distinction Arkoun made between the prophetic

moment of Qur'anic revelation, and the ensuing compilation of the *mushaf*, or Closed Official Corpus (in Arkoun's terminology). Because of the gap between revelation and text, Arkoun approached the Qur'anic text as a literary document to be analyzed with modern interpretive tools, in order to *remember* the truth of the prophetic moment that preceded it.

Lee used two examples of Arkoun's exegesis to illustrate his application of theory in practice: the Fatiha—the statement of faith that begins the Qur'an—and Sura 18 (The Cave).

Summarizing Arkoun's reading of the Fatiha, Lee emphasized his multilayered analysis. Arkoun applied linguistic, historical, and anthropological analyses to understand the language of the text, its changing interpretations over time, and the society in which it was revealed. Arkoun concluded that the text holds a plurality of equally valid meanings and that the "truth" is found in infinite plurality itself.

Lee's second example, The Cave, yielded a different set of observations from Arkoun. Observing that the long *sura* does not cohere in theme or narrative, Arkoun problematized traditional readings, such as al-Tabari's, which sought a unified interpretation. Arkoun blamed such forced readings on "Islamic Reason," which sacrificed rich symbolism in favor of logic and rationale.

Based on his own readings of the text, Arkoun concluded that Qur'anic interpretation and its edifice of "Islamic Reason" have historically been related to worldly power struggles. By contextualizing those interpretations in history, without denying their validity, he sought to liberate the Qur'an.

Lee's concluding remarks drew attention to the intellectual risks Arkoun took by attacking the inherited tradition of interpretation, as well as contemporary political regimes and movements that appropriate religion for ideological aims. Opposed to these abuses of Islam, Arkoun urged Muslims to challenge received knowledge and reopen the realm of ideas that Islamic tradition has rendered "unthought" and "unthinkable," such as the distinction between the compiled Qur'an and the original revelation. Arkoun believed that, through reassembling (*remember*) Muslim tradition by accepting all its past and potential iterations, the Peoples of the Book and humanity as a whole could be brought together.

### **The Ideas of Muhammad Shahrur (Syria): Andreas Christmann, Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Islam, University of Manchester, U.K. (Germany)**

Thanking Lee for an illuminating presentation, Tlili introduced Muhammad Shahrur as a thinker in the same spirit as Arkoun. Shahrur is the author of *The Book and the Qur'an: A Contemporary Reading*, one of the most widely disseminated—and controversial—contemporary books on interpreting the Qur'an. Though the Syrian thinker's work represents a different school, Shahrur, like Arkoun, applies the tools of critical thought to the Qur'an and the tradition of interpretation. Tlili explained that Shahrur was unable to participate in the symposium because of health reasons, and invited Andreas Christmann, Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Islam at the University of Manchester, to present

Shahrur's ideas in his place. A scholar of Islamic civilization and thought, Christmann published an English translation of Shahrur's writings in 2009.<sup>5</sup>

Christmann opened his presentation with a brief overview of Muhammad Shahrur's biography and professional background. Shahrur was not trained in traditional Islamic studies or in the modern study of Islam, but is a retired professor of soil engineering. His "layman's" Qur'anic interpretations, which Christmann characterized as modern, scientific, liberal, and progressive, are therefore from a quite different perspective than the usual scholar's.

Christmann contextualized Shahrur's work in contemporary Islamic discourse by explaining that it responds to both radical Islamists, who politicize Islam for right-wing ideological aims, and to Leftists and secular-nationalists, who seek to eliminate religion from public life. Shahrur's interpretations of the Qur'an offer a third alternative: an Islam that is progressive and liberal and which he believes should be the source of universal moral values and the foundation for political leadership.

Christmann proceeded to summarize Shahrur's work by distilling it into ten theses, drawing a comparison to the *Ninety-Five Theses* of Martin Luther and suggesting that Shahrur's work has the potential to similarly reform institutionalized Islam. Christmann noted that many of Shahrur's readings of the Qur'an entail redefining Islamic terms as universal ethical principals.

Christmann articulated a first thesis that he determined to be the most prioritized of Shahrur's ideas: the necessity of separating state and 'religion,' while reinvesting public life with 'Religion.' Christmann used lowercase 'religion' to denote Shahrur's concept of historical and institutional Islam, as distinguished from 'Religion,' capitalized, which refers to Shahrur's ideal of a universal civic religion. The separation of state and 'religion,' Christmann clarified, means that state authorities must not manipulate religion for their political agendas, nor should institutional religion co-opt state power in pursuit of theocracy. Shahrur is concerned that combining state and religion (*din wa-dawla*) obstructs religious freedom by privileging one religious faction over others. Yet he is equally concerned by the prospect of state without religion (*dawla bidun din*), which he believes leads to authoritarianism. Instead, the moral values of 'Religion,' writ large, should reconnect state and society.

The second thesis Christmann enumerated was Shahrur's observation that Historical Islam ('religion') has been politicized and de-moralized by the *ulama*. To achieve Universal Islam ('Religion'), Shahrur contends, it must be de-politicized and re-moralized. According to Shahrur, the religious classes have interpreted Islamic beliefs and practices in ways that impose the least resistance to political tyranny and despotism. Christmann described Shahrur's third thesis as his proposed solution: civil society and civil 'Religion.' Objecting to Islamist calls for achieving the Islamization of Muslim society by collapsing public and private spheres, Shahrur emphasizes the importance of a sphere of civil society that can operate alongside private religion and public politics. This sphere will provide an ethical

model that overshadows both state politics and private religion while allowing dissent and freedom of thought, speech and religion.

According to the fourth thesis Christmann described, in order to achieve this solution, religious reform must precede political reform. Because Shahrur believes that both politics without religion *and* politics with the current form of Islam lead to authoritarianism, religious reform must come first. Shahrur envisions religious reform as the reshaping of Islam into a 'civil religion,' in which freedom of thought, human rights, democracy and social justice are valued as religious imperatives.

In his fifth thesis, Christmann clarifies that Shahrur does not view this religious reform as a new interpretation of Islam, but as the recuperation of essential Qur'anic principles that have been obscured by traditional Islam. Shahrur draws a distinction between the Islam passed down by religious scholars and the Islam found in the text of the Qur'an. This Universal Islam of the Qur'an, according to thesis six, does not include the *sunna* of the Prophet—stories of the Prophet's life, apart from the prophecies that became the Qur'an. Shahrur sees Islam as a natural religion for all humankind, while the *sunna* are bound to a particular time and place that cannot be accepted as normative. Abandoning the *sunna* and relying only on the Qur'an, Shahrur concludes that Islam has only three, not five, pillars: belief in God, belief in the Last Day, and doing good work.

Christmann's seventh thesis discussed the distinction Shahrur makes between general 'Religion,' which is global, human and universal, and particular 'religion,' which refers to specific culture- and context-bound institutional religions. According to Shahrur, the latter is against human instinct and therefore unsuitable for being the religion of public life. It is the former, therefore, that should be politicized and publicized.

Moving from the general to the specific, Christmann illustrated how Shahrur's views on religion are reflected in his views on religious law, religious duties and jihad. His eighth thesis addressed Shahrur's treatment of *shari'a* – Islamic law – which Christmann described as being at the heart of Shahrur's reform project. Observing that *shari'a* law and *hudud* penalties are not fixed, Shahrur concludes that *shari'a* law only refers to the upper and lower limits of human legislation. Therefore, *shari'a* can and should – to Shahrur's mind – be implemented everywhere, but should be limited to the requirement that human societies legislate laws to uphold justice, equality and morality. Specific laws, such as criminal, family and commercial law, should remain the provenance of parliamentary legislation.

In his ninth thesis, Christmann described Shahrur's reinterpretation of the slogan, *Al-'Amr bi al-Ma'ruf wa al-Nahy 'an al-Munkar*, which is frequently used by Islamists to justify religious policing and their literal implementation of *shari'a* rules.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, Shahrur does not see the phrase as pertaining to individual conduct in matters regarding dress, but as a general imperative to care about the democratic norms and liberal values of civil religion in society; in short, as an obligation of good civil citizenship. He therefore places NGOs and human rights groups under this rubric.

Lastly, Christmann's tenth thesis articulated Shahrur's interpretation of jihad as a non-violent fight against political tyranny, injustice and the oppression of human rights, as well as the duty to do charitable work for one's family, neighborhood and society at large. Christmann summed it up as 'human rights jihad:' the religious obligation of good civil citizenship. He further explained that Shahrur arrived at this view by reinterpreting *ijtihad* not as martyrdom but as the process of giving witness. *Jihad fi sabil Allah* thus becomes a struggle "for the sake of God's covenant with humankind," rather than a military fight against *kufur*—disbelief.

### **Abdelmajid Charfi, Professor Emeritus of Arab Civilization and Islamic Thought at the University of Tunis (Tunisia)**

Tlili observed that Christmann's presentation provided a natural transition to Abdelmajid Charfi's intervention in the discourse on Qur'anic interpretation. Professor Emeritus of Arab Civilization and Islamic Thought, University of Tunis, Charfi distinguishes between Islam as history and as message. That distinction is made possible, Tlili continued, by the application of critical tools borrowed from the humanities and social sciences. Both Arkoun and Shahrur arrive at the same distinction, yet Charfi has dedicated most of his scholarly work to this particular issue. Moreover, Tlili stressed, Charfi is the head of a school of thought and has mentored an entire generation of young scholars, equipping them with the tools of modern critique. Tlili concluded by highlighting Charfi's important book, *Islam Between Message and History (L'Islam entre le message et l'histoire)*, translated into French in 2004 and English in 2009, and encouraging all to read it.<sup>7</sup>

Charfi began by discussing his initial approach to the topic of the symposium. He first tried to list all the social, ethical and political implications of interpreting the Qur'an as a foundational text. Yet he immediately realized this approach was futile because Muslims living under different conditions necessarily approach the text from diverse perspectives. As an example, Charfi compared a wealthy young Malaysian man with a poor Nigerian, or a Saudi woman living in tribal conditions with an Iranian who has internalized the dominant ideology of the theocratic state. Each would clearly arrive at a different, even completely contradictory, interpretation. The only trait shared among them is the influence of a particular social, political, and cultural context. Based on this observation, Charfi revised his approach, deciding instead to focus on the historical and epistemological aspects of interpreting the Qur'an. With this framework, he sought to avoid time-bound polemics and encompass the entire range of interpretation, from extremism to mysticism.

Charfi pointed out that, while it may seem natural to acknowledge the external factors affecting interpretation, in fact this notion is informed by modern linguistics and semiotics. Moreover, he said, it contradicts traditional assertions about Qur'anic interpretation that are upheld by the overwhelming majority of Muslims today. He described his presentation as an attempt to reveal truths often overlooked and clarify the terms of debate about Qur'anic interpretation and its legitimacy.

Before delving into these "truths," Charfi noted that it is first necessary to understand the role of the Qur'an in Islam and the history of Qur'anic exegesis. To illustrate the importance of the Qur'an, he contrasted it with the Bible in Catholicism. In Catholicism, church

teachings inform the understanding of the gospels, whereas, in Islam, the Qur'anic text is sacred and preeminent. Charfi asked rhetorically: do modern approaches, such as those that use recently developed critical tools, therefore challenge the sacredness of the text or its interpretations? In answer, he argued that even traditional interpretation was based on contemporary culture and historical conditions, contending that modern readers are no different.

Taking a historical view, Charfi said, it is possible to see the two-stage process whereby Islam evolved from a spontaneous, oral, prophetic message into an institutionalized, dogmatic, and ritualized religion. Charfi said that this process was driven by the *ulama*, whose readings of the Qur'an were inflected by their particular social position. Unlike the majority of Muslims, the *ulama* were urban, had a direct relationship to the ruling power, and were heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. By the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> Century, their Qur'anic readings, rooted in their specific class interests, were firmly established. This resulted, according to Charfi, in the formation of "Sciences of the Qur'an" – the opinions and methods of the *ulama* that go unquestioned as orthodoxy.

Charfi opined that the entrenchment of orthodox interpretations abrogated alternate readings. Becoming aware of the historical processes by which such interpretations evolved allows us to consider those other possibilities. Charfi outlined three such alternate readings: the Qur'an as created, the theory of revelation, and the idea that the Qur'anic message can stand alone without the *hadith* (stories of the Prophet's life).

According to dominant Muslim belief, the Qur'an is the uncreated word of God. In an alternate interpretation, Charfi proposed the idea that the Qur'an is created, explaining that this view would acknowledge the text's historical as well as divine dimensions. Rather than assuming the Qur'an exists outside of history, such a reading would allow Qur'anic moral injunctions to be understood in light of the particular historical context in which they were revealed.

The second idea, which Charfi described as having been rejected by orthodox belief, pertains to the theory of revelation. The Prophet is traditionally understood to have been a passive recipient of Gabriel's message. An alternative, Charfi suggested, would be to understand his role as active, implying a stage of mediation between the direct word of God and the Qur'an. In another formulation, Charfi added, we might describe the Prophet's role as expressing the divine message in human language.

Finally, Charfi described the possibility that the Qur'anic message is sufficient without the *hadith* of the Prophet. Though today this idea is widely considered heretical, it had proponents in early Islamic history. Charfi claimed that this idea was suppressed because the Qur'an did not provide an answer to every problem encountered in Muslim societies. Social institutions were formed to legislate for societies, and the *hadith* provided necessary religious legitimacy.

Charfi noted that these three positions can be considered from a perspective of modern rationality without being seen as an attack on the sacred nature of the Qur'an. Yet they are

often suppressed for breaking with orthodox belief. Thus, in Charfi's view, they are fertile avenues of inquiry and consistent with the spirit of the text.

Charfi reasoned that the Qur'an should no longer be considered a text of law, but a text of faith. Indeed, despite traditional assertions to the contrary, Qur'anic commandments are primarily moral in nature and not legal. Legal commandments in the Qur'an, Charfi continued, responded to concrete problems in the contemporary social order. For example, when the Qur'an portrays the law of retaliation as necessary, it must be understood in a context in which the state did not have a monopoly on violence. Such commandments, Charfi claimed, are therefore not ahistorical or normative, and Muslims should remain free to legislate on the basis of general Qur'anic values rather than taking literally the specific cases depicted in the text.

In another example, Charfi pointed to the idea of *shura*, or consultation, which Islamists now consider a central Qur'anic concept. Historically, because there was a separation between the political and religious spheres, traditional exegetes did not treat *shura* as an imperative in governance. Charfi again pointed out that modern readings find in the text what traditional readings did not.

Charfi concluded by summarizing his four main points: first, that the Qur'an does not contain a single meaning, but addresses readers in all times and places with multiple meanings that renew themselves on the basis of changing historical conditions. Therefore, as Charfi himself demonstrated, readers should seek a hermeneutic interpretation rather than follow a single exegesis. Second, in order to free Qur'anic interpretation from the dogmatic straitjacket of orthodoxy, it is necessary to acknowledge the limits imposed on traditional exegesis by the "Sciences of the Qur'an." Third, the relationship between exegesis and jurisprudence should be reversed. Instead of subjecting the Qur'an to theologically-based interpretations, as has traditionally been done, the text should be the basis for new theological constructs. Finally, the linear method of exegesis—reading the Qur'an from beginning to end—is neither rational nor necessary. *Suras* were not compiled in order of revelation, but according to their length. Charfi elaborated on this point by dismissing all ideological models of interpretation, including that of Shahrur. Instead, he admonished Muslims to find their own relationship with the Qur'an, a relationship that takes into account the interactions between sacred text, history, and truth. It is futile, he argued, to propose ideas that are only valid to Muslims today, as opposed to Muslims of the future, or, for that matter, the past. Muslims must struggle individually and collectively to find a peaceful relationship with the text. The implications will differ from traditional interpretations, which do not account for the logic of the Qur'an's organization and its spiritual value.

**Discussant: Stefan Wild, Professor Emeritus of Semitic Languages and Islamic Studies at the University of Bonn (Germany)**

Tlili invited the session's discussant, Stefan Wild, a major Arabist and scholar of Islamic thought in Germany, to comment on the diverse material presented by Lee, Christmann, and Charfi. Wild declined to summarize what he described as an already condensed series

of papers on complex ideas. He instead limited his remarks to a few observations designed to facilitate discussion on the panel and with the audience.

Referring to the letter of invitation, which described the symposium as an “intra-Muslim debate,” Wild remarked that he was glad that criterion had not been rigidly enforced, therefore allowing his participation. Yet he acknowledged the importance of the sentiment behind it. However, he opined, dialogue and research are different things. While dialogue is important, it may have nothing to do with academic research and may even be in conflict with it.

Turning to the subject of Arkoun, Wild discussed a point of difference he had with the thinker. Wild explained his belief that Muslim scholars should first develop ideas of how to apply exegesis to real world matters such as gender issues and *shari’a* before non-Muslims are invited to join the conversation. Arkoun disagreed, arguing that Muslim universities should start by incorporating non-Muslim ideas into their curricula. He advocated fervently for a joint effort by scholars from the West and the Muslim world. Wild justified his own position by pointing to the crisis of organized religion in Europe and expressing sympathy with Muslim scholars who are reluctant to follow the path of Western intellectual history.

Wild then introduced the ideas of the late the Egyptian Qur’anic scholar, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, who Wild said would have loved to participate in the symposium. A friend and early follower of Abu Zayd’s, Wild discussed Abu Zayd’s importance in the history of Islamic exegesis and described the hardships Abu Zayd endured for his work, including being accused of heresy, having his marriage forcibly dissolved, and fleeing to exile. Wild described Abu Zayd’s approach to Qur’anic interpretation as a theory of communication based on sender (God), recipient (Prophet), and coded message (Qur’an).

Abu Zayd was famous for his attempt to create a humanistic hermeneutics of the Qur’an, preferring to examine not what a verse literally says but the direction in which it points. For example, where the text says women inherit half what men do, Abu Zayd saw a direction towards greater freedom and equality of genders, when one keeps in mind the rights women lacked at the time the verse was revealed. Wild noted that some of Abu Zayd’s books were first published in German, suggesting they could not have been published in Egypt. Yet they were also published in Syria. Wild concluded by posing a question to the audience and panelists: why did the liberal Qur’anic interpretations of Abu Zayd find publication in an oppressive state like Syria?

### **Floor Discussion**

Tlili opened the discussion to the audience. An Arabic and Islamic Studies professor from The New School (a university in New York City) observed that a common theme running through the presentations was frustration at how the weight of tradition defines Muslim learning and practice. She asked whether there is evidence of pre-modern interventions in the hegemony of exegetical literature and suggested that such an avenue of inquiry might be more fruitful if it looked to non-Arabic language heritages.

Charfi answered, explaining that scholarly work has focused on the circumstances of the revelation because that's where the greatest amount of historical material is available for study. In scholarship, he said, it used to be believed that one must understand the circumstances surrounding the revelation in order to understand the Qur'anic text. Now, on the basis of many studies, it is clear that the narratives describing those circumstances were developed by exegetes decades and centuries after the fact. Referring back to Wild's comments, Charfi stated that he agreed with Arkoun that non-Muslim scholars should participate in these inquiries, for their research and perspective can offer a more balanced understanding than research by Muslims alone.

An audience member asked the panelists to discuss the extent to which new Qur'anic interpretations had made an impact on the larger Muslim world, or what impact they might potentially have on social and political outcomes in Muslim societies.

The question drew responses from each panelist, beginning with Christmann, who said it was a very difficult question but one often asked about academic work. He contended that it is not possible to measure the effect of words in practical and social terms. The only notable measure of Shahrur's influence, according to Christmann, is in the number of his followers, which Christmann said was not large enough to constitute a social movement in the Middle East. Though interest is growing, Shahrur's readership, he explained, is largely limited to intellectuals and university graduates, in particular natural scientists and engineers. In sum, in Christmann's view, it is not possible to see the implications of scholarship on policies.

Wild spoke up to say he was not as pessimistic as Christmann. He pointed out that the strong censorship in many Arabic countries is an indication that thinkers like Abu Zayd and Shahrur are taken seriously. Wild mentioned seeing Abu Zayd's book in a Jeddah bookstore, anecdotal proof that there is an audience for such ideas. He cautioned that theological faculties in the Arabic world are not a good indicator of new trends in thought. Explaining that such institutions do not even recognize 19<sup>th</sup> Century reformists, Wild opined that change is more likely to come from academic centers outside the Arab world.

Lee had earlier described Arkoun as being pessimistic about his own influence. Lee qualified that description by saying he believed Arkoun had underestimated himself. Lee added that if Arkoun's followers in the Muslim world were small in number, it could be attributed to the fact that he wrote in French and his texts were so dense, so his ideas were not accessible to the general public. Lee suggested that Charfi and others would be more likely to have an effect on mainstream thought.

Charfi cautioned that we must distinguish between the effects of scholarly efforts in different Muslim countries. He offered Tunisia as an example where reformist approaches are taught in universities and people are receptive to modern approaches and theories; in Yemen, on the other hand, they are less developed. The greatest impediment to reform comes from Wahhabism, a movement centered in Saudi Arabia, whose adherents, according to Charfi, use their resources to spread hostility to modernist ideas. Their influence is especially significant at the popular level, he said.

The next questioner wondered if the lively debate about the historicity of the Old and New Testaments, seen in Christian and Jewish circles since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, had any parallel in Muslim discourse.

Lee answered, referencing Charfi's book *Islam Between Message and History*, which he described as an argument for differentiating Islam from the message of the religion, a position similar to Arkoun's. However, Lee conceded, such an approach is not widely embraced in the Muslim world.

The audience member spoke again to clarify his original question. He described how, in recent Jewish and Christian discourses, even people of faith acknowledge evolution and eclecticism in the gospels. There is evidence of the same processes at work in the *suras*, but have Muslims been similarly attuned to this historicity of the Qur'anic text?

Christmann answered that such work is being done in Europe, particularly in Berlin (including *Corpus Coranicum*, a research project of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities under the directorship of Angelika Neuwirth), precisely because it is not yet embraced in the Muslim world. There are Muslim scholars who approach the Qur'an using historical criticism, such as Sayyid Muhammad Al Qimni, and others. However, they do not use such methods to the same extent as applied to the Bible by Western thinkers in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The main difference, according to Christmann, is that the Muslim thinkers still approach the reading of the text as, in Charfi's words, a "reading of faith." A truly historical critical reading would see the Qur'an as an expression of human tradition rather than divine intervention, but among Muslim believers, God's power is not separated from that of the historical/human.

Wild suggested that the Wahhabi influence is partly responsible for the suppression of historical criticism. Although exegesis from the 1<sup>st</sup> through 3<sup>rd</sup> Centuries incorporated historicity, as in their treatment of abrogated verses, the tradition was not developed further. Today, Wild said, "petro-Islam" controls much of the intellectual production of Muslim theological centers, not only in Saudi Arabia but in places like Bosnia and the former Soviet Union.

Charfi had a more positive outlook on the issue of historicity, pointing out that many studies have already been made on the issue. Yet he cautioned against applying the Biblical approach of historical criticism to the Qur'an without accounting for the different nature of the Islamic text.

A City University of New York (CUNY) professor in the audience turned the conversation toward literary analysis, asking whether the Qur'an's treatment as a literary text was considered a threat to its status as a sacred religious text.

Lee responded by referencing Arkoun. Arkoun, he said, believed that the Qur'an should be treated as a literary text. The literary approach is not denigrating because it preserves the sanctity of the oral revelation as distinct from its written iteration. In this view, the text is

an avenue by which to better understand the original prophetic moment. However, there are many who disagree; they see the Qur'anic text as sanctified, and therefore object to it being treated like the Bible or other literary texts.

Charfi agreed, describing the Qur'an as a text of human language that must be approached through human language. He again referenced historical exegesis, explaining that Muslims throughout history have analyzed the grammatical, linguistic, and poetic aspects of the Qur'an. Moreover, Charfi said, not only would it be impossible *not* to approach it as a literary text, but reading it through that lens has not prevented Muslims from appreciating other aspects of the text. The literary aspect is only one level of analysis and does not preclude existential, moral, ethical, anthropological and theological dimensions. As a point of entrance into the text, linguistic analysis is less contentious than deeper levels of analysis, where exegetes are more likely to disagree and project their own ambitions, concerns, and traditions onto the text.

The next question was posed to Christmann concerning Shahrur's dismissal of the *sunna* (the sixth thesis in Christmann's summary); how did Shahrur reconcile the fact that God sent a book and a messenger? If the Prophet's practices were his interpretation of how to live God's message, how do we *not* entangle the *sunna* in our own interpretations of the Qur'an?

Christmann explained that Shahrur's treatment of the Qur'anic text divides it into two categories: one universally applicable, absolute and, eternal (prophethood), and the other temporal, historical, and relative (messengerhood). In his dissection of Islamic concepts, Shahrur categorizes each word as belonging to one of the two categories, then distinguishes the eternally divine from the historically contingent. For example, Christmann explained, Shahrur cannot reconcile the idea of Mohammed being human *and* divine, for if divine, he would be a god (which constitutes *shirk*). Therefore, Shahrur concludes that as a human, Mohammed and everything related to him is contingent, historical, and temporal. Shahrur then addresses each verse in turn, showing what is eternally divine and what is historically contingent, and concludes that obedience to God is different from obedience to the Prophet.

A woman in the audience asked if thinkers like Shahrur and Abu Zayd could be convinced to appeal to a larger, less elite audience in order to instigate grassroots movements for reform. She argued that such an effort would defend against claims that the reform movement is driven by the West.

She also commented that, as a secular Muslim, she objected to Shahrur's claim that Islam has only three Pillars of the Faith rather than five. Such arguments, she opined, were a manipulation of language and can be blamed for alienating mainstream Muslims and marginalizing reformist ideas. She asked for Christmann's opinion on this problem.

Responding to the first comment, Christmann replied that Shahrur is aware of such critiques and has been asked by his own friends and followers to clarify his arguments by simplifying them and using illustrative examples. However, he added, Shahrur already

believes that his language is broadly accessible, for as a natural scientist he does not speak in the language of philosophers and the *ulama*. As for the accusation that Shahrur manipulates language, Christmann said it was such a frequent charge that it constituted a cliché.

In response to the issue of the Pillars of Islam, Christmann said Shahrur would ask for a Qur'anic verse that specifically mentions five. The woman retorted, "believers are those who believe xyz," referring indirectly to the doctrinal rationale for the Five Pillars – profession of faith, prayer, fasting, alms-giving, and pilgrimage.

Christmann explained that those are rather tenets of *aqida*, while the explicit mentioning of Islam as based on Five Pillars is only to be found in the *hadith* (Jibril), not in the Qur'an. He said that the Qur'anic verses do refer to only three "items" of Islam, which Shahrur sees as the Pillars; he considers the sum of five to be an imposed number not intrinsic to the text but attributed to it by the *ulama* (through the *hadith*). Christmann described the accusation of textual manipulation as a "killer argument," meaning it can be used against any interpreter of the Qur'an who subjectively chooses between several opinions on a given verse. Christmann asserted that the accusation of Shahrur's linguistic manipulation is weak and without merit.

Christmann then returned to the topic of literary exegesis, reiterating Charfi's point that it has a long history in Islam and a designated technical term in Arabic (*al-tafsir al-adabi*). Ironically, the first person who revitalized this classical tradition in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century was the Islamist Sayyid Qutb, in the 1930s and '40s. After Qutb began using a purely literary perspective, other schools followed.

An audience member interjected asking how Shahrur can be considered an authentic Muslim voice if the Qur'an itself comes from God in its entirety? How can aspects of the text be distinguished as historical or literary versus divine?

Christmann responded that the question encompassed two issues: origin and interpretation. Within the Muslim world, the Qur'an is always considered the divine word of God, Christmann agreed, even if the text also contains things that are historically contingent and not universally applicable. But this belief does not preclude applying various interpretive methodologies to the text; divinity is irrelevant to the literary approach.

Charfi illustrated the discussion about linguistic analysis with an example. Observing that many *suras* narrate the speech of human personages, he contended that those sentences should not be read literally as the divine word of God, since they are being reported from a non-divine source.

Charfi also addressed the earlier comment about applying Western methodologies to the Qur'an. He urged that we must stop defining modern civilization as exclusively Western. While many modern ideas may have Western origins, what is more important is the universality of values such as freedom, equality, justice, and democracy. Charfi criticized

the fear of Western influences, defending the universality and applicability of modern criteria to all languages and texts. He tempered his position by agreeing that Muslims should take a critical position vis-à-vis Western elements, though not because of apparent Western hypocrisy in implementing their own values.

Most importantly, Charfi said, it is necessary to be wary of the anti-intellectualism found in much Islamic thinking, which adheres to tradition, consensus, and what is considered invariable in Islam. It is the right and obligation of each believer to examine ideas that are considered self-evident, and to free himself or herself from the intellectual constraints of traditional thought.

Charfi concluded his comments, and the first panel, by reiterating the connection between the mutually reinforcing spheres of traditional Islam and non-democratic Muslim regimes, which repress critical approaches that threaten their claims to religious legitimacy.

## **SESSION II – INTERPRETING THE QUR’AN, RESPONDING TO THE CHALLENGES OF THE MODERN WORLD: Muslim Societies at a Crossroads**

Tlili described the focus of the second session as “applied interpretation;” an occasion to translate the ideas discussed in Session One to real world scenarios. Before introducing the speakers, he invited discussant Dale Eickelman to speak about an unanticipated absence on the panel.

Eickelman explained that the empty seat on the stage was intended for Mohammad Amin Abdullah, the rector of Indonesia’s Universitas Islam Negari Sunan Kalijaga in Yogyakarta. The day before the symposium, organizers learned that, despite several appeals, U.S. Homeland Security had denied Abdullah a visa. Eickelman had hoped that, after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s recent apology for refusing entry to Tariq Ramadan, fewer mistakes would be made in the screening of distinguished scholars hoping to visit the U.S. He reminded the audience that the objection to Ramadan was based on a small donation he had made to an organization years before it was labeled a supporter of terrorism.

Eickelman spoke scathingly about the failure of authorities to recognize Abdullah’s credentials, which include a higher degree from Canada. Abdullah also succeeded in moving oversight of his Islamic university from the Ministry of Religious Affairs to the Ministry of Education based on his belief that Islamic education should be mainstreamed. Eickelman recounted his recent visit to the university, where he saw visible efforts to disseminate broader knowledge about Islam, including materials censored in many other Muslim countries. Eickelman described the goal of Abdullah’s life’s work as “mainstreaming” Islam, and concluded with an apology to the audience that Abdullah was unable to attend the symposium.

### **Mohammad Amin Abdullah, Professor of Islamic Studies, Universitas Islam Negari Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta (Indonesia)**

In Abdullah’s absence, his speech was presented by a staff-member of the NYU Center for Dialogues. Abdullah’s comments focused on the recent expansion of Islamic studies to include not only historical and doctrinal aspects, but also Islam as a culture, civilization, community, and political, economic, and globalizing force. Nevertheless, he acknowledged, many Islamic studies departments remain rooted in uncritical tradition, often leading to conflict among Muslims of different denominations and beliefs.

So how does the field of Islamic studies, Abdullah asked, compete with other “scientific disciplines” in addressing contemporary issues in areas such as human rights, gender equity, international relations, and the environment? To Abdullah’s mind, this is where the tools of modern epistemology find their relevance. He cited the works of Richard C. Martin (an “outsider” to Islam) and of Mohammed Arkoun (an “insider”) as good examples. Richard C. Martin’s book, *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*,<sup>8</sup> presents Islam as a historical entity subject to scientific study beyond “sacred” theological interpretation. Abdullah cited the work of Khaled M. Abou El-Fadl<sup>9</sup> and Jasser Auda<sup>10</sup> as representing a new generation of interdisciplinary approaches to Islamic studies that still rigorously maintain the discipline of Islamic Religious Knowledge, or *‘Ulum al-Diin*.

Abdullah's speech also covered the development of Islamic studies in the context of Indonesia, where inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary approaches have been put into practice since the establishment of Islamic State Universities in 2002. At the Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University of Yogyakarta, a new scientific paradigm called "integrated-interconnected science"<sup>11</sup> recognizes that a scholar must analyze his field by integrating other disciplines and recognizing their interconnectivity.

Abdullah's remarks then delved deeper into the ontology of contemporary Islamic studies, and the importance of differentiating between Islamic Studies (*Dirasat Islamiyyah*), Islamic Thought (*al-Fikr al-Islamy*), and Islamic Religious Knowledge (*'Ulum al-Diin*). He emphasized that Islamic Thought or *al-Fikr al-Islamy* has a scientific and systematic structure, and a strong and comprehensive body of knowledge on Islam, while *'Ulum al-Diin* often emphasizes certain parts rather than the full body of knowledge. He also discussed how certain religious groups, sects, or organizations may intentionally or unintentionally skew this knowledge set to suit their own purposes and perspectives. In his opinion, the presence of *al-Fikr al-Islamy*, which is more historical, systematical, comprehensive, non-sectarian, non-provincial, and non-parochial, helps students complete their knowledge of *'Ulum al-Diin*.

Pointing to the proliferation of Islamic scientific journals, symposiums, seminars, encyclopedia, and new books published by both 'insiders' and 'outsiders,' Abdullah concluded that the Islamic academic world keeps growing and follows the development of research methods in general. He remarked that contemporary Islamic studies, or *Dirasat Islamiyyah*, always uses and collaborates with methods of thought and research in social sciences and contemporary humanities to reveal Islamic religiosity in daily life, not only limited in circle of foundational texts. These new approaches have surprised and sometimes offended students of *'Ulum al-Diin* who are still implementing old scientific paradigms and perspectives. Some Islamic studies approaches have been criticized as secular, liberal, apostate, and the like.<sup>12</sup>

Looking to the future, Abdullah described the main project of the contemporary Islamic Studies as eliminating misunderstanding and mutual suspicion between Islamic Studies (*Dirasat Islamiyyah*), Islamic Thought (*al-Fikr al-Islamy*), and Islamic Religious Knowledge (*'Ulum al-Diin*). Their only true differences, he believes, are in methods (process and procedure), horizon of observation and theoretical framework (approaches), and sources of data. Abdullah called for the present generation of students, scholars, and other stakeholders to unite these three clusters.

Tili then introduced Mahmoud Hussein as "two men with a shared mind." Mahmoud Hussein is the *nom de plume* of Adel Rifaat and Bahgat El Nadi, political scientists who have co-authored a number of books and articles. Their most recent book, not yet translated into English, raises the implications of interpretation for the social, political, cultural, and ethical issues faced by Muslim communities today. Tili added that their work also carries implications for the relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim communities around

the world, on issues ranging from the status of women to freedom of expression. Adel Rifaat gave the presentation on behalf of the pair.

### **Mahmoud Hussein (Adel Rifaat and Bahgat El Nadi), Authors (Egypt/France)**

Over the course of Islam's history, Rifaat began, religious conformity has too often stifled intellectual curiosity. Unfortunately, in world opinion it is widely assumed that this is an intrinsic quality of Islam. Yet the current state dates only to the last 30 years and followed a period of great intellectual and political progress in the Muslim world. During this "Muslim Renaissance," thinkers were freed from the literalist interpretations that had bound them for years. It paved the way for the national liberation movements that characterized the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in the Muslim world, during which the region's emergent middle classes adopted a political discourse of secular rationalism. Yet after a period of economic and social gains, the progressive momentum gave way to corruption and unequal development. From the 1980s, the tide turned and the religious orthodoxy that had waned during years of secularization took hold once again.

Rifaat assessed the current situation thus: in this new century, Muslims are inextricably drawn into the orbit of globalization where their only hope for success is to adapt by regaining intellectual freedom and mastering the tools of criticism and innovation. However, fundamentalist thought, which counteracts those needs, is again dominant. In the face of this dilemma, Rifaat stressed the importance of recent reformist thought, which furnishes the tools necessary to address the modern world.

Rifaat honored the recently deceased thinkers Arkoun and Abu Zayd, and welcomed symposium panelist Charfi as a preeminent representative of their school of thought. He praised their representation of Islam as both a divine message and a human story, thereby lighting a path for believers to combine faith in God with knowledge of the world.

Such thinking, Rifaat said, is considered by dogmatists to be an affront to the sacred nature of revelation because it connects the divine with temporal events. Dogmatists react violently to the idea that a text of revelation was influenced by its historical context. Fundamentalists refuse to debate the reformers regarding these objections, instead condemning the reformers' interpretive methodologies as illegitimate.

Rifaat described Mahmoud Hussein's recent work as a powerful defense of reformist thought against such attacks, since it exposes the historicity of the Qur'an without relying on "illegitimate," profane disciplines. Their critique uses the testimony of the Companions of the Prophet – a source unassailable by traditional standards of exegesis. By relating a Qur'anic verse to the reported circumstances of its revelation, they prove that the historicity of revelation is not imposed from the outside, but is contained within the Qur'an and is the very will of God.

Rifaat expanded on this conclusion by elaborating three related findings. First, the Qur'an distinguishes God from his Word; while God transcends time, his Word is time-bound and linked to the context in which it was revealed. Second, the Word of God is not presented in monologue, but through exchanges between heaven and earth. God dialogues in real time,

through the Prophet, with the first community of Muslims. Third, God does not weigh each of his revelations equally but has truths of different orders: absolute and relative, perpetual and circumstantial.

In light of these conclusions, Rifaat asked rhetorically how literalist dogma was able to impose itself despite counterfactual evidence in the Qur'an? In answer, Rifaat described the process of the Qur'an's revelation, which took place intermittently over the course of 22 years, in changing circumstances, and touched on a diverse range of topics. The Prophet and Companions memorized these revelations through recitation. Only after the Prophet's death was the Qur'an systematically committed to writing. Under the Caliph Uthmann, verses were standardized and grouped in a single volume, the *mushaf*. Their grouping was ordered not by chronology of revelation but by length of verse, creating problems for the text's intelligibility. Yet the literalist approach treats the order of verses as if decreed by God, and the text is traditionally studied in strictly that order, verse by verse.

Rifaat described this approach as severing any causal link between verse and the circumstances of revelation. In the absence of such connections, many verses are difficult or impossible to decipher. The difficulty of finding meaning is a feature in the earliest Qur'anic commentaries and in all schools of interpretation. From the beginning, it was clear that the context of revelation held the key to understanding, and efforts were made to reconstruct those circumstances by gathering the testimony of the Companions. This material, called *al-asbab nuzul*, is used by all exegetes and actually constitutes its own branch of exegesis.

Given this tradition, Rifaat asked, how do literalists justify their reliance on temporal events while rejecting a connection between the Word of God and human time? In fact, Rifaat argued, they failed to explain the contradiction and merely issued decrees justifying their approach. Thus their work is premised on an *a priori* belief that the Word of God transcends time, though they are unable to explain the logic of the argument.

Rifaat dismissed this position as outmoded. If one reads the Qur'an using those same external sources, it is possible to use the testimony of the Companions to rationally rediscover the connection between text and context. The verses become more than phrases to be recited in order: they are moments of revelation connected by temporal continuity.

Rifaat acknowledged that the chronicles of companion testimony contain contradictory accounts, and are of debatable veracity. Rifaat argued that their analysis, then, is a task for historians rather than religious scholars, who accept the authoritativeness of all *hadith* without question. Rifaat explained that they are nevertheless significant – not because they are necessarily accurate, but because they constitute a critical mass of evidence regarding the historicity of the revelation. Most importantly, literalists cannot object to their use.

Rifaat's examples showed that the Qur'an has a clear time dimension in which moments are relational; some are more important than others; and a subsequent event may override a precedent. God is both always right, and yet says contradictory things. Rifaat resolved this seeming dilemma by emphasizing the historicity of God's declarations. God's interventions

exist in time, making truths relative and contingent on particular but changing circumstances. Therefore, Qur'anic verses cannot be read as though they all have the same weight, and are absolute and eternal, for God made them situational. Lessons and inspiration can always be found in verses, but they are not mandatory lessons for all times and places. Jettisoning the literalist assumptions about the Qur'an frees believers to read it not as a set of commandments and prohibitions, but as a guide to help find God's way on the path of life.

**Discussant: Dale Eickelman, Professor of Anthropology and Human Relations, Dartmouth College (U.S.)**

The discussant Dale Eickelman thanked Tlili again for organizing the symposium despite the setbacks caused by visa problems, deaths, and other challenges.

Eickelman reflected on both sessions and drew out the common threads running through all of the presentations. He said each of the speakers combined thinking with practice, which is a courageous act in much of the Muslim world. Even if their work is not fully accepted in public, it is referred to in private discussions. The fear of public opinion on these issues is a characteristic of the current political moment, and can change over time.

The discussant observed that another theme common to the presentations was the difficulty of defining what it means to be a Muslim, for there is no agreement on the question among Muslims. Although the text of the Qur'an is stable, its interpretation is not. As one delves deeper, Eickelman added, even the text becomes unstable. For example, when early fragments of the Qur'an were found in Yemen, containing aberrations from the standard text, they were destroyed at the behest of conservative Islamic factions.

Eickelman compared Arkoun's embrace of the multiplicity of meaning to Shahrur's. Both are resolutely modernist although in different ways. Shahrur argues that since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, we live in a post-prophetic world. Since prophecy is at an end, humankind must rely on reason to understand revelation. In their separate ways, both thinkers, together with the late Nasr Abu Zayd, illustrate that the Qur'an is a defiantly open text that cannot be closed by anyone. One way of thinking about the debate over what it means to be Muslim is to invoke Oxford philosopher Walter Gallie's notion of "essentially contested concepts."<sup>13</sup>

Eickelman commented that the stated intent of the symposium was to foster a dialogue among Muslims, with non-Muslims serving as discussants. This was also the model that Wild advocated in his comments during the first session. Yet, without identifying names, a reader of the symposium's transcript would be unable to distinguish Muslim from non-Muslim participants. All share a passionate rapport with the text. As Charfi indicated, a passionate rapport is necessary.

Eickelman then commented on efforts to censor Shahrur's first book when it was published in 1990. State authorities refused to censor him, responding to Shahrur's attackers by suggesting that they simply publish their criticisms. Eickelman also recalled the experiences of El Nadi and Rifaat, who served prison time during their leftist student days.

Their presentation today made a passionate rereading of their texts and approach to Qur'anic interpretation accessible to a wider audience.

Eickelman emphasized the importance of Amin Abdullah's proposition for curricular reform in Indonesia. His presentation, the discussant said, like the others, reminded us how ideas and practices are inscribed in the times in which they occur, and of the limits of speech in many places in the Middle East.

Finally, Eickelman suggested the importance of what is *not* said in public. The Arabian Peninsula, for example, has a number of think tanks, but the approach to critical studies of religion is more restrained. While part of the Arabian Peninsula inspires forward thinking, many Gulf leaders are wary of publicly attaching their names to projects involving religious issues and prefer to donate privately. Westerners must pay closer attention to grey areas and layers of meaning. For instance, if explicit feminist statements are ineffectual in the Middle East, there is possibility in more subtle approaches that may not be initially noticed by outsiders less attuned to the realities and practices of contemporary censorship. Thus in the new Islamic Studies (*Dirasat Islamiyya*) curriculum used in the primary and secondary schools of the United Arab Emirates, textbook images depict women and men as equals, at least up to the age of eight, without heavy-handed explanations of how such images differ from predecessor textbooks in which representations of young girls were absent. There is a strong tradition of saying things indirectly in the Arab world and elsewhere in the Middle East, and outsiders would benefit from comprehending such local social norms.

To begin the floor discussion, Eickelman reviewed his main points, beginning with the idea that Qur'anic interpretation is not an arcane topic but one that engages practical reason and often occupies the center stage of public debate. It has implications for how believers think about their faith and its role in society. Because of the different audiences for interpretation, we must take an ethnographic approach and be sensitive to the grey areas, understanding that even if ideas are not publicly embraced, they may still resonate in private.

### **Floor Discussion**

The floor discussion opened with a conversation among the panelists, who returned to the issue of who is entitled to carry on this debate about Islam and whether their ideas are marked by their identity as Muslims or non-Muslims. Wild responded to the opinion expressed earlier that the commentary by Muslim and non-Muslim panelists was indistinguishable. He referred to Abu Zayd's declaration that he would not longer speak of God *per se* but instead about "the divine." Abu Zayd wrote that he wanted to be inclusive of readers who are uncomfortable personalizing divinity. Yet, Wild contended, this notion cannot be translated into Arabic, both linguistically and culturally. Muslim readers would not accept the idea and as a result, he predicted, the book would remain un-translated.

There was a brief discussion of what the Arabic translation for "the divine" in this context would be, whether *al-ilahi* or *al-muqaddas*, until Charfi said the important thing was not how the concept is translated but how it is explained. Frequently in translation, words do

not correspond exactly, but a writer is free to develop his own critical terminology by explaining his use of a word. The importance is not the translation but the context.

Tlili spoke about the importance of the social and political credibility that come from having an intra-Muslim debate. In the wake of 9/11 and the Iraq war, the discussion about what being a Muslim means and how to reconcile Islam with democracy is problematic in the Muslim world; the imposition of these ideas from without has failed materially and poisoned Muslims' understanding of themselves and their relationship to the non-Muslim world. For this reason, debates on issues fundamental to the faith and to Muslim identity must be nurtured from the inside to have social and political value and a chance of influencing the Muslim community. Hence the invitation to this symposium was intended to draw voices from the Muslim world and nurture this debate, but also to offer an opportunity for exchanging ideas with colleagues from the West, who share epistemological tools.

The next question drew a distinction between theory and practice and the questioner opined that, although the ideas discussed on the panels have practical implications, they were insufficiently illustrated. Muslims implement practical interpretations of religion on a daily basis, she said, and there are vibrant interpretations in the area of gender equity, which was not reflected in today's presentations. She said it was an especially important area for discussion because of Western criticism. She suggested that it would be fruitful to ask how practice gets theorized, rather than vice versa.

El Nadi disagreed that we should discuss the details and applicability of the Qur'an, for people find in religion whatever they are seeking. He advocated instead examining the relationship between the Prophet/the divine/God and the Companions. By asking how they treated the verses, we can derive a model for practice. The Companions did not accept the revelation as a *fait accompli*, but discussed it and requested changes, and God complied. If the Companions had freedom and authority, why must believers today see the text as unchangeable?

Rifaat expanded on El Nadi's comments, observing that practice has not remained unchanged over the centuries, especially in the area of gender relations. As an example, he pointed out that today's women are wearing the veil in countries where 50 years ago, it did not exist. So, when talking about practice, Rifaat said, we have to be aware that practice is constantly changing, especially in the last century. A change in practice can be justified through Qur'anic interpretation, and in different cultural contexts, different practices will be justified by the text.

Rifaat continued, commenting on how reformers treat the text. Despite differences of opinion among reformers, they are united in an effort to think differently about the relationship between the word of God and the reality in which that word resonates with human beings. Today, reformers confront a restriction on critical thought in the Muslim world, with anyone who questions the status of the Qur'an as the word of God being shut out of the conversation. He and El Nadi therefore take as their starting point that the Qur'an is the word of God, yet question the implications of this assumption. According to literalist

thinking, since God is eternal and makes no mistakes, then His word is inalienable and applicable in every time and place. Yet this line of thought presupposes that God and his words are one and the same. Rifaat and El Nadi's work argues that the word of God is not the essence of God, but is time-bound. This approach gives Muslim believers the freedom to take responsibility of their own reading of the Qur'an, and to live as citizens of a pluralist world without renouncing their faith.

Eickelman agreed that gender is a central issue, but cautioned that it is also frequently a conversation-stopper in the West, where stereotypes of women in Islam are entrenched. However, the reality of gender relations is far more complex, he said. Interesting debates are taking place in the Arabian Peninsula about the role of women. In the Saudi press last year, the argument was made that the separation of the sexes was *bida* – forbidden – citing *hadiths* that indicate it was not original to early Islam. Such conversations are made possible by the accessibility of the *hadiths* on the Internet. According to Ziba Mir Hosseini, women in Iran learn to imitate men's voices to be taken seriously in magazines. In Kuwait, where classrooms have been integrated since the 1960s, people argue against separation by saying that women's higher academic performance raises the level of education for men as well. On the Internet, women can enter the public sphere without being marked by gender.

Lee, a panelist from the first session, objected to Rifaat's claim that the current climate of intellectual repression dates back only 30 years. Lee cited Arkoun, who commented on the problem as early as the 1960s and believed that the solidification of Islamic interpretation began long before. Lee argued that Islam had not disappeared under secular movements, mentioning by way of example that the Muslim Brotherhood was founded in 1928 and was a factor in Egyptian society even under Gamal Abdel Nasser (Egypt's President from 1956 to 1970). Moreover, he said, many Middle Eastern states attained independence through religious projects. Arkoun himself was restricted from speaking in Algeria, where seminars were run as indoctrination sessions on behalf of the state. Lee concluded that the problem is of long-standing duration and cannot be attributed to recent Islamist movement or policies of the Western powers in the Middle East.

El Nadi clarified Mahmoud Hussein's position, agreeing with Lee that Islam had not disappeared under Nasser. Yet, he maintained, Islam was not as powerful a force in that era as it is today. Nasser was free to impose at will on the Muslim Brotherhood, whereas now it is the religious faction that imposes on the government. For example, in Tunisia during Ramadan you used to see leaders on television drinking orange juice. Such a thing is unthinkable today. When the socialists disappeared, the new power regimes of Anwar Sadat and Husni Mubarak and others based themselves on religious trends as a tactic to counteract leftists.

Rifaat added that it is in vogue today to talk about the Muslim Brotherhood as the only mass movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. However, there was a more powerful movement, the Wafd Party, which had its roots in the masses. The question of whether national movements should be religious or secular was a major debate in the interwar period and a key element of post-colonialism. The Muslim Brotherhood retreated not only because of

acts of state repression but because of the popular sensibilities of an emerging middle class that expressed a clear preference for secularization in public affairs.

Charfi suggested that, despite a clear movement backwards on issues like the status of women and veiling, at a deeper level there is secularization and even Westernization happening throughout the Muslim world. Even movements like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Phalangists in Lebanon were modeled on European Fascist movements of the same era. This speaks to the tension between secularization and religion; even when religion is dominant, it responds to external secular influences.

In conclusion, Eickelman noted that neither secularization nor religion can be isolated as singularly representative of a period. For example, Israel's opposition to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and support of Hamas created a scenario in which the religious movement reflected the sensitivity among the people. In other situations, religion is more ideological than moral or ethical. It is misleading to look closely at religious movements in isolation. In some instances, women's veils may allow them to participate more openly in public space. For those who wear the veil, religion is often not their primary motivation, as many research studies have shown. People take what they want from religion and from modern values, forming a kind of *bricolage*. They may be pious in certain areas but impious in others. The search is underway to find a new balance to relieve this tension.

### **Closing Remarks**

In his closing remarks, Tlili thanked the speakers for sharing many perspectives that warrant further exploration and academic research. He described the symposium as the beginning of an ongoing debate, and raised the question of why such a debate can take place in the West but not the Muslim world. This is a major problem, as discussed by Wild; many Muslims do not have the benefit of the discourse developed here.

Ideas can influence progress and impact lives, Tlili stated. Unlike Charfi, who suggested that Islamism is losing its force, Tlili believes Islamism is still the dominant political discourse, and that there is a dangerous polarization between Western radical discourse and Islamist radical discourse. Because of this, regimes in the Muslim world are increasingly retreating from a commitment to openness and secularization, a trend seen in places like Turkey and Tunisia. New mosques are drawing large crowds and there are ever more social taboos in the name of religion. Yet these phenomena are too new and complex to be fully analyzed yet, Tlili said. The Muslim world is caught between the state and the Islamists: two forces of confused religiosity.

Tlili asked how we can reopen the conversation and give universities and intellectuals a renewed sense of possibility in light of the obstacles posed by the media and political structures. In answer, he stressed the need for stronger dialogue between the West and the Muslim world, and enjoined the West to recognize its stake in the outcome. Granting that all civilizations have contributed to global culture over the course of history, but that the last three centuries have been dominated by the Enlightenment, Tlili suggested that the West has a moral responsibility to engage the Muslim world intellectually by, for instance,

opening their doors to figures like Abdullah. The Muslim-Western dialogue has tremendous implications for all. If we leave the Muslim world to choose between oppressive regimes, radical Islamists, and a confusing religiosity divorced from modernity, the future is not bright. Tlili closed by expressing the hope that all present felt a need for this conversation to continue, and that the symposium had made them feel more engaged in the dialogue.

## NOTES TO SESSIONS

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<sup>1</sup> Al-Mu'tazila (8<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup> Centuries) was a theological school, which argued that human reason could be applied alongside Qur'anic revelation.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Muwahiddin (12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries) was a theological school, which advocated a strictly literal interpretation of the Qur'an and the *hadith* and condemned polytheism and the worship of saints as these practices contradicted the school's belief in the absolute oneness of God (*tawhid*).

<sup>3</sup> Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London: The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Olivier Carré, *Mysticism and Politics: A Reading of Fi Zilal al-Qur'an by Sayyid Qutb* (Boston/Leiden: Brill, 2003). For Carré's discussion of Arkoun, see p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> Andreas Christmann (Trans., Ed.), *The Qur'an, Morality, and Critical Reason: The Essential Muhammad Shahrur* (Boston/Leiden: Brill, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Literally translated as "promoting the good and preventing evil," Shahrur interprets the phrase as an obligation of good civil citizenship. *Ibid*.

<sup>7</sup> Abdelmajid Charfi, *Islam Between Message and History*, trans. David Bond (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Richard C. Martin (Ed.), *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 1985).

<sup>9</sup> Khaled M. Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority, and Women*, (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Jasser Auda, *Maqasid al-Syariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach* (Herndon: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Pokja Akademik, *Kerangka Dasar Keilmuan & Pengembangan Kurikulum Universitas Islam Negeri (Fundamental Scientific Theory and Curriculum Development in the State Islamic University)* (Yogyakarta: Sunan Kalijaga, 2006). See also M. Amin Abdullah, *Islamic Studies di Perguruan Tinggi: Pendekatan Integratif-Interkonektif (Islamic Studies in Higher Education: Integrative-Interconnective Approaches)* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Khaled Abou El-Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 2005); also Roel Meijer (Ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd., 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Gallie argued that it is impossible to conclusively define concepts such as social justice, democracy, or moral goodness. Clarification of such concepts involves considering how the concept has been used by different parties throughout its history. See W.B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 56 (1956).

## **APPENDIX I: CONFERENCE PROGRAM**

**November 10, 2010**

**9:00am – 9:30am Registration**

**9:30am – 10:00am Opening Session**

- Mustapha Tlili, Founder and Director, NYU Center for Dialogues (U.S.)

*In Memory of Mohamed Arkoun, Professor Emeritus of the History Islamic Thought, Sorbonne (Algeria/France, 1928-2010)*

- Abdelmajid Charfi, Professor Emeritus of Arab Civilization and Islamic Thought, University of Tunis (Tunisia)

**10:00am – 1:00pm Session I**

*Normative Islam Versus Historical Islam: A Critical Distinction for Our Times and the Modern Epistemological Tools that Make It Possible*

- The ideas of Mohamed Arkoun (Algeria/France): Robert Lee, Professor of Political Science, Colorado College (U.S.)
- The ideas of Muhammad Shahrur (Syria): Andreas Christmann, Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Islam, University of Manchester, U.K. (Germany)
- Abdelmajid Charfi

Discussant:

- Stefan Wild, Professor Emeritus of Semitic Languages and Islamic Studies, University of Bonn (Germany)

Floor Discussion

**1:00pm – 2:30pm Lunch**

**2:30pm – 5:30pm Session II**

*Interpreting the Qur'an, Responding to the Challenges of the Modern World: Muslim Societies at a Crossroads*

- Mohammad Amin Abdullah, Professor of Islamic Studies, Sunan K. Islamic State University, Yogyakarta (Indonesia)
- Mahmoud Hussein (Adel Rifaat and Bahgat El Nadi), Political Scientists and Islamologists (Egypt/France)

Discussant:

- Dale Eickelman, Professor of Anthropology and Human Relations, Dartmouth College (U.S.)

Floor Discussion

**5:30pm – 6:00pm Closing**

## APPENDIX II: PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES

### **Abdelmajid Charfi, Professor Emeritus of Arab Civilization and Islamic Thought, University of Tunis (Tunisia)**

Abdelmajid Charfi is Professor Emeritus of Arab Civilization and Islamic Thought at the University of Tunis. Prior to this, he was Professor of Arab civilization and Islamic Thought first at the École Normale Superior in Tunis and then at the University of Manouba from 1969 to 2002. Between 2003 and 2005, he served as a member of the Council of the Arab Foundation for Modern Thought. He was a fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin from 1999 to 2000 and held the Chair of Comparative Religions at UNESCO from 1999 to 2003. He is currently the Director of the collection “Ma’alim al Hadatha” and is a member of the editorial board of several journals including *IBLA* (Tunis); *Revue Arabe des Droits de l’Homme* (Tunis); *Islamochristiana* (Rome); and *Prologues, Etudes Maghrébines* (Casablanca). Charfi is the author of numerous internationally acclaimed works including: *L’Avenir de l’islam en Occident et en Orient*; *Damas, Dâr al-fikr* (2008, in collaboration with Murad W. Hofmann); *L’Islam un et multiple* (Beirut, 2006-2009); *L’islam entre le message et l’histoire* (Beirut, 2001, 2nd ed. 2008; French translation, Paris: Albin Michel; Tunis: Sud Editions, 2004; English translation, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010; German and Persian language translations in progress); *Modernisation de la pensée islamique* (Casablanca, 1998; 2nd ed. Beirut, 2009; Persian translation, Tehran, 2003); and *Islam et modernité* (Tunis, 1990; 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Beirut, 2009; Persian translation, Tehran, 2005). He has also published several articles on modern Islamic thought in various journals in both French and Arabic and has lectured extensively at universities throughout Europe.

### **Robert Lee, Professor of Political Science, Colorado College (U.S.)**

Professor Robert Lee has taught in the Political Science Department at Colorado College since 1971. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Columbia University in 1972, having previously received an M.S. in Journalism and an M. A. in Political Science from Columbia, and a B.A. with a major in history from Carleton College. He is a member of the Middle East Studies Association, the American Institute for Maghrib Studies, and the Middle East Institute. His specialty is comparative politics, especially the politics of the Middle East and North Africa, but he also teaches courses on the international relations of the region and other courses in Political Science. Lee’s first book, *Overcoming Tradition and Modernity: The Search for Islamic Authenticity* (Boulder: Westview, 1997), treats the thought of Muhammad Iqbal, Sayyid Qutb, Ali Shariati, and Mohamed Arkoun. Lee also edited and translated Mohamed Arkoun’s *Ouvertures sur l’Islam* (Paris: Grancher, 1992), which was published as *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers* (Boulder: Westview, 1994). His most recent book, *Religion and Politics in the Middle East* (Boulder: Westview, 2010), surveys comparative approaches to the understanding of religion and politics, focusing on four countries: Egypt, Turkey, Iran, and Israel.

### **Andreas Christmann, Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Islam, University of Manchester (U.K.)**

Andreas Christmann received his M.A. (1993) and Ph.D. (1999) from the University of Leipzig where he studied Arabic, Islamic Studies, and Comparative Religion. During his

Ph.D. period he was awarded the Volkswagen-Research-Fellowship and prepared at St. Antony's College in Oxford (1995-1997) to do field work in Syria. Since 1999, he has taught in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at Manchester University and is currently Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Islam and Director of Postgraduate Studies. He has participated in several national and international research groups including a two-year research project on "The Islamic World and Modernity" organized by the Social Science Research Council and the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin, where he took part in the working group on "Islamic Discourse and Modern Muslim scholarship." He was also a participant in the workshop "Multiple Modernities: Between Nation-Building and Muslim Traditions" sponsored by the German-American Research Network and co-organized by the working group on "Muslims, Practices, and the Public Sphere" (Florence, 1999). He is a member of the German Association for the History of Religion (DVRG) and the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies (BRISMES). He has been a member of the *Journal of Semitic Studies* (JSS) editorial board since the year 2000. His most recent publications are *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason: The Essential Muhammad Shahrur* (Leiden, 2009) and *Der Fastenmonat Ramadan und das Fastenabschlussfest 'id al-fitr in Damaskus* (Munich, 2009). He has worked intermittently on the writings of Muhammad Shahrur since his first stay in Damascus in 1995, and in a more focused and systematic way since their first meeting in 2001. *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason* is the first comprehensive introduction in English of Muhammad Shahrur's writings on Islam and the Qur'an, resulting from close collaboration with Muhammad Shahrur since the autumn of 2006.

**Stefan Wild, Professor Emeritus of Semitic Languages and Islamic Studies, University of Bonn (Germany)**

Stefan Wild was Director of the German Oriental Institute in Beirut, Lebanon from 1968 to 1973, Professor of Semitic Languages and Islamic Studies at the University of Bonn from 1974 to 1977, and is now Professor Emeritus at Bonn University. He has written a study on Lebanese place names, has worked on classical Arabic lexicography, on classical and modern Arabic thought and literature, and worked extensively on the Qur'anic text. He was editor and co-editor of *Die Welt des Islams: International Journal for the Study of Modern Islam* (Leiden) from 1982 to 2009. In 2003-2004 he was a Fellow of the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin and in 2005 was awarded the Prize of the Helga and Edzard Reuter Foundation. In October 2010, he gave the H.A.R. Gibb-Lectures at the Center of Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University on the topic of the Qur'an.

**Mohammad Amin Abdullah, Professor of Islamic Studies, Universitas Islam Negari Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta (Indonesia)**

Mohammad Amin Abdullah is currently serving his second term as the Rector of Sunan Kalijaga Islamic State University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia – the first of all the Islamic State Universities, and one of the leading Islamic universities in Indonesia. Dr. Abdullah is well known as an Islamic philosopher who distinguishes normative Islam from historical Islam. Internationally recognized for his role in promoting a modern, pluralistic and tolerant understanding of Islam, Dr. Abdullah helped lead the world's second-largest Muslim organization, the Muhammadiyah, from 2000-2005, when he served as Vice Chairman of its governing board. Born in the regency of Pati, Central Java in 1953, Dr. Abdullah received his Baccalaureate degree from Pesantren Gontor Ponorogo; his Ph.D. in Islamic Philosophy

from the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey; and conducted his post-doctoral study at McGill University in Toronto, Canada. He is the author of numerous books, including *Religious Education in a Multi-Cultural and Multi-Religious Era; Between al-Ghazali and Kant: Islamic Ethical Philosophy; The Dynamism of Cultural Islam; and Islamic Studies in Higher Education*. He is also the author of dozens of articles, and frequently speaks at international seminars in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. Dr. Abdullah is currently engaged in the process of modernizing his institution's curriculum, and expanding its relationships with other leading universities worldwide, while maintaining its links with the past.

**Mahmoud Hussein: Adel Rifaat and Bahgat El Nadi, Political Scientists and Islamologists (France)**

Mahmoud Hussein is the shared pseudonym of Bahgat El Nadi and Adel Rifaat, Egyptian-French political scientists and Islamic scholars born in Egypt, in 1936 and 1938 respectively. El Nadi and Rifaat met for the first time in 1955 during the student demonstrations that shook Egypt after the Bandung Conference. They were both active in the Egyptian democratic leftist movement from 1959 to 1964 and were subsequently incarcerated in Nasser's concentration camps in 1966. Arriving in France, where they established themselves as political refugees, they proceeded to enroll in the Sorbonne and at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. In 1975 they jointly received their doctorate in Political Philosophy. From 1978 to 1998, El Nadi and Rifaat were senior officials at UNESCO, first as members of the cabinet of the Director General, then as co-directors of *UNESCO Courier*, an international cultural monthly published in 30 languages. They are the authors of several internationally-renowned books including: *La lutttes des classes en Egypte* (Paris: Maspéro, 1969); *Arabes et Israéliens, un premier dialogue: avec Saül Friedlander et Jean Lacouture* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1974); *Versant sud de la liberté: essai sur l'émergence de l'individu dans le Tiers-Monde* (Paris: La Découverte, 1989); *Sur l'expédition de Bonaparte en Egypte* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1998); and *AL-SÎRA, le Prophète de l'islam raconté par ses compagnons* (2 vol.) (Paris: Grasset, 2005 and 2007); and *Penser le Coran: La Parole de Dieu contre L'Intégrisme* (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 2009). They have also participated in the creation of several film documentaries including: "Versant sud de la liberté" (France2, 1993); "Sur l'expédition de Bonaparte en Egypte" (France3, 1998); "Lorsque le monde parlait arabe, ou l'âge d'or de l'islam" (France5, 2000).

**Dale F. Eickelman, Professor of Anthropology and Human Relations, Dartmouth College (U.S.)**

Dale F. Eickelman is Ralph and Richard Lazarus Professor of Anthropology and Human Relations at Dartmouth College. He has a M.A. in Islamic Studies from McGill University (Montréal) and a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Chicago. Among his publications are *Public Islam and the Common Good*, co-edited with Armando Salvatore (Boston: Brill, 2004); *Muslim Politics*, co-authored with James Piscatori (Princeton: Princeton University Press, new ed. 2003); *The Middle East and Central Asia: An Anthropological Approach* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. 2002); and *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, co-edited with Jon Anderson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2003). Eickelman is also a former President of the Middle East Studies Association, and since 2003 has served as Senior Advisor to

Kuwait's first private liberal arts university, the American University of Kuwait. He was named a Carnegie Scholar in 2009 for a two-year project, "Mainstreaming Islam: Taking Charge of the Faith," and for the first part of 2010 was concurrently a Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study, Berlin.

### APPENDIX III: MUSTAPHA TLILI'S OPENING STATEMENT

No one here today will doubt that Islam has, in the West, a “bad name.” I leave it to you to conjure all the dramatic instances that prove this statement. The last, you may recall, occurred this summer in Florida where, if not for the intervention of world leaders including President Obama, the Qur'an was to be burned by an obscure pastor of a non-denominational church. The so-called “ground-zero mosque” heightened the drama for weeks this summer to the point where New York City witnessed huge demonstrations for and against the project; political leaders in the City and beyond made their positions part of their bid for office; and, as customary in this country, pundits filled the air-waves with incendiary and often ignorant pronouncements.

Muslims themselves, in this country in particular, do not seem to agree on what being Muslim is about. Those who speak in their name are often driven by a quest for power, and project conflicting images of Islam and different understandings of its holy texts. Whether in this country or in Europe, the non-Muslim public can feel bewildered by the moral, ethical and legal positions articulated by so-called authorized voices of Islam in the West. The multitude of points of view available on the internet amplifies the confusion to an extent unimaginable only a few years ago.

The absence of a central authority in Islamic theology and tradition heightens the anxieties of Muslims and non-Muslims alike regarding Islam. Unsurprisingly, there is a thriving “*fatwa* stock market” (as I call it) in the Muslim world that often relies on the internet to communicate its message, and intentionally frustrates dialogue with other cultures and faiths.

History tells us, however, that the search for a universally recognized truth has been part of Islamic tradition since the advent of the faith more than 14 centuries ago. One can even venture to say that if you strip Islamic history of its competition for political power, what remains can all be articulated in terms of interpretation of the faith, its tenets, and its underpinning fundamental texts – above all, the Qur'an. Various dimensions of Islamic civilization and culture cannot be properly understood if they are not interpreted in light of the context that produced them, whether the impressive openness of Al-Mu'tazila, the fundamentalism of Al-Muwahiddin, or the political and religious agendas of today's Wahabbis.

What makes our moment different is the weight and challenge of globalization, which requires the Muslim world to confront its realities – to look in the mirror of modernity and answer the question of how to be Muslim while being part of world civilization in the 21st century. In the “flat world” of today – in contrast to the times of Al-Mu'tazila or Al-Muwahiddin, or the Wahabbis of the 18th century, or even that of the Islamic reform movement of the 19th century – information is transmitted globally in an instant. The Muslim world can no longer hide certain truths about its lack of economic development, education, women's rights, freedom of expression, rule of law, and regard for our shared humanity. Any open-minded Muslim intellectual or ruler would easily recognize these lacks as plaguing the *umma* today, from Malaysia to Nigeria, from Morocco to Azerbaijan.

Yes, Islam has a bad name -- but let's be truthful, it's not all the fault of its enemies. Islam, I submit, is what Muslims make it to be and, thus, the importance of this symposium. This event could not be happening at a more opportune time, considering the stakes of the relationship between the Muslim and the non-Muslim world, particularly the West. Reading and interpreting the Qur'an, the foundational text of Islam, has always been and will remain the ultimate basis for building an understanding of what it means to be a Muslim. Islam is a faith and a way of life informed by an understanding of the faith. How we interpret the Qur'an is not simply a matter of piety. It has real implications on how Muslim societies, whether yesterday or today, build states, economies, ethical systems, legal systems, and relationships with the non-Muslim world. The science of Qur'anic interpretation has evolved through the centuries. But, if we admit that, as any science, it relies on intellectual tools and categories, we should not hesitate to apply what French philosopher Paul Ricoeur calls "the sciences of suspicion"—the modern human and social sciences—to its interpretation. In fact, I submit that this is the most important challenge that the Muslim world faces today.

Two major thinkers who took up this challenge in the most impressive way and who had planned to be with us here have sadly departed this world. I speak of my former teacher, dear friend, and colleague, Mohamed Arkoun, who passed away two months ago, and the other giant of modern Islamic thought, Professor Nasr Abu Zayd, who I did not know personally but only through his works and correspondence; he passed away last spring. We mourn their deaths and we pay homage to their lives, their intellectual struggles, and to the extraordinary importance of the body of rigorous research they left behind. Generations of Muslims and non-Muslims will look to the work of these two eminent scholars when it is time to ponder the question, what does it mean to be Muslim in the 21st century? There are two other important voices absent from our discussion: the Syrian thinker, Muhammad Shahrur, author of the seminal book, *The Book and the Qur'an: A Contemporary Reading*, and Mohammad Amin Abdullah, the eminent Indonesian scholar of Islam and of the Qur'an in particular. Muhammad Shahrur could not be with us today for health reasons. As for Professor Amin Abdullah, we had hoped until yesterday that he would be present, but he was denied an entry visa.

I intended for these remarks to be both general and provocative, to challenge us to measure up to the task before us; as intellectuals, our foremost duty is to rigorous and clear thought or, as you might say in French, *une pensée sans fard*. Piety serves its purpose, although nobody can ultimately know its role in our salvation. Critical intellect has a different function – one in which the sacred becomes an object for rigorous and clear examination. With everything that we know in the world today, must Islam be simply the Islam of piety? Or can it be the Islam to which Abdelmajid Charfi, Mahmoud Hussein, Amin Abdullah, Muhammad Shahrur, and the late Mohamed Arkoun and Nasr Abu Zayd apply the tools of critical thought? I submit, ladies and gentlemen, that this is the most important question before us in this symposium and before the Muslim world today.