

## **“Islam – Knowledge – Power. Interactions from a Theological and Historical Perspective” February 22 and 23, 2017**

*Report by Alexander Boehmler and Baptiste Brodard*

The conference “Islam – Knowledge – Power. Interactions from a Theological and Historical Perspective” was co-organized by the Swiss Centre for Islam and Society of the University of Fribourg in Switzerland and the Post Graduate Program Islamic Theology from Germany with the support of the Mercator Foundation Switzerland. The evening program on February 22<sup>nd</sup> included a public lecture and a panel discussion, while different panels took place on February 23<sup>rd</sup> in which various scientists reflected on the development of Islamic knowledge and its relationship with the discursive and political order.

### **February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017**

The imam of the Bordeaux mosque (France) Tareq Oubrou was the main lecturer of the evening program. The author of several books, he is one of the most influential Muslim thinkers in the current French context. He opened the international conference with an enthusiastic talk on the quranic revelation, its nature and purposes. He proposed a reformist approach of Islamic



hermeneutics, which aims to be in line with the initial Islamic message transmitted by the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran. First, he described the Quran as an indication. Rather than a point of arrival, it is a starting point which invites the reader to think and to search. In that perspective, the Quran is not the only source of knowledge, which also has to be sought through nature and reason. Therefore Tareq Oubrou identified three books of revelation, which need to be reconciled: the Quran as a revealed book, reason as an internal book and nature as a universal book.

According to the lecturer, the Quran aims to orientate the thinking and to trigger intellectual reflection through poetics. This aspect of the Quran has to be understood by considering the cultural and social environment in which the Quran was revealed, which gave predominance to intuitive knowledge rather than scientific thinking. Islamic sciences were initiated and developed much later by non-Arabs, mostly the Persians and finally taken over by the Ottomans. The meeting of Islam and the philosophy of Aristotle gave birth to speculative theology and hence deeply

influenced the development of Islamic sciences. In the Middle Ages, the *madhab* (which can be quickly defined as a school of Islamic jurisprudence) was understood as a human doctrine and interpretation, which could not be attributed to God but only to a human effort of interpretation. This understanding differs from the current main trend pretending that Islam “speeches” on its own as a unique sacred voice. More recently Salafism fostered this sacralization of human interpretations, hence committing a “fatal” hermeneutical error.

At that point, Tareq Oubrou reminded the audience that the Quran was intended for the whole humanity through the revelation to a specific society (the Arabs of that



period). Hence, he suggested that the separation of dogma and historical elements, as well as the deconstruction of the Islamic heritage, are crucial to reconnect ourselves with the freshness of the Quranic revelation.

In response to the contemporary challenges, Tareq Oubrou proposed a “theology of alterity”. This would be helpful to understand Islam in its current context and to differentiate it from the traditional Islamic jurisprudence developed in the Empire period. Then he gave an interesting insight into the definition of the Quranic word *kāfir* which referred, according to him, to the enemies of the Prophet at his time and not to the non-Muslims of today as the main interpretation suggests. This example emphasizes a larger issue which can be named “identification” and which refers to anachronism. Thereby one should not consider the non-believers of today as the infidels of the Prophet’s period. The Quran must be taken as a reference but not as means of identification in which the Muslim would imagine to have the same role as the Muslims of that period. To conclude, Tareq Oubrou reminded the audience that Islam considers the human being as ontologically good, as it excludes the thesis of original sin.

His presentation was followed by a panel discussion moderated by Mrs. Sandrine Hochstrasser, a journalist at the daily newspaper La Liberté. Besides Tareq



Oubrou, Mrs. Sarah Boulahchiche, a law student involved in local politics, Prof. Dr. Nicolas Hayoz, an expert in political sciences and Prof. Dr. Hansjörg Schmid, the director of the Swiss Centre for Islam and Society were the other panel participants. Among the main points of discussion were questions regarding the tensions between theology and politics with regard to Islam, possible issues and opportunities which could arise in theological, philosophical and political perspectives and the basic tasks linked to the relationship between Muslim knowledge production at the university and public expectations in the European context. Mrs. Boulahchiche emphasized that it



was wrong to think that Muslims are not able to have a Swiss identity. She argued that many of the Muslims nowadays went through a successful process of integration. Prof. Dr. Nicolas Hayoz required the separation between state and religion, which he regarded as a necessity. Tareq Oubrou indicated that the West had still not acknowledged the

fact that the presence of Muslims in Europe was irreversible. He also advocated for a reform of the legal approach of Islam. According to him, this would also solve the problem of Islamism. Prof. Dr Hansjörg Schmid concurred with Imam Oubrou's argument and stressed the importance of developing an understanding and a meaning of reform in the Islamic context.

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## February 23, 2017

Due to illness, the first speaker Prof. Dr. Eric Geoffroy (University of Strasbourg, France) was unable to attend the conference but provided us with his manuscript. Prof. Dr. Serdar Kurnaz (University of Hamburg, Germany) thus began by reading Geoffroy's manuscript, which presented Islam as having embraced plurality from its beginnings. Geoffroy sees in Islamic monotheism, *tawhīd*, a concept implying universality. As the one creator wants plurality in creation, Muslims cannot exclude any person or religion but must work at bringing them together. An outstanding example of this approach is al-Biruni who lived in the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE and took a great interest in South Asian cultures and history, learning Sanskrit and through his writings, presenting his findings in a favorable light to Muslim readers. Geoffroy also mentioned the Sufi "two eyes principle", meaning that unity and plurality should always be seen together. Geoffroy claimed that this approach was dominant amongst Muslims until the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE, when Islamic culture and



theology deteriorated, with localism and isolationist customs taking over. It was especially on this last point that the conference participants could not find agreement, with Kurnaz pointing out earlier epistemological turns and anti-pluralist approaches, for example in Almohad Spain.



Prof. Dr. Reinhard Schulze (University of Bern, Switzerland) highlighted the production of concepts and even knowledge in general in Islamic Theological Studies (ITS) in western universities. Knowledge production in contemporary universities, according to Schulze, usually follows a decisively modern model based on three parts: 1. People claiming to have knowledge must refer to something else as true/real, 2. the audience must accept that something is true/real and 3. the people addressing the audience must be able to justify their claims. Schulze recommended ITS to adopt this model, though he also considered possible the adoption of postmodern approaches such as that suggested by Charles Taylor. When asked, Schulze admitted however that he had not yet considered how an approach based on Taylor could be operationalized in practice. A more general issue Schulze also addressed was how ITS could refer to norms (or rules, as Durkheim calls them) in the Swiss society. He suggested that there should be a plurality of values as opposed to a plurality of norms. All the people in one society must follow common rules such as treating women and men equally. However, several theoretical justifications for doing so are possible and ITS should produce an understanding of Muslim values which can justify Swiss norms. Schulze admits that liberalism in itself is violent and imposes a paradigm shift equivalent only to the Axial Age. But Islam is able to cope with this challenge since it has great experience of incorporating knowledge. Nonetheless, the participants wondered whether the role of ITS could only be to endorse the existing. Should we give up critical reflection on society? A possible answer is that a certain general consent is a precondition for constructive criticism, which would fundamentally endorse Swiss society and its norms, but also point out its flaws, and aim for improvement based on Islamic values, without asking for the adoption of specifically Islamic norms.





The next scheduled speaker was Prof. Dr. Abdolkarim Soroush (University of Santa Clara, USA). As an Iranian living in the United States, he chose not to leave the country due to the political situation, fearing he might not be allowed to return. Schulze's plea for a modern approach was followed by Soroush's decisively postmodern conception of prophecy, presented by Dr. Hureyre Kam (University of Fribourg, Switzerland) in Soroush's absence. For Soroush, prophecy is inspiration, the same experience as that of poets and mystics, but on a higher level. It remained unclear what that higher level consists in or if there is any way to recognize it. Revelation is then defined as content only, whereas the prophets shape the formless,

expressing it in their own words. Soroush further differentiates between religion (*shari'at*), and the understanding of religion, which means to him that religious knowledge is nothing but a series of interpretations of religion. Soroush's preferred interpretative approach is to follow the goals of the prophets. Once again, his absence was felt, as people would have wanted him to clarify what he considers to be such goals, and how he establishes them. Similarly confusing was his understanding of pluralism, which begins with his call not to think in terms of categories of truth and falsehood. Kam commented that he personally could only be convinced to change an opinion if he had a point of truth to refer to. Taking things one step further, Soroush suggested that sincere seekers would be guided to their destination, no matter their path, thereby justifying a pluralism of religions. This thesis did not find agreement in the audience, as people were missing both a means of verification and a logical coherence.

After a well-deserved lunch break, Dr. Mohammad Gharaibeh (University of Bonn, Germany) explained how the Saudi monarchy legitimizes itself through Wahhabi clerics. He described a reciprocal relationship where both sides depend on each other: the monarchy is supported by a religious narrative which frames political criticism as a religious sin, and the Wahhabi scholars are granted the exclusive right to interpret Islam, with Sufi, Shafi'i and Shi'a dissenters being marginalized and often even accused of polytheism. This alliance



has existed since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and since 1924, Wahhabism has been the official religious orientation in the country. With modernization being perceived as a threat to the Wahhabi doctrine, the monarchy made concessions to the religious scholars, such as granting them strong power over the educational system, a Religious Police, and most notably, by establishing total gender segregation throughout the country. Often, even three kinds of public spaces are provided: for men, women and families. It was noted that such a system could only be financed through oil sales. 80% of Saudis work in the public sector, with private jobs being occupied almost exclusively by foreigners.

Gharaibeh went on to give examples for Saudi *fatāwā*, expert advices on juridical questions. Wahhabi's legal methodology includes declaring forbidden things that could lead to something forbidden. This is one of the reasons why women are banned from driving in Saudi Arabia. Driving could lead to forbidden sexual relations or to mothers neglecting their children. Other arguments for the driving ban are so ridiculous that they can only work in the Saudi context, such as the argument that women driving would cause traffic jams, thereby preventing men from getting to work. Responding to questions from the audience, Gharaibeh concluded that Saudi Arabia had no concept of politics and no concept of citizen participation. There were attempts at a national dialogue, but there is no sign that this brought any change. The protocols of the national dialogue on religion are even being kept secret. The only solution Gharaibeh sees would be a clear separation of the religious and political discourses.

A critic of such politicized religious discourse was Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, whose quranic hermeneutics Dr. Nimet Seker (University of Frankfurt, Germany) spoke about next. In 1992, Abu Zaid, who was an assistant professor of Arabic literature in



Cairo, applied for a full professor position. His application was refused at first, because Abdel-Sabour Shahin, a Friday preacher and leading member of President Hosni Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP) accused him of heresy on the basis of his understanding of the Quran. Shahin also owned Rayyan, an Islamic investment company criticized by Abu Zayd for exploiting the religious feelings of people for material gain. When Abu Zayd got promoted, a group of people including Shahin asked the courts to dissolve Abu Zayd's marriage to Ibtihal Younes, since a non-Muslim man cannot be married to a Muslim woman according to Egyptian law. Following the principle of *hisba*, any person could file a lawsuit when they thought Islamic Law was violated. The point of the trial was to prove that Abu Zayd had apparently left Islam. A court granted that request in 1995, forcing Abu Zayd and

Younes to flee to the Netherlands. There, Abu Zayd taught at the University of Utrecht. Abu Zayd's Qur'anic hermeneutics is linked to his criticism of the contemporary discourse, and he insists on historicizing Qur'anic speech, using an approach based on linguists such as Roman Jakobson and Yuri Lotman. Classical scholars, according to Abu Zayd, follow a theocentric approach, neglecting the role of the primary audience. And whereas for classical exegesis, interpretations of the first generations of Muslims are normative, Abu Zayd insists that every interpretation is historical and every generation has its own interpretations.

Ufuk Topkara M.A. (University of Paderborn, Germany) carried on with a presentation on the theme of the concept of justice in Islam. He began by explaining his approach and methodology: he claimed the right for Muslims to think about and to give an interpretation of Islam. He then mentioned Sayyid Qutb and his use of the concept of “social justice”, which he borrowed from the Marxist ideology and incorporated in his own theology. Ufuk Topkara continued by exploring the concept of justice with the figure of Miskawayh, who borrowed many ideas from the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. He therefore linked the concept of justice with the idea of happiness. Here he pointed out a difference between these two great philosophers, as Plato thought that happiness was reachable only in the hereafter while Aristotle claimed that it was possible to reach it even in this life. Besides, he reminded the audience that Shi'a acknowledges five principles in theology. He finally emphasized the link between happiness and justice in the perspective of Islam.

The conference carried on with Prof. Dr. Roel Meijer (University of Nijmegen, Netherlands) by focusing on the political, politics and citizenship with the description of the political as the higher and more abstract level of politics, which focuses on the transcendent, foundational identity and legitimacy and which belongs to the field of political



philosophy. Conflicts were then presented as the essence of politics. Besides, law, power and knowledge have been separated in the process of modernity. The political has been absorbed by cultural anthropology, Islamic law, Islamic studies and political science. The study of different elements of the political, such as “*maqāṣid al-shari‘a*” or “*maṣlahā*” can indicate a separation of politics and religion. The abstraction at a higher level can also enable the extraction of some principles from the texts. Five different ways of understanding the political within Islam can be illustrated by the following figures:

- Muhammad ‘Abduh (Modernism): concepts of *işlah*, *maşlahā*, *sa‘āda*, *al-dalīl al-‘aqlī*, *ijtihād*, *‘ilm*, etc., are used.
- Hasan al-Banna (Islamism): Islam is here understood as an ideology and “comprehensive system”.
- Sayyid Qutb: The Jihad as politicide.
- Yusuf al-Qaradawi (*al-wasāṭiyya*): the re-emergence of the political, politics and citizenship.
- New Trends: Jasser Anda (*maqāṣid al-shari‘a*).

Esmā Isis-Arnautovic, PhD student at the Swiss Centre for Islam and Society concluded the event by summing up the conference in four aspects:

1. The conference reflected on different types, conditions, sources, methods, locations and objects of knowledge. Concerning this various elements a deeper analysis of terms and their relations is necessary.
2. The discussion of true/good and false/bad knowledge led us to the field of action and ethics. Herein is a need for a reflection on doubt as a disturbing or even fruitful variable for the political and theological context.
3. Although the *madrāsa* as classical type of educational institution was not mentioned during the conference, it is obviously a place where knowledge and power intertwine. A deeper insight into the *madrāsa* could help us to understand the institutional organization, selection and classification of knowledge as well as the different expectation knowledge is confronted with from a political, societal and epistemological point of view.
4. A very important subject is the function of knowledge. It serves for educational, salvation and ruling proposes or as an instrument for social change. Thus, when producing knowledge we should consider for which purpose and whom for.

Concerning the set-up of Islamic-theological studies in the European context and further research it is important to take these four aspects into account.

Ufuk Topkara concluded by recalling the systematic composition of Islamic knowledge, which gathers many fields and various interpretations. This fact raised the question of identification, choice and legitimacy of various scholars’ viewpoints within the community.

