

The Alexandria Dialogues

some reflections

Jan Henningsson

To me, the Alexandria dialogues 2003-2007 were a journey during which I reconnected with lines of thought, that were very central to my own research in the 1980's and 1990's, especially Hasan Hanafi's neo-scholastic philosophy. But I was also – most inspiringly – immersed in that intellectual atmosphere which characterizes the circle of Arab critical thinkers, convened annually by the Egyptian Philosophical Society. Here, I was allowed to eavesdrop – yes, even participate – when colleagues from the Sudan and Syria, from Algeria and Iraq, from Yemen and Egypt, discussed issues in epistemology, hermeneutics and social philosophy. It was particularly gratifying for us, in the Swedish Institute, to be able to offer a forum for free debate, a safe-house, as it were, for those who wished to test new, potentially controversial, ideas. Another very promising development is the fact that our Arab colleagues have been increasingly eager to invite non-Arab thinkers into their midst, in order to widen the horizon and better to understand the ongoing intercultural interaction that I mention, briefly, below.

Epistemology

The first phenomenon that caught my attention was the unabashed debate about the fundamentals of human knowledge. Here, Hasan Hanafi stands out as leading figure. His works often carry titles that denote a process – “From doctrine to revolution”, “From tradition to reason”, et c. – indicating a movement from the

religious towards the secular, from the memorized towards the analyzed. At first glance, one could be tempted to regard this as an example of the “farewell syndrome” that Jürgen Habermas criticizes in his “Nachmetaphysisches Denken” (1985), i.e. that Hanafi is prefixing the famous “post-“ to those schools of thought that he seems to leave behind. But such an interpretation would be a misunderstanding. For Hanafi does not believe in cognitive ruptures, but in continuity, and in this, I believe, he is highly representative of the spirit of most Arab cultures. Thus – being close to the hearts and minds – Hanafi (not unlike S H Nasr) appears to be a very effective and credible intellectual guide for contemporary Muslims, not least for those perplexed by the many options put forth by (post)modernity.

Looking deeper into Hanafi’s work, we can observe a diachronic dimension, where he historicizes his Islamic thought – and encouraging the ‘*ulama*’ and *fuqaha*’ to do the same – as well as a synchronic dimension, where he studies the intercultural dynamics in the development of contemporary philosophy. (In fact, the Alexandria dialogue 2006 was largely dedicated to a critique of Hanafi’s thought, presented by a number of his disciples, now themselves distinguished teachers and professors.)

Reading an encyclopedic work such as “Introduction to the Science of Occidentalism” (1991), one may come under the impression that Hanafi is trying to unify: East and West, Christian and Muslim, religious and secular, memory and discovery. But to describe this as a kind of synthesism would be to oversimplify. Instead, Hanafi’s vision and ambition is to combine the opposites, while retaining the dynamism specific to each pole in the field of tension, without trying to neutralize or harmonize. I call this “neoscholasticism”, a metaphor for which could be Hanafi’s own

image of *shari'ah* and reason as twins, being nursed at the same bosom... Another way of putting it is to highlight the ancient concept of wisdom, *hikmah*, in which ethics and epistemology, revelation and reason, are intertwined. Indeed, Hanafi has done more than any other modern Arab Muslim thinker to remedy the divorce between *falsafah* and *hikmah*, thus paving the way for Euro-Arab dialogue about the parameters of scientific research and the quest for truth.

It was against the background of such ideas, that I proposed to invite Christian philosophers in order to discuss the well-worn dichotomy (if that is what it is) between faith and reason, with special – and obvious! – reference to the magisterial letter (encyclica) sent to the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church by the late Pope John Paul II, under the title “Fides et Ratio”, (1994). I believe that the soundness of this approach was eminently borne out by the Alexandria dialogue in December 2007, in which two high representatives of the Vatican took part, (Prof. Etienne Renaud and Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald).

Hermeneutics

Another, related topic, has to do with hermeneutics, the modern science of textual analysis, or simply “reading”, terms for which there are several corresponding Arabic words already found in the Qur'an (most importantly in Surat Al Imran). Here, Hamid Nasr Abu Zayd is the undisputed trail-blazer among contemporary Arabs. Suffice it, here, to refer to his book “The road of reason in exegesis” (1996).

Abu Zayd was one of Hanafi's earliest disciples, and has remained faithful to his teacher even through difficult times of enforced exile. The first topic we asked Abu Zayd to discuss with us in Alexandria was “renewal of religious discourse” (2004), which he

did successfully – and in an intensely emotional atmosphere – among his former colleagues, whom he had had to leave eight years earlier.

But when local Egyptian media came in at the end of the seminar, recording an in-depth interview with Abu Zayd and others about the meaning of this “renewal”, it became clear that the ground was not yet prepared. The interview was never broadcast, and press coverage was unusually meagre. That picture has changed over the years, however, and ensuing visits by Abu Zayd to Alexandria have been less fraught with fearful overtones.

Social philosophy

A distinctive feature of many, if not all, Arab philosophers is their visibility in the media, their perceived relevance in terms of being involved in ongoing political and cultural battles and, thus, their potential influence on the informed public opinion. In Europe, to select topics such as “the philosophy of resistance” and “state and citizenship” would certainly be more common among sociologists than among philosophers. Indeed, Pope John Paul II rebuked contemporary Western thinkers for being abstruse ivory-tower dwellers, thus abandoning the task of enlightening the public, i.e. that mission which Noam Chomsky called “the responsibility of the intellectual”.

However, through the Alexandria dialogues we have come to see, at close hand, just how committed Arab philosophers can be to those causes which lie at the very heart of their peoples. The weak point – possibly the only serious deficit – in our seminars is the relative absence of Islamist voices. But, although several efforts are made over and over again both within and outside the

Arab world, it is still notoriously difficult to arrange academic-style encounters between those various schools of thought that today dominate the Arab scene. In December 2007, the Swedish Institute hosted a conference on "Islam and Nationalism", organized by the Centre for Arab Unity Studies. There were certainly some voices who could not, and would not, be easily harmonized. But many obstacles – socio-political as well as epistemological – remain to be overcome, before believers and seekers can sit around the same table in that respectful and frank manner that has been the hall-mark of our Alexandria dialogues.

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