"THE FORM IS PERMANENT, BUT THE CONTENT MOVES": THE QUR’ANIC TEXT AND ITS INTERPRETATION(S) IN MOHAMAD SHAHROUR’S ‘AL-KITĀB WA ’L QUR’ĀN’

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Introduction

The appropriate term to describe the approach of the Damascene writer Mohamad Shahrour1 to the study of the Qur’an is defamiliarization: it describes the process in which language is used in such a way that its use suddenly attracts attention and is immediately perceived as uncommon, as deprived of ‘automization, as deautomized’. Defamiliarization is a subversive strategy to describe an object of art ‘as if one were seeing it for the first time’; its aim is to counteract conventional ‘habitualization’ in the way of reading art so that eventually very familiar objects become unexpectedly unfamiliar to the reader.2

What Mohamad Shahrour has in common with the Russian Formalists and the Prague School of Literary Theory, in which the terms ‘defamiliarization’ and ‘habitualization’ originated, is the explicit wish to undermine the well-established canon of interpretations and to suggest alternative ways of reading a text. He wants his readers to understand the Qur’an ‘as if the Prophet has just died and informed us of this book’ (ka’anna al-nabi tuwwaffiya ḥadīthan wa-ballaghanā

* This article will also be published in: Suha Taji-Farouki (ed.): Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur’an. (Series of the Institute for Ismaili Studies, London), forthcoming.

1 In spite of many different spellings, this article adopts the way M. Shahrour himself transliterates his name in non-Arabic correspondence. Other versions are kept if quoted in titles and citations.


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hâdha l-kinâb), i.e. as if they were seeing it for the first time. This is meant to be a comprehensive programme of challenging traditional perspectives on the Qur’an, which he regards as being corrupted by the ‘inherited dubious axioms’ (al-musallâmat al-maurûtha al-mush-kila) of the Islamic discourse. Shahrour wants to demonstrate that the exact opposite of what ‘habitualized’, ‘automized’ interpretations say, is true. It is no wonder, then, that his books have become a permanent object of fierce debate and criticism in the Arab-Muslim world. They have also started to draw some attention in Western academic circles interested in Islamic reform and liberal thought in modern Islam. However, although Shahrour has already been labelled as the ‘Immanuel Kant in the Arab World’ or as ‘a Martin Luther of Islam’ and his books as an ‘equivalent of the 95 Theses that Martin Luther nailed to the door of the Wittenberg Castle church in 1517’, to introduce and explain his work to the Western reader is still a desideratum. For a better appreciation of his style and approach it is necessary first to introduce some biographical details of Mohamad Shahrour’s life.

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4 This is taken from his first book al-Kitâb wa’l-qur’ân: qirâ’a mu‘asira (cited hereafter as KQ), 1992, pp. 44, also repeated in an interview with Mohamad Shahrour by the journalist Ali al-Atasi in: inamo. no. 23/24, 6, Autumn/Winter 2000, “Ein Staat, wo kein Zwang in der Religion besteht”—A state in which there is no religious coercion, pp. 75-79.
5 KQ, p. 47.
6 See footnotes 19-27.