

The Islam of Sayyid Qutb

A COMPARISON TO CLASSICAL ISLAMIC THOUGHT

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uring the time of Western expansion in the Middle East, the identity of the general Middle Eastern population went through a number of changes that would later influence how the region viewed the Western world. Sayyid Qutb grew up in the Middle East in the early twentieth century as the region was establishing its identity, struggling to meld the traditional and modern. Qutb became a vocal opponent of Western society and worked to persuade Muslims everywhere of the need to return to tradition, reject Western culture, and devote themselves to God. Although his radical views ultimately brought about his execution, his death did little to stop the spread of his ideas, which were soon adopted by Islamist terrorist groups across the Middle East. Though Qutb refers to some of the earliest Islamic Prophetic Sunnah to make his points, the overall message of his *Milestones* does not agree with the Classical

Islamic sources. By looking at the Qur'an, Quranic commentary, Hadith, and other sources of the Islamic Prophetic tradition, it can be shown that Qutb's views are not Islamic.

A Short Biography of Sayyid Qutb

In 1906, in the Egyptian village of Musha, Sayyid Qutb was born into a well-respected, educated family. His father, Qutb Ibrahim, was a farmer and a political activist in the local branch of the Egyptian Nationalist Party.¹ His mother, Fatimah, was a very devout Muslim who encouraged him to obtain a good education and memorize the Qur'an, which he accomplished by the age of ten.² During the 1919 revolt in Egypt, Qutb's primary school was closed, and his family soon moved to Cairo. He was later enrolled in a preparatory school in Cairo and then enrolled at *Dar al-'Ulum* in 1929, graduating with a Bachelor's Degree in Arts of Education.

During his years in Cairo, Qutb composed poetry and wrote essays that were published in Egyptian journals, including *al-Hayat al-Jadidah* ("The New Life") and *al-Balagh* ("Proclamation"). At the age of nineteen, Sayyid Qutb published his earliest poem in *al-Balagh*, in which he attacked British policies and defended Egypt's current leader, Sa'd Zaghlul.³ Qutb distinguished himself in his field and upon his graduation was employed at the university as an instructor. Following that, he worked in the Egyptian Ministry of Education.⁴ In 1939, Qutb began pursuing a career in literary criticism, which brought him back to the Qur'an. At this point, he started to examine the Qur'an beyond its religious qualities and to contemplate it as a book of law.⁵

Qutb's hatred of Western ideology became more prominent. He thought the Middle East's imitation of the West's replacement of moral and religious values with modern inventions and material possession was a mistake. His hatred of the West intensified in 1942 when President Truman began supporting a Jewish

homeland in Palestine.⁶ Sayyid Qutb further solidified his distaste for Western society in 1948, when he enrolled at the International Center for Teaching Languages in Washington, D.C. and then at the Colorado State College of Education.⁷ Qutb visited the United States at the emergence of the sexual revolution, a period marked by great debate on morality, love, sex, and relationships. Qutb grew uncomfortable during his time in the United States, and deepened his disapproval of American values.

Qutb also joined church groups to observe how Americans worshipped God. He noted that the church functioned primarily as a place to meet with friends, not as a place of worship.⁸ Both genders worshipped together, and churches competed to attract parishioners. In his book *Amrika allati Ra'aytu*, he expresses disgust for a priest who promoted fun and dancing at a church event, believing the priest acted merely as stage manager.⁹ When Qutb returned to Egypt, his career plans had changed:

"Two events in particular from his sojourn in the United States made him entertain joining the Muslim Brethren. The first was 'the happy and joyous American reception' in 1949 of the assassination of Hasan al-Bannā, the founder of the Muslim Brethren. The second was meeting with a 'British agent,' identified by Qutb as James Heyworth-Dunne, who told him

Emblem of the Muslim Brotherhood. © Maher Attar/Syigma/Corbis



that the Muslim Brethren was the only movement that stood as a barrier to Western civilization in the East. Dunne also showed Qutb 'intelligence reports' on al-Banna and his organization."¹⁰

After joining the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1950s, Qutb became the chief managing editor of the weekly Brotherhood journal, which was banned in 1954 on suspicions of conspiracy. A majority of the Muslim Brotherhood, including Qutb, was jailed, and the organization lost followers, even though the court could not find enough evidence to convict the members of the Brotherhood.¹¹

Qutb spent the rest of his life working with the Muslim Brotherhood and publishing his radical Islamic books. Much of his work on the Qur'an was written during his time in prison. Upon his release in 1964, he gained approximately one hundred followers, and together, they worked to plan the assassination of major Egyptian governmental figureheads, as well as the destruction of national infrastructure.¹² After being arrested for these activities, Qutb and other leaders within the Muslim Brotherhood were hanged in 1966.¹³ Qutb's execution marked the government's move to curtail the spread of his ideas and of the Muslim Brotherhood. This plan backfired, angering the extended family of Qutb, increasing the number of others, and inspiring Qutb's followers to publish his works. His brother Muhammad Qutb fled Egypt and began teaching Sayyid's works in Saudi Arabia. Qutb's ideas were widely read and implemented by radical Islamists, including Osama Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, 'Abdallah Azzam, and more.¹⁴

Milestones

Of the numerous books written by Sayyid Qutb,



Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. © Reuters/Corbis

his most renowned, *Milestones*, was the work that ultimately led to his re-arrest and execution in 1966. In this text, he emphasizes the need to return to a time when Islamic law reigned supreme but believed that only a complete annihilation of the current system would guarantee the formation of an ideal society. Qutb's primary idea, expressed in every chapter of *Milestones*, is that humanity has devolved into *Jahiliyyah*, or "the Age of Ignorance," which represents the time prior to the Qur'an.

The message of God revealed to Muhammad, delivered believers out of the time of ignorance. Notably, the Qur'an differentiates between those who are ignorant of the message and those who are *kafirs*, or disbelievers. According to Islam, disbelievers have no chance at Paradise following the Day of Judgment. For this reason, the claim that all Muslim societies are *jahili* societies is inaccurate. Qutb most likely took the idea of continued *Jahiliyyah* from verse 5:50 of the Qur'an: "Is it judgment of the Age of Ignorance that they seek? And who is fairer in judgment than God, for a people who are certain,"¹⁵ which alludes to the possibility of 'ignorance' happening at any point in time. However, the 'Age of Ignorance' in general should not be associated with Muslims.

Qutb's continuous use of the word *Jahiliyyah*

“Thus, it is the imperative of those who read Qutb’s teachings today to develop a critical perspective.”

and his definition implies that ‘current Muslims are not true Muslims.’ However, the Qur’an specifically tells Muslims not to accuse the other of disbelief. Accusing a Muslim of apostasy is a practice in Islamic law called takfir, which if unjustly declared, is considered impermissible by every school of Islamic law. Ironically, Qutb himself was unable to follow the Qur’an’s most basic injunctions.

Though Qutb’s idea of *Jahiliyyah* as expressed in *Milestones* differs in definition from the ‘Age of Ignorance’ with which Muslims are most familiar, earlier Islamist radicals, among them Nadwi and Mawdudi, had also used the term to describe “a trans-historical reality definitionally opposite to Islam.”¹⁶ Although “Qutb described himself as someone who lived in the *Jahiliyyah* for many years devoting himself to the quest for knowledge and studying whatever sciences came to his hand,”¹⁷ Qutb’s claim that he lived in *Jahiliyyah* due to his quest for knowledge can be seen as a gross contradiction to the classical Islamic view to actively seek knowledge.

In *Milestones*, he discourages the current Muslim population from striving to compete with Western industry and to instead focus primarily on establishing a new world order focused on submission to God. “The Muslim community today is neither capable of nor required to present before mankind any great genius in material inventions, which will make the world bow its head before its supremacy and thus re-establish once more its world leadership.”¹⁸ Qutb believes that seeking knowledge distracts from religious obligations but claims later that Islam supports education, including a secular one. His claim that God wants Muslims to stop educating themselves goes against a number of prophetic Sunnah within the Islamic tradition. An example of this can be seen in a *sahih* hadith composed by at-Tirmidhi, which states that the Prophet Muhammad encouraged Muslims to seek knowledge as a way of understanding God: “Whoever takes a path upon which to

obtain knowledge, Allah makes the path to Paradise easy for him.”¹⁹

An entire chapter of *Milestones* is dedicated to the Islamic idea of Jihad. According to Qutb, “the Jihad of Islam is to secure complete freedom for everyman throughout the world by releasing him from his servitude to other human beings so that he may serve his God.”²⁰ This passage presents an extremist interpretation of Jihad, especially since Qutb believed that the only way to obtain ‘freedom’ was the destruction of *jahili* society

The permission to fight granted by God in Quranic verses is interpreted by Qutb to mean that those who do not dedicate their life to God are the ones who should be fought and that it is the right of the ‘true Muslim’ to fight against those who oppose the Message of the Prophet Muhammad. In *Milestones*, Qutb concludes with the following:

*“In the verse giving permission to fight, God has informed the Believers that the life of this world is such that checking one group of people by another is the law of God, so that the earth may be cleansed of corruption [...] this struggle is not a temporary phase but an eternal state—an eternal state, as truth and falsehood cannot co-exist on this earth.”*²¹

What is interesting about this interpretation is that the majority of *tafsir* concerning verses 22:39-40 of the Qur’an addresses these verses as circumstantial, particularly referring to the state of the Muslim community during the *hijra* to Medina following their expulsion by the Quraysh tribe of Mecca. Ibn Abbas explains that the interpretation of this “permission to fight” is directed solely at the permission to fight against the Meccan oppressors of the early Muslim community.²²

For this reason it can be concluded that Qutb’s belief in the Muslim right to fight non-believers solely for their misbelief is misplaced and that his

hatred for Western culture caused him to stretch the verse to meet his needs. He further uses his hate for Judaism and Europe's support of Israel to blame Jews for Western expansionism.²³

Though the Qur'an often takes an ambiguous stance towards Christians and Jews, it does acknowledge that their holy books contain the word of God. Though the path laid out by Muhammad is regarded as the "straight path" to God and therefore believed to be the most truthful of God's Revelations, the Qur'an does state that all People of the Book have a chance at Paradise. The Qur'an generally puts forth an amicable attitude toward the People of the Book, and for this reason it can be Sayyid Qutb's anger for the Jews is not based on the Qur'an but instead on the political events of the Middle East.

Conclusion

This paper sets the framework for discounting some of the unfounded interpretations put forth by radicalized Islamist groups. Due to the Islamic teaching that the Qur'an can and should be interpreted in many different ways, Sayyid Qutb and his ideas cannot be considered wholly non-Islamic. However, although the works of Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* in particular, use the Qur'an to validate his claims, it can be shown that Qutb's thoughts and ideas are not based on the religious laws set forth by God in the Qur'an and the hadith of the Prophet, but are the extreme prejudice of an individual who feels as though his culture has been destroyed by Western society. Thus, it is the imperative of those who read Qutb's teachings today to develop a critical perspective towards the interpretation of Islam used to justify their actions.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Adnan A. Musallam, *From Secularism to Jihad: Sayyid Qutb and the Foundation of Radical Islamism*. (Westport: Praeger, 2005), 29.
- 2 Ahmad S. Moussalli, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Ideological and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb*, (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1992), see Chapter 1.

- 3 Ibid, 35.
- 4 Moussalli, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism*, see Chapter 1.
- 5 Ibid, 58
- 6 Ibid, 85-86.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid, 28-30.
- 9 Ibid, 26-28.
- 10 Ibid, 30.
- 11 Ibid, 31.
- 12 Ibid, 37.
- 13 Ibid, 38.
- 14 Musallam, *From Secularism to Jihad*, 169-192.
- 15 Translations of Quranic passages are from *The Study Quran*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Maria Dakake, Caner Dagli, Joseph Lumbard, and Muhammad Rustom, Verse 5:50.
- 16 Shepard, *Sayyid Qutb's Doctrine of Jahiliyya*, 533.
- 17 Moussalli, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism*, 19.
- 18 Qutb, *Milestones*, 10.
- 19 Jami' at-Tirmidhi 2646, Vol. 5, Book 39, Hadith 2646.
- 20 Qutb, *Milestones*, 70.
- 21 Qutb, *Milestones*, Pp. 64-65.
- 22 Tafsir Ibn 'Abbas, trans. Mokrane Guezzou (Amman: Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2013), Surah 22, v. 39.
- 23 Qutb, *Milestones*, Pg. 111.