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**AUTOBIOGRAPHY, POLITICS
AND IDEOLOGY IN SAYYID QUTB'S
READING OF THE QUR'AN**

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ABSTRACT

The Egyptian Islamist ideologue Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) is a founding figure of modern Sunni militancy. The West knows Sayyid Qutb through the prism of his *Milestones*, the 1964 manifesto urging a Qur'anic revolution against illegitimate Muslim regimes. However, it was Qutb's commanding Qur'anic interpretation, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, which provided the rich lodestone for *Milestones*. In the Muslim world, moderates and militants alike have found sanctuary *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, making it a unique work that cannot be ignored. Offered below is a detailed analysis of Qutb's work, focused primarily on *juz amma* (the last thirtieth) of the Qur'an, which is considered the key entree for Muslims who seek a return to faith. Sensitive yet uncompromising, *In the Shade of the Qur'an* adroitly rehearses at a personal and political level the combat between a pristine Islam and all other profane systems, with the final objective of establishing a supreme Islamic order.

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY, POLITICS AND IDEOLOGY IN SAYYID QUTB'S READING OF THE QUR'AN

Introduction

The Egyptian Islamist ideologue Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) earned his reputation as the beacon of modern Sunni militancy because of a slim tract that earned him his death sentence. Known to the English-speaking world variously as “Milestones” or “Signposts along the Way” (*Ma'alim fi al-Tariq*), Qutb's martyrdom made the work an ‘icon-text’ for many militant Islamist movements.¹ The 1964 manifesto promoted a Leninist scheme whereby the vanguard would inspire the masses with a transformative revolutionary consciousness drawn from the Qur'an. This pure Qur'anic generation (*al-jil al-Qur'an*) would then divorce itself from a fallen society and prepare for the overthrow of all illegitimate regimes, which feigned Muslim piety but promoted infidel systems. Aimed in particular at Nasserite Egypt, the manifesto urged the construction of a truly Islamic order (*al-nizam al-Islami*). It motivated an uprising in Egypt barely a decade later, mounted by the *Jama'at al-Takfir wa al-Hijra* (Society of Excoriation and Exodus/Repentance and Holy Flight). The uprising failed, but word of the manifesto spread.

Consistently apocalyptic and adversarial in tone and substance, Qutb's manifesto inevitably attracted an audience of committed militants and curious malcontents. But on the other hand, Qutb's comprehensive and wide-ranging Qur'anic exegesis, “In the Shade of the Qur'an” (*Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* and hereafter referred to as *Zilal*), has mustered a wider and more heterodox audience in the Middle East and beyond.² Meditative and confrontational in turns, in its original form, *Zilal* comprises

¹ Carre, Olivier, *Mysticism and Politics – A critical reading of Fi Zilal al-Qur'an by Sayyid Qutb* (1906-1966), Translated from the French by Carol Artigues and Revised by W. Shepard, (Boston 2003), p. 13

² For example, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* is taught as a set *tafsir* text in some Islamic Colleges. For example, in South Africa, to take merely one example of its influence, see http://www.icoso.co.za/courses/bth_degree/tafsir_301.php. Interestingly, the American Qur'anic scholar Amina Wadud Mushin has used Qutb's *Zilal* for her emancipatory, gendered readings of the Qur'an, even as Al-Qaeda number two Ayman Zawahiri had expressed his profound identification with other aspects of Qutb's writing.

a unique compendium of *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis) spanning some eight volumes.³ Yet *Zilal* is not merely a product of pious concentration on the Qur'an. *Zilal* exhibits elements of autobiography, albeit expressed indirectly, and it is resolutely political and ideological in a good number of its interpretations of the holy text. It was the commanding *Zilal* that provided the rich lodestone for the shorter manifesto's call for a Qur'anic revolution, and it remains a text popular among moderates and militants alike.

Qutb began composing his magnum opus in 1951, soon after his drift into a more political Islam but before his hardening into a radical Islamist. His earliest effort at *tafsir* brought him halfway through *Surah 2*, the Qur'an's longest *surah*, or chapter. This was serialized in a journal, *al-Muslimin*.⁴ But Qutb's final work spanned the entire Qur'an, which is divided into 30 parts of roughly equal length to facilitate recitation over the nights of a month, especially the month of Ramadan. Overall, *Zilal*'s appeal rests on its author's adroit use of *adeeb* (literary) methods to generate interest in an ideologically charged interpretation of the Qur'an. It is one that conditions its adherents to see a bipolar world of difference and division pit between pure Islam and modern paganism.

The Qur'anic commentary was completed during Qutb's decade of imprisonment for involvement in the notorious secret cell of the Muslim Brotherhood. He had been implicated in an assassination plot against the populist radical Egyptian President Gamel Abdel Nasser. The secret cell, and more generally, the Brotherhood, served as the prototype for modern, militant Sunni Islamist movements. The Brotherhood's centerpiece ideology of *Salafism* undertook a radical re-interpretation of the faith. Drawing from what it imagined to be the well-springs of the faith, the ideology harked back to Islam's 7th century antecedents by sanctifying the way of the pious forebears (*al-salaf al-salih*).

³ Moussalli, Ahmed S, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Ideological and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb* (Beirut, 1992), p. 48

⁴ Preface to Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, Revised Edition, Volume 1, Surah 1-2, Islamic Foundation 2003, xii.

Although it is written from the perspective of Sunni fundamentalism, the pan-Islamic appeal of Qutb's *tafsir* attracted Shiite radicals. It was translated into Persian and reportedly even made an impact on Ayatollah Khomeini, the father of modern Shi'ite fundamentalism. In the broader Sunni world, the redaction and propagation of Qutb's work was undertaken by his brother Muhammed Qutb, a key figure behind Saudi Arabia's *sahwa* (Islamist awakening and return to faith) of the eighties and nineties. The *sahwa* reconciled Sayyid Qutb's and the Muslim Brotherhood's urban *salafism* with the desert *salafism* of the puritanical, Saudi state-sponsored *Wahhabism*.⁵ Muhammed Qutb worked hard to make his brand of *Salafism* palatable to his conservative Saudi hosts. However, he was in a sense hoist by his own petard. The popularity of Qutb's *tafsir* produced a reaction among the *Wahhabi* clerical establishment. Dismissed as 'exegesis-lite' that was both sentimental and over-literary, Qutb's *tafsir* provoked a genre of refutation in an effort to suppress further translation and propagation of his work.⁶

⁵ Giles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds – Islam and the West* (London, 2004), p. 175-176.

⁶ The Bombay-based, Wahhabi-inspired outfit Ansaar-us-Sunnah Library and Research Center, runs a popular website known as [Allaahuakbar.Net](http://www.allaahuakbar.net), describing itself as "a Presentation of the Aqeedah (creed), Manhaj (methodology) and Ibaadah (worship) of the earlier Generations, known as the Salaf-us-Saaliheen". It publishes refutations of Qutb's work in classic Wahhabi-Salafi style, which discourages disparagement or criticism as a tool that may eventually be used against the establishment, and notes censure of Qutb in an elliptical style: "Muhammad Tawfeeq Barakaat in his book 'Sayyid Qutb Khulaasatu Hayaatihi' (p.176-177) said: In these pages we shall try - with the help of Allaah - to state the most important criticisms that have been directed at Sayyid Qutb - may Allaah have mercy upon him - whether it is positive or negative, trying to do that to the best of our capability. And to the extent of my knowledge, there has not appeared any Muslim writer who has been promoted to such a high level, or whose position has been disparaged and reduced to a low level as the likes of Sayyid Qutb - and we are not fostering this second aspect [i.e Qutb's disparagement]. Let us then look at some of the things that have been said about him, generally:

It has been said: That he is a new prophet for a specific Jamaa'ah of the Muslims

It has been said: That he does not know what comes out of his head, the strong sentiments and fluency of the language led him to words which are but useless [no meaning behind them]

It has been said: That he is a man of imaginations/ideas, he makes his rulings upon whims and he flies in the wind/breeze of the soul therefore he does not correctly know the true state of affairs

It has been said: That he used to speak about the ahkaam (rulings) of the Sharee'ah without having any knowledge whatsoever of fiqh

It has been said: That he desires to bring about a massive barrier between the Muslims and the Islamic fiqh

It has been said: That he desired to cut the people off from the books of tafseer with the use of sentimental words in his Zilaal

It has been said: That he declared all the Muslims to be disbelievers and did not leave save a few people who were still revolving around Islam.

And many more things have been said about him"

See http://www.allaahuakbar.net/jamaat-e-islami/qutb/mistakes_and_innovations_of_sayyid_qutb.htm

Undeterred, Qutb's *tafsir* continued to attract a readership in the Arab world and beyond. It enjoys a reputation as the one of the most popular and reader-friendly *tafsir* available. Along with Persian, it has been translated into Urdu, Bengali, Malay and Turkish.⁷ Funding for the first English translation of *Zilal* was supplied by the King Abdul Aziz University of Jeddah and a Jeddah-based construction company, Kara Establishment.⁸ The first part translated into English was Part 30, the final part (*juz' 'amma* or the last 1/30th)⁹ which begins with *surah* 78 and ends with *surah* 114. Part 30 accounts for 5% of Qutb's entire exegetical commentary. It contains the most number of *surahs* since these are mainly sign-passages and short *surahs*. These closing *surahs* are nearly all from the earliest revelations at Mecca and form a distinct group of apocalyptic signs, events, warnings and cataclysms of the end-times (*al-akhira*), as well as fundamental questions of belief and creed (*aqidah*).¹⁰

My own analysis restricts itself to this final 1/30th of the Qur'an, the key entrée for many in the Muslim world who seek a rediscovery of their faith. Qutb believed that the early Meccan experience, before the Prophet's emigration *hijra* to Medina, could also offer powerful lessons for modern Islamic revolutionary practice.¹¹ I will examine his *tafsir's* language and tone; how it establishes its authority as a Qur'anic exegetical commentary and as an ideological document; the effectiveness of its arguments; and its key silence. While pointing out its fallacies, I try to highlight the pull and the push of Qutb's popular Qur'anic exegesis, animated in turns by the personal, the religious and the political. I also pay some attention to its shaping under the circumstances of imprisonment, although many of my conclusions

⁷ Preface to Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, Revised Edition, Volume 1, Surah 1-2, Islamic Foundation 2003, xii.

⁸ The King Abdul Aziz University, Usama Bin Laden's alma mater, in the context of the Arab Cold war, was a seed-bed for many Islamist ideas and Wahhabi propagation. The Kara Establishment is a Jeddah based construction company that was active in building projects until the early nineties.

⁹ The references to the Qur'anic text in translation are from *Zilal*.

¹⁰ Other parts of Qutb's *tafsir* have also been translated and serialized in *daw'a* (call to mission) literature in the United Kingdom, with Parts 1-10 recently published in book form by the Islamic Foundation in London.

¹¹ Carre, Olivier, *Mysticism and Politics – A critical reading of Fi Zilal al-Qur'an by Sayyid Qutb* (1906-1966), Translated from the French by Carol Artigues and Revised by W. Shepard, (Boston 2003), p. 19

in this regard are admittedly speculative and incomplete because I have focused on a single part and have not had the benefit of original, field research related to the circumstances of Qutb's exegetical composition in prison. Nevertheless, as Olivier Carre dryly but wisely observes in his landmark study on Qutb's Qur'anic interpretation: "It is the text of *Zilal* that interests me; its author's biography is only useful for an understanding of the text. The considerable aura that surrounds Qutb, the martyr, today spreads over (a) text that served as the single sole proof for his death sentence and execution by Nasser."¹²

Tone and Language

Zilal's hallmark style as *tafsir* is its remarkably skilful interpenetration of pulpit pronouncement and its intimacy of voice. The artful shifts in register are true to its form as 'activist exegesis', where theology and politics are freely mixed. *Zilal* does not soft-peddle a dichotomous separation of a sacred Islamic system and the profane ideologies of capitalism and communism. However, the hard-line political and the antinomian ideological discourse of *Zilal* are relieved by Qutb's personal address and consistently accessible prose.

When not railing in dichotomous mode, Qutb's *tafsir* features a sensitive close-reading and interpretation of passages from the Qur'an. Not infrequently he sounds more like a cultivated and engaging literary critic than an uncompromising, radical Islamist. This is especially true when Qutb teased out the aesthetic power of the Qur'an, which, as he was always quick to qualify, is provided in service of a higher ideal. This occasional geniality provides the reader with respite from the numbing harshness of his more doctrinal strictures and ideological posturing, and perhaps even permitted a refuge for Qutb, who produced his work under prison conditions where the writing of his *tafsir* was his only privilege.

Ironically, Qutb was allowed to complete his *tafsir* because of a legal decision. His publisher had proceeded with litigation against the government for its decision to

¹²Ibid, p. 12

prevent Qutb from carrying out the terms of a pre-imprisonment contract.¹³ Suspended in time in prison, Qutb could seek out solace, for example, in an *ayat* (verse) from *surah* 86 (The Night Visitor/*At-tariq*), where he notes God's comforting advice to his Messenger to exercise patience in the face of adversity and amidst the apparent superiority of adversaries:

“For every soul there is a guardian who watches over it...
They try and scheme against you.
But I too have My schemes,
So give respite to the unbelievers; leave them alone for a while.”¹⁴

Qutb's physical condition made him especially vulnerable in prison. Along with many other incarcerated Muslim Brothers, he experienced extreme privation and even torture at the hands of his military prison wardens.¹⁵ A 1957 prison massacre, where almost a third of the Muslim Brother population in Qutb's prison were either killed or wounded, had a profound impact on him.¹⁶ The aberrant conditions of a Nasserite regime prison at the height of its confrontation with an as-yet unreconstructed Muslim Brotherhood could not help but find its way into Qutb's work and worldview.

Recalling his own experience when he read the final portion of the Qur'an, Qutb outlines its distinctive, thematic unity in his commentary on *surah* 78 (The Tiding/*An-Naba*):

“The thirtieth part of the Qur'an has a special, distinctive color. All the *surahs* it includes are Makkan, except two...they form a single group with more or less the same theme. They have the same characteristics of rhythm, images, connotations and overall style. They are indeed, like a persistent and strong knocking on a door, or loud shouts seeking to awaken some people who are fast asleep, or some drunken men who have lost consciousness, or are in a

¹³ Mousalli, p. 35.

¹⁴ *Zilal*, p.127.

¹⁵ Mousalli for example cites a Syrian newspaper report that claims in 1955, soon after Qutb was imprisoned, a “trained military dog was let loose at him, which, holding his thighs with his jaws, dragged him back and forth”, p. 34.

¹⁶ Mousalli, p.36

night-club, completely absorbed with their dancing or entertainment. The knocks and shouts come one after the other.”¹⁷

Qutb continues with a series of exclamatory imperatives:

“Wake up! Look around you! Think! Reflect! There is a God! There is planning, trial, liability, reckoning, reward, severe punishment and lasting bliss. The same warning is repeated time after time... (t)hey may wake up once or twice to say obstinately, “No!”. They may stone the person warning them or insult him and then resume their position of inattention. He shakes them anew”.¹⁸

I have quoted the paragraph at some length because it captures the intimacy of tone, conversational style and sharp immediacy of Qutb’s *tafsir*. There is perfect blend of form and content as Qutb conveys the effect of a series of brisk knocks to the reader. It is not a facetious point to make to say that Qutb’s *tafsir* was perhaps the first in the history of Qur’anic exegesis to compare the effect of the Meccan *surahs* to the brusque awakening of men in night-clubs. Such references would make perfect sense to the lost Arab generation of the seventies and eighties, which was seeking to find God after the nightlife of Beirut had been shattered, and the world beyond looked strange and alienating. In addition, the apocalyptic themes of the final section inevitably influence and even infuse the language and tone of the writing. After all, part 30 is largely concerned with creation, cosmology and eschatology, focusing on the end of times (*al-akhira*) and cataclysmic events of the moment or “The Hour” (*al-sa’a*) when each and every human will be shaken into an awareness of all his deeds and misdeeds.

At the same time, Qutb’s *tafsir* also recognized another mood and tone - quieter, meditative and harmonious - which are emulated in his exegesis. An example is the symphonic *surah* 89 (The Dawn/*Al Fajar*). Qutb waxes lyrical over its “exceptionally beautiful style which is varied and harmonious at the same time.”¹⁹ Indeed, *surah* 89 progresses with a series of varying moods - from a quiet time before

¹⁷ *Zilal*, p. 3

¹⁸ *ibid*

¹⁹ *Zilal*, p. 162.

the storm, the corruption of un-Islamic practices, the raging storm of punishment to the eternal tranquility of the after-life. For the alienated, the language and tone of Qutb's *tafsir* can be beguiling, as his work rides on a form associated with traditional religious credentials but avoids a sclerotic outcome by making a direct connection with the reader.

Establishment of Authority

Zilal derives its authority in part by appropriating the traditional form known as *tafsir* (scholarly Qur'anic exegesis). *Tafsir* refers to an interpretive literature, as well as a discipline of learning, devoted to the correct understanding and interpretation of the text of the Qur'an. *Tafsir* can be divided into two broad categories:

- (a) *tafsir bi-l-riwaya* (exegesis by transmission), also termed *tafsir bi-l-ma'thur* (by authority) performed by *taqlid* (following the badge of authority).
- (b) *tafsir bi'l-ra'y* (by sound opinion), which is exegesis done by *ijtihad* (effort of independent reason) based on sound sources, also labeled as *tafsir bi-l-diraya* (by knowledge).

Proponents of such specialized learning are known as *mufasssirun*. Unlike the encyclopedic, traditional exegesis based on chains of transmission (*tafsir bi-l-riwaya*) of Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 922 C.E)²⁰ or the comprehensive exegesis based on reason (*tafsir bi-l ra'y*) of Muhammad bin Amr Al-Husain al-Razi (d. 1209 C.E), Qutb does

²⁰ The watershed work of scholarly traditional exegesis belongs to the category of *tafsir bi'l-riwaya*. It was produced by Abu Ja'far Muhammad al-Tabari (d. 923 C.E), entitled *Jami al-bayan fi tafsir al-Qur'an*. Al-Tabari was a scholar of Persian origin whose hallmark was his diligent collection of *hadith*-based exegesis existing at the time. His is a prolific and encyclopedic amassing of the first 250 years of exegetical activity. He meticulously reproduces chains of transmission (*isnad*) of reports from the Prophet, the *sahaba* (Companions) and the *tabi'un* (Following generation) and places side by side similar content (*matn*) received through different chains, while consistently indicating his preferred interpretation among the various options. Providing clarifying paraphrases and explanation of words and concepts, he also presents grammatical discussion in detail, a feature of early exegesis.

not list all the variant interpretations and mechanically indicate his preference.²¹ Qutb himself did not seek to be compared to the traditional *mufassir*. Nevertheless, traditionalists accuse him of deviance in not following the basic criteria of *tafsir* and practicing *tafsir madhmum* (blameworthy interpretation) instead.²²

I believe that the seriousness and scope of Qutb's exegesis qualify it as a form of *tafsir bi'l ra'y*, albeit with an 'activist' as opposed to a 'passivist' agenda. Admittedly, in its etymological sense, this is a contradiction in terms. *Tafsir*, after all, is a word derived from the Arabic root *fassara*, which means to explain or to expound. And explanation is not action. Yet, Qutb's exegesis seeks to explain contemporary political and social conditions through the lens of the Qur'anic text. It is more 'exegesis-plus', rather than 'exegesis-lite'. In his introduction to the English translation of part 30 of *Zilal*, Muhammad Qutb declares: "The book is a "campaign of struggle" because it is, indeed, much more than a "commentary" on the Qur'an".²³

Qutb's style of exegesis would not have been completely unfamiliar to its readers. *Zilal* certainly owes a debt to the pioneers of modern Qur'anic exegesis, Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, who developed the so-called *Tafsir al-Manar*,²⁴ the "rational school" which sought for the first time to make exegesis relevant to the contemporary situation. The principles of this rational school have been summarized as follows:

"(E)xegesis should be rid of the excess baggage of legal and grammatical technicalities; that exegesis should to a public with a secular western type of education; that religion should be explained through rational principles; that context is (a) more reliable guide to meaning than the opinions of earlier

²¹ See Riddell, Peter, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World – Transmission and Responses* (Singapore, 2003), p. 94.

²²The conventional periodisation of exegesis divides exegesis into four phases; exegeses up to the end of the 1st century (A.H.), exegeses from the second to the end of the 4th century A.H. by the *mutaqaddimun* or the early scholars, exegeses of the *muta'akhhirun* or the later scholars from the fourth century onwards and then the moderns like Muhammed Abduh and Rashid Rida. Qutb tends to be categorized as a activist or a radical exegete and the late, legendary mufti of Egypt, Shaiykh Ibn Baz has proscribed Qutb's *tafsir*.

²³ *Zilal*, Introduction, p. xi.

²⁴ See Carre, p. 13. Exegetic commentary of the wise Qur'an named *Tafsir al-Manar*. *al-Manar* (the Beacon) was a journal started by Rashid Rida that served as the vehicle for modernist, *Salafi* ideas.

commentators...no attempt to supply information not given by the Quran itself is justified".²⁵

Qutb derived from Rida and Abduh the value of "scriptural analysis focusing upon a concern for the reader, rather than an exclusive preoccupation with the text itself".²⁶ He also saw the value of a discourse level analysis of the Qur'an performed by Abduh and Rida, where commentary focused on blocks of verses or entire *surahs*, rather than the traditional focus on a word-by-word or phrase-by-phrases exegesis such as that of medieval commentators like Muhammad bin Amr al-Husain al-Baydawi (d. 1209).²⁷

Yet the *tafsir* also charts its own course as Qutb seeks to establish his own authoritative discourse. Qutb goes a step beyond Abduh and Rida, whose *tafsir* sought to harmonise Western science and reason with the message of the Qur'an, even as they insisted on Islam's distinctness from the West. For Qutb, the burden of measuring up lay with the West. In other words, the mountain of the West must come to Muhammad.

In his reading of the powerfully compressed *surah* 105 (The Elephant/*al Feel*), where God deals with the Abyssinian "people of the Elephant" who have come to tear down the *Ka'ba* in pre-Islamic times, Qutb makes clear where he parts company with what he calls the "rational school" of *tafsir* of Abduh and his disciple Rida. He claimed that the school was stuck between a rock and a hard place in its exegesis. On one hand the rational school had to resist the pressures of "superstition" and on the other hand was transfixed by "modern technology and science and doubt".²⁸ Abduh tried to defend religion by interpreting its statements in accordance with human reason. Yet this led him, according to Qutb, to lean too far towards reason, making

²⁵ J.J.G Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: 1974), pp 24-33, cited in A.H. Johns, "Islam in the Malay World: An Exploratory Survey with Some Reference to Quranic exegesis", in *Islam in Asia, Volume II, Southeast and East Asia*, Edited by Israeli, Raphael and Johns, Anthony H. (Jerusalem, 1984), p.143

²⁶ Riddell, p. 86

²⁷ Riddell, p. 95

²⁸ *In the Shade of the Quran - Part 30*, with an Introduction by Professor Muhammad Qutb, Translated by M. Adil Salahi and Ashur A. Shamis (London: c. 1979).p. 301 (hereafter referred to as *Zilal*)

the “familiar natural laws” the only basis of the “Divine Laws of nature”.²⁹ In other words, religion had to define and defend itself in terms of human reason.

For example, in his effort to explain rationally God’s dispatch of birds to pelt the “people of the Elephant” with “stones of sand and clay” to make them “like devoured dry leaves”, Abduh explains that the birds were a kind of flying creature that brought smallpox or a similar disease to the Abyssinians. Abduh takes pains to provide a logical explanation for this supernatural *surah*. On his part, Qutb asserts that whether the Abyssinians were destroyed by natural phenomena familiar to reason or accomplished through divine or supernatural means scarcely matters. The miracle itself is a manifestation of God’s greatness, and indeed Qutb says that in his view, the “opinion advocating an unfamiliar, superhuman course carries more weight”.³⁰ According to Qutb, since the Qur’an comes from God, “it is binding on us in the sense that whatever it states is the basis of our very ‘rational’ concepts.”³¹ It is not the human mind that is the “final arbiter” of what the Qur’an states, but “Allah’s will and power”, which are absolute and limitless.³² Declaring that there is no need to feel uneasy in the face of a supernatural event or to seek rational explanations for it, Qutb prescribes a sort of “negative capability”³³ in the face of such events, accepting their supernatural status without giving in to the tug of rational justification.

In his effort at reformation, Abduh had called for what he saw as a Qur’an-centered life to substitute sclerotic tradition. A new Qur’anic-based theology would replace the old scholasticism.³⁴ Qutb agreed with Abduh that the exegete or *mufasssir* must be in tune with the concerns of the world and not cut himself off in sclerotic

²⁹ *ibid*

³⁰ *Zilal*, p. 299.

³¹ *Zilal*, p. 302.

³² *Zilal*, p. 301

³³ Negative capability is a state of mind described by the English Romantic poet John Keats, where the mind is content to accept “uncertainties, mysteries and doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason.”

³⁴ Yvonne Haddad, “Muhammad Abduh: Pioneer of Islamic reform” in *Pioneers of Islamic Revival* edited by Ali Rahnama (London, 1994), p.49.

scholastic isolation. The *mufassir*'s true duty was not to mechanically interpret the text on the basis of established reports or precedents, or to square Revelation with reason, but to return the world and especially the community of Muslims to its true Qur'anic roots, and more specifically the scripture-based worldview of the Qur'an. According to Qutb, Muslims mistakenly brought the prejudices of science and reason to bear on their reading of the Revelation. Demanding a rational explanation for everything unacceptable to human reason was the wrong way to approach the issue. In no uncertain terms, and in the English translation, this is cast in upper-case to stress the imperative nature of Qutb's directive; we are told exactly how to approach the Qur'an: "WE MUST APPROACH THE QUR'ANIC STATEMENTS IN ORDER TO DERIVE OUR CONCEPTS AND FORMULATE OUR IDEAS FROM THEM". Significantly, he hews to the principle that the best *tafsir* is the explanation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an.³⁵ Like Abduh, the Revelation is the key source for his *tafsir*, but unlike Abduh, Qutb was convinced human reason could not and should not logically explain every part of Revelation. Instead, for Qutb:

“...our knowledge covers only a scanty part of what is in the visible universe, beyond which extends a whole world of which we know nothing apart from the few hints Allah has chosen to drop to us, as befits our limited abilities.”³⁶

For Qutb, the ultimate power was not reason but the all-knowing Creator of *surah* 87 (The Most High/*Al-Al'aa*), “He knows what is manifest and is kept hidden”. In a sense, this outlook reflected the prison perspective that Qutb endured, where much of his view of the outside world was determined by what his jailers provided him. In such a situation, it is not surprising that Qutb discounts human governance in favor of the divine. His commentary on *Surah* 96 (The Blood Clots/*al-Alaq*) makes the point forcibly, noting that “it refers to every obedient believer calling men to follow the path of Allah and to every tyrant who forbids prayer, threatens to punish the believers and act conceitedly.” This is the first *surah* revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, and Qutb undoubtedly found strong resonances in its references to the tyranny of man and his henchmen, and God who was prepared to call out the guards

³⁵ This is the principle of *tafsir al-Qur'an bi'l Qur'an* (exegesis of one part of the Qur'an based on other relevant parts)

³⁶ *Zilal*, p. 138-139.

of hell. Qutb's own harsh prison experiences give his *tafsir* an authority and weight of personal experience that many traditional exegetes lacked.

However, from the perspective of the orthodox scholars, a problematic feature of Qutb's *tafsir* is that he freely draws upon his insights from an earlier, secular phase as a literary critic when he wrote *Al Taswir al-Fanni fi al-Qur'an* (The Theory of Artistic Imagery in the Qur'an).³⁷ Although he had by the time of *Zilal* repudiated his early literary work, he nevertheless hews close to charges that his method in *Zilal* suggests the created artistry of the Qur'an - a doctrine that is anathema to the inimitable nature (*I'jaz*) of the Revelation, let alone Hanbalite-inspired views of the Revelation as unquestionably God's speech on earth.³⁸ The legendary, traditional *mufassir* Al-Tabari placed great emphasis on the external or surface meaning of the Qur'anic text, avoiding the identification of intricate, inner (*batin*) meanings or the allegorisation (*taw'il*) of meanings. Al-Tabari's avoidance of *batin* arose from the theological debate between the opposing dogmas of the Hanbalites and the Mu'tazlites, and was conditioned by his preference for the views of the former over the latter. The Mu'tazlites had ignited controversy with their dogma on the createdness of the Qur'an while the Hanbalites believed that merely reciting the Qur'an reproduced uncreated, eternally present divine speech.

For example, in the interpretation of *surah* 111 (Fire Flames/*al-Masad*), which hurls imprecations at the Prophet's adversarial uncle Abu Lahab and his wife, Qutb's skill at close-reading come to the fore. He points out the powerful aesthetic effects contained in the *surah*, noting that the "language of this *surah* achieves a remarkable degree of beautiful harmony between the subject matter and the atmosphere built around it".³⁹ Abu Lahab, which means 'son of the flames of the fire', is punished by

³⁷Moussalli, p, 39

³⁸ The Wahhabi clerical establishment has accused Qutb of peddling the ideas of the *Ash'aris*, denying the divine attribute of Allah, and *Mu'tazilah* on the createdness of the Qur'an. Shaikh Abdullaah bin Muhammad as-Dawaish in his book, *Al-Mawrid uz-Zilaal fit-Tanbeeh alaa Akhtaa'a az-Zilaal* points out 181 mistakes in matters of creed and issues of knowledge in *Zilal*. See http://www.allaahuakbar.net/scholars/ibn_baaz/ibn_baaz_on_sayyid_qutb.htm.

³⁹ *Zilal*, p. 345.

being plunged into flames while his wife who carries wooden fuel for the fire will meet the same fate with the palm-fiber rope around her neck. Qutb observes that:

“Phonetically, the words are arranged in a way which provides a wonderful harmony between the sounds made by the pulling of the wood and the neck by ropes. Read in Arabic, the verse, ‘Tabbat yada abi Lahabin watab,’ makes one feel a kind of hard sharp pull,⁴⁰ analogous to that of bundles of wood or of dragging an unwilling person by the neck into a wild fire; all is in phase with the fury and the violent, bellicose tone that goes with the theme of the surah. Thus, in five short verses of one of the shortest surahs of the Qur’an, the vocal melodies click neatly with the actual movements of the scene portrayed.”⁴¹

Qutb brings out the artistic power contained in the essence of this *surah*. Yet while Qutb discusses the section’s “artistic use of fine expressions, images, rhythm meter and rhyme to touch upon areas of exception beauty in the human soul and in the universe at large”,⁴² he makes clear that his is an aesthetic in service of a clear objective – to attract a lapsed community who have lost sight of the truth and to awaken them from slumber.

Intended Audience

Abduh had conducted reasoned debate with skeptical, European elite about the true nature of Islam, refuting charges that it sought a confrontation with the West. Abduh had been somewhat on the defensive in the face of a colonizing Europe on the march. His reform project was arguably partly the result of the sting of western criticism of Islam and the recognition that Muslim societies had to either effect a reform from within or be swamped by an alien perspective.⁴³ On the other hand, Qutb was not interested in addressing a western audience or the political and social elite of Muslim nations. He found little positive to say about Western civilization and culture, and cultivated a conscious and unapologetic supremacist posture.

⁴¹ Zilal, p. 346

⁴² Zilal, p. 7

⁴³ Haddad, p. 42-43.

For example, in his reading of *surah* 105 (The Elephant/*al Feel*), drawing out the event's ideological significance, Qutb avers that the *surah* of the Elephant best demonstrates how God defended the people of the Arabian Peninsula and the Holy Land and made it the "cradle of the new ideology".⁴⁴ Warning against the erosion of the pan-Islamic ideal, Qutb asserts that whenever the Arabs substituted narrow nationalistic ideas for the "banner of Islam", the outcome was subjugation. However, as God's chosen people to disseminate the message of the Revelation, the Arabs were leaders of humanity as long as they stood together to advance the cause of Islam. In this sense, a key audience for Qutb are all those who identify themselves as Arabs but are asked to forget their Arab-ness to help carry "the message of a forceful and all-comprehensive faith, (to be) delivered to humanity with mercy and compassion."⁴⁵ Qutb expresses his concern in another section of his *tafsir* on *surah* 103 (The Declining Day/*al'Asr*) that raising the "banners of race"⁴⁶ will compound the weakness of the worldwide community of Muslims.

More broadly, Qutb targets a wider Muslim audience, or at least the buried sense of religious identification in his intended audience. He is certainly not writing for an audience of *ulema* or clerics, but the *homme moyen sensuel* who has lost his way in the thicket of modernity. Sayyid Qutb's own stated objective in writing the *tafsir* was to produce a document that spoke directly to Muslims and would be lodged in their consciousness (*hiss*). In 1954, a book by a Muslim Brother⁴⁷ lamented that no truly useful *tafsir* existed except for those of Abduh and Rida and the *mufasssir* Ibn Kathir (died 1373 C.E.), whose works remain popular and widely available. The Brother asserted that *tafsir* should make clear pronouncements about the "vital message" of the Qur'an.⁴⁸ Qutb appeared to have taken up the challenge. In his mind, his *tafsir* would serve as a living guide for the emergence of a true Islamic society, which Qutb explains in the following way:

⁴⁴ *Zilal*, p. 294

⁴⁵ *Zilal*, p. 305

⁴⁶ *Zilal*, p. 280.

⁴⁷ Mitchell, Richard, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (Oxford, 1993), p. 238.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*

“We need, more than ever, to perceive the Qur’an as a propelling, dynamic and lively document....it no longer represents in our consciousness that type of life that actually took place on earth in the history of the Muslim community. We do not remember anymore that the Qur’an was the daily preoccupation of the recruited Muslim from which guidance for action and execution were derived. The Qur’an has met its death-bed in our consciousness (*mata al-qur’an fi hissina*)...What is required is for the Qur’an to establish in the Muslim consciousness and life”.⁴⁹

Echoing the thought of an influential mentor, the Pakistani ideologue Abu al-Ala Maududi,⁵⁰ Qutb’s operating assumption is that all necessary guidance for man can be found in the *shari’a*, the laws of God, and not man-made laws. Maududi’s political theory asserted belief in the *al-hakimiyyah* (governance) of God and the *al-jahiliyyah* (pagan ignorance) of societies.⁵¹ The primary *fitnah* (disorder) is the rejection of *shari’a* as the sole source of legislation on earth.⁵² Man’s innate human intuition (*fitrah*) is in harmony with the natural laws of the universe, and in receiving the Revelation is provided with the only source of moral law in the land.⁵³ But Muslims have since been cut off from original Islamic doctrine and have adopted foreign worldviews. The living link has also been obscured and distorted by the enervating quibbling of the scholars who take *irf* (tradition) as a principle of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) instead of the Qur’an, which is the only truly Islamic source of legislation and the “only arbiter”.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Quoted in Ibrahim M Abu-Rabi, *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (New York 1996), p.195

⁵⁰ Maududi’s magnum opus was also a *tafsir*, *Tafhim al-Qur’an* (“Towards Understanding the Qur’an”), produced over three decades. Maududi’s work is aimed more at the non-Arab literate audience, and is popular in the South Asian context and among those who have studied in the *madrassas* of Pakistan. Despite its impressive scope and grasp of early Islamic history, Maududi’s work does not match the inimitable style or the unique balance between the personal and the political and ideological aspects of Qutb’s *tafsir*. Maududi is more reticent in mixing theology and politics than Qutb, although Maududi provides a more comprehensive explanation of key Qur’anic concepts than Qutb.

⁵¹ Moussalli, p. 36

⁵² Abu Rabi, p.197

⁵³ Mousalli, p, 126

⁵⁴ Abu-Rabi, p. 196

Against the ‘paper jurisprudence’ (*fiqh awraq*) of the traditional *ulema* and *fuqaha*, the scholars of traditional Islam, Qutb sets his own ‘dynamic jurisprudence’ (*fiqh haraki*) which wrestles with real-life issues that confront the emerging Muslim community.⁵⁵ The motif of dynamism (*harakiyah*) and vigor is set against the torpor of traditional exegesis, which in Qutb’s view has lost touch with the natural well-springs of the religion and the *homme moyen sensuel*. Qutb is not interested in scholastic quibbling, but seeks to turn his reader’s mind to the problems confronted by the religion as it was revealed in its original context. As Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi puts it in his perceptive analysis of Qutb’s Qur’anic exegesis, “The Qur’an must be understood, not for the sake of accumulating more knowledge or its artistic beauty, but for the sake of a personal and political revolution.”⁵⁶

In his timely study on “The Multiple natures of *Da’wa*”,⁵⁷ Egdūnas Račius characterizes Qutb’s *tafsir* as a form of “intra-ummaic *da’wa*” aimed more at “re-converting” Muslims or creating born-again Muslims than in converting new Muslims. Qutb’s *tafsir* on the last part of the Qur’an certainly seems concerned with those who have strayed from the path rather than bringing in new converts,⁵⁸ especially those from the West, who might require a different kind of invitation to embrace Islam in the first instance more as “spiritual rejuvenation” than as a “political program”.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Abu-Rabi, p. 197

⁵⁶ Abu-Rabi, p.181

⁵⁷ Egdūnas Račius, *The Multiple Nature of the Islamic Da'wa*, Academic Dissertation, October 2004, University of Helsinki, Faculty of Arts, Institute of Asian and African Studies, Arabic and Islamic Studies and Vilnius University, Institute of International Relations and Political Science. Available at <http://ethesis.helsinki.fi/julkaisut/hum/aasia/vk/racius/themulti.pdf>

⁵⁸ Račius, p. 178

⁵⁹ Račius cites Abdul Hakim Murad, in his study of *Da’wa* contained in “Islam at the New Millennium”, who observes: “Westerners are in the first instance seeking not a moral path, or a political ideology, or a sense of special identity - these being the three commodities on offer among the established Islamic movements. They lack one thing, and they know it – the spiritual life. Thus, handing the average educated Westerner a book by Sayyid Qutb, for instance, or Mawdudi, is likely to have no effect, and may even provoke a revulsion. But hand him or her a collection of Islamic spiritual poetry, and the reaction will be immediately more positive. It is an extraordinary fact that the best-selling religious poet in modern America is our very own Jalal al-Din Rumi. Despite the immeasurably different time and place of his origin, he outsells every Christian religious poet.”, p. 124.

However, at another level, Qutb's *tafsir* is also addressed to the select few, or the vanguard, who have begun to carry out the political revolution, rather than the average returnee to Islam who has just initiated a revolution of conscience. For example, Qutb notes that in the Meccan *surahs* of the Qur'an, there was no promise or discussion of earthly victory. Believers were only promised victory in the after-life in heaven, while the disbelievers were punished with Hell. The task of the Meccan *surahs* was to train the hearts of its adherents and to prepare them for the arduous task of propagating the faith, which still lay ahead.⁶⁰ He explains that the verses of victory are the Medinan verses, which were all revealed after the fact. The mention of earthly victory was thus not a promise of success but merely an example of success for subsequent generations to "have an actual, definite and practical example of the Islamic way of life".⁶¹ Qutb is addressing those in the Islamist movement who may have been discouraged by a string of defeats at the hands of their Nasserite tormentors. Many of them, like Qutb, would be languishing under harsh prison conditions, an anti-climax after performing their terrorizing propaganda by deed or fury for God (*ghadba lil-allah*).

Qutb's *tafsir* has to find an answer for the idealists disappointed by a series of failures. Finding Qur'anic sanction for human suffering, Qutb highlights its inevitability: "Indeed, we have created man in affliction" in *surah* 90 (The City/*Al-Balad*) or *surah* 84 (The Rending/*Al-Inshiqaq*), "O man, you are striving to your Lord laboriously, and you will duly meet him". According to Qutb's compensatory interpretation, those entrusted with the mission of leading the others towards the Islamic order must not expect earthly rewards. Instead, they should be prepared to endure all forms of privation (*fitnah*) with no expectation of relief or earthly victory. Qutb rationalizes their suffering by pointing out that after being toughened by their tribulation (*fitnah*), God may deem them fit enough to carry out their mission and grant them earthly victory in achieving a truly Islamic order (*al-nizam al-Islami*) or "ethico-social world order".⁶² The *jihad* or the effort is everything. The rest is up to God:

⁶⁰ Zilal, p. 99

⁶¹ *ibid*

⁶² "Ethico-social world order" is Fazlur Rahman's phrase from "Major Themes of the Qur'an", p.63

“One struggles for the sake of satisfying lusts and desire, and the other for the sake of faith or ideology. One strives but achieves no more than Hell and another strives for Paradise. Everyone is carrying his own burden and climbing his own hills to arrive finally at the meeting place appointed by Allah, where the wretched shall endure their worst suffering while the blessed enjoy their endless happiness.”⁶³

Effectiveness of Argument

In Qutb’s scheme of history, where a mystified and hallowed period of the past is eternally present,⁶⁴ the Medinan phase of creating legislation and founding a new society is preceded by the crucial, early Meccan phase where the creed (*aqidah*) was first built in “a revolution of conscience”.⁶⁵ For Qutb, the beginning of Revelation is the “demarcation line in the history of mankind”.⁶⁶ From a strictly logical point of view, Qutb’s argument on the need for a literal revolution of conscience back to the past rests on the classic fallacy of *consensus gentium* where the asseverated ideals of the past are held up as an incontrovertible truth. Yet, we are not merely dealing with a secular manifesto here but the interpretation of a religious text that is bound to be couched in deeply emotive terms. Given the powerful hold in Muslim imagination of the purity of the early Meccan era, especially the mystique of the Prophet and the pristine era of his Companions⁶⁷, Qutb’s return to the original

⁶³ *Zilal*, p. 174-175.

⁶⁴ Ziauddin Sardar recently put it this way: “I discovered that in modern Wahhabism, there is only the constant present. There is no real past and there is no real notion of an alternative, different future. Their perpetual present exists in the ontological shadow of the past--or rather, a specific, constructed period of early Islamic history, the days of the Prophet Muhammad. The history/culture of Muslim civilisation, in all its greatness, complexity and plurality, is totally irrelevant; indeed, it is rejected as deviancy and degeneration.” See Ziauddin Sardar 'Is Muslim civilisation set on a fixed course to decline?' *New Statesman*, June 14, 2004

⁶⁵ *ibid*, p. 172

⁶⁶ *Zilal*, p. 222

⁶⁷ Ironically, in his pre-Islamic phase as a literary critic, Sayyid Qutb had attacked some personalities from the Rashidun era in *Kutub wa-Shakhsiyyat* (Books and Personalities), 1946. When this writing was brought many years later to the attention of the former Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia Shaikh Ibn Baaz, he reportedly said "This is an error and a mistake which is not disbelief. For his revilement of some of the Companions or just one of them is evil (*munkar*) and sinfulness (*fisq*) and he deserves to be given exemplary punishment for it – we ask Allaah to pardon him – however, if he reviled most of

context of Revelation is *de rigueur*. In Qutb's reckoning, the true *ummah*, or community of Muslims, has been dormant for centuries. For Qutb, the challenges faced by the novel creed (*aqidah jadidah*) in establishing itself amidst the hostile *jahiliyah* (Ignorance) of the 7th century pre-Islamic Hijaz have re-surfaced in the 20th century. The present is ripe for a missionary 're-call' of Islam and a revival of the *ummah*, the worldwide society of Muslims. Reconstructing the new society of Muslims compels a return to the earliest stage of Meccan Islam with a re-committal to the original creed (*aqidah*).⁶⁸

The operational effectiveness of Qutb's *tafsir* lies in its arrogation of a specific role in this process, as a form of *tafsir al-haraki* (dynamic exegesis) that seeks to revive, energise and move the masses from passivism to a reawakened sense of their Muslim identity and on the basis of this advance towards activism. This makes Qutb's work, especially Part 30, a key plank of the modern Islamic *da'wa* (call to mission) movement. Qutb's *tafsir* on *surah* 98 (The Clear Proof/*al-Bayyinah*) underlines the transformative value of the first "new message" from God. The Prophet himself was a clear proof of the validity of the message. Thus, the missionary goal of Islamic resurgence is not merely a call to arms but a 're-call' to Islam. It is thus perhaps no accident that in recent years, which have been characterized by the *da'wa* movements of Islamic revivalism, the first part of the *Zilal* to be translated and made widely available in English also happens to be its penultimate part 30. Qutb writes that this part of the Qur'an is "drawn with images which leave a stunning effect".⁶⁹ Without the sense of a catastrophic final judgment, the creed would lack the power of warning and of a final sanction.⁷⁰

them and declared them sinners then he would become an apostate, because they are the Carriers of the Revelation. When he reviles them then this means that he is reviling the legislation." See www.allaahuakbar.net/scholars/ibn_baaz/ibn_baaz_on_sayyid_qutb.htm

⁶⁸ *ibid*, p. 173

⁶⁹ *Zilal*, p. 5

⁷⁰ See Fazlur Rahman, "Major Themes of the Quran" (Chicago, 1980), especially Chapter Six on "Eschatology" for a different interpretation from Qutb on the reforming value of "The Hour". In general though, Qutb hews closer to the traditional interpretation of Islam which points towards the Day of Doom as the main motivating factor for human belief and conduct in the earthly world.

Qutb's exegesis on the enigmatic *surah* 101 (The Striker/*al-Qari'ah*) brings out this point vividly. According to Qutb, the mysterious Striker is:

“...the resurrection named in other places in the Qur'an as the *Overwhelming One*, the *Deafening Shout*, the *Stunning Blast* and the *Enveloper*. The term *al-Qaari'a* also connotes hitting and knocking hard. It hits the hearts with its engulfing horrors.”⁷¹

Qutb believes that the Striker (also translated as the Clanger or the Sudden Calamity) epitomizes the apocalyptic theme of this final section of the Qur'an. The scene portrayed in this *surah* is the Day of Judgment, the final Hour which is described as one that strikes, pounds or knocks out. Qutb explains that the *surah* creates an “air of awe and expectation of the outcome of the reckoning”.⁷² The explanation of this *surah* recalls Qutb's introduction to part 30 of the Qur'an, a commentary on *surah* 78 where he discusses the dramatic re-awakening of those who had slumbered in their faith. Qutb notes that *surah* 101 has a physical effect on its listener or reader, leaving hearts in panic and limbs trembling with fear. He is intent on maintaining the physical and psychological impact of the *surah* and is careful not to dilute its impact with tedious elaboration on the reference to the scales, which traditional *tafsir* has pored over in great detail. Pointedly furnishing a straightforward explanation, Qutb declares:

“He, however, knows best the exact nature of these “*scales*”. To indulge in a sophisticated, logical and linguistic dispute about the meaning of this term is in itself a departure from the Qur'anic spirit and indicates that the reader is not interested in the Qur'an and in Islam.”⁷³

Indeed, it is characteristic of the broader aims of modern *tafsir* inaugurated by Abduh that the message of the Qur'an speaks directly to the believer without too much scholarly mediation or elaborate detail, which corrupts the essence of belief. In his elucidation of the compact, creedal *surah* 112 (Purity of Faith/*Al Ikhlas*), for which he cites a *hadith* from al-Bukhari noting that it is equivalent to a third of the Qur'an, Qutb points out that the first call to Islam was aimed at establishing “the reality of the

⁷¹ *Zilal*, p. 266

⁷² *ibid*

⁷³ *Zilal*, p.277.

unity of Allah in the hearts and minds of men”.⁷⁴ According to Qutb, belief in the form of God’s unity and absence of equals or *ahad* provides a “full explanation of human existence, a way of life and (is) not merely a spoken word or an inert belief.”⁷⁵

Relating *surah* 89 to contemporary concerns, Qutb compares the pagan ignorance (*jahiliyyah*) of pre-Islamic Arabia and its compulsion to accumulate wealth as a recurrent feature of all Ignorant societies including the present age.⁷⁶ Indeed, a key concern for Qutb was to highlight Islam’s relevance as an alternative, positive and sustaining system (*manhaj takaful wa ijabi*)⁷⁷ to the prevailing orthodoxies of capitalism and communism. Indeed, for Qutb, what set Islam apart from the other systems is, *inter alia*, its intense concern for social justice. In his *tafsir* on *surah* 83 (The Stinters/*al-Mutaffifoon*), he describes the conditions faced by the Islamic call in Mecca the 7th century. He points out that the pagan Meccans realized that the new faith threatened their way of life and their core interests as well as the values of pagan ignorance (*Jahiliyyah*). In other words, they recognized that Islam contained a revolutionary potential. According to Qutb, those who obstruct the path of Islam at any time realize, that “the pure and straightforward Islamic way of life endangers their unjust order, interests, hollow structure and deviant practices”.⁷⁸

For Qutb, the born-again breed of believers is animated by a single, defining characteristic. Explaining *Surah* 80 (The Frowning/*Abas*) where the Prophet frowns and looks away from a blind man who repeatedly interrupts his proselytizing conversation with some Meccan notables to ask for some guidance, Qutb makes clear that the standard which guides the reborn Muslim or the vanguard of believers is not derived from man or society. Instead, the basic standard is contained in God’s injunction in *Surah* 49:13, one of the Qur’an’s most important verses: “The noblest [*akram*] of you in Allah’s sight is he who fears [*atqa*] him most.” According to Qutb,

⁷⁴ *Zilal*, p.352

⁷⁵ *ibid*

⁷⁶ *Zilal*, p. 167.

⁷⁷ Abu-Rabi, p. 183.

⁷⁸ *Zilal*, p. 90.

this is a “purely Divine criterion” unconnected to any “worldly considerations.”⁷⁹ Converting the notables of Mecca is less important than answering the pious but poor, blind man. Islam does not need to humble itself before the powerful since “it cares only for the one who accepts it on its merits, regardless of his position in human society”.⁸⁰ The operative Qur’anic concept here is *taqwa*, a complex term with many shades of meaning which essentially connotes fear of God, or the God-fearing. It is a conditioning attitude that determines human conduct in anticipation of facing God on the Day of Judgment.

Commenting on *Surah* 49:13 in his study of *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur’an*, the Japanese Qur’anic scholar Toshihiko Izutsu notes:

“The proof of a man’s being genuinely noble (*karim*) of character and personality should not be sought in the direction of audacity in mundane affairs...The real *karim* is he who lives with great moral earnestness, being ever conscious of the approaching Day of horrible catastrophe.”⁸¹

Taqwa serves, in a sense, as a safeguard against transgression or the evil consequences of one’s transgression, as the modernist scholar Fazlur Rahman explains.⁸² In Qutb’s view, the essential message of the Qur’an, as guidance for those who fear God⁸³ and the major principle for Islamic society, is that God favors those who fear him and who show true faith, even if that person lacks all the attributes of worldly success. While Muhammad Abduh’s *tafsir* was interested in explaining the deistic intelligence behind this *surah*, Qutb’s focus is on the *taqwa* of the blind supplicant. Qutb is less interested in *taqwa* for its own sake than its role in

⁷⁹ *Zilal*, p. 41

⁸⁰ *Zilal*, p.44

⁸¹ Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur’an* (Montreal 2002), p. 53

⁸² Rahman, p. 28. Conscious of the Western stereotyping of Islam as a religion of fear and punishment, Rahman is careful to point out that *taqwa* does not exclusively refer to a fear of God’s punishment. Instead it is the conscious, human attempt to safeguard against transgression, although Rahman underlines that the final judgement of man lies outside of society.

⁸³ As stated in the opening verse of *Surah* 2 (*Al-Baqarah/The Cow*)

underpinning a new ethico-social order. Qutb asserts that the establishment of this new principle constituted a “rebirth of humanity”.⁸⁴

Qutb looks forward to the “second rebirth of humanity”, similar to the one announced by God’s privileging of the pious over the powerful. He regrets that this “Divine standard ceased to operate after the whole world had been overwhelmed by the tide of Ignorance”.⁸⁵ Writing at the height of the Cold War, Qutb points out that in the US a man’s value is judged by the size of his bank balance while in the Soviet Union, a man is worth less than a machine, and in the lands of Islam, alien Ignorant (*jahili*) values predominate. According to Qutb, the only hope that remains is for a new Islamic movement to “rescue mankind from the clutches of Ignorance.”⁸⁶

Qutb’s dichotomous world-view between modern *jahili* values and true Islam is a classic example of what logicians call the black-and-white fallacy. Qutb mounts many of his arguments by deploying acute distinctions that do not rest on any factual support and by refusing any middle path between these extremes. In an early essay, the popular Qatar-based Egyptian sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who was a contemporary of Qutb and who was also jailed by Nasser, extensively critiqued this dichotomous and extremist world-view on religious grounds, noting that it was a feature of the Khawarij sect in Islam.⁸⁷ Qaradawi was especially concerned about the extremist groups like the Excoriation and Exile group that Qutb’s writing had inspired by advocating a strict separation between the system mandated by God and the *jahili* system created by man.

For example, on *surah* 109 (The Disbelievers/*al-Kafiroon*), Qutb explains the theological distinctiveness of Islam. Amidst pagan quibbling over the nature of the Revelation, he notes that the black-and-white sharpness and decisiveness of *surah* 109 was revealed to clear up once and for all, and “to demarcate monotheism (*tawhid*)

⁸⁴ *Zilal*, p. 46

⁸⁵ *Zilal*, p. 53

⁸⁶ *ibid*

⁸⁷ See Yusuf Qaradawi’s essay “Extremism”, translated and reproduced in *Liberal Islam – A Sourcebook*, edited by Charles Kurzman, (Oxford, 1998).

from polytheism (*shirk*), and to establish a true criterion, allowing no further wrangling or vain arguments”.⁸⁸ Qutb goes on to outline the key requirement for anyone who seeks to invite others to embrace Islam. The vanguard who calls others to embrace the faith on the way to re-establishing the true Islamic system must detach themselves from Ignorant (*jahili*) surroundings. According to Qutb, no half-measures, conciliation, compromises or adjustment is possible. For those who seek adjustment or compromise with the caller, he must tell them “you have your own religion, and I have mine”.⁸⁹ Qutb’s ideal callers to Islam must brook no compromise, in the fashion of the first callers to Islam. This fundamentalist prescription sets them apart from those Muslims who follow the Western system and worldview but claim to follow Islam. In Qutb’s scheme, religion is not merely confessional affiliation but behavior, culture, a way of life and a system that regulates man’s conduct. *Tawhid* is the totalizing concept which makes religion and society indivisible.⁹⁰ It sweeps away the legitimacy of all other systems and all other creeds.

In his reading of *surah* 112 (Purity of Faith/*Al Ikhlas*) Qutb views God as the supreme fountainhead of *tawhid* from which all other causes flow.⁹¹ According to Qutb, the Qur’an takes pains to establish this basic truth in the Muslim conception of faith. Qutb tells us that when a person liberates himself from belief in anything but the one Truth, he undergoes a remarkable transformation:

“By disregarding all apparent causes and connecting matters directly with the will of Allah, a feeling of relief gently penetrates the human heart so that it knows the only Saviour from whom it can ask whatever it wishes and by whom it is rescued from all fears.”⁹²

Tawhid for Qutb was the supreme concept that negated any man-made system. It assures that everything man needs or wants can be found through the correct posture

⁸⁸ *Zilal*, p. 329.

⁸⁹ *Zilal*, p. 331.

⁹⁰ Mousalli, p. 74-75

⁹¹ *Zilal*, p. 351

⁹² *ibid.*

of faith. In this sense, Qutb's understanding of *tawhid* was at odds with that of the modernists and rationalist school of Muhammad Abduh or later scholars of liberal Islam like Muhammad Iqbal.⁹³ For Abduh, *tawhid* was the starting-point for human discovery and progress. For Qutb, it was the ultimate source of knowledge and required complete submission to the governance of God, and no other system. Such a perspective undoubtedly provided a form of psychological relief to those who had high expectations of the 1952 Revolution, seen their hopes dashed, had been tortured in Nasser's prisons, and who sought to transmute their fears of the future in a metaphysical system of governance that transcended the messy realities of human governance.

Silences

In his commentary on *surah* 103 (The Declining Day/*al-Asr*), Qutb identifies in this short *surah* of three verses the "basic conception of faith" and the "whole Islamic constitution". The believers carried the banner of Islam and had faith, performed good deeds and counseled each other to do the same. Qutb expresses shock that among the believers, the Arabs, who had once assumed leadership of all humanity, are now "in the forefront of the caravan which is heading towards loss and ruin".⁹⁴ He claims that:

"the Muslims, or rather people claiming to be Muslims, are the farthest of all from what is good and the most averse to the ideology Allah ordained for their nation and the one route He prescribed for their deliverance from loss and ruin."⁹⁵

The Islamic Shining City on the Hill hangs under a dark cloud, with Muslims in particular, who had been blessed with the clear instructions of the divine Qur'an, the farthest from divine favor. The alternative systems that threaten Islam have no redeeming value in this scheme since they are not valid ideologies for humanity. Qutb is resoundingly silent on the internal reasons for this loss of power and decline of dominance. He insists that following the path of faith, good works and the

⁹³ Moussalli, p. 129

⁹⁴ *Zilal*, p. 280.

existence of an Islamic community whose constituent members exhort each other to good works can assure that Islam will return to its roots and “lead humanity away from loss”. Such a simple prescription begs the question of why Muslims have lapsed in the first place from following the message of the Qur’an.

In his *tafsir* on *surah* 105 (The Elephant/*Al-Feel*), Qutb blames external forces by raising the classic straw-man fallacy. He refers to the “wicked ambitions of international crusading forces and world Zionism concerning the Holy Lands” and that these forces “spare no effort to achieve their wicked ambition”.⁹⁶ However, he takes comfort in the fact that God has protected “His House” (i.e. Mecca) from previous onslaughts even in pre-Islamic times and the city of his Prophet (i.e. Medina) from the “designs of the evil doers”. Qutb’s simplistic political explanations barely stand up to intelligent scrutiny and reflect a perennial and more generalized Arab failure to both critically and comprehensively examine the factors causing the decline of a once preponderant Islamic civilization. Instead he warns that the Arabs must not forget that their only mark of distinction is the ideology of the Islamic faith “which raised them to the position of human leadership.”⁹⁷

Conclusion

For Qutb, the Qur’an is the ultimate arbiter on all issues concerning the faith. The central task was to restore its centrality to Muslim consciousness and imagination, spark a revolution in consciousness and to enlist this new consciousness in service of a definite political and social program to re-establish the Islamic way of life. Qutb conceived his *tafsir* as an important instrument in this process. The impatient radical can find a definite program of action in the compressed “Milestones”. But Qutb’s broader *tafsir*, which provided a structure of sanctity and sanity for its author during his prison ordeal, offers a sanctuary for readers in analogous circumstances in the form of “In the Shade of the Qur’an”. It was meant to yield a method for what Qutb

⁹⁵ *Zilal*, p. 285.

⁹⁶ *Zilal*, p. 304-305.

⁹⁷ *Zilal*, p. 306

called the ‘Qur’anic revolution’. This outcome would not be produced by the traditional exegesis of the *mufasssirun* or the harmonizing hermeneutics of the modernist school. Instead, Qutb believed that only the totalizing vision of his *tafsir* could show the *ummah* a way out from the blind alley of defeat and submission to an alien system.

In the final analysis, *Zilal* rehearses at a personally and politically religious level - the combat between the good of a pristine Islam and the evil of all other profane systems. Produced under tough conditions, the politics of Qutb’s prison *tafsir* was not ever likely to acknowledge the possibility of accommodation. In addition, his view of the West and the regimes it supported had been drawn from a static picture gained during his stint in the US of the late forties – which Qutb had condemned as materialistic and immoral in his American travelogue “The America that I have seen”. Protecting a beleaguered Islamic identity and the integrity of a totalizing faith called for a revolution that returned the *ummah* to its Qur’anic roots. In a sense, Qutb’s *tafsir* recalls Marx’s rebuke to western philosophers: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”⁹⁸

For Islamists at least, Qutb’s execution by Nasser elevated him to martyrdom, assuring the legitimacy of his writing. His piety and his sacrifice have been mythologised, with a new generation of militant Islamists encouraged to study his works through glowing tributes such Al-Qaeda number two Ayman Zawahiri’s verdict on Qutb:

“Sayyid Qutb became an example of sincerity and adherence to justice. He spoke justice in the face of the tyrant (Gamal Abdul Nasser) and paid his life as a price for this. The value of his words increased when he refused to ask for pardon from Gamal Abdul Nasser. He said his famous words, “the index finger [which holds the prayer breads] that testifies to the oneness of God in every prayer refuses to request a pardon from a tyrant”.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach (Thesis XI)*, (1845)

⁹⁹ Serialized excerpt from Ayman Zawahiri’s “Knights under the Prophet’s Banner”, London Al-Sharq al-Awsat, FBIS-NES-2002-0108.

That Qutb lived out and died for his beliefs lends an aura of legitimacy and authority to his writing. In the morbid imagination of Ayman Zawahiri, *Zilal's* politics and ideology intersect with the extra-textuality of Qutb's autobiography, written with his own blood. Seen in this light, Qutb's *tafsir* serves not only as a pungent critique of passivism, but as an activist exegesis that boasts a powerful identity between thought and deed.

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