Sayyid Qutb

Snapshot of Qutb

Sayyid Qutb, one of the leaders of the Ikhwan al-Muslimun, Muslim Brotherhood, had a very deep impact on the Muslim Arab youth coming of age since the late 1960s. Western writers in recent years have focused on him as one of the two most influential Muslim thinkers of this century, the other being Sayyid Maududi. Qutb’s writings prior to 1951 are more “moralist”.

It was after he was introduced to Maududi’s ideas, especially his emphasis on Islam being a complete way of life, and establishment of God’s order on earth as every Muslim’s primary responsibility that Qutb changed into a revolutionary. His two years rest (1948-1950) in the USA opened his eyes to what he termed as “the malice of the western culture and non-Islamic ideologies”.

After his return to Egypt, he resigned his job in the Education directorate and devoted himself to the idea of bringing a total change in the political system in his country. Ikhwan gained ideological vitality when Sayyid Qutb in his jail cell wrote a book in which he revised Hassan al-Banna Shahid’s dream of establishing an Islamic state in Egypt after the nation was thoroughly Islamised. Sayyid Qutb recommended that a revolutionary vanguard should first establish an Islamic state and then, from above impose Islamisation on Egyptian society that had deviated to Arab nationalistic ideologies.

His subsequent 11 years behind prison walls gave him an opportunity to confirm what Maududi’s writing made him aware, and that is what convinced the secular Arab nationalists (Nasserites) to condemn him to death on false accusations.

Background

Sayyid Qutb was born on 8 October 1906, in a village called Musha in the township of Qaha in the province of Assyout in Egypt. He entered elementary and primary school in Musha in 1912 and finished his primary education in 1918. Qutb memorised the Qur’an when he was about 10 years old. He dropped out of school for two years because of the revolution of 1919. His father was Haj Qutb, son of Ibrahim, and a well-known religious person in his village, and his mother was also a religious lady from a well-known family who cared about him and his two younger sisters, Hamida and Amina, and a younger brother, Muhammad.
After completing his primary education in Musha, Sayyid Qutb moved to Cairo for further education where he lived with his uncle, Ahmad Hussain Osman. This was in 1920, when he was 14 years old. He lost his father while he was in Cairo, so he convinced his mother to move with him to Cairo, where she died in 1940. After the death of his mother, he expressed his loneliness in several articles *Ummah* (My Mother) published in the book, *Atatiaf Alarbaa (The Four Lights)*, which his sisters, brother and he wrote.

In Cairo, he completed his high school education and enrolled in the teachers’ college, Darul Oloom, in 1929. In 1939 he qualified as an Arabic-Language teacher and received a Bachelor of Arts degree then joined the ministry of education. About six years later he left his ministry job as a teacher and devoted his time to freelance writing. A factor leading to his resignation from the teaching job was his disagreement with the ministry of education and many colleagues regarding his philosophy of education and his attitude towards the literary arts.

From 1939 to 1951, an obvious switch in his writing towards the Islamic ideology was noted. He wrote several articles on the artistic expression of the Qur’an, as well as two books titled *Expression of the Qur’an* and *Scenes from the Day of Judgement*.

In November 1948, he went to the United States to study educational curricula. He spent two and a half years moving between Washington DC. and California, where he realised the materialistic attitude of the literary arts and its lack of spirituality.

Qutb was disappointed about the state of western society in the USA. In Egypt the West was being promoted and idealised as the solution to Egypt’s problems.

Qutb’s criticism of the west included the following:

- Religion being excluded from many aspects of life – in Islam *tawhid* is the basis of every part of life and Allah is not excluded from any part. This was unsettling to Qutb.
- Reduction of importance of family life (ie individualism) – family is Islam is hugely important
- Original sin – he believed people should be free to sin or do good deeds without the burden of original sin. In Islam children under puberty are sinless.
- Capitalism and monopolies – he believed people had become slaves to materialism/monopolies/working. He didn’t believe people were happier as a result. Being a slave to money/markets is against *tawhid*.
- The West promoted the emancipation of women, yet he saw women being treated as sexual objects in advertising and not treated as equal and having to fight/struggle for equal status.
- Cumbersome laws of divorce – in Islam divorce is a last resort yet is a blessing where reconciliation is detrimental to either or both parties.
He describes Egypt as living in *jahiliyya*, which is the time referred to as the time of ignorance just before Islam came. *Jahiliyya* is:

- People not being free to practice their own religion
- God being deliberately removed from society
- Ruling elites and slaves
- Women with no rights
- Violence.

In 1949, his book *Social Justice in Islam* was published. In it he stated that true social justice can only be realised in Islam and criticised Arab countries for following the west.

He interrupted his stay in the United States and returned to Egypt in August 1950. Sayyid Qutb resumed his job as a teacher and inspector in the ministry of education before he resigned in October 1952 (again because of his repeated philosophical disagreements with the minister of education and many of his colleagues).

The period from 1951 to 1965 included his joining the *Ikhwan* (The Muslim Brotherhood). His ideas were quite clear about the fallacy of many of the prevailing social and political/economic injustices and the need for Islamic reform, and he became the chief editor of the newspaper of *Ikhwan*. During his period, several of his books appeared on Islamic ideology and Islam as a complete way of life. He was arrested when the *Ikhwan* was accused of attempting to overthrow the government in 1954 and was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment with hard labour. He remained in Jarah prison near Cairo for about 10 years after which due to his health condition, he was released when the Iraqi President, Abdul Salam Arif, intervened.

In 1965, he published his famous book, *Mallem Fittareek* (*Milestones*), which led to his re-arrest with the accusation of conspiracy against the Egyptian President, Abdul Nasser. He was tried and rapidly sentenced to death based upon many excerpts of his book, Milestones. There was quite an international uproar and protest in various Muslim countries with appeals to President Abdul Nasser to pardon Sayyid Qutb. In spite of several demonstrations and many objections in various Muslim countries, Sayyid Qutb was executed by hanging on August 29, 1966.

**Impact and Contribution**

**Literary Contribution**

He left behind a total of 24 books, including several novels, several books on literary arts’ critique, on the education of adults and children, and several religious books.

His major contribution is his 30 volume commentary of the Qur’an, which is a valuable addition to the discipline of Qur’anic commentary. Although Qutb has written many works, this is possibly the only work today that impacts on everyday Muslims.
Commentaries on the Qur’an are essential for practicing Muslims to understand the context of the verses revealed and understand the Qur’an (Holy Book of Allah) in detail. Due to the Qur’an being the direct word of God for Muslims and the number 1 source of guidance in jurisprudence and in all matters commentaries are significant.

Being a modern commentary on the Qur’an, Qutb’s work is important contribution to the classical commentaries.

**Contribution to radical Islam**

Qutb has been interpreted in some parts of the Western media, as an intellectual precursor to fundamentalist movements of the 1980s to the present. In this view, Qutb is argued to be a theoretical foundation of Islamic extremism. One can find some ideological connections between Qutb’s thought and radical fundamentalist groups. These include Qutb’s advocacy of an Islamic theocracy as the only legitimate state, his justification of *jihad* in the conflict against non-Islamic governments, and his uncompromising opposition to Western culture and values.

The many links between him and terrorism is not grounded, as the movement is against such violence and so is Maududi. *Milestones* does not encourage violence, neither overthrowing governments.

In *Milestones* Qutb advocates establishing Shariah law, which is establishing God’s teachings, based on Qur’an and hadith. He argues that the establishment of a government based on Islamic teachings allows individuals to practice whichever religion he/she chooses (whether Islam or another religion). He argues that implementing a religious government means it will filter to the population and end the problems.

Radical Muslims have taken his teachings about the implementation of Shariah Law to promote the implementation of an Islamic State by means outside of Islam ie violence. This was not advocated by Qutb.

Radical Muslims justify *jihad* as violence against Muslims and non-Muslims, although *Milestones* does advocate violence in *jihad*. *Jihad* literally means to ‘struggle’ or to ‘strive’. In general Arabic use, it applies to any effort exerted by anyone and doing one’s best proactively to achieve a desired goal. The outcome must positive and constructive.

The greatest *jihad* is struggling against our ego.

Qutb’s approach of political changes to end the suffering is understandable given that he was subjected to horrendous torture by the government. Another factor was mind the context in which he was brought up - the decline of Muslim world, loss of Caliphate, European colonisation, puppet governments who promoted nationalism and...
oppressed the practicing of the religion. This plays a part in his advocacy of an Islamic
government.

He was in favour of top-down revolution, like the Muslim Brotherhood and Maududi,
he did not see the importance of bottom-up. Many Muslims have great respect for
these scholars, however, many disagree (at times very significantly) with some of their
views on Islamic revivalism.

There are many other Muslim scholars, such as Nursi and Gulen, who advocate that
politics is not necessary and in fact is not the ideal way to bring about the changes
needed. They advocate grass-roots changes and increasing faith in people’s hearts. Muslims are able to implement most of the shariah without changes in government,
as they can implement all five pillars of Islam, can believe in the six essential beliefs,
practice Islamic morality and manners and other teachings without government
intervention.

From a western Muslim perspective, Qutb can be seen as being negatively biased
towards the west and its culture, based on his experiences and upbringing. For many
Muslims living in western countries, they view western politics and lifestyle as closer
to the teachings of Islam/shariah law than many of the current Muslim countries.
Recent research identifies New Zealand as the best example of a country implementing
the principles of shariah law today.

Other factors to consider:
- The decline of Muslim world during the colonisation. The extent of the damage
  was great loss of educational institutes, political institutes and economic losses (loss of
  Caliphate e.g. if Australia became six country and Indonesia exploited one by one).
  These actions were deliberate and calculated. The indigenous experience of
  colonisation is one aspect of the story.
- Rise of materialism and secular regimes promoting freedom from religion. This
  is a problem for both Muslims and Christians who still want to hold onto spirituality.
- It is important to realise the difference between secular governments in Muslim
countries and secularism in Christian Europe – Islamic governance is by nature secular.
So imposed secularism in Muslim world is seen as is quite dangerous. They are against
freedom of religion (instead freedom from religion), don’t allow women the right to
choose their clothing, are against constitutional changes that allow for more
democracy and transparency etc.