THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

READING A RADICAL THINKER: A STUDY ON SAYYID QUTB

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF NEAR EASTERN LANGUAGES AND CIVILIZATIONS

BY

LAITH S. SAUD

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

DECEMBER 2017

Table of Contents

Table of Figures

Chapter One: Introduction

The following study examines Sayyid Qutb's writings by investigating and building upon what I refer to as his 'foundational' beliefs. I have argued elsewhere that political theorists too often think of Islamic political thought in epiphenomenal terms; it is either a rejection of 'modernity,' and expression of 'frustration' or a product of socio-economic conditions. (Saud 2005) Though none of those contexts should be dismissed outright, treating Islamic political thought on its own terms is rare in academic literature.

I have sought to correct this problem by investigating 'foundational' beliefs and examining how those beliefs inform a worldview. In Sayyid Qutb, we have a case of a pantheistic mystic, who believes humans have a human nature and that popular culture, more often than not, obstructs that nature by promoting 'false' values and beliefs (*jahili*). In all, Sayyid Qutb struggled with what so many of his radical peers, particularly in the Marxist tradition, struggled with: How does humanity revolutionize culture, when they are, in terms of knowledge, a by-product of that culture.

To answer this question, we need to look at Qutb's metaphysical beliefs and how they pertain to human nature and the 'recovery' of what Qutb considers the pristine human condition (*fitra*). Secondly, it is necessary to place Qutb within the larger context of Islamic and anti-colonial thought in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in order to elucidate how he fits in with his predecessors and to see what

tradition, if any, he builds upon. Lastly, upon establishing these parameters – and 'foundational beliefs are parameters, in that one cannot impose an interpretation upon a thinker that contravenes what that thinker actually seemed to believe – we will look at how those beliefs applied to his thoughts on America, religion, culture and politics.

Before proceeding it is necessary to make several notes: This dissertation follows a simplified transliteration style, wherein most Arabic words are conveyed through simple English and an (') marks the Arabic letter 'ayn. Secondly, though it is usual to provide a literature review in the introduction, in this thesis, the literature review is found in the second chapter entitled "Reading Qutb Theologically.' When quoting a scholar, I use their translation of *ma'alim fi al-tariq*, for example Roxanne Euben refers to this text as '*Signposts*,' but in my own usage I prefer *Milestones*. Finally, comparative theory or comparative literature is a significant part of my methodology.

How, for example, can I understand Qutb as a political thinker if I do not compare him to other political thinkers? And since so much of modern political thought is influenced by western concepts, I freely compare Qutb to western thinkers in order to understand how similar or dissimilar he is to those thinkers. I owe much to Andrew March for establishing this approach. (March 2010) I also compare Qutb to other Islamic thinkers, such as 'Abduh (d. 1905) or even Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (d. 1792), in order to produce the same effect, how can I understand Qutb's notion of *tawhid*, if I do not compare him to other theorists on the issue? Lastly, I compare Qutb to other radical thinkers as well.

Biography

Sayyid Qutb has been considered "the most significant thinker of Islamic resurgence in the modern Arab world." (Abu-Rabi 1996, 96-97) His beginnings are quite humble however. Qutb was born in the small village of Musha in the Egyptian countryside in 1906. (Ibid) *Musha* is located, amidst dozens of other similar villages, in the flood plains of the Sa'id. And in some ways he followed in the footsteps of Taha Husayn, at least in his early career, where Qutb fashioned himself a poet and man of letters. Qutb "picked up on the theme of the quarrel between modernists and traditionalists" in literature an Arabic poetry. (Ibid) Thus, from the onset, Qutb is initiated into the ideational realm of binaries, conflict and, by extension, the dialectic. I will argue that the dialectic plays an important role in Qutb's thinking process, his framework for analysis.

At an early age Qutb, pursued the path of a poet, making his way to Cairo for schooling in the year 1929, Qutb was twenty-three years old when he was inaugurated into the British education system. This is, as perhaps for any young thinker, a seminal period in Qutb's life. Soon thereafter, Qutb travels to the United States and pursues graduate studies in education. Many scholars argue that this period is indeed the watershed moment in Qutb's life; yet Qutb's turn from 'secular' poet to 'Islamist' theorist can be detected even before his trip to the states. It was during this time that Qutb published his first work in Islamic theory: *al-'Adalah al-ijtima'iyah fi al-Islam.* Upon his return, Qutb refused an appointment by the government and began writing politically charged writings. In 1953, he joined the

Muslim Brotherhood, the social movement, based on more explicitly Islamic doctrines, that was founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928. In the year 1952, Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser led the Free Officer's Movement coup against the British backed Egyptian monarchy. At that time, it is argued that Qutb was a liaison between the Officers and Brotherhood.

Between 1954 and 1964, relations between the Muslim Brotherhood and Nasser's government deteriorated quickly. Seen as a powerful source of opposition and organization to the regime, Nasser had many members of the Brotherhood arrested. Qutb was caught up in these arrests and severely tortured. After Qutb's release in 1964, he composed what is widely seen as his most radical tract, *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq*. In this work, Qutb lays out a revolutionary program; coupled with his exegesis, Qutb's works compose an Islamist ideology that remains a potent force in the world today. In 1966, Qutb was re-arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to death by Nasser's government. Upon Qutb's execution, another prominent Arab thinker wrote a letter to Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser, admonishing him. That letter was from no other than Muhammad Baqir as-Sadr, a thinker and activist who would also share the same fate as Qutb. (as-Sadr 2003, 33)

Chapter Review

Chapter Two: Reading Qutb Theologically

In chapter two, I probe deeply into what I consider to be the best source for Qutb's foundational beliefs, his *tafsir*. Spanning many volumes, Qutb's commentary

on the Qur'an is quite remarkable and uniquely modern. Qutb composed his *tafsir*
while before he began his prison stay, as well as during it between 1952-1959, John
Calvert refers to it as the "finest and most expansive expression of his radical
Islamist ideas." (Calvert 2013, 175) The benefit of studying Qutb's *tafsir* is it gives
us access to his beliefs plain and clear, but it also allows us to compare him to other
mufassir, such as al-Maududi, who he is often associated with; in my analysis, the
association falls short when we look at his *tafsir*.

In this chapter, it becomes clear what Qutb's organizing principles are:
Tawhid and *Fitra*. In Qutb's discussion on *tawhid* (the ultimate Unity of God), he
displays pantheistic tendencies that cannot be overlooked or thought of as
incidental. The chapter will demonstrate why pantheism is so significant for
political thought, but in brief, pantheism makes esoteric interpretations of the
world possible. In this sense, Qutb begins to see the world as text that fails to
correspond to an inner truth (*batin*). Treating Qutb as a fundamentalist, which
many scholars do, while disregarding Qutb's mysticism displays a poor
understanding of the underlying premises of theology and philosophy. I take those
premises seriously.

Terminology

Part of my argument is that Qutb is a mystic and a pantheist. Some
qualifications are in order for me to make these claims; First, Qutb never referred
to himself as such. I could offer some reasons why, but part of the contribution of
this work is to demonstrate through Qutb's *tafsir* that, indeed, Qutb was a
pantheist. The Islamic concept *wahdat al-wujud* is what is most analogous to the

concept of pantheism and it is a concept difficult to define. *Wujud* in Islamic

philosophy is the term used to denote 'Being,' (Leaman, *EI*, 2017) which, following

Sadiran philosophy I take to be a self-evident concept. Trying to define 'Being' is

like trying to define 'Existence,' any term or phrase employed to denote either

term, such as 'is' or 'to be,' itself would require definition, they are all self-

referential terms. *Whadat al-wujud*, the 'Unity of Being,' a term ascribed to Ibn al-

'Arabi's (d. 1240) student al-Qunawi (d. 1274), again is a concept that evades easy

definition, but involves the theological notion that God is both transcendent and

immanent to the material world. This view has multiple political implications that

I intend to expose in this work. Some more detail is provided on what a pantheist

is in chapter 4.

Secondly, a mystic or gnostic is not necessarily a pantheist, but a pantheist is

almost certainly a mystic or gnostic. In my own understanding of what a gnostic is,

I think of someone who is the opposite of an *agnostic*, the latter being someone who

claims 'not to know' if there is a God, a gnostic "knows" there is a God. A mystic, on

the other hand, is "a person who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to

obtain unity with or absorption into the Deity or the absolute, or who believes in

the spiritual apprehension of truths that are beyond the intellect." (*Oxford

Dictionary*, 2017) I argue Qutb is such a person.

Chapter Three: Qutb in the Context of Colonialism and Anti-Colonial Thought

In chapter three, I take Qutb's framework of seeing the world as text and its

inherent contrast with *fitra* as truth, to examine how he thinks of ideas percolating during the colonial and immediate post-colonial times. I begin by looking at colonialism as a 'context of contradiction:' This means that colonialism advanced claims about 'development,' 'democracy' and 'progress' but was never seen as embodying those claims. In other words, colonialism contradicted itself, this contradiction opens up space for critique and a sense of dissonance. The dissonance is seized on by Qutb as evidence that those ideas are in open opposition to actual 'truth,' found, naturally, in Islam.

Before looking at Qutb's views on gender relations for example, I survey some of the conversations taking place during the period in order to contextualize the issues. For example, by looking at al-Afghani's debate with Renan, we can see how Islam was being thought of as a civilization and impetus for progress and change. But in al-Afghani we also detect similar themes, later elaborated on by Qutb, informed by the former's highly philosophical background. It is the colonial context that most significantly fashions Qutb's text/truth and exoteric/esoteric dichotomy.

Chapter Four: Review of Qutb as a Radical Thinker

In chapter four, I survey several subjects that reinforce Qutb's unique take on Islam, culture and radical politics. I begin with his sojourn to America in the late 1940's; during this time, Qutb was confronted by a 'modern' country that espoused many of the colonial claims of democracy and progress. How Qutb thought of

America is well known, but his ethnography of Americans is little studied. A brief look at his American diaries reveals a rich ethnography with one single theme: American culture obscures American misery. Americans think they are happy, Qutb intimates over and over again, but are actually unhappy. This contradiction feeds Qutb's observation that culture is not what it claims to be and it is a lesson he takes to Egypt.

This chapter also contains a section that exposes Qutb's actually anti-*salafi* tendencies. I briefly compare his approach to religious belief and practice to highlight how he is not a *salafi* and in fact takes liberties with Islam. Lastly, I compare Qutb to radical thinker George Lukács to demonstrate how Qutb is grappling with a problem that all radical thinkers do: How do you change the world when you are a part of it?

Chapter 5: Conclusion

It is most likely clear that I have written a dissertation that does not focus on Qutb's 'influence' on jihad or terrorism, there are plenty of those in the field. It has been my aim to make an original contribution to how Qutb is read and, hopefully, placed within the larger tradition of political theory, as he was a political theorist. In this effort, some of the things examined, such as *tafsir*, *maqasid al-shari'a* (goals of the *shari'a*), Islamic philosophy and mysticism may also be seen in some new light.

It should also be noted, though this study is being submitted as a dissertation, I hope it is only the beginning of a longer study that will allow me to engage some

of the more common questions surrounding Qutb, such as *takfir* and political violence. This study could benefit from another chapter devoted to those subjects, however, only in so far as I could shed new light on them based on the methodologies I develop herein. I look forward to engaging such themes in the near future and adding to the research found here.

Chapter Two: Reading Qutb Theologically; Toward a Method for Reading an Islamist

Few Islamist thinkers are written of more than Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966). His influence has been immense, and he is perhaps the only Islamist thinker (aside from A. R. Khomeini) who commands attention in the West beyond academic circles. The emphasis on Qutb's influence as an ideologue, "fundamentalist," *ikhwani* has obscured the logic of his work. Referring to Qutb as "fundamentalist" is easy, but not helpful; noting his radicalism is accurate, but inadequate. In this chapter, I will elucidate some of Qutb's more salient beliefs, and begin to outline his worldview according to the logical trajectory of those beliefs.[1] My basic argument is that Qutb's metaphysics does not comport with the traditionalist outlook that we normally ascribe to *salafi*s or "fundamentalists." Qutb is neither a fundamentalist nor a *salafi* for the same reasons. First, there are serious questions as to whether the term "fundamentalist" can be applied to Islamist thinkers.[2] But what are thought of as "fundamentalist" epistemology and *salafi* epistemology are similar in that they tend to privilege texts over reason. Sayyid Qutb, however, does not subscribe to such an epistemology.

---

[1] Qutb's thought is not systematic, this chapter will also uncover the deficiencies of his thought in that respect.

[2] For example, there has been nothing in Islam analogous to the Niagara Bible Conference of 1878, the Holy Book Conference of 1902, or the Presbyterian General Assembly of 1910. These conferences established what could be thought of as the "fundamentals" of Protestant Christianity. (Khatab 2011).

The Current State of Inquiries on Qutb: The Fundamentalist par excellence

Interpretations in Islamist political thought are fraught with methodological shortcomings, a lack of specific ground rules, and misconceptions. Studies of Sayyid Qutb especially exemplify these problems. This is due, in part, to the current climate of Islamic/Arabic studies, where orientalist discourses remain embedded in economic and political realities, while those realities become stretched and skewed by the so-called "War on Terror" and by the increasing demands of the security state. Additionally, considering Qutb's aforementioned influence and the fear generated by security demands, scholars feel compelled to put Qutb "in his place" before embarking on objective study of his work. Qutb is treated not as a theorist, but rather as an expression of various sociological conditions that produce fundamentalism.

Qutb studies often begin by categorizing his work. The most prominent taxonomy in this respect is William Shepard's, which plots Muslim thinkers along a spectrum ranging from secularists (who see the state as falling well outside the boundaries of Islam) to Islamist "totalists" (who envision the state and *sharia* as virtually synonymous). (Shepard 1987) Shepard's case studies involve Muslims who do not articulate an *Islamist* political view at all, but rather views that invoke no Islamic doctrine, dogma, or ontology.

The thinkers he discusses often do not qualify as Islamic thinkers. (Not every born Muslim is an Islamic thinker, after all.) Further, it has become clear to me that the Lewisian idea that "there is no separation of Church and State in

Islam" is not simplistic, but simply false.[3] When a scholar assumes there is no separation in Islam, between the two, as an analytical paradigm, that paradigm heavily informs the way Islamic political theory is read and understood. Lastly, concepts of the "secular" are also more nebulous than commonly thought; this again renders Qutb potentially as more 'secular' than usually perceived.

Shepard's cautious use of the term "fundamentalism" is welcome; he refers to Sayyid Qutb as an "Islamist radical," which is more or less a fundamentalist. This type of stance is characterized by a strict adherence to the text and a severe restriction of *ijtihad*. (Ibid, 313) I will demonstrate that Qutb is less of a "literalist" than Shepard presumes, and that this flexibility can be adduced to some of his foundational beliefs; I am assessing Qutb's thought on the basis of the logic of his foundational beliefs.

Yvonne Haddad also characterizes Qutb as a fundamentalist, arguing that due to the "extensive dissemination" of Qutb's work in the Muslim world "his ideas have become the accepted definition of Islam and its role in shaping the social, economic, cultural, and ethical aspects of society" (Haddad 1983, 70).

> Qutb's work has had extensive dissemination throughout the Muslim
> world, and his ideas have become the accepted definition of Islam
> and its role in shaping the social, political, economic, intellectual,
> cultural,

---

[3] Much work has promulgated this falsity, although more work could be done to explicate the actual relations of religion and politics. For an illustration of one possible way of making the case, see   Lapidus 1975. Ira Lapidus' article "The Separation of State and Religion in early Islamic Society." *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 6 (1975), 363–85.

and ethical aspects of society. (Haddad, Sayyid Qutb: Ideologue of Islamic Revivial 1983, 70)

Although Haddad does not herself "essentialize" Islam here, the implication is that Muslims await the essence of Islam to be determined and delineated – and that Qutb has become the *definitive* voice in that respect.   Regarding the passages cited by Qutb in his Qur'anic defense of revolution, Haddad remarks:

In these passages the context is the defense of Islam–the refutation of all competing truths and an apologetic for the veracity and eternality of the Islamic message, as one providing a total and comprehensive world-view. (Haddad, "The Qur'anic Justification for an Islamic Revolution: The View of Sayyid Qutb" 1983)

The Qur'an, however, does not attempt to "refute" all "competing truths." Though the Qur'an may be ontologically absolutist, insisting on an uncompromising *tawhid*, it is ethically/politically human-centric, thus proto-liberal in its exhortations regarding that very ontology:

Say: Do you argue with us about God, when he is our Lord and your Lord? We are responsible for our deeds and you are responsible for your deeds. To Him alone we are devoted. (Qur'an 2: 136–39)

Scholarship on Islamist thought is heavily informed by the evolution of religion in Europe. Theology evolved into philosophy and philosophy evolved into positivist thinking. This evolution is also seen as teleological, in that it is thought of as the transition from a reliance on myth to a dedication to science. Since Islam is, naturally, thought of as a religion, Islamist thinkers are thought of as absolutist and dogmatic.[4]

This history informs Haddad's assumption that an Islamist—or at least Qutb—must be a fundamentalist, since religion is absolutist. This implies that the Islamist must adhere to scripture, while also looking at the world through dogmatic eyes. But the Qur'an is not absolutist, at least in political/ethical terms. Thus any scholarly inquiry into the Qur'anic foundations of Islamism must begin by taking the Qur'an seriously, not simply projecting onto it the ethical absolutism of medieval Christianity. Haddad correctly observes, however, that the Qur'an's "eternality" is incredibly important but underappreciated. Sayyid Qutb's *tafsir* reveals his epistemology, while also shedding light on some of the paradigms in Islamist thinking. What is interesting is that Qutb looks to the Qur'an not for eschatological vindication (a salient feature of Christian fundamentalism), but rather for historical-political analogues to his own time, so that he may excavate an underlying ethical and political imperative regarding how to act ethically and politically.

---

[4] Moreover, as several scholars (Assad, Mahmood) have suggested, during the European Enlightenment the absolutism of religious belief, often narrowly defined by the Church, shook the shackles of intellectual inflexibility by transitioning from theology (the discovery of "God's essence") to the search for the parameters of "natural law." But with time, post-Enlightenment thinkers like Jeremy Bentham (d. 1832) criticized the search for "natural law" for being as dogmatic in its way as theology. In this sense, Enlightenment epistemology—characterized by either Cartesian rationalism or the Empiricism of Hume—pulverized ecclesiastical authority with philosophical speculation, eventually opening the door to utilitarian and positivist thinking, especially in ethics. (Skirbekk and Gilje 2001)

oxanne Euben allows Qutb to be thought of as a political theorist, rather than

simply an epiphenomenal writer who reacts madly to a new world. Euben insists

that Qutb should be seen as part of the larger critique of modernity—a critique the

West delights in itself. The postmodern critique of Enlightenment thinking

demonstrates discomfort with "foundational" bases for political legitimacy. (Euben

1997) More simply, "natural law" and God are transcendent concepts, existing

outside of history, language, and human interests; such a foundation has been

deemed inappropriate for modern politics. (Ibid, 28) Euben locates at the

foundation of Qutb's political theory a critique of postmodernism, particularly in

Qutb's formulation of *hikimiyya* (a neologism) or *al-Hakimiyyah*, the term signifying

sovereignty in his works. (Ibid, 35) Euben explains:

> *Signposts* begins with a diagnosis of modernity as a condition of
>
> *jahiliya*. *Jahiliya*, a term taken directly from the Qur'an, refers
>
> specifically to the period of ignorance in Arabia prior to the
>
> Revelation…. *Jahiliya* becomes a "condition" rather than a particular
>
> historical period, a state of ignorance into which a society descends
>
> whenever it "deviates" from the Islamic way. Whereas ancient
>
> *jahiliya* was a function of simple ignorance, modern *jahiliya* is a
>
> conscious usurpation of God's authority. All contemporary ills are the
>
> product of this foundational transgression of human hubris. The *jahili*
>
> society is thus one that refuses to submit to Allah's sovereignty in the
>
> realm of belief, worship, and law, through a denial of His existence,

restriction of His authority, or dilution of His sovereignty with false "gods." Its essence is a rejection of Allah's sovereignty in favor of a philosophy and "epistemology" that claims for men the right to create values and legislate rules for collective behavior, as well as the authority to define how life is to be lived. (Ibid, 34–35)

According to Euben, Qutb's critique is directed at modern conceptions of the political, as well as at positivism. However, I argue that Qutb's emphasis on *hakimiyya* speaks not for a literalistic reading of Islamic law, but rather for the spiritual autonomy of the individual. This categorization appears again in Mousalli, who observes:

"No God but Allah" means that the only ruler is God, the only true shari'ah (sic) is God's and the only authority is God's. Here Qutb like al-khawarij (the seceders) does not make the linguistic difference between hukm Allah in its political meaning and its juridical meaning. For Qutb and the khawarij political rule includes both. (Mousalli 1992, 151)

Qutb, however, is *not* like a *khariji*. But when he is described as such, the implication is he is a fundamentalist and the constant emphasis on Qutb as fundamentalist presumes him to be a literalist. Claims that Qutb was an Islamic radical because he was an advocate of the *shari'a* are uncritical, and presume that advocates of the *shari'a* are advocates of *fiqh* in a narrowly conservative sense.

Some of these shortcomings can be attributed to scholars' extensive concentration on *Ma'alim fi al-Tariq* (*Milestones*), the revolutionary manifesto for which Qutb was executed by the Egyptian government in 1966. (Sivan 1985)

Qutb is not a literalist; and as I explore Qutb's *tafsir*–a far longer and more deliberative work than *Milestones*–I will demonstrate that Qutb employs reason and metaphor to a high degree. Basic constituent features of Islamic *kalam* are silenced, unwittingly no doubt, in studies on Qutb. And if Qutb is to be thought of as a "Sunni" writer (as in the work not only of Euben and Mousalli, but of Antony Black, John Calvert, and Emmanuel Sivan), then these features must be brought to the fore. (Black 2001, Calvert 2010, Sivan 1985)

Theology, Epistemology, and Logic: Toward a Methodology

In the following section I will address a premise which is basic: How does Qutb's theological beliefs inform his political beliefs? Though this premise is easily stated it evades a simple extrapolation. Most studies in the field address beliefs as if they are static terms, devoid of underlying force and even aesthetics. For example, when scholars assert Qutb believes in the 'sovereignty of God,' their analyses then follow a common trajectory; Qutb believes in God, thus the primacy of the Qur'an, thus the primacy of *shari'a*. But this trajectory does not take into account what 'God' or the 'Qur'an' or the '*shari'a*' means to Qutb himself. So in this section I will explore what God means to Qutb through the concept of *tawhid*.

In response to typologies like William Shepard's (Shepard 1987) or surveys

like *Islam and Politics* (Esposito 1984) and *The History of Islamic Political Thought* (Black 2001), I developed — building on the insights of Quentin Skinner—a methodology that involves treating Islamist political thought as theology. I ask preliminary questions about a thinker's general view of history, prophecy or God. The importance of this is obvious enough when we recall that these questions would be answered altogether differently between a Muslim a traditionalist *faqih* or a philosopher; or between a *Shi'i* and a *salafi*. The above typologies do not explore these distinctions deeply and basically throw all thinkers together, who invoke God, into a 'fundamentalist' box. Qutb is very eclectic in his theology, he is clearly a mystic when we study his understanding of *tawhid* and he is clearly metaphorical when we explore his thoughts on *jahiliya*. In the following section I will establish Qutb's cosmology by comparing him to Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and 'Abdu, while highlighting Qutb's overlooked or underappreciated mysticism.

What is Qutb's General Cosmology?

Much has been said of Qutb's theological invocations: *Tawhid*, *Jahiliya*, *Hakimiyya*, *Shirk*. Taken together as static terms, they constitute Qutb's "fundamentalism." But in this thesis I identify some of his basic beliefs, then plot them and identify their logical trajectory within a larger worldview. In the following section, I will extrapolate a political logic from Qutb's theology by examining concepts such as *tashbih* and *tanzih* and comparing Qutb to other Muslim thinkers.

Tawhid is the foundation of Qutb's thought. Mousalli argues *tawhid* is the

18

centerpiece of Qutb's *al-Tasawwur al-Islami al-Kawni,* or The Universal Islamic Concept (Mousalli, 70); in emphasizing *tawhid*, I am not contributing anything new, but few scholars have examined Qutb's understanding of *tawhid*, especially in relation to other thinkers. It is important to uncover Qutb's metaphysics for the following reasons: A) without a proper understanding of his metaphysics, the other concepts that animate his political theory are vacuous. B) It is impossible to relate Qutb to other Muslim thinkers, which reinforces the larger problem of generalizing terms like 'fundamentalist.' C) And, it again renders difficult comparative political theory, which reduces Islamic political thought to mere dogma.

In Qutb's *Fi zilal al-Qur'a*n (*In the Shade of the Qur'an*), his expansive Qur'anic exegesis, Qutb articulates the nature of Islamic *tawhid*; nowhere is this description more resonant than in his commentary on *Sura al-Ikhlas*. (Qur'an: 112) This chapter focuses on God's unity, implied by the term *tawhid*; but *tawhid* is not limited simply to God's unity. For Qutb "God's oneness which the Prophet was ordered to declare to the whole world is a belief to be ingrained in our minds, an explanation of human existence and a way of life in itself." (Qutb 2009, 288) Qutb goes on to explain the nature of God's existence:

> God's oneness is such that there is no reality and no true and
> permanent existence except His. Moreover, every other being
> acquires whatever power it may possess from God who rules over
> this world. Nothing else whatsoever plans anything for the world nor,
> for that matter, decides anything in it. (Ibid, 288)

Qutb argues that "there is no reality and no true and permanent existence except" God's. Throughout this chapter, I will cite numerous examples in Qutb's *tafsir* that not only allude to non-fundamentalist interpretations of the Qur'an, but in fact insist on mystical interpretations–all proceeding from his understanding of *tawhid*. Qutb's understanding of *tawhid* is more or less analogous to *wahdat al-wujud* (the Unity of Being). Before explicating Qutb's thoughts further, it will be helpful to compare Qutb's use of the term *tawhid* to those of two other prominent modern Muslim thinkers: Muhammad b. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad 'Abdu. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's thought is best expressed by his *Kitab al-Tawhid*, and the eighteenth-century reformer does in fact influence a great deal of modern Sunni thought. Like Qutb, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab stresses that devotion to anything other than God is self-delusion. But beyond that point the comparison entirely falls apart.

Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab exemplifies the literalist approach to the Qur'an. Born in 1703 in the Nejd of Arabia, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab is an important figure in modern Islamic thought. Upon receiving a classical education through his religious family, 'Abd al-Wahhab left for Mecca to perform the Hajj; then he travelled to Medina and finally Basra, where he completed his education. He left Basra in 1739 and eventually returned home to reunite with his father. It was then that he produced his *Kitab al-Tawhid*, to which I shall return shortly. But Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab is most famous for establishing an alliance with the Saud family, sealed in 1744 with a mutually binding oath between them. This oath became the basis of the political-ideological foundations of the modern state of Saudi Arabia. (Laoust n.d.)

The ideological foundations of the Saudi state can be characterized by a puritanical austerity of dogma and cosmology. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's commentary on the Qur'an and prophetic tradition (*ahadith*) emphasizes *tanzih,* or God's transcendence.[5] There are major implications for the theological presumption of *tanzih*. First, should God be transcendent, then "true knowledge" is likewise beyond the reach of human reason. Reason derives from experience and the consensual use of language (which facilitates disciplines like logic)—that is, from things of this world. Anything of this world–according to the notion of *tanzih*–is necessarily *not divine*, thus not a source of true or eschatological knowledge. Staunch traditionalists like Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab therefore remain diligently committed to the literal meaning of the text, for any move toward interpretation brings something of "this world" (human reason) into Islamic understanding. Reason is the bedrock of interpretation; and true to his basic theological premise Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab resists interpretation at all costs. His Kitab al-Tawhid consists of sixty-six brief chapters, many taking up no more than two or three pages. The author offers a Qur'anic verse on *tawhid,* then summarizes it by quoting from the prophetic tradition of the same theme. For example, the Qur'anic citation:

> Allah the Most Exalted said "It is those who believe (in the Oneness of
> Allah and worship none but Him Alone) and confuse not their belief
> with *Zulm* (wrong i.e. by worshipping other besides Allah), for them

---

[5] *Tanzih* and *tashbih* are closely associated; the latter is often thought of as "anthropomorphism," and the former as "transcendentalism." At a very basic level, the concept of *tashbih* revolves around the problem of anthropomorphic attributes ascribed to God in the Qur'an. Such issues are not limited to human ascriptions to God, however; the term also "opens up the systematical question of how the personalist aspect of the divine pre---supposed by all theistic religions has to be dealt with" when contrasted with *tanzih*, God's transcendence. (Van Ess n.d.)

(only) there is security and they are guided ones.

is followed by the explanation:

> 'Itban (May Allah be pleased with him) narrated that the Prophet
> (May the peace and blessing of Allah be upon him) said:
>
> "Indeed Allah has forbidden for Hell the person who testifies: 'There is
> nothing worthy of worship in truth (no true God) but Allah', seeking
> thereby nothing but Allah's Face (pleasure)." (*Al-Bukhari, Muslim*).
> ('Abd al-Wahhab 1979)

Throughout the text it is difficult to find Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's "own thoughts" (if you will) at all; this is consistent with his general theology that insists that the introduction of anything human, including interpretation, is by definition profane, non-divine, and idolatrous. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab insists on understanding *tawhid* within the framework of *tanzih,* God's utter incomparability to creation. It is no accident that one can find hardly any remarks at all from Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab himself in the text. Due to his understanding of *tawhid*, the Arabian scholar considered even his own opinions to be profane, and thus not appropriate for disclosure. Only the Word of God or the Prophet (and by extension the companions) are proffered. Now, when we contrast this attitude with *tashbih*, the human centrism of *tashbih* becomes evident. *Tashbih* cosmology makes the human being a pre-requisite to understanding the divine, thus, also, human contexts like

history.

The term *tashbih* "means to declare something similar to something else."
(Murata 1994) And though at a surface level *tashbih* may seem to refer simply to
anthropomorphism (i.e., ascribing to God human attributes such as mercy,
compassion, love, or even anger) the theological and scholastic scope of *tashbih*
refers to God's immanence as both a metaphysical reality and an epistemological
principle. Conversely, an emphasis on *tanzih* will yield more literal readings of
texts. This point is essential to an understanding of Qutb.

Tashbih is invariably associated with the notion of God's immanence, it is also
vital to gnosis, or the idea of experiencing God. Sufism generally moved in the
direction of "affirming *tashbih*," wherein "they acknowledge God's 'withness'
(*ma'iyyaa* a term derived from the Qur'anic verse 'God is with you wherever you are.'
Q (57:4)." (Chittick, "Ibn 'Arabi" 1996) Qutb's theology places him in the gnostic
camp. In order to highlight the importance of this feature of Qutb's thought, let us
examine Qutb's commentary on verses from *Sura al-Hadid*, the Qur'an says in these
verses God is the "First and the Last, the Outer and the Inner;" God is "with you
wherever you may be." (3-4, abridged) Qutb, the supposed fundamentalist, celebrates
how the Sufis held this to be "a great truth;" while stressing here "we have a glimpse
of God's perfect knowledge." (Qutb, Vol. 15-17, pg. 350) Here God's 'presence' is
intimately bound to knowledge, not only God's knowledge but all knowledge.

If God is "absent" in all things, human beings possess an innate and
autonomous power, thus circumscribing God's power. This position was untenable
for more" orthodox" theologians, particularly those in the Asharite camp; the

Asharites developed the doctrine of *kasb* (acquisition) in which humans "acquired" actions "created" by God.[6] In other words, God is *present* and active in the world, and human beings are the vehicles of God's actions. In the eleventh century, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) argued that God actually acted in all events, maintaining creation through constant activity and creativity.

In certain Sufi, Asharite, and philosophical circles, God was indeed the literal and direct cause of all things–because God is present in all things. For some, *tashbih* may refer to how the universe and humans "mirror" the absolute reality of God. Action, creativity, love, mercy all mirror the Real. "God is also near, because nothing can escape reality. To speak of human beings is to speak of life, knowledge, desire and so on, no matter how faint these attributes may be. There can be no escape into an absolute nothingness, because these qualities do not belong to us in the first place...these are God's qualities." (Ibid, 75) No Muslim thinker expounded upon this notion more than Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240) the great sage of the thirteenth century. Chittick observes:

> It may be fair to say that his major methodological contribution was to reject the stance of the *kalam* authorities, for whom *tashbih* (declaring God similar to creation) was a heresy, and to make *tashbih* the necessary complement of *tanzih* (declaring God incomparable with creation). This perspective leads to an epistemology that harmonizes reason and unveiling. (Chittick, "Ebn al-'Arabi" *Encyclopedia Iranica* 1996, 664-670)

---

[6] Al-Ghazali's formal denunciations of *tashbih* were, in my mind, directed to the masses, as the doctrine of *kasb* is intimately bound to notions of immanence.

This view is embedded in Qutb's revolutionary thought, as well as in that of

Khomeini, another twentieth-century thinker who invoked the power of Gnosis in

the service of revolution. (Ibid) Adherents often defend this view by quoting Qur'an

50:16: "We created man and surely know what whispers arise in their hearts; for

We are closer to him than his jugular vein." Consider the implications of the

metaphysics.

Should God be "in" everything, then each thing has an outer (*zahir*) and an

inner (*batin*) reality. The outer reality is apparent and profane, while the inner

reality may yield knowledge of God. This view is more common among Sufis and

Shi'is; the inner reality may be obtained through esoterics, the ability to intuit "real"

knowledge by way of the Imam or Sufi '*alim* or Shaykh. These are luminaries who

"understand" that God is present in the world and in humanity. It is entirely

unsurprising that human beings play a central role in conveying the Divine message

according to this view; in fact, according to this theology, the human being is the

prerequisite to understanding the Divine, whereas according to a transcendentalist

view — held, for example, by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab — the human being negates the

Divine by definition. (Saud 2013) Here, I will examine Qutb within the pantheistic

tradition and contextualize the implications of his beliefs by addressing those

debates, particularly in relation to Ibn al-'Arabi and Ibn Taymiyya.

Qutb's thoughts on *tawhid* are *clearly* not of the (exclusively) transcendental

variety, which inhibits the easy association of him with "fundamentalism." Qutb is

more inclined toward *tashbih*, which opens the door to esoteric interpretations of

the Qur'an *contra* "fundamentalism." Sayed Khatab discusses the appearance of

tashbih in Qutb's poetry, and in fact goes on to describe Qutb's theology, as *wahdat al-wujud* (the Unity of Existence).[7] (Khatab 2006, 72) The doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud* is ascribed to Ibn al-'Arabi. Though Ibn al-'Arabi never used the term explicitly (it was most likely used by his students), it came to signify his theology. In looking into Ibn al-'Arabi's role in Qutb's theology, this thesis introduces the first substantive break from typical treatments of Qutb.

Ibn Taymiyya's (d. 1328) influence on Sayyid Qutb has been regarded as singular. The most comprehensive study of this connection is Sivan's *Radical Islam*. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab was committed to Ibn Taymiyya's worldview, but Sivan highlights the preponderance of Ibn Taymiyya in twentieth-century Islamist discourse generally. Ibn Taymiyya wrote at the time of the Mongol ascendency in Syria. Though the Mongols would eventually embrace Islam, the emergence of these "pagans" was a crisis to writers like Taymiyya. In 1258 the Mongols sacked the caliphate and Baghdad, the capital of the Muslim world. This represented a challenge to Muslim thinkers' faith in the superiority of their civilization. Sivan argues that this situation was analogous to the situation in which Muslim thinkers of the twentieth century found themselves: the Caliphate had (again) been abolished, and Muslim lands were occupied by the superior force and capabilities of non-Muslim invaders. Thus Ibn Taymiyya's writings and his heroic role in fighting the Mongols represented a source of inspiration. (Sivan 1985)

It has been argued that Qutb's literalism is apparent, and that the influence of Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) and Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350), in addition to that of

---

[7] *Salafi* disputations accusing Qutb of being a *kafir* due to his theology abound online.

Ibn Taymiyya, is clear. (Dekmejian 1990) But what is not clear is how this influence

affects the trajectory of Qutb's work. Furthermore, considering Ibn Taymiyya's

strong opposition to *wahdat al-wujud*, there is a glaring omission on the part of those

who emphasize the Qutb – Ibn Taymiyaa connection too deeply; Ibn Taymiyya's

treatment of *wahdat al-wujud* articulates some of the possibilities of Qutb's political

theory that have been heretofore overlooked.

Alexander Knysh's study of Ibn al-'Arabi's legacy in Muslim thought pays

special attention to Ibn Taymiyya's students. Al-Dhahabi (d. 1348) was a scholar,

historian, and *muhaddith*; he was also an outstanding student of Ibn Taymiyya. Al-

Dhahabi took it upon himself to disabuse Muslims of Ibn al-'Arabi's excesses in

theology. According to al-Dhahabi:

> By God, for the Muslim who lives in ignorance, tending his cattle,
>
> who knows nothing of religious science but a few *suras* from the
>
> Qur'an that he recites in his prayers, and who believes in God and the
>
> Last Day – his knowledge is much more beneficial than the obscure
>
> gnosis and the subtle truths (one acquires) after reading a hundred
>
> books and staying a hundred days in retreat. (Knysh 1999, 115)

According to Knysh, al-Dhahabi's "understanding of the correct belief, which

was firmly grounded in the thoroughly exoteric, pragmatic perspective, inevitably

clashed with Ibn 'Arabi's [sic] esoteric, individualistic outlook." (Ibid) And this is

what esoteric readings entail: a potentially liberal reading of the text, which is very

much present in Sayyid Qutb. This potentiality is actualized in both his *tafsir* and in *Milestones*.

Qutb's tashbih theology is manifest in his Islamic political discourse. I have demonstrated Qutb's differences with Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. But Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's relationship to salafi thinking remains under-examined. For example, Muhammad 'Abduh agreed with the Wahhabi condemnation of "saint-worship," while Rashid Rida's *Al-Wahhabiyyun wa'l hijaz* explicitly praises the teaching of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. Rida (d. 1935) approved of Wahhabi austerity in matters of religious authority; in turn, he remained suspicious — if not outright hostile — to views inherent to Shi'ism and Sufism, where religious authority was innate in the person of the Imam or Sheikh (or Pir). This too is a comment on the theological difference between immanence and transcendence. Should God be present in the world, His authority could theoretically be present in the Imam or spiritual guide (i.e., a notion of "mystical prowess," a type of authority to which transcendentalism is not conducive). In spite of the great deal of diversity among salafi thinkers, this aspect is a common thread that runs through all salafi thought: the idea of "mystical prowess" is circumscribed. *Salafi* thought — the true giants of which are Afghani (d. 1897), 'Abduh and Rida — is the immediate background to Qutb's thinking, and the integration of some modes of *salafi* thought is apparent in Qutb. Qutb's theology informs his reception of these figures (or at least their legacies), and most importantly distances him from the *fiqh* central themes that they espoused.

1:a The *Salafis* and 'Abduh's Philosophical God

The term *salafi* (or the type of thinking that the term signifies) is not altogether consistent. Salafism has been defined as "a neo-orthodox brand of Islamic reformism, originating in the late nineteenth century and centered on Egypt, aiming to regenerate Islam by a return to the tradition represented by the 'pious forefathers' of the Primitive Faith." (Shinar and Ende 2012)[8] Muhammad 'Abduh is considered both a modernist and a *salafi*. But not all *salafi*s are considered modernists. The term *salafi* refers to an *attitude*; it is an attitude that suggests that what took place between the life of Muhammad and contemporary times was degenerative. *Salafism* can imply both blindly imitating the early generations of Islam in a strict way or an appeal to the openness of early Islam – two almost contradictory approaches. The latter direction of this *salafi* attitude opened up possibilities in constructing new ways to apply Islam to modern life, much in the same way that the early generations of Muslims accommodated an expansive empire with a robust approach to problem-solving.[9]

Late-nineteenth-century Muslims, facing an encroaching West and a declining Ottoman polity, committed themselves to the task of "reforming" Islam. Amid the centuries of Islamic thought and literature, the *salafis* were determined to break with the weight of a tradition that was no longer virile. Ibn Taymiyya is seen as the chief advocate of the *salafi* attitude. Ibn al-'Arabi's thought was particularly

---

[8] The term "orthodox" is always misleading when it comes to Islam, because different interpretations and authority structures were disputed in the beginning of Islamic history.

[9] For comprehensive treatments of Salafism see CC Adams, *Islam and Modernism in Egypt* (New York: 1933); H. Laoust, *Le Reformisme Orthodoxe des "Salafiyyaa"* in REI, vi (1933), 175–224; J. Heyworth Dunne, Religious and Political Trends in Modern Egypt (Washington, DC: 1950).

problematic to the Hanbali scholar, for Ibn al-'Arabi's Gnosticism threatened to render Islam unrecognizable (at least to him). At the turn of the twentieth century, Muslims faced a similar need to reform. Rabble-rouser Jamal al-Din al-Afghani set the tone. Al-Afghani's commitment to pan-Islamic ideas interacted with his eclectic philosophical tastes. Al-Afghani "took the idea of a return to first principles of Islam from India; the demand for charismatic leadership and revolutionary action from Shi'ism," while he "conceived Shi'ites and Sunnis as members of the same community and drew on both traditions in order to combat the common enemy." (Black, 302) Afghani's significance here is that he derided *taqlid* or imitation (and conservatism) in religious thought, and preferred a return to philosophical tools such as reason and science–a theme advanced by his Egyptian student Muhammad 'Abduh. It may seem paradoxical that these activists chided *taqlid* and yet are still considered among the *salafists*; but, as I mentioned before, *salafism* is an attitude, not a doctrine.

'Abduh's *Risalat al-Tawhid* (*Essay on Monotheism*) suggests that *tawhid* precludes the possibility that factual truths can contradict cosmological truths. God's truth is one, and facts imply such a truth. Along the lines of this theme, 'Abduh sought to reinvigorate science and philosophy within the Muslim world. One of the more striking features of the *Risala* is 'Abduh's relaying of Ibn Sina's (d. 1037) ontic distinction among the possible, the necessary, and the impossible. This ontic distinction – relying on logical categories–serves as the basis for the ultimate metaphysical postulate: God *the* necessary being.[10] 'Abduh's work advocates reason

---

[10] Abduh also composed a gloss on al-Dawani (d. 1502) and a commentary on al-'Iji (d. 1355). For more see

by demonstrating its usefulness to Islam, which then allows 'Abduh to transition from metaphysics to *fiqh*, where reason-based reform is a more pressing issue.[11] Whereas Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's *tanzih*-based theology enacts a literal approach to religious texts, 'Abduh's philosophical God is unrecognizable without reason, and hence *is* reason (or can be understood only through reason). 'Abduh, however, was not simply provoked by modernity. He was also engaging in an Islamic debate nearly as old as Islam itself. "How then can reason be denied its right, being, as it is, the scrutineer [sic] of evidences so as to reach the truth within them and know that it is Divinely given ('Abduh 1966, 103–04) This approach by 'Abduh exemplifies the modernist agenda. There is something misleading about the term "modernism," however:

> Now intelligence is nothing but the perception of things with their causes, and in this it distinguishes itself from all the other faculties of apprehension, and he who denies causes must also deny the intellect. Logic implies the existence of causes and effects, and knowledge of those effects can only be rendered perfect through knowledge of the their causes. Denial of cause implies denial of knowledge, and denial of knowledge implies that nothing in this world can be really known, and that what is supposed to be known is nothing but opinion, that neither proof or definition exist, and that the essential attributes

Robert Wisnovsky, "Avicenna's Islamic Reception" in *Interpreting Avicenna: Critical Essays*, ed. Peter Adamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[11] Malcolm Kerr argues that 'Abduh failed in his efforts to fully secularize *fiqh*; see Malcolm Kerr *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashid Rida* (Berekely: University of California Press, 1966).

which compose definitions are void. The man who denies the necessity of any item of knowledge must admit that even this, how his own affirmations, is not necessary knowledge.

The above is taken from Averroes' (d.1198) (Averroes 1987, 318-320) It is clear that reason has deep roots in Islamic thought, and 'reason' based epistemology lends itself to certain institutional ways of thinking. These Arabo-Islamic institutions run deep, and render Islam perfectly suitable (at least in the mind of the reformers) for the modern world. The *nahda* is not modernizing Islam so much as it is resurrecting an important part of the Islamic epistemological spectrum — of which reason and gnosis occupy one end, and tradition the other. 'Abduh imparted to his students a confidence to engage the world critically, while focusing on disseminating his reason-based reforms by way of the state. 'Abduh's influence can be seen in al-Azhar University, which he helped to reform, and in his students, who went on to become influential figures in the Egyptian state. It is vital, however, not to consider Qutb as being in dialogue only with medieval figures. Key *Nahdawi* philosophers, who wrote about similar themes, were bothered by the same questions (for example, the meaning of unity or the role of the West in Egyptian life); and their works were read avidly by a whole generation of Egyptian thinkers.

1:b Qutb's Gnostic God and Its Implications

Qutb's theology is, *experience* based. From childhood on, Qutb emphasized

"that Egyptians such as himself are possessed of an inherent spiritual sensibility that distinguished them from the essentially material outlook of the West." (Calvert 2010, 41) To Qutb, this sensibility was apparent from youth, but corrupted by village simplicity and superstition; but with age and maturity this same sensibility was actualized and "perfectly expressed in adherence to the divinely ordained principles of the Qur'an." (Ibid) Qutb's *tafsir* is an exhaustive source on how he, at least, envisaged such an adherence. In the following section, I will visit several broad categories that are essentially "non-political," to indicate how Qutb's notion of *tawhid* affects otherwise standardized conventions. A comparison between Qutb's *tafsir* and that of other *mufassirun* will be helpful as well.

In his discussion of *Sura al-Fatiha* Qutb elaborates on *tawhid*, worship, and comparative theology; regarding the term *rabb al-'alamin* (Lord of the worlds) Qutb says:

> The last part of this verse, "Lord of all the worlds," expresses the belief in absolute universal Godhead which is at the very core of the Islamic concept of God. God is the sole, absolute and ultimate owner with full independent authority to act in the whole cosmos. He is the overall supreme master who has created the world and continues to watch over it, take care of it, and ensure its stability and well-being. This living and dynamic relationship between the Creator and the created is the perpetual fountain of life for all creation. God has not created the world and abandoned it to its own devices. He continues to be an active living authority over His creation, giving it what it needs for its

33

continued and meaningful life. This applies to all God's creation. (Qutb 2009, 3, Vol. 1)

Though the language here may seem conventional, taken together with other parts of Qutb's *tafsir*, a clear mystical theme emerges. For example, Qutb comments on verse three of *Sura al-Hadid*, which states: "He is the First, the Last, the Manifest (*zahir*), the Hidden (*batin*) and all things He knows." (Q 57:3) Qutb says:

> [This] truth that may be greater and more profound than the previous
>
> ones: It is the truth that the only true entity is God — limitless is He in
>
> His glory…. He is the First, which means nothing was before Him; and
>
> He is the Last, which means that nothing remains after Him. He is the
>
> outer, which means that nothing is above Him; and he is the inner,
>
> which means that nothing is beyond Him. The first two attributes
>
> encompass the nature of time, and the other two the nature of place.
>
> The human mind may look everywhere, but it will find nothing has
>
> any entity except God. Indeed all qualities of existence apply to Him
>
> alone. The very existence of the human mind materializes only
>
> through God's existence, which is the only true existence. Everything
>
> else receives its existence from Him. This is the basic truth that gives
>
> everything its nature. Nothing has an independent existence beyond
>
> this truth. (Qutb, 2009, p. 349-350, Vol. 15)

Now contrast Qutb's comments with Maududi's, who is consistently linked to Qutb as a major influence. Maududi states:

> That is, "When there was nothing, He was, and when there will be nothing, He will be. He is the most Manifest of all the manifest, for whatever manifests itself in the world, does so only by His attributes and His works and His light. And He is the Most Hidden of all the hidden, for not only do the senses fail to perceive Him but the intellect and thought and imagination also cannot attain to His essence and reality. (Maududi, *Tafhim al-Quran*. n.d., n.p.)

For Maududi, *al-Batin* basically refers to God's incomparability. Within the scope of Islamic philosophy and theosophy, this could be considered an interpretation devoid of any serious metaphysics. Sayyid Qutb, on the other hand, proffers an interpretation immediately recognizable to scholars familiar with neo-Platonist thought in Islam, Qutb reflects the neo-Platonist concepts of immanence and hypostasis. (Dillon and Gerson 2004) To him, *al-zahir* and *al-batin* refer to "the nature of *place.*" Qutb argues that the "human mind *materializes only* through God's existence, which is the *only true* existence." He denies actual existence to what we would commonly refer to as objects, be they people, insentient things, or even inanimate objects. "Everything else *receives* its existence from Him." The comment that "all qualities of existence apply to Him alone" is an astounding comment that places Qutb, again, in the middle of certain debates in Islam regarding ontology that

"fundamentalists" dare not broach, nor even imagine.[12] His intuitive approach to the

Qur'an, framed by his understanding of *tawhid* yields these types of more

philosophical interpretations — that in fact may belong to competing schools of

Islamic philosophy. Qutb's writing is replete with links between pantheism and his

epistemology.

　　　　Olivier Carre addresses this very notion in his comprehensive study of Qutb's

tafsir. In this regard, Carre explains that "the 'straight path' of the first *sura* is that

which adjusts harmoniously the human dynamic with the cosmic dynamic, while

'those who go astray' are those who separate the two dynamics and set them against

each other." (Carre 2003, 58), Carre fails to grasp the logic of Qutb's reading,

preferring instead to explain such passages as dogmatic rhetoric.[13] Secondly, Carre

overlooks how Qutb diverges from prominent understandings of his time. Qutb does

take an unconventional stance regarding this particular verse. Muhammad al-

Ghazali's (d. 1996) well-known commentary, while clearly influenced by Qutb, still

reflects conventional interpretations of the time. For example, regarding *fatiha* and

this particular verse, Qutb says:

　　　　　　The surah reveals the nature of the "straight path" as being one taken

---

[12] For a fascinating study on Islamic ontology, see Acikgenc 1993. The author states that "all major trends in the history of Islamic thought can be traced back to two ontological schools: One is what we shall refer to as the "Essentialist School" and the other one is what may be called the "Existentialist School." Each of these schools stands for either an ontological monism or pluralism." (p. 1) This work began as a dissertation at The University of Chicago, under the direction of Fazlur-Rahman and John Woods.

[13] In explaining Qutb's attraction to the Qur'an, Carre — with seeming sarcasm — adds "if one adds to this the personal magnetism of Muhammad when his mouth delivered *those* verses!" Carre, perhaps lacking the sensibility himself, does not seem to understand the nature of Qutb's temperament, which   is that of a poet. All poets — the good ones anyway — are mystics, and the best poetry comes from "somewhere else." This is part of Qutb's temperament, which cannot be reduced to a callous   infantilism of dogmatic belief; for the poet's intuition is of demonstrable value to the poet himself, as it   yields insights as well as literature.

by those whom God has favored, not the way of those who have

earned His displeasure by their deviation from the Truth, nor that of

the heedless who have no knowledge of the truth. It is the path of

happiness and salvation. (Qutb 2009, p. 13, Vol. 1)

While al-Ghazali says:

A straight line is the shortest distance between two points and is

therefore unique. Whoever leads a straight and righteous life will be

on the right path to God, for that is the one and only sure and direct

way that leads to Him. (M. al-Ghazali, 1997, 13)

Both commentators agree on the practical nature of the straight path: it

leads one to God. According to Qutb, this means "the path of happiness *and*

salvation" — in other words, peace in *this* life *and* the next. Though Carre notices as

much, Andrew March provides a more lucid explanation when he argues that Qutb

seeks a "realistic utopia." "[T]he concept of a 'realistic utopia' is an ideal type,

certain features of which we can see in varying degrees throughout the history of

political thought." (March 2010, 192) March references the common assumption

underlying much political theory: in order to articulate the perfect vision for society,

one must discover "true human nature." When Qutb speaks of "happiness," he is

clearly not speaking of "salvation," which is separate. Instead he speaks of

psychology, of how to attend to human needs. He is presuming a (more) stable

human nature, which something of modernity obfuscates. The postmodern idea

that human nature is a social construct is what is under attack in Qutb. In the

following chapter I will highlight some of the more practical applications of this view by comparing Qutb's view on gender with, for example, Judith Butler's.[14] More broadly, however, Qutb declines to subscribe to the idea – very prominent in Western political theory – that gender is "socially produced." This analysis will open up Qutb's views on cultural production stemming from colonialism regarding gender roles, "civilization," and culture generally.

Qutb's views on nature and society differ from those of Enlightenment figures. As for politics, however, positing a theory to accommodate human beings politically without accounting for their "true" human nature — if such a thing is supposed, which it often is — is obviously difficult, if not ridiculous. Thus one of the most prominent philosophical devices of Enlightenment political theory is the notion of the "state of nature." For Rousseau, human nature is corrupted by economic inequity, fostered and protected by the advent of the state; thus, humans' natural inclination toward innocence is thwarted by corrupting human institutions. Thus "for Rousseau the problem of inequality after the advent of property can only be solved within a body politic." (March 2010, 194) *Nahdawi* thinkers, according to Albert Hourani, were interested in Rousseau in terms of education. (Hourani 1983, 83) There is no such connection between Qutb and Rousseau, or between Qutb and Enlightenment thinkers generally; but the *structural* concerns overlap a great deal: one possesses a natural disposition (*fitra*), and the *state* interferes or corrupts that nature.

In Islamic thought, the notion of *fitra* is a foundational premise: "*Fitra*, as

---

[14] See Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. New York: Routledge. 1990.*

the primordial nature of the human individual, is the genuine Islamic concept of human nature formulated from Islamic sciences." (Kahteran 2006, 210-212) This concept is articulated throughout the Qur'an, and finds its fullest expression in Qur'an 30:30.[15]

> Countenance the constitution (i.e., "religion"), implicating God's nature
> (*fitra*), (this same nature) upon which God constitutes (*fitra*) humanity.
> There is no inconsistency in the creation of God, thus this firm constitution,
> but most people know not. (Qur'an 30:30)

Thinking of *fitra* usually involves references to the well-known prophetic tradition "Every infant is born according to the *fitra*, then his parents make him a Jew, Christian, or Magian." The concept informed legal debates in Islamic theology and *fiqh*. (Macdonald 2012) But Qutb's interpretation never mentions this well-known tradition; instead Qutb vies for a more practical application to modern life. The *fitra*, when honored, both obliges and guides, Qutb speaks of it "*healing* man of ills and deviation" and that humankind needs Islam so as not to "deviate from the true path that leads to true *happiness*." (Qutb 2009, 296, Vol. 13, emphasis added) Qutb discusses happiness often, as opposed to salvation. This view complements his interpretation of *al-Fatiha*. But it is also an elaboration of the antique impulse to address the "correct life." For Aristotle, the "correct life" or "happy life" is the "virtuous life." Virtue, according to Aristotle, is the mean between two extremes, as "courage" is the mean between "cowardice" and "recklessness," and "generosity" is

---

[15] This is my own rendition.

the mean between "wastefulness" and "miserliness." (Aristotle, *Nic. Ethics*, II, 6)

Again, there is either a coincidental similarity between Aristotle's virtue-as-mean"

and the Qur'anic "straight path," or a trans-geographic, trans-temporal ascent onto

a similar premise.[16]

The common thread running through these theorists or psychologists is an

attempt to identify what is essential as opposed to incidental. Rousseau, of course,

argues that pity is perhaps the sole natural virtue in humanity insofar as it militates

against the possible excessive desire for self-preservation. (Rousseau, 2004, 21) In

common is that virtue is located in what is necessary and not superfluous, what is

reasonable and not excessive. And Rousseau begins his discourse by citing

Aristotle's *Politics*. Aristotle says that "we should consider what is natural not in

things depraved but in those which are rightly ordered according to nature."

(Rousseau, *Social Contract & Discourses* 1913)[17] While I do not claim that Aristotle

or Rousseau influenced Qutb, I do suggest that there are certain universal concerns

provoked and exposed by alienation. Solutions for these concerns often take

similar forms when the underlying assumption is a stable "human nature," an

assumption abandoned by postmodern philosophy. Qutb displays a deep and

prolific concern with the "natural" human condition, and how modern society

stifles it. Finally, since in Islam there are precedential concepts (such as *jahiliya* and

fitra), Qutb is quite comfortable arguing that Islam is the "solution." Qutb says that

the *fitra*, as both nature and Islam, steers us away from whim and passion. (Khalidi

---

[16] Al-Ghazali argued, famously, for a "middle way" between extremes, but it would be difficult to deny that Ghazali was unfamiliar with Aristotle. See Campanini 2008.

[17] This quote is derived from Rousseau's "A Discourse on a Subject Proposed by the Academy of Dijon: What is the Origin of the Inequality of Men?" submitted for evaluation in 1754 in Geneva, it would serve as a basis for Rousseau's later work.

1994, 18)

Taken in tandem, the two concepts of "state of nature" and *fitra* share identically in the notion of a primordial human self-corrupted by the influences of society. The two concepts obviously differ in origin, purpose, and trajectory; but as a philosophical device they achieve the same end: they serve as starting points for the critique of society, at the very least. Carre does not detect the modern break from classical interpretations. The verses referring to people on the "straight path" are juxtaposed with those referring to people who have "strayed" and earned God's "anger." These two categories have often been interpreted as the Christians and Jews. For example, Ibn Abbas' (d. 687) *Tanwir al-Maqbas* and al-Tabari's *Tafsir al-Tabari* both confirm such an interpretation; both *tafsir* also evince the common understanding of the time.

> It is also said that (the path of those whom Thou hast favored) refers
> to the prophets. (Not of those who earn Thine anger), not the religion
> of the Jews who earned Your anger, whom You forsook and whose
> hearts You did not protect until they became complaisant. (Nor of
> those who go astray), nor the religion of the Christians who erred
> from Islam. (Ibn Abbas 2016, n.p)

Meanwhile al-Tabari insists that Q1:7 corresponds to Q5:77, which clearly refers to *ahl al-Kitab* and the "excesses" of the people of the book in dogma, the operative verb connecting the two passages for Tabari being *dhal*. (Al-Tabari 1989)

We find no such references in Qutb. He prefers a more abstract reading that

refs to states of mind, psychology, and human behavior—in other words, something like happiness rather than dogma. And in fact, both commentaries simply gloss over those verses denouncing *al-dhalin* (those who have gone astray). Ghazali—most certainly following Qutb here who cites the exact same tradition- qualifies al-Fatiha with the following hadith al-Qudsi:

> As the worshipper recites [in Prayer]: "Praise be to God, the Lord of all the worlds," God will say: 'My servant has praised Me.' As he recites: "The Compassionate, the Merciful," God will say: 'My servant has thanked Me.' As he recites: "Master of the Day of Judgement," God will say: "My servant has glorified Me." As he says: "You alone do we worship, and to You alone do we turn for help," God will say: 'This is between Me and My servant, and My servant will receive what he asks for.' And, as he says: "Guide us on the straight path, the path of those on whom You have bestowed Your favours, not those who have incurred Your wrath, nor those who have gone astray," God will say: 'This is for My servant, and he will be granted his wish" (M. al-Ghazali 2000, 4)

Qutb's notion of *tawhid* is prominent here. The modern nature of Qutb's *tafsir* is driven by socio-political concerns, not overtly "religious" ones. By re- orienting these verses of *al-fatiha*, fellow Muslims may now be considered *dhalin*, with no recourse to claims of salvation through orthodoxy. Again, Qutb is emphasizing

praxis. Carre calls attention to the pivot of Qutb's commentary when he notes that

Qutb's concern is to adjust "harmoniously the human dynamic with the cosmic

dynamic"; the implications of how and why Qutb breaks with the classical tradition

are important, however. The very interpretation offered by Ghazali and Qutb —

which is exactly the same, as the latter must have influenced the former — is

provoked by modern psycho-social needs to be "worked out" in the political, at least

for Qutb. In the following section, I will discuss how Qutb's pantheism informs his

psycho-social political theology.

2. The Politics of *Tawhid*

Qutb's pantheistic *tawhid* undermines things; it never sits well with

'Orthodox' scholars and is usually a threat to political establishments, it certainly

offends *salafis*. Pantheism is an inherently esoteric doctrine: that which is seen is

not all that there is; something lurks beyond, which is "truer," thus revolutionaries

can appeal to a 'truth' beyond doctrine or the state. The idea that God is

omnipresent does not, of course, make one a pantheist: God is in everything and is

the *only real* thing (There is no "real or permanent existence" other than His, Qutb

says *fi Zilal*). Here it is useful to define pantheism:

1) Pantheism asserts that all things are God, God all things. The Universe is
   identical with God, or at least God's self-expression.
2) Everything that exists constitutes a unity, and this unity is Divine.
3) Signifies the belief that all things are one Being; division and plurality

are "modes" of appearance –projected by the mind–or identical with

Unified Being in some way.[18] (Levine 1998, 7-11)

Levine introduces his study on Pantheism with this quote:

> There are two and only two systems of philosophy to be offered. The
> one posits God as the Transcendent cause of all things; the other
> makes God the immanent cause…The former establishes the
> foundation for every religious devotion and for all piety, and this the
> latter fundamentally overturns and takes away. (quoted in Levine
> 1998, 1)

Generally speaking, this mystical assertion regarding the universe — as Hume

writes in his dialogues — essentially makes some "atheists without knowing it."

That is because if God is in all things, all things are sacred, making all things

simultaneously profane — for the sacral evokes its status by its distinction from the

profane. In other words, if God is all things, then there is no point in "praying" or

fasting. In a simple yet philosophically untrue sense, all things are equally God; thus

there is no transcendental truth. This is the threat that Sufism and philosophy have

historically posed to orthodoxy. Qutb poses a similar threat to *salafi*s.

In a Platonist sense, this world is merely a shadow of Eternal Forms; this is what

makes Plato's allegory of the cave so enduring. The allegory is itself a critique of

empiricism, and the empirical view makes Protagoras' "man the measure of all

things." Qutb is certainly not Platonist, but more so for ideological reasons than

---

[18] I have only slightly modified Levine's definition to account for variations with which I am familiar
throughout Abrahamic philosophy (i.e., Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theology and philosophy).

philosophical ones. Qutb's insistence on *fitra* and the "natural" character of Islam relies on this worldview, in which the inner and the outer must coincide "truthfully."

The politics of democracy also makes "man the measure of all things," the human being or "the nation" is sovereign. This sovereignty entails rational compromise, social contracts, and mutually recognized liberties. Is Sayyid Qutb's problem with democracy a problem with democracy *per se*, or with the appropriation of democratic language among authoritarian regimes? It is in Qutb's cosmology of pantheistic *tawhid* that we find our answer. Qutb's problem is not with democracy *per se*, or that human beings are endowed with decision-making capabilities; Qutb's claim is that "outside" of the Islamic context, such capabilities are inhibited by ignorance (*jahiliya*). Thus we have the three major themes of his political theory: *tawhid*, *hakimiyya* (sovereignty), and *jahiliya* (ignorance). Ahmed Mousalli and Sayed Khatab have both surveyed Qutb's conception of these terms; but I argue that Qutb's conception cannot be understood while underestimating the importance of two other concepts: *fitra* and Sharia.

Mousalli laments Qutb's un-philosophical temperament; Mousalli says Qutb's "exposition of *tawhid* is impoverished." Further, Qutb refrains from any philosophical or theological speculation, and "shelters himself behind the holy Qur'an in considering it as the ultimate and only proof on all metaphysical, moral and political issues." (Mousalli 1992, 75) Though Qutb often disparages discursive philosophy, Qutb's *tafisr* and political theory are inherently theological, which means that he engages philosophical concepts that undergird his political outlook.

Further, for Qutb to import concepts like *shirk* and *hakimiyya* from theo-metaphysical speculation into the political, belies the theological nature of his political thought. In the following section, I will address how Qutb's cosmology informs his more politically explicit uses of concepts like *jahiliya* (ignorance) and *shirk* (associating partners to God), especially to draw a distinction between Qutb's understanding of these concepts and classical understandings.

2.a Jahiliya and Shirk

The world that Qutb inhabits is very different from the world of Ibn Taymiyya, though much has been made of Qutb's reliance on Ibn Taymiyya (Sivan 1985). The main feature of this reliance is Qutb's emphasis on the *salaf*, or the early generations of Islam, particularly the first. *Jahiliya* is such an important concept to Qutb that examining his treatment of this concept historically will shed light on his larger project. Naturally, it only makes sense to look at Qutb's treatment of *jahiliya* in conjunction with his treatment of *shirk*; here we will see how Qutb clearly diverges from Ibn Taymiyya, and politicizes these concepts in a modern way.

Jahiliya refers to the period preceding the advent of Islam. For a believing Muslim, this period is characterized by heathenism, idolatry, and injustice (predicated on false beliefs); but in a more general way, it also marks a certain historical epoch, during which the Arabs were a marginal people, possessing certain talents for poetry and trade, but lacking unity and a common cause. The Qur'an uses the term "*jahiliya*" in several places, and for different purposes.

> Is it the judgment of the days of ignorance [*al-jahiliya*] they seek? Who
>
> is better in judgment than God for an upright people? (5:50)

Or:

> And stay quietly in your houses, and make not a dazzling display, like
>
> that of the former times of Ignorance [*al-jahiliya*); and establish
>
> regular prayer, and give regular charity; and obey God and His
>
> Messenger. And God only wishes to remove all abomination from
>
> you, you members of the family, and to make you pure and spotless.
>
> (33:33)

In both instances, the term *jahiliya* is qualified by the affixation of the definite article "the" (*al*); thus it is not simply ignorance but *The* Ignorance. Contrast this with other uses of the word in the Qur'an: 2:89 states: "He said: Do you know what you did to Joseph and his brother in your *ignorance (jahiliya)*?" Here the term is simply descriptive, there is also the correlating term *ghamra*, which is often translated as "confusion" or "ignorance," but never takes on the definitive form of "*The* Confusion" or "*The* Ignorance." This conceptualization is unique, and acts as a philosophical device. Much in the same way that Enlightenment philosophers used the concept of "state of nature"—a concept whose implication could never be proven to have existed, let alone actually known—*jahiliya* can be used as a description that requires a prescription, the prescription in this case being Islam. What *jahiliya* represents is all the various and subtle ways that *tawhid* is violated or

unrecognized, and how that harms humanity.

The most fundamental features of *al-jahiliya* are of course polytheism and idolatry, which obviously violate the notion of *tawhid*. But Qutb's elaboration on the concept of *tawhid* is not simply the elucidation of a monotheistic doctrine, but a more complex psychological, epistemological, ethical, and social claim — as is the case with many Muslim thinkers and writers who have attended to this concept. For a classic scholar like Ahmed b. Hanbal, *tawhid* was the cornerstone of obedience to the Sharia. Contemporary thinker Ismail Faruqi (d. 1986) argued that "God is not merely an absolute, ultimate first cause or principle but a core of normativeness. It is this aspect of God that suffers most from any theory where God becomes *deus otiosus*," thus the abstract theories of Ibn Sina and Ibn Rushd evacuate *tawhid* of its moral imperative: "the value of the metaphysical is that it may exercise its imperativeness, its moving appeal or normativeness." (Faruqi 1992, 2) So worshipping idols did not simply "offend" God in the Hebraic sense. Idol-worship is not wrongly acknowledging many gods, when "in fact," there is only one; polytheism and idolatry (*shirk*) rendered both the individual and society unworthy of any claims to knowledge–in other words "ignorant." Since God is literally the "cause of everything," not knowing God makes one oblivious to any cause whatsoever; thus *tawhid* is the axiom of all knowledge in the Aristotelain sense of "to know something is to know its cause." Knowledge of God results in knowledge of self, others, nature, ethics, and the universe. Though Faruqi wrote a moving introduction to his translation of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's *Kitab al-Tawhid*, his understanding — as articulated above — would be alien to the latter. When Faruqi

speaks of God's "normativeness," he suggests that God is the norm; there are certainly platonist assumptions here, never fully flushed out by Faruqi, but more so by Qutb.

The theoretical relationship between *tawhid* and behavior is most exactly expressed by the concept of *fitra*, and *fitra* is such a ubiquitous concept in Islam (in the Qur'an, and even more so in the Sunna), it does not need to be redundantly cited. Qutb comments on Qur'an 30:30:

> "Set your face steadily towards the true faith, turning away from all that is false," and move straight towards it, for it protects you from the influence of divergent desires that have no right basis and which rely on *no true knowledge*. They are subject only to whim and passion, lacking control or *evidence*. When you set your face steadily towards true faith, you turn away from everything else. This is "in accordance with the natural disposition which God has installed into man." (Verse 30) Thus the surah links human nature with the nature of this faith. Both are made by God, in accordance with the *law of existence*; both are mutually *harmonious in their natures and objectives.* (Qutb 2009, 296; italics added)

The above passage bears a striking resemblance in both logic and import to the thinking of Natural Law theorists in sixteenth–eighteenth-century Europe. Andrew March has pointed out the commonalities between Qutb and Rousseau (and to a lesser extent Marx), but Kant, Smith, Hume, Locke, and Hobbes all

49

initiated their political and ethical projects by seeking the "State of Nature" (i.e., the natural disposition of the human being), though such a state was not necessarily normative to Natural Law theorists (for Hobbes such a state was to be overcome by rationality, for example). In this sense, the concept of *jahiliya* is a philosophical device more so than it is a historical reference. (Morris 1999)

Jahiliya implies that corrupted state in which man, though "born free," finds himself everywhere — as Rousseau lamented — "in chains" (March 2010) The state, serving the interests of the powerful, "corrupts" the nature of humanity by convincing humanity of something deviant to serve the purposes of the few. Again, Muhammad himself might have shared such a sentiment considering the famous tradition stating that "every child is born in the *fitra*, but it is the parents that make them a Jew, Christian, or polytheist." And Rousseau does not advocate greater equality merely as a progressive member of the political spectrum, but with an insistence that inherent in humanity is a *disposition* toward harmony interrupted by the forces of politics.

Shepard's focus "is on the doctrine of *jahiliya* itself as Qutb presented it and understood it," but admittedly he restricts "comments on the social and political significance of the doctrine." (Shepard 2003, 521-22) Ahmed Moussalli does not treat *jahiliya* directly in his taxonomy of Qutbian thought, but he does point out *al-waqi'iyyah* (realism) as an important attribute of Qutb's thought, the seemingly disparate scholarship of Mousalli and March converge here. (Mousalli, 121) Khatab offers a historical view of Qutb's development of the theory. (Khatab 2006) But my emphasis here is more simple and concentrated. There is a deep abiding

interdependence between Qutb's use of *tawhid*, *fitra*, and *jahiliya*. Sayyid Qutb's

jahiliya, like the mythical "State of Nature," is a philosophical device. This is

important to point out in one certain respect: The concept is potent less for

excommunicative reasons, as Haddad might argue, but more for basic

epistemological reasons. Andrew March and to a lesser extent Roxanne Euben

elucidate Qutb more clearly by their comparative method — bringing Qutb into

conversation with social contract theorists, for example.

Philological treatments of Qutb that focus on the etymology of Arabic terms like

jahiliya sustain the peculiarity of such concepts, and render them little more than

dogma, evacuating them of their more universal political implications.

     Shirk is another one of these concepts. In *Milestones*, Qutb says:

> This association with God has been either in belief and worship, or in
>
> accepting the sovereignty of others besides God. Both of these aspects
>
> are *Shirk* [*Shirk* is an Arabic word which refers to ascribing the
>
> attributes, power or authority of God to others besides Him and/or
>
> worshipping others besides Him.] in the sense that they take human
>
> beings away from the religion of God, which was brought by the
>
> Prophets. After each Prophet, there was a period during which people
>
> understood this religion, but then gradually later generations forgot it
>
> and returned to *Jahiliya*. They started again on the way of *Shirk*,
>
> sometimes in their belief and worship and sometimes in their
>
> submission to the authority of others, and sometimes in both. (Qutb
>
> 2006, 56)

Qutb goes on to say:

> Before this, God accused the Jews and Christians of committing *Shirk*,
>
> and of unbelief, and of taking priests and rabbis as lords in addition to
>
> God, only because they had given certain rights and privileges to their
>
> priests and rabbis, which today those who call themselves "Muslims"
>
> have given to some people among themselves. This action of the Jews
>
> and Christians was considered by God in the same category of *Shirk* as
>
> that of the Christians' making Jesus into the Son of God and
>
> worshipping him. The latter is a rebellion against the Oneness of God,
>
> while the former is a rebellion against His prescribed way of life and a
>
> denial of "There is no other deity except God". Among Muslim
>
> societies, some openly declare their 'secularism' and negate all their
>
> relationships with the religion; some others pay respect to the
>
> religion only with their mouths, but in their social life they have
>
> completely abandoned it. They say that they do not believe in the
>
> "Unseen" and want to construct their social system on the basis of
>
> "science," as if science and the Unseen are contradictory! This claim of
>
> theirs is mere ignorance, and only ignorant people can talk like this.
>
> [Refer to the discussion in Volume 7 of *fi-zilal* in explanation of the
>
> verse: "He has the keys to the Unseen; no one knows it except Him".]
>
> There are some other societies which have given the authority of
>
> legislation to others besides God; they make whatever laws they
>
> please and then say, "This is the Shari`ah of God". All these societies

are the same in one respect, that none of them is based on submission

to God alone. (Ibid, 94)

Qutb moves from a typical dogmatic critique of Jews and Christians to one of

Muslim *societies* and, in fact, of all societies. To critique society is to criticize all the

moods, manners, and mores of a place. It is more than merely a critique of beliefs,

but of the culture at large. Qutb does not opine over the deliverance of "hell," or how

false worship leads one to damnation. He does not even suspend the power or logic

of science — "*as if* science and the unseen are contradictory!" Qutb is concerned

with authority, whether ecclesiastical or legislative. Having a Rabbi or Priest or

Secular state (or god made of stone) all incur the same problem: they stem from

false or "ignorant authority." The verse that Qutb refers to above is in *Sura al-An'aam*

(The Cattle). In the prologue to his exegesis, Qutb's subtitles are listed as, for

example: "A Call for Freedom," "A Call for Social Justice," "A Practical System" — all

themes that are elaborated upon in *Milestones*. Qutb also denounces nationalism by

arguing that "it would have been easy for [Muhammad] to launch an Arab

nationalist movement aimed at uniting the Arabian tribes that had been weakened

by long periods of feuding and disputation." But God in "His wisdom directed him to

declare 'there is no deity other than God,' and to bear with his few Companions all

the ensuing persecution." (Qutb 2009, 3, Vol. 5)

Again why did this happen? It was not God's purpose to subject His

Messenger and the believers to oppression. But God knew that

replacing Byzantine or Persian tyranny with Arab tyranny was not the
right way. For all tyranny is the same. The earth belongs to God and
must submit purely to God. (Ibid, 3-4)

The references to Arab Nationalism and tyranny no doubt elicit thoughts of
Nasser's Egypt. But Qutb goes further, finding ways to invoke *tawhid* in
contradistinction to Marxism as well: "It would have been easy for Muhammad
(peace be upon him) to start a social movement, declaring war against the
aristocracy, and calling for social justice through the redistribution of wealth." (Ibid,
4) But, Qutb insists, "social justice can only be achieved fully through a
comprehensive ideological concept that submits all affairs to God." (Ibid) As I have
been emphasizing, Qutb's gnostic God and pantheistic *tawhid* (clear, yet
incoherently denied by Qutb himself) have implications beyond dogma. What does
it mean to juxtapose all authority to an omnipresent God? In his commentary on
Sura al-An'aam Qutb addresses *knowing* God.

Qutb laments the gulf between mystical knowledge (i.e., knowledge of the
'Unseen') and science; Qutb's comments on verse 59 argue that:

Again, the nature of Godhead is clearly reflected in God's knowledge
that encompasses everything that takes place throughout the
universe. This is described in a way that cannot apply to anyone other
than God, and cannot be painted by anyone but Him. (Qutb 2009,
148)

Qutb does not qualify his discussion by entering into traditional philosophical debates regarding God's knowledge of particulars/universals or the primacy of essence as opposed to existence. But Qutb actually does take positions in these debates–whether wittingly or not (something to which I will return).

Wael Hallaq offers an interesting quote from John Straw in *The Impossible State*; Straw says that humanism's belief in "progress" is a myth, "further from the truth about the human animal than any of the world's religions." (Hallaq 2012, 1) The secular "nation-state" embodies the myth of the sovereign nation (a group of people held theoretically together through common features like ancestry, language, history, or religion) as ruling together, forming together a sovereign singularity. Hallaq refers to this as the myth of the "will of representation"; "the concept of sovereignty" is one of the modern State's defining "hallmarks." This is contrary to pre-modern rule, whereby ideological structures indeed persisted, but rule was still essentially personal and instantiated in a ruler. (Ibid, 25) The modern state claims to embody the sovereign "will of a people," and to do so such people must assent ideologically to the paradigm of collective will and even knowledge.

Qutb understands this well, and though he possesses neither training nor command of the technical language in this domain, Qutb's pursuit of knowledge *qua* God is an attack on modern conceptions of sovereignty (see Mousalli, 1992; Euben, 1997). But what Qutb brings to the debate is a very important notion of the gnostic. The concept of Gnosis suggests that God discloses directly to the believer as experience (*'irfan/ma'arifa*). There is a deep and longstanding tradition of *'irfan* in Islamic thought, particularly philosophical theology. Al-Ghazali (d. 1111),

Suhrawardi (d. 1191), Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240), and Mulla Sadra (d. 1640) — as well as contemporary thinkers such as Mutaharri (d. 1978), Tabataba'i (d. 1981), and Khomeni (d. 1989) — have all composed tracts on the concepts of *'irfan*. It could not be said that Sayyid Qutb belongs to this school in any scholastic way, but it is vital to look at how he considers the unknown. There are several passages in the Qur'an that more or less demand a mystical interpretation. Earlier I referred to Q 57:3; another well-known passage is *Ayat al-Nur*. The *aya* states:

> God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The example of His
> light is like a niche within which is a lamp, the lamp is within glass,
> the glass as if it were a pearly [white] star lit from [the oil of] a
> blessed olive tree, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil
> would almost glow even if untouched by fire. Light upon light. God
> guides to His light whom He wills. And God presents examples for
> the people, and God is Knowing of all things. (Q 24:35)

One of the seminal texts in the Islamic Gnostic tradition is al-Ghazali's *Mishkat al-Anwar.* It is a demanding text, requiring philosophical and theological knowledge on the part of the reader, while alluding to what could be considered "heresies" by so-called "Orthodox" Muslims. David Buchman, in his critical translation and edition of *Mishkat*, notes that al-Ghazali's exegesis establishes "a metaphysics of light–which includes an ontology and an epistemology–and interrelated cosmological and psychological schemes based upon this metaphysics." (A. H. al-Ghazali 1998) The concept has compelled articulation, which

is indeed integral to the concept itself. Buchman's comments on Ghazali's

metaphysics could be exactly said of Qutb's political theology of *tawhid*. Al-Ghazali

says "the only true light is (God's). Everything is His light—or, rather, He is

everything…. Therefore, there is no light except His light." (Ibid, 20) The similarity

here between al-Ghazali and Qutb's commentary on *Ikhlas* is striking, but let us

consider Qutb's comments on *Nur*.

> "God is the light of the heavens and the earth." (Verse 35) No sooner
> does this remarkable statement impart its meaning than a bright
> light spreads over the whole universe and lightens up feelings and
> emotions, filling hearts and minds. The entire universe swims in a
> radiant light. Screens and curtains are removed, hearts radiate,
> spirits fly high, and everything is purified in a sea of light. All shed
> their burdens and join together in an atmosphere of pure happiness
> and delight. Indeed, the universe and all it contains break their fetters
> so as to let the heavens and earth meet, the distant and the near
> come together, as do the animate and the inanimate. What is hidden
> joins with what is apparent, as do people's hearts and senses. (Qutb,
> 2009, 253)

The language that Qutb employs here is deeply mystical. The universe

"swims in a radiant light"; importantly, "screens and curtains are removed." The

concept of "screens and curtains" — veiling — is ubiquitous in the Sufi tradition.

The Sufi experience is predicated on removing "veils" of perception to see reality.

Murata and Chittick stress that a way of knowing God within the Islamic Sufi tradition is to experience God. This "way" is often referred to as *kashf* (unveiling). "The image suggested by the word is connected to the idea that God is veiled from His creatures.... Unveiling takes place when god removes some of the veils between him and a given human being... after the experience, the person has no lingering doubts about the Real behind the veils." (Murata 1994, 238) By extension, Sufi frame creation within *tashbih*, which when it comes to God and creation "does not see difference, it sees sameness. It recognizes that everything other than God is in fact present with God. All things are real, all things are something, but only in respect of God's presence within them." (Ibid, 257)

Qutb argues "the heavens and earth meet, the distant and the near come together, as do the animate and the inanimate. What is hidden joins with what is apparent." Qutb collapses all of creation into one-ness — not at an apocalyptic moment such as the "end of time," but a state of awareness or knowledge *now*. Maududi's commentary, on the other hand, is again far more reticent in entering into metaphysical discourse on this verse. Maududi argues (like the introductory comments by al-Ghazali in his *Mishkat*) that God is the primary "cause of manifestation," meaning that things receive their ability to be perceived from God. And secondly, Maududi argues that the "word light is also used for knowledge, and ignorance is termed as darkness. Allah is the Light of the universe in this sense too, because the knowledge of Reality and of right Guidance can be obtained from Him alone; without having recourse to His "Light," there will be nothing but darkness of ignorance and the resultant vice and wickedness in the world." (Maududi, n.d., n.p.)

In other words, God's light is the *shari'a* — a far cry from Qutb's metaphysical commentary.

Qutb's resultant metaphysics also produces an epistemic problem. Theoretically, all humans should be capable of "seeing," unveiling, or tasting (*dhawq*) the truth, a form of intuition and inspiration. But, from Qutb's point of view, not all human beings have done so. The Qur'an is ambiguous in regard to how or why humans embrace Islam. At times it says God that has "closed their hearts"; during others, the Qur'an stresses that those who do not submit to God will be held accountable for their actions. These contradictions persist in Qutb too, as his epistemology is the gateway to his political theory. In this respect, Qutb can be seen as authoritarian in his outlook, morally judgmental of those who have not "seen the light"; and this attitude on the part of Qutb is what, in my view, has made him so easily pigeonholed as a "fundamentalist," though he is not.

2:b Hakimiyya and Qutb's "Problem of Other Epistemes"

Hallaq's work *The Impossible State* explores the various convergences of State formation: economic, structural, ideological, and historical. Modern epistemic frames of reference are essential to the idea of the modern state: Democracy requires rationality (i.e., Rousseau); but so does authoritarianism (Hobbes). Rationality, however, has its limits. When the eighteenth-century European philosopher David Hume articulated those limits in his *Inquiry*, the need for reason and reason's limits were reconciled through empiricism. (Morris 1999) Ideology, as Hallaq argues, is at the heart of the modern state–it is not a natural or inevitable "development."

Qutb faces two problems: 1) Proving the superiority of gnostic knowledge over reason; and 2) the presence of other political philosophies. Qutb succeeds in the first argument, by demonstrating that Gnosis and reason are not at odds in his articulation of the Sharia. In order to understand Qutb's second problem, the comparative perspective yields more clarity. The secular state is predicated on something like Locke's privatization of belief. Locke says:

> The commonwealth seems to me to be a society of men constituted only for the purpose of preserving and promoting the public good. By "the public good" I mean: life, liberty, freedom from bodily illness and pain, and the possession of things such as money, land, houses, furniture, and so on. The civil magistrate's job is … to secure, for the

60

people in general and for each one in particular, the just possession of

these worldly things. If anyone tries to violate the laws governing this,

he should be deterred by the fear of punishment, consisting of the

lessening or outright loss of the goods that he otherwise might and

ought to enjoy. Because no‑‑‑one willingly allows himself to be

punished by the loss of any of his goods, let alone his liberty or his life,

the magistrate in punishing those who violate any other man's rights

is armed with the force and strength of all his subjects. (Locke, *Of Civil*

Government & Toleration 1895, 147, with modern English rendering)

The state, for Locke, protects property. Its purposes are limited. The state protects

us from *one another*. Yes, it is true, Rousseau commits his ideal state to different

purposes; but even Rousseau's diagnosis of the state does not deny its anchoring in

property relations. If the state exists to protect us (and our property) from one

another, do we agree to an autocrat to protect or mutual consensus? These are the

crude elements of state theory. But in addition to that, Locke argues that civic

authorities cannot—by sheer logic—have jurisdiction over the "saving of souls." He

observes:

The care of souls is not committed to the civil magistrate any more

than it is to other men. It isn't committed to him by God, because it

seems that God hasn't ever given any man the authority to compel

someone else to join his religion. And such a power can't be given to

the magistrate by the people, because no-one can be so unconcerned about his own salvation that he blindly leaves it to someone else — whether monarch or subject — to tell him what faith or worship to embrace. (Ibid, 147)

Although I single out the state's arbitration and policing function at the expense of perhaps other functions; nothing in the above quotation bears directly upon the concept of "sovereignty." But it does so indirectly, by privatizing belief Locke assures the sovereignty of people in politics and their autonomy even religion. He says of the Church:

Let us now consider what a church is. A church seems to me to be a free society of men who voluntarily come together to worship God in a way that they think is acceptable to Him and effective in saving their souls. (Ibid, 150)

Qutb addresses the well-known verse in the Qur'an '*la ikrah' fil-din*' (there is no compulsion in religion 2:256) in such a way that it puts him in lockstep with Locke in terms of voluntary faith. But there is also a sharp distinction. Qutb says:

Islam looks at religious faith as a matter of conviction, once the basic facts are provided and explained. Faith is never a matter of coercion or compulsion. To achieve this conviction, Islam addresses the human

being in totality. It addresses the human mind and intellect, human

common sense, emotions and feelings, the innermost human nature,

and the whole human conscious being. It resorts to no coercive

means or physical miracles that confound the mind or that are

beyond human ability to rationalize and comprehend. By the same

token, Islam never seeks converts through compulsion or threats or

pressure of any kind. It deploys facts, reasoning, explanation and

persuasion. (Qutb, 2009, 348)

Whereas for Locke, religion is merely "worshipping God," for Qutb Islam

addresses "innermost human nature" and the "whole human conscious being."

Thus Qutb, rather than arguing for the *Islamic* state, argues that Islam *replaces* the

state. (see Euben 1997; Qutb 2006,) In Locke's conception, the concept of

sovereignty need not even be elucidated. Locke's organization or purpose of the

state stems from his argument regarding human nature. He says:

Besides the crime which consists in violating the law, and varying

from the right rule of reason, whereby a man so far becomes

degenerate, and declares himself to quit the principles of human

nature, and to be a noxious creature, there is commonly injury done

to some person or other, and some other man receives damage by his

transgression: in which case he who hath received any damage, has,

besides the right of punishment common to him with other men, a

particular right to seek reparation from him that has done it: and any other person, who finds it just, may also join with him that is injured, and assist him in recovering from the offender so much as may make satisfaction for the harm he has suffered. (Locke, *Second Treatise Concerning Government*, Sec. 2)

For Locke, reason is an inherent human capacity, and to violate the law is to exceed the limits of reason and to "quit" human nature. The state then occupies a passive place, arbitrating in the anomalous violation of human nature. Andrew March is absolutely correct in focusing on Qutb's insistence on *fitra*. But Locke's epistemology is empirical. He famously argued that "no man's knowledge here can go beyond his experience," which would not include Gnostic experience. Qutb cannot rely on empirical experience as a consensual claim, if he concedes this type of epistemology his entire project becomes moot. Though the distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena* is Kantian, Locke means phenomenal experience. Though he often invokes "human nature" (which seems difficult actually *to experience*), Locke's state is really devoted to protecting property — including the self — and arbitrating disputes thereby. This remains the standard of the secular state today.

Qutb cannot have an argument against the state in this regard. Qutb's real problem has to do with social values and culture, not with the state *per se*. He thus argues that if the culture were ethically "correct," there would be no need for a state. But he sees the state as protecting, facilitating, and harnessing "bad culture" to the

ends of a few. It is not the purpose of the state that is Qutb's problem; it is the

admixture of politics and popular culture. The *raison d'être* of the Egyptian state in

Qutb's time was its agency on behalf of the "Arab nation," a cultural phenomenon

with its own historical referents.

Arab nationalism, bounded by linguistic, cultural, and perhaps even ethnic

imaginings has an empirical base and a tautological legitimacy. Al-Husri argued "the

idea of Arab unity is a natural idea. It has not been artificially started. It is a natural

consequence of the existence of the Arab nation itself. It is a social force drawing its

vitality from the life of the Arabic language, from the history of the Arab nation and

from the connectedness of the Arab countries." (al-Husri 1962, 152) 'Abd al-Rahman

al-Bazzaz likewise stresses "Arab nationalism in which we believe, and for which we

call, is based, as our national pact stipulates, not on racial appeal but on linguistic,

historical, cultural and spiritual ties and on fundamental vital interests." (al-Bazzaz

1962, 174) Though it is not obvious, the nationalist state and Locke's secular state

have in common empirical responsibilities. Qutb attempts to undermine claims to

legitimacy by appealing to gnosis.

2:c Qutb's Practical Solution

Qutb's critique of the state draws analogies from Muhammad's life.

Muhammad challenged "idol"-worship as man-made superstition. Qutb challenges

the nation-state in a similar way, as he sees it, arguing that it is a man-made entity

predicated on similarly made premises. Qutb advances the idea of *tawhid* as the

singular reality, and insists on a worldview that "corresponds" to that reality (*fitra*).

As proof of this reality, he invokes the *sahaba* as evidence of both witness to *tawhid*

and of success. Qutb says:

> [*Jahiliya*] is not now that simple and primitive form of the ancient
>
> *jahiliya*, but takes the form of claiming that the right to create values,
>
> to legislate rules of collective behavior and to choose any way of life
>
> rests with men, without regard to what God has prescribed. (Qutb
>
> 1978, 4)

The nation-state embodies the "nation's right" to legislate for itself, personifying the

"nation's sovereignty." But Qutb argues that to be loyal to the nation is to commit

an act of *shirk*, and that it subjected the intellect to human creations such as states

and "ethnicities." Thus Qutb insists "only Islam has the distinction of basing the

fundamental, binding relationship on belief .... Arab and Greek, Persian and African

and all nations which inhabit the earth become one community." (Qutb 2006, 109)

Qutb's use of Islamic mythical concepts such as *jahiliyya* is profoundly

modern and classical.[19] "In classical usage, the term *jahiliya* refers to the period of

time and the condition of society before the advent of Islam." (Doumato 1995, 352-

354) *Jahiliya* is not simply a *time* but also a *condition*; Qutb's notion of *jahiliya* as a

condition brings him into the modern world of critique. Mawdudi (d. 1979), the

well-known Indian '*alim*, is generally considered the first to employ the concept as a

modern philosophical device. Mawdudi's usage was popularized by his student

---

[19] By "mythical" I am not suggesting that *jahiliya* is not a historical period. I only mean that as a
reference it embodies much more than a historical period.

'Abd al-Hassan 'Ali Nadvi. Qutb 1) relies heavily on a classical understanding of the term; 2) develops the idea more fully, and populates it with easily recognizable political concepts such as the "nation" and state; and 3) adds an economic component to his critique as well.

The philosophical use of the concept of "modern *jahiliya*" should not be contrasted with the classical usage, but assimilated to it. Tarif Khalidi notes that the most basic and essential component to the classical usage, to be found in the Qur'an itself, is the Qur'anic distinction between "true wisdom" (*'ilm*) and "whimsical opinion" (*zann*). The Qur'an states: "They follow naught but an opinion, and they do but guess" (Q 6:116); "ye follow naught but an opinion, ye do but guess" (Q 6:148). Yet the Qur'an also repeatedly distinguishes between *'ilm* and *al-kitab*: "Assuredly, We gave the people of Israel [i.e., the Jews] the Book and the Wisdom..." (Q 45:16); "And He will teach him [Jesus] the Book, the wisdom, the Torah, and the Gospel" (Q 3:48). This distinction suggests, at least conceptually or even theologically, that there is "true" knowledge extraneous to the Holy text–so something "true" is intellectually attainable outside of the revealed text. Qutb's political theory relies on this type of knowledge far more than on *fiqh*.

The distinction between "book" and "wisdom" is not lost on Qutb. On verse 48 of *Al-'Imran*, Qutb comments:

> The term "the book," as used in the Arabic original, may be
> understood to mean "to write," or to mean the Torah and the Gospel. If
> it is the latter, then the fact that they are mentioned immediately

67

afterwards is perfectly acceptable usage in Arabic, which provides the
details of something already mentioned in general terms. "Wisdom" is
a certain condition, which enables a person to look at things in their
right perspective, understand what is right and follow it. To be
granted wisdom is to be granted much grace by God. The Torah is the
book of Jesus in the same way as the Gospel, for it represents the basis
of the religion he preached. The Gospel is a complement renovating
the spirit of the Torah and reviving the essence of faith, which had
been smothered by the Israelites. Many of those who speak about
Christianity make the mistake of neglecting the Torah when it is the
basis of the religion preached by Jesus and contains the law which
should be implemented in a Christian society. The Gospel contains
only a few amendments to the Torah. Otherwise, it is a message
reviving what has already been established by the Torah. It has a
refining effect on human conscience enabling man to be in direct
contact with God through the revealed text. (Qutb 2009, 74)

Qutb notes that "wisdom is a certain condition" enabling the "right perspective."
Indeed, Qutb attributes wisdom to the Grace of God rather than to reason, which
further suggests his mystical inclinations. But it is apart from the revealed text,
though potentially revealed itself. Yet such wisdom *confirms* the holy text, it does
not contradict it. *Jahiliya* is the adjectival term for the lack of correspondence
between human knowledge (or wisdom) and revealed texts, and in this sense it is a

simple yet deep concept. It is also consistent with a classical understanding of the

term. The idea that what we "know" may in fact be false in Islamic thought is

radically different than the doctrine of "false consciousness" developed in Marxist

literature, but it elicits a similar political response. Far too much has been made of

the idea that Qutb simply Islamisized Marxist concepts. (See Binder, 1988) I will

return to this subject later.

The problem of "false consciousness" is endemic to Islamic theology. The

term *jahiliya* means "false consciousness" in the broader political, cultural, and

sociological sense. It does not simply mean "ignorant" in the English sense. A well-

educated secular-nationalist could be *jahil* in this sense, whereas we would not

commonly refer to a well-educated person as "ignorant." In fact, when we look at

Qutb's views of other prominent Egyptian writers of the time, some of the most

brilliant are the most entrenched in "ignorance" according to Qutb. Further, even if

the Marxist doctrine of "false consciousness" had never developed, the sheer logic of

the concept in its Islamic lineage would have demanded its use in the modern

setting. Further, Qutb's object of critique is the nexus of cultural thinking and

political organization or, in other words, the way we think and the state. In this

sense, Qutb is steeped in the instincts of the western philosophical tradition, who

belabored the point that epistemology precedes politics.

For example, for Kant the state is a suitable contractual arrangement; for

Hegel the state is eventuated by rationalism and modern self-awareness; for Weber

the state is an organizing institution *par excellence*. But in modern critique, from

Rousseau to Marx, the emphasis is on the contingent nature of the state. (Morris

1999) Qutb fits into this tradition quite easily, though his references differ. The state is a "fiction," a man-made idol. It is not an idol in the simplistic sense — one revered on the living room mantle. It is an idol in the referential sense: the state underpins the human condition in modern times. For Marx, the contingent nature of such an influential institution meant that it could be fashioned toward more democratic ends (though Marx too predicted the state's demise). Qutb is inconsistent in his views on the "state," however. On one hand, Qutb admonishes the notion of "state"[20] (see Euben 1997); yet on the other hand, Qutb continually cites Muhammad's Medina as the ideal state.

   In *Milestones*, Qutb argues that the Medinian state "uplifted" its inhabitants (44); while *jahili* society was only capable of "enslaving" humanity. The difference is the insertion of the "Sovereignty of God." In theoretical terms, the concept of *jahiliya* serves as a philosophical device more than as a finite historical epoch for Qutb. Just as in Western political theory the "state of nature" acted as a description against which to prescribe the appropriate political theory, for Qutb *jahiliya* is inversely the "unnatural state," denoting the loss of *fitra* and the need for a Divine "call." But even this "call" is subject to historical realities. Qutb says:

> God Most High did not desire that all laws and regulations be revealed
> during the Meccan period so that Muslims would have a ready-made
> system to be applied as soon as they reached Madinah; this is out of
> character for this religion. Islam is more practical than this and has

---

[20] Qutb says "for now conscience was the law---enforcer, and the pleasure of God, the hope of divine reward, and the fear of God's anger took the place of police and punishments." (2006, 43)

more foresight; it does not find solution to hypothetical problems. It first looks at the prevailing conditions, and if it finds a viable society which, according to its form, conditions or temperament, is a Muslim society, which has submitted itself to the law of God and is weary of laws emanating from other sources, then indeed this religion provides a method for the legislation of laws according to the needs of such a society. (Qutb, 2006, 47)

Qutb's attribution of agency to "Islam" is problematic, yet this description of Islam differs from a typical *salafi* interpretation that insists that the *sunna* is a complete code of conduct for all time. This view implies that seventh-century Arabia is paradigmatic for all societies at all times. Qutb clearly admits more room for the development of Islamic norms, one that insists that social conditions be considered in the development of Islamic thought. The respect for "social conditions" makes Qutb more historically oriented and critical than a simple "fundamentalist."

Conclusion

Though Sayyid Qutb relies heavily on the notion of the *salaf*, he is neither a *salafi* nor fundamentalist. Qutb's metaphysics is too gnostic and his commentary too literary and politicized. Qutb is committed to critiques of modern political institutions like "the state." The premise of "sovereignty" is the organizing principle of his critique. Nowhere is Qutb more clear on the actual political implications of

sovereignty than in his exegesis of *Al-'Imran*. Qutb does not simply postulate God's

absolute sovereignty; he also admits room for a relative human sovereignty. In this

respect, Qutb's political theory on sovereignty is simple and complete. God is

sovereign and bestows a conditional sovereignty on men; should they break the

conditions of that sovereignty, they are to be forcibly removed. Again, Qutb is not

radically different here from a social contract theorist (particularly Locke).

Qutb's theory of sovereignty relies on his epistemology, which this chapter

has sought to establish through Qutb's metaphysics. Qutb is a pantheist. As such,

the esoteric dimensions of his thought are the most important. Qutb constantly

refers to knowledge of God, which is obtained and experienced. To experience God

is gnosis, and by establishing Qutb's gnosticism he can be placed within the

pantheon of gnostic thinkers and the range of political and theological thought

produced therein. If pantheism is at all a relative term, it is useful to compare Qutb

theologically with other prominent modernists. In the case of Qutb *contra* Ibn 'Abd

al-Wahhab, it is clear that Qutb frames God and the relationship between God and

cosmos within a *tashbih* understanding. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab's understanding of God

is transcendent; Qutb's understanding of God is imminent. This does not imply that

the opposing view does not persist within Qutb — but his ontological scale definitely

tilts toward *tashbih*. What I have argued is that this cosmology possesses an

inherent logic that must be respected if the nature of Qutb's political thought is to be

understood. This is the scope of my methodology.

At the very least, establishing Qutb's Gnosticism problematizes claims that he

is a "fundamentalist," even though he relies heavily on the *Salaf*. When we compare

Qutb to the prominent *salafi* modernist Muhammad 'Abduh, Qutb's thought within the context of the *nahda* is more readily understood. 'Abduh, building on the philosophical legacy of al-Afghani, resurrects aspects of the Islamic philosophical spectrum that are more reason-based and figurative. Qutb's gnosticism continues this tradition. Though gnosticism is thought of as irrational, I have argued that in fact gnosticism and reason occupy similar spaces on a hermeneutical spectrum. Gnosticism requires interpretation, which always posits a human interlocutor poised over a text and employing reason to offer meaningful interpretations. It is no accident that the philosophers and Sufis interpret the Qur'an more figuratively than do traditionalists.

Thus far, by establishing Qutb's cosmology we have been able to elicit the logic of his political theory, most generally regarding sovereignty and dominion. In the third Sura of the Qur'an there is a symbiotic relationship between descriptions of "the heavens" and notions of dominion (verses 24–27). Whereas the Qur'anic description of God's dominion could be considered celestial only, there are potentially political interpretations available. Notions of "false belief," accountability, dominion, and the "passing of day and night" are all present in these few verses.

The Qur'an states: "They are deceived in their own faith by the false beliefs they used to invent (24); every soul will be paid in full what it has earned (25), You [God] grant dominion to whom You will and take dominion away from whom You will (26); You cause the night to pass into the day, and You cause the day to pass into the night" (27). The Qur'an itself directs attention to the relationship between

73

celestial "power" and earthly balance. (Another example would be *Sura al-Rahman*,

verses 1–6.) Qutb argues that these verses spell out the conditions of political rule.

> Since there is only a single deity, He is then the only Master, "the
>
> Sovereign of all dominion" Who has no partners. He gives whatever
>
> portion He wishes of His dominion to whomever He wants of His
>
> servants. What is given becomes simply like a borrowed article. Its
>
> owner retains his absolute right of taking it back whenever he wants.
>
> No one, then, has any claim of original dominion giving him the right
>
> of absolute power. It is simply a received dominion, subject to the
>
> terms and conditions stipulated by the original Sovereign. If the
>
> recipient behaves in anyway which constitutes a violation of these
>
> conditions, his action is invalid. Believers have a duty to stop him from
>
> that violation in this life. In the life to come, he will have to account for
>
> his violation of the terms stipulated by the original Sovereign. (Qutb
>
> 2009, 49)

Locke argues in the *Second Treatise* that "if a long train of abuses,

prevarications and artifices, all tending the same way, make the design visible to

the people, and they cannot but feel what they lie under, and see whither they are

going; it is not to be wondered, that they should then rouse themselves, and

endeavor to put the rule into such hands which may secure to them the ends for

which government was at first erected." (Locke 2016, 151) Present in these

comments are themes similar to Qutb's: notions of a natural purpose to

government; that society has a right to prevent "violations" of said purpose; and conditional dominion. Looking at Qutb in comparative context, his views become much more vivid.

When we examine Qutb in this light, many more questions are raised about how his political theory has been treated thus far. The Egyptian radical was far more fluid in his view of Islam than either Haddad or Shepard recognizes. Qutb was also more original than Binder suggests. In the following chapters, we will put Qutb in a greater comparative context to elucidate his thought and to draw parallels with other theorists who are thought of as far more "rational" and suitable for modern times.

Chapter Three: Qutb in the Context of Colonialism and Anti-Colonial Thought

      In this chapter, I will examine Sayyid Qutb's writings in the context of

colonialism and that period of Islamic thought. I am not referring to colonialism

merely as a historical context but also as a sociological concept: A phenomenon

consisting of identifiable institutions of epistemological and cultural import.

Obviously, colonialism does not imply military and political dominance only, but

also the dissemination of concordant ideas, resulting in the politicization of culture

itself. At the heart of this chapter, is Sayyid Qutb's use of *fitra* and the esoteric

dimensions of his thought within this context; colonialism demanded a certain

correspondence between culture and sovereignty, for example, how does Qutb's

notion of *fitra* critique these relations? And how does Qutb use the Qur'an to do the

same? Sayyid Qutb's thought is deeply cultural; on the one hand, he proffers a "pre-

modern" cultural philosophy, that sees people as having "natural" characteristics,

while, on the other hand, Qutb is incredibly modern in seeing culture as a form of

power.

Identifying Features of Colonialism

      I refuse to believe that the real people of Great Britain, who have never

      had discord with Italy, are prepared to run the risk of hurling Europe

      along the road to catastrophe for the sake of defending an African

      country universally branded as a country without the slightest shadow

of civilization.

Benito Mussolini (1935)

The important point—a very Gramscian one—is how the British, French and American cultures maintained hegemony over the peripheries. How within them was consent gained and continuously consolidated for the distant rule of native peoples and territories?

Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)

Colonialism produced its own cultural discourse: It circulated concepts like "civilized," "barbaric," "rights," "subjugation," and "historical progress." Colonialism is a modern phenomenon to be distinguished from pre-modern forms of Empire. This is not to say that pre-modern forms of empire did not persist and even expand in the early modern period (ca. 1500) — for example the great Ottoman expansion into the Arabic speaking world in 1517. The differences between modern and pre-modern forms of empire are too innumerable to be listed here, but glaring distinctions are: Pre-modern empire did not necessitate domestic consent, did not exemplify the *normative* distance between metropole and periphery and, finally, did not insist on instantiating a perpetual racial hierarchy.

Modern empire is distinguished by these features, personified by Kipling's poem *The White Man's Burden*; though the title is provocative in seemingly one direction, Kipling's words actually convey some ambivalence toward the enterprise. Risk, cost and liability are prominent themes, denoting the ambivalence of a people

questioning why one should:

> Take up the White Man's burden,
>
> Send forth the best ye breed
>
> Go bind your sons to exile,
>
> To serve your captives' need;
>
> To wait in heavy harness,
>
> On fluttered folk and wild —
>
> Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
>
> Half-devil and half-child.
>
> Kipling, *The White Man's Burden* (1899)

Colonialism required not just the subjugation of "native peoples" but the persuasion of the domestic population of its purpose. A dialectical relationship persists between the politics of metropole consumption and the policies (particularly those polemicized) in colonized or mandated lands such as Egypt in the late nineteenth century. The presence of the colonial state informs the intellectual landscape that colonial intellectuals are navigating. This is not a new observation, it is central to Said's *Culture and Imperialism*; this work is more concerned with the products of western culture, however, and the inhered relationship to Empire. Those who resisted British imperialism were also in dialogue with British culture. The same can be said of Sayyid Qutb. Colonialism introduced new modes of living that were celebrated or resisted, appropriated or dismissed. I am arguing here, most simply, that Qutb saw in these cultural debates

struggles in power. And in seeing culture as a form of power, Qutb is incredibly

modern.

1. Colonialism in Egypt and the "Context of Contradiction"

> *My country is no longer in Africa; we are now part of Europe. It is*
>
> *therefore natural for us to abandon our former ways and to adopt a*
>
> *new system adapted to our social conditions.*

Khedive Ismail (1869)

At the turn of the twentieth century, Egyptian elites wavered between

thinking of themselves as Egyptians, Muslims, Ottomans, or Arabs (or, as we see

above, Africans). Unlike Egypt's Arabic speaking neighbors, the project of the

modern Egyptian state was well underway by the year 1900. 1881 and '82 are

pivotal years in the colonialization of Egypt. The 'Urabi revolt served as an

important pre-text for direct British intervention in Egypt. After the bombardment

of Alexandria, the British occupied Egypt and transitioned into more or less direct

rulers over Khedive Tawfik. (Rogan 2009, 124-31) Egypt would remain under

British influence until the end of World War II. In 1952, Nasser's "free officer's

movement," would overthrow the pro-British monarchy.

No event signals Egypt's entrance into modern colonialism like the

construction of the Suez Canal in 1869. Coincidentally, the Suez Canal Company

(SCC) was formed in 1856, exactly one-hundred years before Nasser would

nationalize the canal and precipitate the Israeli-French-British invasion of Sinai.

Though not the same in magnitude, like the East India Company, the SCC is an early example of commercial globalization in its modern trappings. The company benefited from concession arrangements; this meant that the company was granted the right to manage an Egyptian public domain by the Egyptian government itself, while enjoying certain privileges and securing a long-lasting monopoly. (Piquet 2003) Such international companies were both the product of and motivation for colonialism. And colonialism changed local economies in Africa and Asia, absorbing them into a global economic market dominated by European rules and capital.

As Piquet notes, the logic of concession contracts was development. European capital and expertise would develop the Egyptian Suez, thereby empowering the local economy, providing higher paying jobs and advancing infrastructure. But since these companies remained self-contained they "looked like real foreign colonies — business logic was mixed with colonial ideology." (Ibid, 2–3) In the case of the SCC, the first President of the company, Ferdinand de Lesseps, was admired by Ernest Renan for his "civilizing work"; Auguste-Louis-Albéric, the second president, was formerly head of the *Union Colonial*; and third president Charles Jonnard became governor of Algeria after working for the company. (Ibid, 7)

With the inauguration of the Suez Canal, Egypt entered the modern world, purportedly as a rising equal to European powers and with reasonable hope. On paper, a reciprocal relationship existed between foreign-based entities like the SCC and the local Egyptian state. European expertise and capital would essentially "trickle down" onto the local population, creating jobs and increasing skill sets. This approach was not merely theoretical but incorporated into the by-laws of the

SCC. For example, the executive branch of the company was to live in Egypt, to insure that they understood local conditions. But, in fact, the executive branch always remained in Paris. Secondly, Ismail Pasha's poor financial administration rendered Egypt's share in the canal's revenues liable and Egypt did not enjoy the economic benefits associated with partnering with a foreign company. Piquet observes that the SCC "embodies all the contradictions of the concession system." (Ibid, 1)

Indeed, I agree, but I would like to take an observation about colonialism, generally, one-step further and apply the observation to modern Islamic and Arab political thought and the thought of Sayyid Qutb particularly. The claims made of modern colonialism, as a "civilizing mission" and the realities often associated with colonialism, result in cognitive dissonance. Metaphorically, the "text" of colonialism does not match the "meaning" of colonialism. The ideologies of Arab nationalism and Islamism sought to replace the "incoherent" or "subversive" ideology of colonialism, with an empowering ideology wherein the claims of that ideology matched its achievements, theoretically of course.

In the case of Sayyid Qutb, something more structurally particular happens. For Qutb the gap between "text" and "meaning" or "ideology" and "political reality" in Egypt — or the Muslim world generally — in the colonial and immediate post-colonial period (1950s and '60s) is due to the origins of those ideas. *Mission civilisatrice* or secular Arab nationalism are resultants of "man-made" ideas. As such, they lack the capacity to reconcile the exoteric claims of politics and the esoteric realities of human beings and relations. Andrew March's emphasis on

fitra is optimal for analysis, as *fitra* stands-in as the esoteric reality of the human being for which an exoteric (i.e., textual) doctrine must correspond, which is the *shari'a*. In the absence of this correspondence, alienation, unhappiness and injustice are inevitabilities for Qutb. (Qutb 2006)

Believing in "false" ideologies is the literal equivalent to worshipping "false gods," for it "cuts one off" from one's Creator, as Qutb would say. And God, the inspirational correspondent between the esoteric an exoteric, is accessible and available through immanence and gnosis. Finally, investment in any "man-made" idea can only be an example of *jahil*, since such ideas perpetuate the gap between "text" and "meaning," opposed to collapsing said gap. Contradiction will always provoke inquiry, thus the colonial period is a "context of contradiction."

In imposing a notion of contradiction, I am not invoking a ready available moral judgment, but a pervasive, prevalent and obvious problem faced by colonialists or their advocates as well. On Algeria, Tocqueville, an admirer of British activities in India, argued "one can only study barbarous people with arms in hand." (Curtis 2009, 162) Distressing over the difficulties in subjugating the Algerians, he conceded "it would be better to use the land in the Egyptian manner, to have the native's farm it, but to the government's profit." (Ibid) Finally upon visiting Algeria in 1841, Tocqueville acknowledged the contradiction, without rejecting colonialism, to the French national enterprise itself; commenting on the colonial regime, he wondered how could "a nation that calls itself liberal should have established, close to France and in the name of France, a government so disordered, so tyrannical, so meddlesome, so profoundly illiberal." (Ibid, 163)

Colonialism, while spreading the industrial and sociological mechanisms of modernity throughout much of the world, nonetheless remained repugnant in ideological, ethical and political terms; colonialism was never seen as achieving its claims, but rather as exploiting the people. But this also provoked attempts to reconcile the contradiction. For Tocqueville and innumerable other colonial-period thinkers, this contradiction was explained away by the "inferiority of native peoples," thus Europe should push forward "for the continued development of their [i.e. native] imperfect civilization." (Ibid, 159) For intellectuals like Taha Husayn, however, the contradiction was a product of misunderstanding, Egypt, in his case, should embrace its "European identity," something I will return to later. Qutb writes in the waning ages of colonial contradiction but is still affected by them by the prevalence of values and ideas associated with the West. Qutb's works need to be understood, in part, in this context.

Before continuing down this line of inquiry, I will review the thought of al-Afghani and 'Abduh within this "context of contradiction"; as well as Qasim Amin and Taha Husayn. It is also fair to ask weather this context is only colonial or, in fact, related to modernization itself. It is obvious that colonialism frames a new age in Islamic political thinking. Historians like Antony Black refer to the period 1830 – 1920 as the "Age of Modernism," arguing that "modernism was an adaption of religious ideas and practices to take account of what the West has achieved, and to improve upon it" (Black 2001, 279); meanwhile, modernization was also deeply bound up with the process of state formation. Al-Afghani is focused on the former, while 'Abduh attempts to improve the latter, with the disparate emphases

fostering different ideas.

1:a al-Afghani: Contradiction, Pragmatism, and Knowledge

It is argued that al-Afghani played a prominent role in the tobacco revolts of

1890–91, he was subsequently deported by Shah Nasir al-Din. (Hourani 1983) The

revolts are another instance of concession contracts sparking political unrest in the

late nineteenth century. But the revolts of 1890 were not the first instance of public

outcry over concessions in Iran; in 1872 the Reuter concession was made, similarly

provoking dismay at foreign interference in the Iranian economy. (Averny 1991,

187) The public outcry caused the concession to be cancelled, but concession

contracts were the vehicle of colonialism *par excellence*. And are still regarded by

some scholars as a viable vehicle of economic globalization. As noted by Michael

Curtis "the European needed the Arab to make his land productive, the Arab

needed the European to gain a higher wage." (Curtis 2009, 161) It was the revolt of

1890, however, that resulted in al-Afghani's deportation.

Al-Afghani is the first direct antecedent to Sayyid Qutb since, like Qutb, he

pursues a political project, not an eschatological one. Al-Afghani lobbies on behalf of

a civilization, not a religion, though Islam is the centerpiece of that civilization.

(Keddie, 1968) Finally, in al-Afghani, the emphasis on the "nature" of humanity and

Islam's ability to "correspond" to that nature is firm and an organizing principle of

his thought. Is there something in the context of modernity and colonialism that

draws attention to the Islamic concept of *fitra* or is the concept endemically

paramount in Islam? Obviously, these are not mutually exclusive positions, but something in the colonial discourse does elicit the concept of *fitra*.

Al-Afghani shared in a particular fondness for philosophy, which has been explained as due to his potentially Shi'i background. (Hourani 1983) But I will argue here that al-Afghani's use of philosophy is actually driven by colonial discourses, enabling him to rationalize the Qur'an and Islamic precepts; while liberating him both from literal readings of the text and tradition (the *Sunna*). In other words, philosophy epistemologically justifies a certain kind of reading. Qutb does not share in the same philosophical sophistication, but he does share in this kind of reading of the text. We find some of these premises in his polemical writings, such as his *Refutation of the Materialists* and his response to Renan.

In his *Refutation*, al-Afghani takes aim at the writings of Sayyid Ahmed Khan (d. 1898), a prominent Indian thinker who undertook a critique of Islam. Interestingly, for someone as opportunistic as al-Afghani, he criticizes Khan for "hovering around the English in order to obtain some advantage from them." (al-Afghani 1983, 176) But again, this is indicative of his goal; Afghani does not mind opportunism so long as it serves the larger goal of Islamic unity. Al-Afghani is a sincere Islamic nationalist, conceiving of the Muslims as a single people, with a common history. And his political activities were in this pursuit. Khan was identified with materialism and "naturalism" (i.e., identifying nature as the only divinity); but al-Afghani is more interested in how Khan's religiosity affects his politics: "Those materialists (i.e., Khan) are not like the materialists of Europe; for whoever abandons religion in Western countries retains love for his country, and

his zeal to guard his country from the attacks of foreigners is not diminished."
(Ibid) Inversely, it is clear that with religiosity, comes patriotism. Is it possible that
al-Afghani promulgated a Platonist vision of religion, wherein it was the noble lie,
appropriate to determine political and ethical imperatives?

Religion is being re-construed in the colonial period, in part because its truth
was no longer indisputable. We have nothing less than a sociology of religion, Islam
in particular, in debates between al-Afghani and his rivals. Al-Afghani argues a
theory of religion, something, with the exception of Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), that
seems entirely new and Qutb writes in the wake of this shift. Afghani is not a
"fundamentalist" in any sense of the word, but a political pragmatist who invokes
the usefulness of religion. Abdulkader Tayob observes how Khan argues for an
'enduring essence' of religion, wherein devotion to God is the core, but ritual is
cosmetic, thus subject to 'modernatization.' Al-Afghani, however, is focused on the
pragmatics of religion as a mobilizing, unifying force. (Tayob 2005, 50-57) Tayob also
argues that al-Afghani did not necessarily perceive an essential core to Islam. I
disagree and for the purposes of understanding Qutb, it is important to point out
how al-Afghani could be a pragmatist and one who subscribes to a metaphysical
truth.

1:b Afghani's Theory of Religion: The Renan Debate

Ernest Renan delivered a lecture at the Sorbonne on Islam in 1883, wherein
he argued three main points. First, religion stifles reason. Second, Islam in

particular stifles reason. Lastly, any and all achievements of Islamic civilization are due to the pre-Islamic and Aryan achievements, which the Arabs absorbed through conquest. (Renan 2011) al-Afghani rebuts Renan in writing and tackles the themes of history, progress and decline. Without engaging in the entire debate, al-Afghani's theory of religion can be detected. In terms of history, al-Afghani redistributes the responsibilities of religion. Whereas Renan seemingly holds Islam responsible for stifling science, al-Afghani argues it is religion that offers the initial step out of primitiveness; "one cannot deny that it is by this religious education that, whether it be Muslim, Christian or pagan, that all nations have emerged from barbarism and marched toward a more advanced civilization." (Afghani 1983, 183) It is the religious impulse that frames inquiry and even the idea of stable knowledge.

But a more telling passage comes at the end of al-Afghani's intervention. Al-Afghani concedes that:

> Whenever religion will have the upper hand, it will eliminate philosophy; and the contrary occurs when it is philosophy that reigns as sovereign mistress. So long as humanity exists, the struggle will not cease between dogma and free investigation, between religion and philosophy; a desperate struggle in which, I fear, the triumph will not be for free thought, because the masses dislike reason, and its teachings are only *understood by some intelligent members of the elite*, and because, also, science, however beautiful it is, does not completely satisfy humanity, which thirsts for the ideal and which likes to exist in

such dark and distant regions as *the philosophers and scholars can neither perceive nor explore.* (Keddie 1983, quoted in, 89)

As Nikki Keddie notes, in this incredible passage, so much of Afghani's epistemology is revealed. 1) It is interesting that in spite of the perceived progress surrounding him in Paris, Afghani insists "the triumph will not be for free thought." 2) This is because "the masses dislike reason" and only the elite understand certain things. When we read this passage in conjunction with his earlier comment that "since humanity, at its origins, did not know the causes of the events that passed under its eyes … it was perforce led to follow the advice of its teachers … imposed in the name of the Supreme Being to whom the educators attributed all events." We see that al-Afghani subscribes to a classic epistemic stratification produced and reproduced in some form or another by al-Farabi (d. 945), al-Ghazali (d. 1111), and most importantly Ibn Rushd (d. 1198); wherein religion is a system of symbols for the masses, a conveyor of truth, no doubt, but suited for the masses. Philosophy, on the other hand, is a more logical truth, appropriate for the elites. This is exactly Ghazali's main concern with philosophy; philosophers do not subscribe to religion literally — thus threatening the masses should philosophy spread. Afghani is clear, religion is not falsehood for it attends to things that "the philosophers and scholars can neither perceive nor explore."

So what do we make of Afghani's insistence that "all religions are intolerant (including Islam), each in its own way." I would argue that if we keep Afghani's classic epistemic stratification in mind, Afghani does mean religion *per se*, he is referring to puritans or, as we might say today, "fundamentalists." Yet, since the

rebuttal was more concerned with Renan's history and ethnicism, he does not

spend time arguing the distinction or alternative interpretations of Islam. As Tayob

argues, whatever seeming contradictions we may find in al-Afghani can be

reconciled, "rather than a plain contradiction, these different positions on religion

reveal a fundamentally distinct approach to religion in al-Afghani … a closer look at

these arguments reveals a functionalist approach to religion, presented to Muslim

audiences, that could be reconciled with his critical comments made in response to

Renan." (Tayob 2005, 55) But the classic philosophical stratification of *khass wa*

'amm is missing in Tayob's analysis. Al-Afghani's "functionalism" is present, but it is

not of the Straussian sort, wherein religion is simply a form of social control.

Afghani's use of religion is to give the masses access to higher truths through

symbols. There is also his allusion to mysticism, a realm behind the philosophical

and scientific.

1:c Race, Class, and Identity in the Colonial Period

But more singularly, for our purposes, the Renan/al-Afghani debate is

inconceivable outside the context of colonialism. Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905),

likewise engaged in a debate with French Foreign Minister Gabriel Hanotaux, who

advanced ideas that were essentially Renan's; Christianity and Christian peoples,

according to Hanotaux, were more civilized, rational and capable because

"inheriting directly the traces of the Aryans [they were able to break] completely

once and for all from the Semitic approach." (Tayob 2005, 60) Renan likewise

disparages the "Semitic spirit," in part, out of his offense of Islam and, one can imagine, in line with the pervasive anti-Jewish mood in France (the Dreyfus Affair happened in 1895). This emphasis on race and the constant need on the part of Europeans to reify the terms and conditions of race is essential to the colonial enterprise. In fact, it can be described as nothing less than an ideology. Europeans not only colonized African, Asian, and Latin lands, but disseminated a meaning for imperialism throughout their governments, universities, arts, and cultures at large. As famously noted by Edward Said, the East was an integral part of the West, in so far as the West reimagined itself in contrast to an image of the East westerners imagined for themselves. (Said 1979, 2)

Thus race, as a discursive frame for power, is an essential feature of colonialism. And this frame — disseminated as it may be through other categories such as religion and culture — underscores the centrality of identity as a crucial part of political logic. In other words, in the absence of a stable "identity," one does not qualify as political; for example, stateless ethnic groups such as Kurds or Assyrians invoke their 'identities' as a basis for claiming statehood. At the core of 20th century politics is 'identity,' whether it is celebrated in the form of the nation-state or challenged by social science, which I will address momentarily.

Colonialism issued new ways to organize politics in places like Egypt, largely around the idea of the nation-state, so familiar and longstanding institutions of power no longer held sway. Again, to speak of this dynamic in another way, when the British set their sights on "privatizing" *shari'a*, they were not only changing the institutional landscape of modern Egypt, they were also making a

claim. The claim was "religion," as Islam was surely understood by the Europeans, was a "private" matter and not a political one.   This discourse in and of itself facilitated — between Muslim and non-Muslim alike — the politicization of Islam. Making Islam "public" was a political act of resistance and an anti-colonial call. Thus the call to Islam is also a castigation of colonial legitimacy.

With the outbreak of the social sciences in Europe in the late nineteenth century, class was gaining increasing currency as an identity marker. And not merely a *de facto* marker, but one that presumed certain shared common characteristics amongst members of said class. With Sanu, we can see how class was expressed through the identifying marker of language — alluding to how he saw class. Class was the *real* identity.

Ya'qub b. Rafa'il Sanu' (d. 1912) was a Jewish-Egyptian playwright who was forced to flee to France for his political views. Sanu''s work is an example of the emerging intersection of privilege and culture — the forming and informing of the public sphere, even though Sanu' did not belong to the Egyptian or European elite. There is in his work the counter push of "prestige." But lacking the requisite privilege, such views cost him exile. J. M. Landau argues that Sanu' "indirectly influenced" the 'Urabi revolt by "by teaching, lecturing, writing and performing short satirical plays and first starting the publication of *Abu Naḍḍara Zarḳaʾ* ('the man with green spectacles'), an anonymous lithographic sheet, enlivened by cartoons, in the Egyptian *fallaḥin* dialect." (Landau 2012)

Here we have an example of a man, writing (as one of the first Arabic speaking writers at the time) in the local dialect, in fact, the Egyptian peasantry

dialect. It would be strange to presume that he wrote his plays for the peasantry.

Where would we place Sanu' in our analysis? He is a dissident, advancing his social

status by speaking on behalf of "the people." And in this case, the Egyptian farmer is

the "real" Egyptian.

Irene Gendzier observes that Sanu' was "an active member of the Muslim

community, though born a Jew, he devoted himself untiringly to the cause of

Egyptian independence at a time and in a place where religion as well as race

defined men's place in society." (Gendzier 1961, 16) Sanu''s place as a member of

the Egyptian nationalist movement is well established. But the correspondence

between his political positions and his choice of accessories is what is interesting.

Though born Jewish, he identified with the Muslim community. Though not a

fallahi, he wrote in the *fallahi* dialect.

Sanu''s plays and newspapers made Islam and a certain way of speaking

Arabic "untainted" by the strictures of emerging western modeled education. But it

is not enough to observe Sanu''s identification of the above. More importantly, his

influence suggests that Egyptian nationalists identified with him as well.

High Arabic remained available to Sanu', but it would necessarily be

associated with al-Azhar and, thus, with the state. Only *fallahi* Arabic represented

"the nation." Sanu' is thus not just representing the nation; he is also helping to

define it.

The following cartoon is taken from Sanu''s *Abu Naddara* (Paris, 1879):

Figure 1. Sample cartoon by Sanu'

The above cartoon advances the claims of the journal, enticing the reader to enjoy its 'literary and scientific' spirit. As one can see in the top right cartoon, the Egyptian "Pharaoh 'stuffs' (*bdiss*) his pocket with the foreigner and the native." Moving forward to the cartoon on the top left, the text reads: "The troubled peasant does not know who to please or who to keep." The contents of these cartoons are

complemented by Sanu''s activism in Egypt. In 1863, Sanu' became professor at the Polytechnic University in Cairo. There he "took advantage of his early position as instructor to organize meetings with Egyptian youth in which he developed his ideas on nationalism and the liberation of Egypt." (Gendzier, 19) In fact, many of Sanu''s students were future officers in the 'Urabi movement. (Ibid) By 1879, Sanu' is openly critical of the Egyptian government and exiled to Paris. The average Egyptian may very well have felt like the *fallahi* depicted in Sanu's cartoons. By 1880, the British were importing 80% of Egypt's exports and providing 44% of Egypt's imports. (Reid, 1998) The various measures imposed on the Egyptian economy after the bankruptcy of 1876 placed great weight on the Egyptian landowning class, who, in turn, squeezed the Egyptian peasant to compensate for the gap. The Egyptian elites were the 'weakest' of the elites and thus had to accommodate colonial leverage, while exploiting the peasantry to maintain their own elite status and pay off their debts. Sanu' represented this burden in his works and contributed to the development of a certain consciousness in Egypt.

Three things come together to form the core of late-nineteenth-century Islamic thought: A sociology of religion, secondly the politicization of identity, whether ethnic or economic, or religious. Lastly, the pragmatic goal of uniting Muslims in the face of colonial expansion. Sanu' is an example of an activist, thinking in terms of class as an identity marker, but he is not an Islamist thinker. In this regard, both al-Afghani and 'Abduh are forefathers to 20th century Islamist thinking and both demonstrate clear pragmatism, urging Muslims to work with compatriots, regardless of religion. (See Hourani, 1983) In the person of al-Afghani, we see

someone who gravitated toward power many times in life, until he finally succumbed to such associations himself. In 'Abduh, we find a thinker who joined established institutions to initiate reform in his own land. The writings and work of al-Afghani and 'Abduh initiate several epistemic and scholastic ruptures.

First, from al-Afghani to 'Abduh, the blazing torch of revolution dwindles into a more practical candle of reform. This results in the rise of greater focus on legal, political and cultural practices, as opposed to the more grand vision of al-Afghani who wished to ignite a pan-Islamic identity. In some ways, Afghani's project is resurrected in Qutb. Secondly, the isolation of Islam as a category of analysis becomes more acute; Islam becomes separated from culture, contrasted to culture or invoked for culture. Lastly, Egypt likewise is extricated outside of its larger civilizational context and discussed on its own terms. Questions like "Is Egypt African, Arab, or European?" arise. I refer to this as the twentieth-century turn, where thoughts about reform, decline and the like do not begin with Islam and "turn-in" onto Egypt, but begin with Egypt and turn-out to Islam, the West and Western thought. This is the context Qutb inherits.

2. Egypt and the Twentieth-Century Turn

Qutb's membership in the Muslim Brotherhood places him within the broader context of Egyptian politics in the twentieth century. Negotiating Islamic and Egyptian identity was central to elaborating political thought, thus 'Abduh's legacy was central at the turn of the century. It was inevitable that Qutb would have

to address this legacy head on. All the primary players in the early twentieth

century were in one way or another influenced by 'Abduh, thus an Islamic

discourse. In terms of political manifestations, this would include the Wafd party,

centered on Sa'ad Zaghlul. In terms of pedagogy, there was none other than Taha

Husayn, whose attempts to articulate a clear Egyptian identity required him to

engage the legacy of 'Abduh. Qasim Amin's contribution to public discourse on the

topic of gender is very important, one may add 'Ali Abd al-Raziq as well. All three

thinkers contribute to debates on religion and culture in Egypt and the role culture

must play in the liberation of Egypt. It is clear, however, that although not

necessarily "incorrect," these thinkers were shaped by Western ideas and

institutions.

Qasim Amin (1863–1908) is emblematic of the strong connection between

Egyptian reformers and French society and custom. Amin obtained a license to

practice law in 1881, wherein he was dispatched to France for an educational

mission; he returned in 1885, so Amin was in Egypt during most of the 'Urabi revolt

(1879–1882) and was exposed to the stirrings of nationalism, Arab and Egyptian,

therein. Amin's most famous contribution to Egyptian thought however is his two

essays on women in Egyptian society: The *Liberation of Women* (*LW*) (*Tahrir al-*

Mar'a) and *The New Women* (*NW*) (*Al-Mar'a al-Jadida*). Amin essentially launched the

feminist movement in Egypt with these texts and he distinguished himself in style

and scope of argument; first, Amin was the only nineteenth-century thinker who

almost exclusively dealt with the issue of sex/gender relations. Secondly, the

eclectic nature of Amin's influence is apparent in the texts; Amin read and

interacted with leading Egyptian reformers such as Muhammad 'Abduh and Sa'ad

Zaghlul. But Amin also displays familiarity with Marx, Darwin and Nietzsche.

(Peterson 2005, xii)

In Amin, the son of an Ottoman lieutenant-general, we have a seminal

example of the "culture challenge" facing elites within the context of not just

colonialism but globalization. Consider this passage, which I am quoting at length,

from LM:

> The history of nations is saturated with disputes, arguments,
>
> sufferings, and wars that originated with the purpose of establishing
>
> the superiority of one idea or ideology over another. During these
>
> encounters victory was sometimes for truth and at other times for
>
> falsehood. This characterized Islamic countries during the early days
>
> and middle ages, and continues to characterize western countries. It
>
> is reasonable to state that the life of western countries is a continuous
>
> struggle between truth and falsehood, between right and wrong: it is
>
> an internal struggle in all branches of education, the arts, and
>
> industry. This is especially obvious in this century when distance and
>
> isolation have been eliminated by modern inventions, and when the
>
> separating borders and forbidding walls have been torn down …
>
> likewise, the ideas of any western scholar, when formulated in a book,
>
> are translated and published simultaneously in five or six languages.
>
> (Amin 2005, 4)

Themes such as Hegelian dialectics and notions of material and intellectual progress are prominent. Note how Amin distinguishes the Islamic past — characterized by dialectics — with the European present, which is likewise characterized by conflict. Amin's view of intellectual growth is a linear one, like a glacier crashing into land, the longer the confrontation, the higher the mountains that emerge as a result. Ideas are the same for Amin, reaching new heights through conflict. It is not altogether clear whether Amin is familiar with the differences between Hegel and Marx, but here, at least, Amin privileges a very Hegelian view of history, where ideas lead to historical change. But the type of observation Amin makes here cannot be explained as merely acquiescing into the colonial dominance of the Europeans. He is commenting on a relationship between time, history and knowledge.

> In truth, during a specific historical era every country has peculiar traditions and mores that match its intellectual state. These traditions and mores change continuously in an unobtrusive way so that people living during that era are unaware of the changes. However, the changes are influenced by regional factors, heredity, intercultural exchanges, scientific inventions, ethical ideologies, religious beliefs, political structures, and other factors. (Ibid, 5)

In his memoirs (*Kalimat*), Amin comments, with some sadness we can assume, that "if reformers were to wait for the approval of public opinion, the world would be the same as it was at the time of Adam and Eve." (Peterson 2005,

xiii) Several things need to be noted here: First, when we take Amin's teleological

views on knowledge in consideration, the above paragraph continues the theme of

"epistemic gaps." Certain countries, certain nations and certain individuals are in

possession of more "advanced knowledge" or something "further ahead" in time.

And it is tempting to think of this position as merely a Khaldunian reflection of the

conquered by the vanquished. But Amin's view is more attributable to an

epistemological position than merely a historical one. For example, consider al-

Jahiz's (d. 868) observation:

> "…books were transmitted from nation to nation, from era to era and
>
> from language to language until they finally reached us and we were
>
> the last to inherent and examine them…our practice with our
>
> successors ought to resemble the practice of our predecessors with
>
> us. But we have attained greater wisdom than they did and those
>
> who follow will attain wisdom than we have." (Khalidi 1996, 107–08)

Al-Jahiz famously subscribed to the Mutazilite School of Islamic theology,

heavily Rationalist in its scholastic disposition. The *adib* sees knowledge as

progressive, time and history improve knowledge through the accumulation of

"greater wisdom" from age to age. It is also impossible to understand Jahiz's

observation without taking into consideration the role of Baghdad as imperial

metropole. Thinkers from all over the world converged upon Baghdad in the ninth

century, embodying a pre-modern globalist occurrence. The bringing together of

various cultures, the "making of a smaller world" if you will, constantly renders

culture subject to critique. And although he does not refute al-Jahiz directly, as far as I know, al-Ghazali's critique of Islamic philosophy rests, in part, on the supposedly de-legitimizing observation that philosophy was a Greek vocation, not natural to Islam. I argue that, for a reformer, the notion of progress is fundamental. But when such reformers are tied to the institutions of the state, their vision is empowered and potentially enacted, thus a relationship exists between reform and state institutions. We seen, then, throughout Islamic history a relationship between rationalism, theology, notions of 'progress' and commitments to reform.

The epistemic gap between "truth" and the culture at large places the rationalist in an almost adversarial role vis-à-vis society. As mentioned earlier, culture is the meta-institution guiding human behavior. People do not need to be told to behave according to traditions; they simply do, as tradition is ubiquitous. Furthermore, tradition's very legitimacy is derived from the past; whereas for rationalists like Amin, tradition's source of legitimacy being the past, is exactly what renders it an illegitimate source of knowledge. The past can only reflect a less complete journey to "truth" than the present. So the mid- and late- nineteenth-century reformers of Egypt gravitated toward the state, as the state possessed the ability to force reform through state institutions like education and even military conscription against the culture at large.

This raises two questions: First, how did such reformers present the relationship between culture and Islam? Was the culture seen as an expression of the ethical and normative content of Islam in the sense that it is informed by Islam, but needs to be updated? Or is the culture seen as a deviation from Islam, a

competing structure, to be marginalized? Again, consider the possibility here, where thinkers argue culture should be "minimalized," this argument would yield all sorts of problematics. Secondly, if reformers take a certain approach to the relationship between Islam and culture, can we detect an inverse vision from traditionalists?

Qasim Amin tackles the question of Islam and culture directly: "Some people will say that today I am publishing heresy. To these people I will respond: yes, I have come up with a heresy, but the heresy is not against Islam. It is against our traditions and social dealings, where the demand for perfection is extolled." (Amin 2005, 4) Thus Amin seems to separate culture and religion, but this has consequences, for this is exactly what the most stringent of traditionalists do. Everyone in Egypt during the nineteenth and twentieth century is holding his or her nose, crying that the culture has run afoul.

Oliver Roy draws connections between imperialism, missions and contemporary fundamentalism in his *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Par Ways*. Roy argues, amidst imperial ventures, Western "missions were unquestionably an enterprise of acculturation." Western missionaries were aware of other cultures, but aware of them in their inferiority only. Christianity and Christendom were the only "*civilization*"; and Western missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, carried along the idea that western culture *along* with Christianity were superior vehicles of civilization. (Roy 2010, 57) The "idea of a 'pure religion' which was above all culture — since culture is tainted by the Fall of Man, God's creation — a powerful idea that was much in evidence in

Calvinism, was absent from the missionary project until the appearance of the evangelicals in the twentieth century." (Ibid) In colonial Egypt, though missions were not prominent, the attitude of Egyptian cultural inferiority permeated the British colonial bureaucrats, through which there "deserved" role in Egyptian state institutions was sustained.

Amin adopts the idea of Egyptian cultural inferiority. But he does not wish to attribute it to Islam, whether this is strategic or sincere is irrelevant. What is relevant is Amin's place within the context of his times. When we look at *LW* it bears a striking resemblance — in some parts — to J. S. Mill's *On the Subjection of Women* and Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication for Women's Rights*. The clearest correlation is the shared principle of critique: Amin is very clear; he attributes social shortcomings to contingent institutions and behaviors. The "image" of women in Egyptian society is not due to the "essence" or "nature" of women, but rather the institutionalization of that image as normative in Egyptian society. Furthermore, for Amin, Mill, and Wollstonecraft, the inferior status of women harms the *entire* society. Is it possible to think of the nature of this discourse outside the context of colonialism? It is not and Qutb inherits this very context.

Amin attends to women's education and the structure of the family. He argues "the gap between men and women in this situation can be attributed to women's deprived upbringing, which leaves them ignorant of their potentialities and abilities." (Amin 2005, 14) Similarly, Wollstonecraft observes:

> Educated in the enervating style recommended by the writers I have
> been criticizing, and being deprived by their subordinate social status

from recovering their lost ground, is it surprising that women everywhere appear to be a defect in nature? When we consider what a definite effect an early association of ideas has on the character, is it surprising that women neglect their understandings and turn all their attention to their persons? (Wollstonecraft n.d., 159)

Amin compares the oppression of women to tyranny:

Throughout the generations our women have continued to be subordinate to the strong and are overcome by the powerful tyranny of men. On the other hand, men have not wished to consider women other than beings fit only to serve men and be led by men's will! Men have slammed shut the doors of opportunity in women's faces, thus hindering them from earning a living. As a consequence, the only recourse left to a woman was to be a wife or a whore. When women devalued intellectual or useful work, they were left with only the commodity of entertaining and gratifying the physical needs of men according to the men's demands. As a result, women directed all their energy toward inventing ways to attract men and to capture their affection … History has left women behind without nurturing her mind through any sound training, thus weakening her rational and intellectual power. (Amin 2005, 15)

Now consider this passage from Mill:

Again, the theorists of absolute monarchy have always claimed it to

be the only natural form of government, descending ultimately from

the authority of a father over his family, which is older and more basic

than society itself and, they contend, the most natural authority of all.

Indeed the law of force itself has always seemed the most natural of

all grounds for the exercise of authority — has seemed so, I mean, to

those who haven't been able to find any other basis for their favored

form of tyranny. (Mill 1997, 12)

Here, the significant correlation is between Amin and Mills' view on the

contingent nature of knowledge. Knowledge is a by-product of practice, upbringing

and environment. It is malleable and can thus be improved. But improvement is not

improvisation. There is a direction, a general status that is to be obtained and, for

Amin and Mill, the organizing principle at work is equality. Men and women are

humans and individuals. That premise requires Amin to criticize and culture that

makes men and women 'different' leading us to our larger conclusion; Egyptian

scholars, particularly Amin, were aware of the relativity of culture. It is also difficult

to imagine that western colonialism did not provoke in English reformers a sense of

cultural relativity. English ideas on "knowledge" can most markedly be traced back

to John Locke (d. 1704), whose empiricist philosophy sets the tone and direction

from which Benthemian utilitarianism emerges, the philosophical school to which

Mill most closely identified. Locke argued for the *tabula rasa*:

Let us then suppose the mind to have no ideas in it, to be like white

paper [sic] with nothing written on it. How then does it come to be

written on? From where does it get that vast store which the busy

and boundless imagination of man has painted on it — all the

materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word,

from experience. Our understandings derive all the materials of

thinking from observations that we make of external objects that can

be perceived through the senses, and of the internal operations of our

minds, which we perceive by looking in at ourselves. These two are

the fountains of knowledge, from which arise all the ideas we have or

can naturally have. (Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human*

Understanding 1836, 51, rendered in contemporary English)

But Locke does not venture into cultural relativity from this theory; we see

this more and more throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as English

civil servants are exposed to greater cultural variety throughout the British Empire.

The variety of cultures within the British Empire was inexhaustible and thus no

cultural practice was any longer free from the suspicion of arbitrariness and even

superstition. Likewise, nineteenth-century Marxists became more and more

interested in questions of culture, but the arbitrariness of culture was replaced with

its repressiveness. And finally, Arab reformers became increasingly committed to

the reform of the culture of their societies. These parallels in philosophical concern

are unimaginable outside of the context of modern colonialism and globalization.

From Qasim Amin's exposition on social and relations, we can view 'Ali Abd al-Raziq's (d. 1966) argument about political relations in a similar light. Al-Raziq insisted on the contingency of political institutions and thus attempted to establish some contemporary human authority over them. (Bashkin 2013) This type of backdrop makes Taha Husayn's pronouncements more readily understandable. Amin is more or less advancing "Westernization." Attempts to evade this kind of characterization, by suggesting that modernity should not be confused with the west do not hold. Taha Husayn is clear that Egypt is open to modernity precisely because it is of the west. There are parts of *Future of Culture in Egypt* that are incoherent in fact, as Husayn tries so hard to make Egypt a nation of the West. Take for example these passages:

It seems to me that there are two distinctly different and bitterly antagonistic cultures on Earth. Both have existed since time immemorial, the one in Europe, the other in the Far East…The Egyptian mind has had regular, peaceful, and mutually beneficial relations only with the Near East and Greece.

Egypt was receptive and hastened at top speed to adopt it (Islam) as her religion and to make the Arabic of Islam her language. Did that obliterate her original mentality? Did that make her an Eastern nation in the present since of the term? Not at all! Europe did not

become Eastern nor did the nature of the European mind change

because of Christianity, which originated in the East, flooded Europe

and absorbed the other religions.

The essence and source of Islam are the essence and source of

Christianity. The connection of Islam with Greek philosophy is

identical to that of Christianity. Whence, then, come the difference in

the effect of these two faiths on the creation of the mind that

mankind inherited from the people of the Near east and Greece?

(Husayn 1954, 7)

The above passages convey the sense that the author only believed those

parts of his analysis indigestible to his audience, while having contempt for such

parts that he must say in order to be heard by his audience. First, Husayn divides

the world into Europe and the "Far East," situating the Near East squarely within

the Mediterranean, i.e. European, world. But then he juxtaposes the Near East to

Europe, when he observes that Christianity, which is of the Near East, did not

change "the nature of the European mind," which would presumably be exclusive to

it. When a thinker of such prominence literally "shifts" Egypt to the west, it is an

open call to "Westernize." Husayn goes on, regarding the Ministry of Religious

Endowments (*awqaf*) and other things:

Most of us, however, feel that this ministry is still too backward for

the times. Some would like to abolish or change the institution of

waqf itself in conformity with modern economic requirements. The

dominant and undeniable fact of our times is that day-by-day we are

drawing closer to Europe and becoming an integral part of her,

literally and figuratively. This process would be much more difficult

than it is if the Egyptian mind were basically different from the

European. Anyone urging Egyptians to return to the way of life

characteristic of Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, or early Islamic would be

ridiculed by the people, including arc-conservatives and those who

loathe any tampering whatsoever with our ancient heritage.

Our educational system is also based on exclusively European

methods, which are applied through our primary, secondary, and

higher schools … we have been putting into their heads modes of

thought and ideas that are almost completely European …. If God had

preserved us from the Ottoman conquest, we should have remained

in unbroken touch with Europe and shared in her renaissance. This

certainly would have fashioned a different kind of civilization from

the one in which we are now living. (Ibid, 13)

Again, the teleological theme of "catching up" to 'the times' is apparent.

Husayn insists that the Egyptian mind "is European." But again he contradicts

himself; Husayn begins by asserting that there is an essential mode of European

thinking, as opposed to "Far East" thinking. The Pharaonic and Greco-Roman, it would seem, would embody that essence. It seems Husayn really wants to say that Islam is what ripped Egypt from her European relations, which is confirmed in his lamentation regarding the Ottoman conquest, even though the history of Istanbul is far more central to European history than Cairo.

Apparent in Husayn's writings here are Euro-centric (i.e., poor) understandings of history and acquiescence into the ideology of modernity, which suggests that Europe is the eternal home of reason. When Husayn speaks of the Ottomans, he employs all the biases of "decline" and "regression" an Orientalist of a similar time period would. Ottoman history is complex and full of feats of achievement, including dominating the west for centuries. Furthermore, the European model of schooling, while potentially advantageous, also reinforced the hierarchy of Europe and the rest, as well as the colonial enterprise.

Husayn, along with Amin and al-Raziq would most likely be described as "imitating the conquerors," much in the way described by Ibn Khaldun in the fourteenth century. "The vanquished always want to imitate the victor in his distinctive mark(s), his dress, his occupation and all his other conditions and customs," Ibn Khaldun observes in Chapter 2, Section 22 of the *Introduction*, he goes on illustrate:

> The reason for this is that the soul always sees perfection in the
> person who is superior to it and to whom it is subservient. It
> considers him perfect, either because the respect it has for him

impresses it, or because it erroneously assumes that its own subservience to him is not due to the nature of defeat but to the perfection of the victor. If that erroneous assumption fixes itself in the soul, it becomes a firm belief. The soul, then, adopts all the manners of the victor and assimilates itself to him. This, then, is imitation.

Or, the soul may possibly think that the superiority of the victor is not the result of his group feeling or great fortitude, but of his customs and manners. This also would be an erroneous concept of superiority, and (the consequence) would be the same as in the former case.

Therefore, the vanquished can always be observed to assimilate themselves to the victor in the use and style of dress, mounts, and weapons, indeed, in everything.

In this connection, one may compare how children constantly imitate their fathers. They do that only because they see perfection in them. One may also compare how almost everywhere people are dominated (in the matter of fashion) by the dress of the militia and the government forces, because they are ruled by them.

This goes so far that a nation dominated by another, neighboring

nation will show a great deal of assimilation and imitation. (Khaldun 1989, 116)

Notions and impressions that elites or society-at-large were "imitating" the west are far more central and essential to understanding Qutb. Imitation was not a cosmetic issue for Qutb, but a fundamental problematic of psychological, social and political import. The only way to overcome these shortcomings is a return to something "real" or "authentic" and in Qutb's mind reality does not imply simply cultural "authenticity," but gnostic apprehension of the cosmos — embodied in realizing one's *fitra*. In the following section, I will explore Qutb's cultural critique through the lens of gender, as gender is an essential institution of culture.[21]

2:a The Qutbian Response On Gender

One of the most important themes informing discourses on social reform is the status of women in Muslim societies. Tahtawi spoke of it. (Tahtawi 2011) As I have referenced the tendency in Qutb to emphasize the esoteric dimensions of reality, the idea of gender roles factors into the nature (*fitra*) of men and women. By examing Qutb's thoughts on gender roles we can place him within the context of post-Abduh reform discourses and compare him to Western literature on the subject.

The Qur'an, though replete with references to men and women is actually not very specific on gender roles or in assigning them. First, I agree with Fazlur

---

[21] By this statement, I am not insisting on a position on gender; rather the debate over gender in the United States in the early 21st century simply proves my point as to the concept's inherently organizing capacity, which is what culture is, a set of mores that organize behavior.

Rahman that, when seen in its historical context, the Qur'an is a very progressive text. (Rahman 2002) But that does not mean the Qur'an eschews the notion of an essence of a man or woman, a notion that twentieth-century gender theorists would contend. Secondly, the very lack of specifics in the Qur'an regarding gender roles makes Qutb's *tafsir* all the more valuable in so far as it attempts to delinate those roles.

We have seen Amin argue that women are deprived in Egypt, resulting in their diminished capacity as full-fledged contributors to society. In fact, women are deprived of education, thus reinforcing the contrived view of women as inferior. The role of women in Egypt is not a by-product of a woman's "essence" but social factors that converge to sustain this role for women. *Sura an-Nisa* provides us with ample material to assess Qutb's thoughts on the matter.

Generally, Qutb argues that this *Sura* identifies the family as the "basic constituent of society." Further, the *Sura* has three features to facilitate the "perfect social morality": 1) It makes clear the family is the primary building block of society. 2) The family unit — brought together through sexual desire — is the primary education unit of the child. 3) Social conditioning is what keeps families together, not the inherent inclination for two people to stay together. (Qutb 2009, 4:74–75) This last point is fascinating, as he assigns credit to social conditioning to preserving a unit he argues is commensurate with *fitra*. Thus is *fitra* natural or does it require struggle? Are we in fact, prone to contradict our *fitra*? If so, how does that not undermine the status of *fitra* as the human being's "natural inclination"? I will address Qutb's attempts, if indeed there are any, in reconciling

this possible contradiction.

In one way, we can address the question within this Sura. Verse 28 exclaims, "God wants to lighten your burdens, for man is created weak." Qutb celebrates this passage as indicative of the Islamic mean; the notion that Islam straddles a median path between wonton desire and monk-like asceticism. (Qutb 2009, 4:89) Qutb elaborates on this verse quite emphatically, arguing that sexual promiscuity leads to the collapse of nations.

> Uncontrolled sexual relationships were the major factor that led to the collapse of ancient civilizations, including those of Athens, Rome, and Persia. The same factor is now working for the destruction of Western civilization. Those effects have appeared first in France and they can be clearly seen now in America, Sweden, England and other Western civilized countries. France is foremost because she took the lead in shedding moral inhibitions. She succumbed in every war she fought since 1870. (Ibid)

This is naturally a conservative argument, heard time and time again. But the logic holds, if Qutb thinks marriage is to preserve the family and that the family is the basic building block of society, sexuality outside of marriage would likely disintegrate the foundation of society. Of course, it is not altogether clear whether France is in "decay" or not, but Qutb certainly thinks so, citing a reference to the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, but decay is a notion floating around at the time. In no way shape or form could Egypt's liberality be compared to that of France, but in

Qutb's mind, in contrast to Islam's glorious past, Egypt was weak. And Qutb linked

such weakness with the liberality of Egypt's popular culture. And this reinforces the

idea of contradiction and the context therein produced by the colonial and post-

colonial discourse. For Amin, Egypt was inferior because of the inferior status of

women, for Qutb, the claims of modern freedom contradicted the reality of Egypt's

subordination. He tried to answer the question of "why."

Qutb directly comments on gender roles in *Sura an-Nisa* in an explicit

exposition on their reality and function in society. Qutb addresses the differences

between men and women according to two themes: Jihad and inheritance. The

Qur'an, despite being vague on many questions concerning "the law," is quite

specific regarding inheritance, where a woman inherits only half of what a man

inherits. (Q 4:11) The Qur'anic reason for this is the claim that a man must provide

for his family, thus he requires greater inheritance. Men are also required to fight

jihad, where women, though not prohibited, are not required; this too appeared to

entitle men to greater honor. (Qutb 2009, 4:103–04)

Qutb addresses gender roles through these two themes arguing: In fact,

women contribute more to the "long term national interest than men" because they

produce fighters to defend, thus they are not required to risk their lives. (Ibid) In

this respect, Qutb privileges a jihad-centric view of the world wherein it seems

conflict is a perpetual aspect of human nature. As for inheritance Qutb argues that

men must sustain not only the wife and family, but those "insolvent and those who

are unable to earn their living in his family, according to their degree of kinship,

while the woman is exempt from the duty of mutual family support." (Ibid) In this

case, Qutb fails to recognize that this argument is circular, justifying an arrangement predicated on the fact men earn. But Qutb discusses gender roles in other writings as well; in *The Islamic Concept* Qutb juxtaposes a critique of gender roles to the critique of the state. Since producing humans is more valuable than producing products, the women's role in society is, again, more valuable than that of a man. (Qutb 1991)

Qutb proceeds on gender roles on a heavily biological basis, while also distinguishing between Islam and western secular societies:

> Islam has given the right of individual ownership to women of its own accord. Women did not have to launch a revolution, form women's societies or enter parliament in order to claim such a right. Islam's motives are found in its overall view of humanity. It considers that both parts of the single soul, from which men and women issue forth, are honorable. Moreover, it makes the family the basic unit of its social system. Hence, the atmosphere in the family must be one of love and mutual care. The rights of every individual in the family are safeguarded. It is for this reason that Islam gives both men and women equal rights of earning and ownership. (Qutb 2009, 4:105)

What distinguishes Qutb from his immediate predecessors is his return to seeing things from "Islam out" rather than from "outside into Islam." For Qutb it is wholly consistent with the notion of *fitra* to presume that men and women have different natures due to their biological differences. Yet, the Qur'an is not very

explicit in this regard, it is clear that Qutb is reacting to commentary around him at the time and that which preceded him in the person of figures like Qasim Amin. He is not so much extending a clear Qur'anic mandate as critiquing the west and western critiques of gender roles in the Middle East, a dialogue in place since Tahtawi.

Amin's critique nonetheless remains mild while the history of feminism in Egypt is robust. Two figures who stand out proceeding and contemporaneous with Qutb are Hoda Sh'arawi (d. 1947) and Zainab al-Ghazali (d. 2005). Sh'arawi was born to an upper-class family in 1879; she became the founder of the Egyptian Feminist Union the (EFU) and was known for provoking clear acts of social defiance by removing her *hijab*, for example. She was also an affiliate of the Wafd party, demonstrating the intimate relationship between ideas, actions and politics. (Sh'arawi 1987) Al-Ghazali compares to Qutb as she articulates what could be described as an *Islamist* feminism that largely comports to Qutb's worldview. Born in 1917, she was roughly ten years younger than Qutb, growing up in light of the achievements of Sh'arawi. Al-Ghazali joined the EFU, but later left to pursue a more Islamic based feminism. She was very familiar with Qutb on a personal level and even Qutb's sisters, Amina and Hamida.

Al-Ghazali dedicated herself to forming the Muslim Women's Association and affiliating with the Muslim Brotherhood. Her mission was *da'wa* or spreading the Islamic message, very much in line with the vision of the MB. She worked personally with Qutb in devising curricula for her work and meetings. She recounts showing Hamida Qutb a syllabus to share with her brother, which

included works by Muhammad Ibn 'Abdul-Wahhab and Sayyid Qutb's *tafsir*. (Ghazali 1989, 40–41)

The purpose of the syllabus was for meetings at her home to study Islam. Her language, as she recalls her objectives, is quite Qutbian. She says:

> Under Sayyid Qutb's directions we decided to continue our training and program which aimed at moral training and ingraining on the mind the concept of *tawhid*. It made one believe also that all forms of government, which do not look upon the Qur'an and Sunna as sources for framing the law, are un-Islamic. (Ibid, 42)

Qutb was not merely an influential as a thinker, but also as a personal friend, mentor and teacher. What is obvious is the central role that "questions of gender" played in Egyptian political, social, and religious discourse. The question was intimately tied up to those of "civilization," "progress," and Egypt's future. Even though Qutb looks at gender roles from 'Islam-out,' that is, he rationalizes Qur'anic prescriptions onto gender roles, he does so confidently, citing the "perils" of modern western living and their effect on happiness and even equality. (Qutb 2009, 4:100–05) Expanding this critique into questions about Egyptian identity and culture at large is a challenge that remains to him and considering the period in which he wrote was the golden age of Arab Nationalism, Qutb must address larger questions about Egypt and its roots.

2:b Qutb on Egyptian Identity

For Sayyid Qutb, one of Islam's most useful and worthy characteristics is the rejection of ethno-centrism and racism. As a graduate student in the United States in the 1940s, Qutb witnessed outright the explicit and relentless nature of American racism. This informed him deeply. Two things therefore come together to inform Qutb's thoughts on Egyptian identity: His rivalry with Nationalism generally, Arab nationalism specifically; and the larger colonial enterprise, so heavily reliant on concepts of race and superiority, of which he saw American racism as a thornier subset. What ties this critique together, however, is Qutb's insistence that racism and oppression were by-products of materialism and atheism.

In 1952 Qutb penned a small essay entitled "The White Man: Our Primary Enemy." There is an immediate contradiction between the theme of this essay and Qutb's larger work, for Qutb decries the notion of racial logic but seems to suggest here that the "white man" is to the exclusion of other peoples, in other words, he cannot be redeemed. Qutb touches upon this notion in other works, but here is his most developed exposition on the subject. Qutb observes that the colonial enterprise is ideologically justified by the argument that the "nature" of the white man, "whether in America or Europe" is superior to others. This results in the ideological contrivance of a hierarchical humanity, where whites sit atop the world order in terms of "civility" and knowledge. The knowledge aspect here is important, as it will inform his critique of the social sciences. Obviously, such a discourse is unacceptable to Qutb and he points out the intimate relationship

between this discourse and colonialism, an exploitative enterprise whose realities contradict its claims.

> The White man crushes us underfoot while we teach our children about his civilization, his universal principles and noble objectives… we are endowing our children with amazement and respect for the master who tramples our honor and enslaves us. (Qutb 1952, 1216)

Qutb addresses this theme in his *tafsir* as well. This context of contradiction is referred to when discussing gender relations in the west. Qutb critiques typical western norms, i.e. those referring to gender roles and the more progressive values in the west compared to the apparently more conservative account in Egypt, as vacuous because a racist society cannot at the same time be one that is truly just or equal. In his commentary on *an-Nisa*, within the context of his critique of gender values he argues:

> Some societies today, such as those in America and South Africa, practice a repugnant system of racial discrimination. Crimes which are overlooked when committed by an "honorable" white man are never forgiven when committed by a colored person. The same logic of *Jahiliya*, or state of ignorance prevails wherever and whenever Divine faith is ignored. Islam implements its own philosophy in all places and throughout all generations. (Qutb 2009, 4:86)

In other words, Qutb seems to ask, "How can a racist society offer any thoughts on the just society?" The intertwining themes of gender and race come at an interesting time in global intellectual history, in many ways laid bare by colonialism and the inherent contradictions therein. The colonial project was always an extension of Enlightenment claims. Asia and Africa in the modern colonial period of ca. 1750–1950 — distinct from the early modern colonialism of ca. 1500–1750, focused on the New World — was exposed to many claims that the west brought civility to their uncivilized lands, such claims inherently invoke the universalist edicts of the enlightenment.[22]

The prestige by which some in Egypt hold the west is put in contradistinction to the way "the West" or "the White Man" has only disdain for Africans or Asians, this apparent dissonance is a rallying cry for Qutb. Interestingly, Talal Assad draws our attention to another Muslim "radical" who invokes a similar point as a rallying cry. In a famous speech in the early 1960s, Malcolm X criticized the American Civil Rights Movement for its narrow focus on civil rights as opposed to human rights, such as those contained in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Malcolm argued:

> The Negro problem is never brought before the UN. This is part of
> the conspiracy. This old, tricky, blue-eyed liberal who supposed to be

---

[22] The colonialization of what would become the Americas too involved universalist claims, but such claims were predicated by-and-large on post-Renaissance Christianity; in addition, significant differences arouse between what transpired between the largely Catholic conquest of South America and more non-Catholic advance in North America. Qctavio Paz points out how the Catholic Church still incorporated Native-Americans into the hierarchical cosmology of the Church, whereas in the North Native-Americans were brutally eliminated. See Paz's *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, 1985.

your friend and mine, supposed to be in our corner, supposed to be

subsidizing our struggle, and supposed to be acting in the capacity of

an adviser, never tells you anything about human rights. They keep

you wrapped up in civil rights. And you spend so much time barking

up the civil-rights tree, you don't even know there is a human-rights

tree on the same floor." (quoted in Asad 2003, 141–46)

What is interesting about these two passages is the underlying epistemic

critique. Both Qutb and Malcolm point out that: a) there is a contradiction in the

values put forth by "whites" and those actually maintained, and there persist double

standards and mitigating contexts that override the universalist nature of the law,

making the law merely an exercise in control, not a sustainer of liberty or justice;

and b) the only way to achieve universal justice is to transcend the jurisdiction of

t h e local, whether that be legal or cultural. For the culture of whites will never

empower colored people. Interestingly, though the passages are quite different and

criticize different things, Malcolm X's critique of civil rights fits perfectly with Qutb's

critique of democracy. Consider this passage, quoted at length:

This religion (Islam) is really a universal declaration of the freedom of

man from servitude to other men and from servitude to his own

desires, which is also a form of human servitude; it is a declaration

that sovereignty belongs to God alone and that He is the Lord of all the

worlds. It means a challenge to all kinds and forms of systems which

are based on the concept of the sovereignty of man; in other words,

where man has usurped the divine attribute. Any system in which the

final decisions are referred to human beings, and in which the sources

of all authority are human, deifies human beings by designating

others than God as lords over men. This declaration means that the

usurped authority of God be returned to Him and the usurpers be

thrown out- those who by themselves devise laws for others to follow,

thus elevating themselves to the status of lords and reducing others to

the status of slaves. In short, to proclaim the authority and

sovereignty of God means to eliminate all human kingship and to

announce the rule of the Sustainer of the universe over the entire

earth. (Qutb 2006, 34, parenthetical note added)

Qutb's extensive emphasis on "sovereignty" has been well documented and

examined. William Shepard, Sayed Khatab and Ahmed Mousalli have undertaken

critical studies of Qutb's notion of sovereignty.[23] But little attention has been paid to

the metaphysics of Qutb's politics and the epistemic quality. Most treatments of

Qutb relay his claims within the vague context of "fundamentalism," but in fact,

Qutb's beliefs are not only poorly understood through that context, Qutb is the

opposite of a fundamentalist. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Qutb's esoteric

inclinations and allegorical interpretations constantly reveal where Qutb looks for

truth. Qutb looks *within*, not simply at the text; circumstance, context and political

---

[23] See Khatab, Sayed. *The Power of Sovereignty: The Political Philosophy of Sayyid Qutb*. London: Routledge, 2006; Shepard, William. "Islam as a 'System' in the Later Writings of Sayyid Qutb" in *Middle Eastern Studies Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Jan. 1989), pp. 31-50; Mousalli, Ahmed. *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism*: *The Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb*. Beirut: AUB Press, 1992.

conditions determine his reading of the text, not the other way around. Perhaps

that could be said of any reading, but in Qutb's case, he constantly cites the *fitra* as

the source of not only human happiness, but understanding. He insists there is

something inside a human that can act as *Farooq* or an arbitrator of truth. I will

return to this in a moment.

Democracy, ironically, obscures the instinct for truth and obfuscates it under

the mechanisms of voting and the like. He does not only speak of democracy here

however, but any system that renders the human sovereign; no doubt having

Nasser's Egypt in mind, where the President was hailed as both leader and celebrity.

Malcolm X, too, argues that confusion persists in the world and he too appeals to a

"universal right," though affirmed by the UN, a human organization, Malcolm too

appeals to jurisdictions beyond local power. As such, both critiques are shrewd in

undermining local power dynamics and in empowering radical detractors.[24]

In short, both critiques involve the setting of the twentieth-century world,

where rules and ideologies of power emanating from a post-Enlightenment Europe

dominate the world stage and the language of political discourse. In many ways,

Taha Husayn's insistence that Egypt "belonged to Europe" was an attempt to

situate Egypt within this context to the practical benefit of her culture and

relationship to this discourse. (Husayn 1938, 26) Husayn insisted on many

occasions that Europe, France in particular, was good to Egypt and had

strengthened Egypt's development. (Attar, 2006) Husayn's attempts to "shift"

---

[24] Talal Asad actually argues that Martin Luther King, Jr. was more successful than Malcolm X, in part because the former appealed to American and Judeo-Christian traditions, rendering his appeal more familiar and accessible to the average American.

Egypt's cultural orientation westward also involved an evaluation of Islam and religion generally, as we see earlier in this chapter, but Qutb argues quite forcefully that Egypt is of Asia and Africa, that it is *not white*, when he argues that the "white man is our primary enemy." It is impossible not to think of the broader colonial context here, including Malcolm X, in linking colonialism to race. Previously, stating emphatically or by way of implication that Egyptians are "not white" would have made little sense in Egyptian cultural life; this identity claim was fostered within the colonial context. Such insistences on the part of writers like Husayn opened them up to critiques of contradiction, since colonialism rarely delivered on its promises, criticisms made famous by Fanon for example. And contradiction implies falseness, thus accentuating Qutb's claims that western society contradicts justice and that modern values contradict the *fitra.*

Conclusion

One of the most salient features of Qutb's thought, in this context, is he essentializes Egypt and projects Egypt's identity outwards against modern western thought. Egypt is an Islamic, Arabic and African country, naturally against the "white man." As such, he takes Taha Husayn's ideas and many others to task for imitating the west and not liberating his people. Taha Husayn and Qasim Amin represent new modes of thinking about Egypt and her problems and opportunities; the former wants to situate Egypt into new environs to reinforce Egypt's orientation westward and the latter wants to mirror Europe's progress by

mirroring certain social norms related to gender. Together, they represent how the legacy of Muhammad 'Abduh become secularized and militated through various claims of new legitimacies unrelated to Islam or at least the canonized Islamic tradition. This is the context that underlies Qutb's writing.

The entire discourse from al-Afghani to Qutb cannot be correctly understood outside of the context of colonialism. Colonialism, operating through modes of discourse, as much as modes of martial and political dominance, brought new concepts to the fore such as "equality," "progress," and "democracy"; not to say that certain concepts did not persist in the Islamic tradition, but they would have to be gleaned from the *maqasad al-sharia*, they would not be explicit in their own right. Yet the resounding power of these concepts also shed led on how inadequately colonialism could deliver them to colonized peoples, exposing the gap between the text of colonialism and its actual meaning or reality. Between Afghani and Husayn, thinkers like 'Abduh sought to reform Islamic institutions to meet this challenge, writers like Sanu' appealed to labor and class, Amin and Husayn advocated wholesale adoption of Western norms to varying degrees.

Sayyid Qutb, consistent with his frame of mind, argued, like *jahiliya*, that the gap between values and realities, text and meaning, found in western democracy or post-colonial Egypt is the result of 'the fact' that those values do not correlate to God's reality and as such they are mere idols, revered but false, powerful but handmade. In order to close the gap between values and reality one must return to Islam and most specifically the *fitra*, where the essence of the human being coincides with a system of beliefs, values and edicts that is natural, moral and just.

Here the inner and outer comport. Further, the "false gods" of material wealth

perpetuate inequality, requiring ideas to justify such inequality, which rely on false

notions of racial superiority. Everywhere Qutb sees falsehoods, which naturally

stem from false beliefs, only in turning to God can truth be restored and a more

sensible world achieved. There can be no truth, with no *fitra*.

Chapter Four: Review of Qutb as a Radical Thinker: Qutb on America, Religion and on Radical Method

Sayyid Qutb is often thought of as an ideologue and one who articulated an ideological Islamism, but ideologues often argue for largely theoretical revolutions. And much of Qutb's work contains themes found in radical western theory, such as 'alienation' and reflections on property relations. But Qutb abandons intellectualism later in life. In this chapter, I will identify ways in which Qutb finally abandons 'intellectualism' all together, in favor of discussing things like 'movement' and the vacuity of 'theory.' Sayyid Qutb's esotericism, I argue, inevitably leads to what scholars like Leonard Binder refer to as Qutb's 'rhetorical monism.' (Binder 1988, 179-180) By looking at key aspects of Qutb's life and writings, we will see how Qutb finally arrives at works like *Milestones* that disparages theory completely. Throughout Qutb's life, he was essentially working out the dissonance between what he perceived as the esoteric and the exoteric, whether in culture, property relations, sovereignty and even religious practice.

The Evolution of Qutb's Thought on Religion: Ethnography and Theology

Qutb scholars recognize three distinct phases of Qutb's thinking (I. Abu-Rabi' 1996). The first phase is Qutb's secular literary phase, characterized by a love of poetry and personal reflection; in this phase, Qutb's work engages Taha Husayn and

Mustafa Aqqad.[25] The second phase of Qutb's writing reflects his Muslim

Brotherhood affiliations; naturally, his writing in this period draws on Islamic

terminology and is largely ideological. During Qutb's evolution into the second

phase of his writing, he spent a considerable amount of time in the United States,

which has also been associated with his "radicalization." (Calvert 2010) The final

phase is often attributed to Qutb's extensive time in prison (1952–1962); it has

been argued that the experience of prison, including torture, "completed" Qutb's

radicalization. (Bergesen 2008)

1:a Qutb's Time in America

Abu-Rabi' observes that the period 1933–1952 is an important phase in

Arabic letters. Qutb's work in this period reflects the overall *milieu* of the Arab

intelligentsia, wherein politics is engaged as a matter of both education and culture,

rather than simply as centralized power. (I. Abu-Rabi 1996, 92) In other words, the

Arab intellectual perceived the Arab power deficit as not simply a matter of inferior

military and technological development compared to the West, but also as a matter

of cultural backwardness. The Arab writer wanted to enlighten. 1952 marks the

rise of Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser and the popularity of Pan-Arabism; though this period is

seen as a golden age of Arab nationalism, it is also during this period that Qutb

developed his most salient ideas.

---

[25] Abu-Rabi' actually categorizes Qutb's writing under two distinct phases, pre-Brotherhood and Brotherhood; but when looking at the organization of his work, one detects three—and the post- Prison experience definitely warrants a specific treatment.

For an overview of Qutb's literary growth Abu-Rabi' and Calvert provide

excellent surveys. Here I would like to focus on the American sojourn, a period much

discussed but little analyzed. In Qutb's writings during this time, one detects a

playfulness more suited to a man of letters than to an ideologue. Qutb spends a

considerable amount of time performing ethnography, observing American attitudes

and behaviors in terms of innocuous things.

Qutb arrived in the United States in 1948, and upon his return to Egypt he

published an account of his stay in *ar-Risala*. This same essay was included in a book

edited by 'Abd al-Fattah al-Khalidi entitled *Amrika min al-Dakhil bi-Minzar Sayyid*

Qutb. Kamal Abdel-Malak notes that the book's cover page "has a drawing of an

American flag shown partly folded with a blood-stained, black-stripped flag

beneath it. America may appear to be one thing, but inside it is something else

totally." (Abdel-Malak 2000, 9) This theme — that America is not what it appears to

be — fits in with the overall view that Qutb views culture and politics as text, with a

hidden dimension. During the 1948 trip, Qutb confronted the behemoth, the

United States; the U.S. would, I argue, stand as the paradigmatic model of the *jahili*

phenomenon in Qutb's thinking.

Qutb returns to the theme of dissonance repeatedly in his American diaries.

Of Americans Qutb says, "It is the case of a people who have reached the peak of

growth and elevation in the world of science and productivity, while remaining

abysmally primitive in the world of the senses, feelings, and behavior." (Qutb 1986)

For Qutb, the latter characteristics are of greater moral weight than the former.

The ability to build or organize is an ethically neutral capacity; Qutb says that "the

true value of every civilization that man has known lies not in the tools man has invented … most of the value of civilizations lay in what universal truths and worldviews they have attained." (Ibid)

But again there is a direct correlation between humanity's material progress and spiritual regress for Qutb. He says that when one scrutinizes "the past and present of this people [Americans] the reason that this zenith of civilization has combined with this nadir of primitiveness is revealed." Science, particularly the applied sciences, embellishes the value of the physical. For Qutb, the first Americans had to "tame the virgin" land of America; this produced an excessive appreciation of "muscle" and development and expansion. According to Qutb, this "shrank" the soul of the American, removing him from the humanistic roots of the Old World. (Ibid)

Undoubtedly, one can assume that Qutb thought that the direction of America was the direction of the world. The twentieth century is one in which the geographical advance of the sciences was self-evident and even ideological. In other words, the concept of science translated into a concept of both power and civility. Zionist emphases in the period embody the relationship between science and ideology, as Etel Solingen observes. Zionist leaders "viewed science and technological achievement as a source of international political power and leverage." (Solingen 1994, 232) Anecdotally, the preponderance of doctors and engineers among baby boomers corresponded with the desire to build a strong modern state in many parts of the Arab World. (Rohde n.d.) What Qutb saw in America he also saw to some extent in Egypt, and he certainly anticipated that this

was the direction Egypt was going into to.

In technology's awesome power lies its capacity to veil the more "human" values as Qutb describes them. Average Americans, because they have so much technological power at their disposal, presume that they possess the most sophisticated ideas regarding human behavior as well. Qutb scoffs at "such an industrial civilization, with its precise order and organization of labor, with such primitiveness of feeling and manner, a primitiveness that reminds one of the days when man lived in jungles and caves!" (Qutb) Nowhere is this "primitiveness" more obvious than in American views on sex. Qutb relays conversations he had with fellow university students on sex. He conveys their views on sex as being primarily "biological" and not a "moral matter"; sex offers a way to "relax nerves," but Qutb is quick to point out that "there is nothing in America that indicates relaxed nerves, despite every easy means of life." (Ibid)

In America Qutb pointed out contradictions. America is a place of freedom, but Qutb found people "enslaved" to their desires. This inquiry into contradiction will evolve throughout Qutb's work into his paradigmatic notion of *fitra* and *hikmiyyaa*; Qutb's ethnography does not speak of "sin" or "evil," but seems to focus more on what we might describe as well-being. The Americans think that they are happy, and claim to be happy, but in fact they are nervous, stressed, and driven by the basest of instincts. *Jahiliya* will become a perfect stand-in for what Qutb thought of as cognitive dissonance; the "idols" of technology, power, and science are false substitutes for the truthful wisdom of Islam. They detract from inner realization while making false claims to knowledge. Yet, at this point, we can only anticipate

131

Qutb's use of theological concepts, while in America his politics is not yet theology.

1:b Qutb and the Problem of Sovereignty

One of the most studied features of Qutb's thinking is the concept of
hikmiyya (*hakimiyya*), which refers to the sovereignty of God. Scholarly
understandings of *hikmiyya* serve as the cornerstone for the way in which Qutb is
received and perceived within academic circles. Qutb's emphasis on "God's
sovereignty" is naturally understood as undermining secular democracy or
secularism generally. As I have argued elsewhere regarding other Qutbian
concepts, scholars focus too much on the *prima facie* meaning of "God's
sovereignty," thereby failing to address the concept's more nuanced implications.
Qutb's views on sovereignty correspond to the general problem of sovereignty in
political theory.

Ahmed Moussalli links *hikmiyya* to *tawhid*; he argues that "because *tawhid* is
the basis of the criteria of right and wrong, the lawful and the unlawful, and the
legal and illegal, governance or *hikmiyyaa*, for Qutb belongs only to God." (Moussalli
1992, 150) Accordingly, since God is known as *al-Hakim* (amongst other names) in
Islam, governance belongs to God. The term "*hikmiyya*" itself is not in the Qur'an,
but is thought to be a neologism developed by Maududi's student and most
important Arabic translator 'Ali Nadwi, an Arabic rendition of Maududi's "*hukumat-i
ilahiyya*." (Calvert, 214)

Shahrough Akhavi, a prolific scholar on Qutb, makes explicit what is

constantly implied regarding Qutb's view on *hikmiyya*. According to Akhavi, Qutb "maintained that Muslim states are apostate, as it were, because they have arrogated to secular authority the sovereignty of God." (Akhavi 2013) Akhavi also emphasizes the role played by Maududi in influencing Qutb.

Missing from the above inquiries are general reviews of the "problem of sovereignty" in political theory. Yes, Qutb spoke of the sovereignty of God. But what exactly does that mean? Surely Qutb did not mean that God governs directly. Qutb's insistence is most often understood as applying "the *shari'a*"; but again, Qutb, though not an '*alim*, was surely aware of how varied and non-uniform the *shar'ia* is. Two things stand out at this point: If we consider Qutb's time in America as integral to his intellectual development, the dynamics of American politics should be considered a fruitful starting point to his thoughts on democracy, wherein — and this is crucial—the sovereignty of the *demos* is theoretically personified in the nation-state. No type of conversation like this was quite happening in Egypt in the 1940s.

In the 1940s, the post-colonial impulse was still robust, as was the looming crisis in Israel/Palestine. Thinkers like 'Abd al-Rahman al-Bazzaz and Michel Aflaq were trying to buttress Arab Nationalism with Islamic validity and figures like 'Husri were attempting to define the Arab nation. But there were no conversations regarding the "sovereign" state. Maududi's critique of sovereignty was an undeniable force on Qutb; but I have shown elsewhere that it is an inadequate explanation for Qutb's thought, which is much more mystical. Qutb began to think about ignorance, or what might be described as "false-consciousness," in America. These thoughts later adopted the terminology of *jahiliya* and *hikmiyya*, but the seeds

were planted in America, where Qutb observed first-hand the awesome power of development — and how, in his mind, it confused people into "thinking" thay they were happy.

Carl Schmitt wrote what is perhaps the most famous definition of sovereignty, wherein he argued that the sovereign is "he who decides the exception." (Schmitt 2005, 5) We are reminded here of what Ernest Gellner described as the greatest definition of government, Ibn Khaldun's: government is "an institution which prevents injustice other than such as it commits itself." (Gellner 1988, 239) In these conceptions, sovereignty implies absolute power, in some ways analogous to positions taken up by medieval theologians. Muslim, Christian, and Jewish theologians debated whether God was bound by justice (*potestas ordinata*) or was boundless and absolute in power (*potestas absoluta*).[26] In Islam, for example, the Mutazilites argued that God was bound by justice; the Asharites demurred, to some extent, arguing that such a position compromised God's omnipotence, and was thus potentially blasphemous.

Does the state possess an inherent power to be capricious? What is the relationship between the state and the law? Hannah Arendt's brilliant inquiry into the concept of sovereignty is useful for us here. Arendt observes:

> Since the Rights of Man were proclaimed to be "inalienable,"
> irreducible to and undeducible from other rights or laws, no
> authority was invoked for their establishment; Man himself was

---

[26] I use the Latin terms here to acknowledge the plethora of literature on the genealogy of the state in Western political theory; the connection between theological concepts and political ones can be seen from Hobbes to Schmitt. For more see Elshtain, Jean. *Sovereignty: God, State and Self.* New York: Basic Books, 2008. Jean Elshtain, *Sovereignty: God, State and Self* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

their source as well as their ultimate goal. No special law, moreover, was deemed necessary to protect them because all laws were supposed to rest upon them. Man appeared as the only sovereign in matters of law as the people was proclaimed the only sovereign in matters of government. The people's sovereignty (different from that of the prince) was not proclaimed by the grace of God but in the name of Man, so that it seemed only natural that the "inalienable" rights of man would find their guarantee and become an inalienable part of the right of the people to sovereign self-government. (Arendt, 2004, 369)

Arendt famously traces the evolution of totalitarianism in her work, and it is not incidental that the issue of sovereignty is central. According to Arendt, sovereignty is intimately tied to the "rise" of human rights. As we see above, a mutually reinforcing relationship exists between human rights and sovereignty: the former is the basis of the latter, and the later insures the former. But reading Arendt allows us to look at Qutb with fresh eyes.

As Akhavi argues, Qutb's thinking seems to be a matter of "secularism" (another word fraught with ambiguity) only. But both Akhavi and Moussalli acknowledge that by "God's sovereignty" Qutb means implementing the *shari'a*. In *Milestones*, Qutb repeatedly insists that "the love of the Divine Law, *al-shari'a*, should be a consequence of pure submission to God and of freedom from servitude to anyone else." (Qutb, 2006, 49) More emphatically Qutb states:

No doubt the *shari'a* is the best since it comes from God Almighty; the

laws of His creatures can hardly be compared to the laws given by

the Creator. But this point is not the basis of the Islamic call. The basis

of the message is that one should accept the *shari'a* without any

question and reject all other laws in any shape or form. This is Islam.

There is no other meaning of Islam. (Ibid)

Qutb's ontology and theology is vivid in the above quote. Islam, *shari'a,* and

Hikmiyya are the same. Any other idea for social organization is inevitably

predicated on a false premise, and should an individual comport themselves with

such forms of organization, he betrays his own *fitra*. Yet, Qutb's critique is not

merely one of a fundamentalist, blindly insisting on matters of faith. And this point

can be made beyond Qutb's circular reliance on what are believed to be revealed

texts. It is demonstrated through his theology and his specific — but not unusual —

way of seeing the relationship between God and humanity.

What is the *shari'a* exactly? It seems that this question is rarely asked when

identifying Qutb with the *shari'a*. More particularly, how does Qutb define the

shari'a? The *shari'a* is always presumed to be an innumerable body of antiquated

social and ritual regulations. The moment we investigate the *shari'a*, that view must

change, however — particularly when we consider the epistemic distinction

between *shari'a* and *fiqh*. *Fiqh* is the human interpretation of *shari'a* and is

unanimously recognized as the body of literature, possessed by Muslims, attempting

to interpret the *shari'a*. Thus, *fiqh*, by its very nature is mutable and dynamic, not static. Qutb corroborates this understanding in his own work by arguing "in Makkah [*sic*] the Muslims were not autonomous nor did they have any influence in the society. Their practical life had not taken a permanent form so that they could have organized themselves according to the Divine Law (*shari'a*)" (Qutb, 2006, 46)

According to this interpretation, revelation was a contingency, predicated on Muslims successfully "organizing" themselves into an Islamic society. On this basis, many contemporary Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood, insist that the *shari'a* can only be implemented in a just society, wherein other Islamic imperatives promoting social justice are in effect. Qutb subscribed to a similar view. (Calvert, 212) The famous case of 'Umar b. al-Khattab, who suspended the *hudud* punishment for theft during a famine, demonstrates ambiguity at the very origins of what is understood to be *shari'a* (or, more accurately, *fiqh*) regarding the role of human reason, secular authority, and social conditions.

The only aspects of *shari'a* that are fixed are the *shari'a's* goals or *maqasid as-sharia*. The *maqasid* are generally associated with five primary categories: Life, Religion, Family, Mind, and Property. The *shari'a* has been interpreted as preserving or serving the interests of these five categories. Abu-Ishaq as-Shatibi (d. 1388) insisted that the content of *fiqh* should be produced through the goals of the *shari'a*; any juridical opinion not composed according to the *shari'a's* goals is not in keeping with the law according to the fourteenth-century jurist. (al-Shatibi 2011) Muhammad b. Zahra (d. 1974), an Egyptian thinker and writer, in line with more contemporary developments, extrapolates from the classical goals of the *shari'a*

new articulations, including "establishing justice" and "expanding benefits." (Abu Zahra N.D.) Could this development in any way be traced to Qutb?

The goals of the *shari'a* are legal categories, but also heuristic devices by which to interpret the Qur'an and *Sunna*; in other words, the content of a particular tradition can be interpreted in light of the goals of the *shari'a*, rendering the tradition's content applicable. When we apply this type of understanding to Sayyid Qutb's advocacy of the *shari'a*, he resembles someone advocating human rights rather than simply a dogmatic traditionalist. Qutb identifies the *shari'a* with something more closely resembling human rights or natural law; by insisting that states must obey the *shari'a*, he is positing a higher order, law, or sovereign, justifying resistance against an authoritarian state. Articulating a political theory in this way, within this sort of context, is hardly alien to Western political theory.

1:c Qutb's Theory of Religion

In the previous chapter, we saw how al-Afghani considered religion a type of philosophy for the masses, and a necessary precondition to evolved knowledge; thus to al-Afghani religion is essentially a cultural phenomenon, an idiomatic cultural expression of higher philosophical truths not yet attained. On the whole, al-Afghani remains well within the Islamic philosophical tradition in this regard. Qutb, on the other hand, proffers a different theory of religion. Qutb, quite emphatically states that too many Muslims "have adopted the Western concept of 'religion,' which is merely a name for 'belief' in the heart, having no relation to the practical affairs of

138

life." (Qutb 2006, 86) What then is "religion" to Qutb?

Milestones is usually considered Qutb's most radical work (See Sivan, Mousalli, Euben); yet, the conclusions of Milestones are readily found in his tafsir. What differentiates these two works from Social Justice in Islam is the emphasis on theology, tawhid in particular. Social Justice lacks a political theology. It resembles a salafi work insofar as it relies on traditions to convey a social message. Qutb goes straight to the hadith. Qutb's tafsir and later work is different; these works incessantly refer to tawhid and then extrapolate from that essential principle toward a cosmo-epistemic imperative.

Qutb's main thesis is that once tawhid is realized (ihsan) all matters regarding communicating religion will become redundant, no longer needed or merely a formality. By ihsan, I am referring to the notion that one's behavior is in 'accordance with God's will,' as one has 'realized' the 'truth.' In other words, politics, theology, even fiqh (the discursive process of developing Islamic "law" in human societies) will become secondary, a shadow of ihsan. It is neither theology nor fiqh that lead people to being good Muslims; such discourses are as corrupt as the jahili society that produces them, even if the society is nominally Muslim. Rather, realizing tawhid facilitates gnosis, where one naturally acts according to the principle of God's oneness and submits, achieving peace in the world. In Milestones, Qutb says:

> When belief in "La ilaha illa Allah" penetrates into the deep recesses
> of the heart, it also penetrates through the whole system of life, which

is a practical interpretation of this faith. By this means, those who believe are already pleased with the system that this faith uniquely determines and submit in principle to all the laws and injunctions and details *even before they are declared*. Indeed, the spirit of submission is the first requirement of the faith. Through this spirit of submission the believers learn the Islamic regulations and laws with eagerness and pleasure (Qutb 2006, 45–46; italics added).

Something happens before Islam (the rites, rituals, and regulations constituting what is recognized as Islam), that is *Ihsan*. It would seem Qutb's thoughts here would pertain only to Islam on a theoretical level; however, there is something universal that Qutb is claiming here. Anthropological theories on religion are considerably interested in symbols and practices. So, for example, Clifford Geertz argues that "religious symbols formulate a basic congruence between a particular style of life and a specific (if, most often, implicit) metaphysic, and in so doing sustain each with the borrowed authority of the other." (Geertz 1973, 90) In other words, the rites and duties of religion correspond to a hidden but accessible reality beyond comprehension, but "miraculously" relayed through religion.

For example, in this sense, I may not be able intellectually to comprehend the power of the cosmos, but if I purchase an amulet I may harness natural power to my advantage to obtain fame, fortune, or revenge. Religious rites are the same. God transcends, but the esoteric dimension of ritual provides me "access," through their supposedly transcendent origins, or so religious persons might assume. What makes this universal for Geertz is that all religions do this, or all cultures claiming

religion possess the ambition to achieve this. In this sense, religious symbols are the "language" of religion, and this renders such symbols very important structurally. It is to be presumed then that: a) religious symbols certainly say something about what a religion may be claiming metaphysically; and b) analyzing such symbols make sense only within the framework of the entire symbolic discourse itself, much in the way that Saussure argued for a study of linguistics.

Qutb's social critique rarely relies on the notion that if more Muslims simply practiced" Islam, a Muslim society would come into being. Though Qutb speaks highly of Islamic practices (such as worship), it is clear that worship is nothing in and of itself. *Tawhid* precedes everything. Practice does not facilitate belief; even the use of the word "belief" is misleading. The Qur'an mentions the canonical worship rituals in Islam only twice, in verse 238 of *Sura al-Baqarah* and in verse 58 of *Sura an-Nur*. In his *tafisr*, Qutb's attitude towards worship is qualifiably different from what one might think a *salafi* or fundamentalist interpretation of worship would be. Qutb says:

> The Qur'an relates man's behavior in all these situations to worship, which is, from the Islamic point of view, *not confined to prayers and rituals*. Thus, to further relate prayer to aspects of worship in practical life situations, the surah mentions, along with these rulings regulating marriage and divorce, a couple of rulings on prayer in times of fear and security." (Qutb 2009, 294; italics added)

For example, it is interesting to compare Qutb's statements on prayer to those of prominent contemporary *salafis*, such as Nasir al-Din al-Albani (d. 2000): al-Albani wrote an entire treatise on the traditions compelling various movements of worship, considering how one's hands must touch the ground first as one prostrates oneself, including the justifications for placing one's right hand over the left while standing, etc. (al-Albani 2005) In al-Albani, each movement of worship must be authorized and sustained, because worship is an end in and of itself. Qutb collapses the distinction between worship as performed in the daily *salat* and worship as in acting in a socially just manner. It is incomprehensible to imagine Qutb writing an entire volume on *salat*, for animating Islamic rites is simply not his goal.

True religion, according to Qutb, is not composed of rites and rituals but of social justice, which correlates, in his view, with the human *fitra*. Personal conduct must comport with inner reality; the rites and rituals associated with Islam, as Qutb treats them, are arbitrary — and further, not to be confused with fulfilling one's religion. Obviously, Qutb did not dismiss worship in the form of *salat*, and he was known to perform *salat*. (See Calvert)

Qutb challenges the entire separation of religion and politics, which is why he is so often considered a "fundamentalist"; but to consider this attitude on the part of Qutb as simply reactionary would be incorrect. Qutb's theory of religion is a theory of knowledge, wherein one's organizing principle is either "true" (as in *tawhid*) or "false" (as in everything else). To think about religion or politics in Qutb is to begin with the self, which Qutb stresses corresponds to a certain *fitra*. When

the basic components of Qutb's thoughts are rendered obvious, it is clear that

Qutb's instincts overlap with two traditions, the tradition of radical politics and the

Islamic tradition. But most importantly, Qutb's work does express some universal

tendencies within radical traditions that rely on pantheism.

Section 1 Conclusion

I have argued that Qutb is a gnostic who draws upon God's immanence

(*tashbih*). I have further argued that Qutb's views on God inform his exegesis and

political theory. It is difficult to identify any clear system of ideas in Qutb. He was

not a systematic thinker or writer, so any claim to see a coherent political theory or

theology in his views is based on explicating certain key features of his thought and

extrapolating from them. There are two key features of Qutb's thought that serve as

a firm foundation for implicating a larger worldview: Qutb's views on faith and

ritual. Qutb constantly remonstrates against seeing the *shari'a* or Islam as rituals

(*ibadat*) attached to social regulation (*mu'amalat*), but insists that Islam must be

seen as a "unity" or organic whole. Of ritual, Qutb constantly says: "Islam is not

mere feelings, conceptions, slogans or worship rituals. (Qutb, 2009, pg. 8) "Islam is

not merely a number of beliefs that our minds accept, nor is it a host of rituals and

acts of worship, nor a worldly system divorced from faith and worship." (Ibid, 122)

Qutb does not however dismiss rituals as some antiquated act no longer

needed, but argues that performing rituals without implementing the *shari'a* is a

vacuous act, devoid of true spiritual substance. Rituals of worship and social

regulation — known as *mu'amulat* in discourses concerning *fiqh* — unite the cognitive to the moral, enabling social regulation to be self-inspired and not *coerced*. This brings to mind Qutb's famous argument in *Milestones* that if *tawhid* "penetrated the heart" all members of society there would be no need for a state. (Qutb 2006, 106-109) (Euben 1990, 64) Qutb's political theory is gnostic anarchism, for example, compare Qutb to Spinoza.

Yirmiyahu Yovel, in an illuminating study on Spinoza, explains parts of the seventeenth-century Dutch philosopher's project in these terms:

> Spinoza indeed suggests a new religion, a supreme metaphysical and mental liberation, a semi-mystical reunion with God that realizes the infinite within the realm of finitude and, charged with powerful emotion and love, transforms the person as a whole and dominates a whole new life-course. (Yovel 1989, 12)

Yovel's description of Spinoza's project could be applied to Qutb *in toto*. Qutb too seeks mental liberation through a mystical union with God, and the Egyptian thinker's writing is replete with this message. Most pressing are Qutb's calls for transformation through allowing *tawhid* to penetrate the heart, but Qutb stresses that both belief and "obedience" to the *shari'a* are not simply mental concepts to which one ascends and acquiesces, but actual states of being. Commenting on verse 36, Qutb states:

> This serves to stress the total unity that pervades all aspects of

Islamic faith. Islam is not merely a number of beliefs that our minds accept, nor is it a host of rituals and acts of worship, nor a worldly system divorced from faith and worship. It is a way of life that combines all these aspects and unites them together on the basis of believing in the Oneness of God and deriving all systems and legislation from Him alone. There can be no split between accepting God's unity and implementing His legislation. (Qutb 2009, 128)

Milestones concentrates on the theme of mystical union with more tenacity. It can be said without exaggeration that the central theme of *Milestones* is to convince the reader to abandon intellectual pursuits such as ideology, political theory and the social sciences in favor of 'opening up one's heart' to the realization of *tawhid*. I will offer an interpretation as to 'why' this is the main theme of *Milestones* momentarily; however consider some of these statements. Qutb says of the success of Islam:

All this was possible because those who established this religion in the form of a state, a system and laws and regulations *had first established it in their hearts and lives in the form of faith, character, worship and human relationships*. (Qutb 2006, 44; italics added)

Or,

When belief in "*La ilaha illa Allah*" penetrates into the deep recesses of the heart, it also penetrates through the whole system of life, which

is a practical interpretation of this faith. (Ibid, 45)

Also, of the Qur'an he says:

> The Makkan (sic) period of the Qur'an has this glorious attribute that it
> imprints 'There is no deity worthy of worship except Allah' on
> hearts and minds, and teaches Muslims to adopt this method and no
> other, in spite of the fact that it appears difficult and to persist in this
> method. (Ibid)

Qutb, seemingly curiously, refers to *tawhid* as a "method" This is one of the most overlooked aspects of Qutb's writing, his emphasis on *tawhid* as a method. What is the basis of thinking of *tawhid* as a "method"? As Euben and Mousalli have exhaustively demonstrated, *tawhid* affirms God's sovereignty; Euben explains particularly, "belief in the unity of God thus entails total submission to his authority both in the spheres of worship and that of sovereignty." But Qutb does not ask us to "believe" in God's unity (though at times he speaks that way), but to realize it. In addition, Euben misses the finer point here: Qutb constantly stresses the notion that merely "believing" is not enough. Above I mention how Qutb says Islam is "not merely a number of beliefs that our minds accept"; this is a powerful statement regarding Qutb's thoughts on *tawhid*.

Qutb says of the Qur'an that it imparts it's "powerful message to Muslims as also to eradicate all traces of *ignorance* from their hearts." (Qutb 2009, 3:39) In *Milestones*, Qutb elaborates upon this theme further:

The Qur'an on the one hand constructs faith in the hearts of the Muslim community and on the other attacks the surrounding *Jahiliya* through this community, while struggling to remove all the *Jahili* influences, which are found in the ideas, practices and morals of the Muslim community. The construction of Islamic belief occurred under these stormy conditions, and not in the form of a theology or theory or scholastic argument. It was rather as an active, organic and vital movement, the concrete representation of which was the Muslim community. (Qutb 2006, 50)

Tawhid is not a theological premise. In fact it is ineffable, sold short if postulated simply as academic formulae. *Tawhid* lives and breathes as a reality, manifested in the community. Time and time again, Qutb vacates the charge of theology to document the "truth" in favor of a more perennial thing like *presence*. (See Schuon, 1976) Qutb seems to say to us: "Abandon discussions of God in favor of acting in God." Qutb says *tawhid* should "materialize in a dynamic social system" (Ibid, 50); Islamic belief should "take shape in living souls" (Ibid, 51); finally, he says that the Muslim society "cannot come into existence simply as a creed in the hearts of individual Muslims, however numerous they may be. Unless they become an active, harmonious and cooperative group." (Ibid, 58) *Tawhid* transforms the individual to achieve a certain mind of gnosis, as opposed to simply being obedient.

Qutb's Qura'nic View of Human Rights

The *maqasid* are a form of human rights. They insist that human beings are

entitled to certain assurances regarding life, property, soundness of mind, family,

and spirit. Recognizing this potential in the *maqasid* changes the way in which

Sayyid Qutb should be read. Furthermore, one interpretation is the *maqasid* places

theological bounds on any conception of God. God reveals not capriciously to assert

power, but according to reason and the nature of human beings. Qutb says: "The

Islamic faith, its concepts of life and existence, its laws and regulation of human life,

and its practical code which *ensures* man's happiness" made the Arabs leaders in

the world; but note that the *shari'a* "ensures" happiness, not simply "submission."

(Qutb 2015, 233, italics added) This is a different assertion from classical or *salafi*

takes on God, which insist that God's decrees need no justification but are

expressions of divine sovereignty.

2:a The Sovereign Human

For all the insistence on Qutb's fundamentalism, especially attributed to his

conception of *hikmiyya*, Qutb does grant humanity sovereignty, but Qur'anically.

Qutb's views regarding humanity are indeed overwhelmingly concerned with the

fitra but Qutb's commentary on *Sura al-Baqara* is essential to understanding the

theology of *Milestones*. *Al-Baqara* contains several important themes for the Qur'anic

view of humanity. Is humanity free? Does humanity have a divine purpose? Finally,

what constitutes human knowledge?

The second "chapter" of the Qur'an is well known for its articulation of the Abrahamic creation myth. The Qur'an addresses how Adam, Eve, and the Forbidden Tree relate to the human condition. This is important territory for Qutb to cover. In *Baqara*, verse 30, the Qur'an says: "Your Lord said to the angels, 'I am appointing a vicegerent (*khalifa*) on earth.' They said, 'Will You appoint on it someone who would spread corruption and shed blood, whereas we celebrate Your praises and extol Your holiness?' He said, 'I surely know that of which you have no knowledge.'" Qutb comments:

> God, in His infinite wisdom, decided to hand over the earth's affairs and destiny to man and give him a free hand to use, develop and transform all its energies and resources for the fulfillment of God's will and purpose in creation, and to carry out the pre-eminent mission with which he was charged. (Qutb, 2009, 2:50)

The above interpretation of verse 30 allows us to follow up on two questions: First, what is humanity's "pre-eminent purpose" in Qutb's mind? Second, what is God's "will and purpose" for creation as Qutb understands it? Importantly, Qutb's linking of "God's will and purpose" with humanity's "purpose" constitutes a theology that must be unlocked. Is this a theology that applies to all humans? Or only to Muslims? If the latter, certain presumptions about sovereignty can be deduced from Qutb's writings.

The Qur'an addresses *ya ayyuha al-nas* ("oh humankind") 306 times directly and roughly 2,000 times indirectly, while referring specifically to Muslims only 49 times. The theme of the oneness of humanity is a prominent one in the Qur'an. (Abdullah 2017) Clearly the Qur'an is a pluralistic text, addressing not only humanity in general but also other religious traditions. What are Qutb's thoughts in this regard?

Qur'an 4:1, of *Sura an-Nisa* refers to the origins of humanity as descending from a "single soul." Qutb extrapolates from this verse the unity of humanity and argues that differences between people are largely cosmetic and superficial. He then goes on to critique race and ethnicity as a basis of power.

> Had this fact been truly appreciated, it would have ensured that no racial discrimination could ever take place in human society. We know how much mankind has suffered from racial discrimination and continues to suffer even today, in a latter day ignorance that seeks to consolidate its own existence through discrimination between people on the basis of their color or race. It upholds the ties of race and nationality and totally ignores the ties of a single humanity and a single Godhead. (Qutb, 2009, 3:19)

In *Milestones* critique of the nation-state concept is ubiquitous, and Qutb goes directly after the notion of popular national "sovereignty." And he is at pains to argue that Islam or Muslims do not constitute a "nation" in any ethno-identity sense, but only through belief and behavior. Qutb says "Islam cannot fulfill its role except

by taking a concrete form in a society, rather, in a nation." (Qutb 2006, 25) Qutb

lays out the Islamic conditions for sovereignty, drawing attention to the assumed

absence of Arab chauvinism at Islam's origins:

> The way is not to free the earth from Roman and Persian tyranny in
>
> order to replace it with Arab tyranny. All tyranny is wicked! The earth
>
> belongs to God and should be purified for God, and it cannot be
>
> purified for Him unless the banner, "No deity worthy of worship
>
> except God", is unfurled across the earth … "*La ilaha illa Allah*" as
>
> an Arab with the knowledge of his language understood it: no
>
> sovereignty except God's, no law except from God, and no authority
>
> of one man over another, as the authority in all respects belong to
>
> God Almighty. The 'grouping' of men, which Islam proclaims is based
>
> *on this faith alone*, the faith in which all peoples of any race or color,
>
> Arabs, Romans or Persians, are equal under the banner of God
>
> Almighty. (Qutb 2006, 40)

Qutb composed *Milestones* in the mid-1960s, toward the end of his prison stay

and during the height of Arab nationalism, largely inspired by Egypt's Nasser, in the

mid-1960s. Within this context Qutb argues: a) race itself is a construct, indicative of

nothing more than cosmetic differences. In other words, it is a false premise; b) any

political sovereignty based on a false premise is a false sovereignty, which by

definition is a form of idolatry. Qutb clearly rejects the idea of national sovereignty,

wherein people of a common "ethnicity" or "race" are able to deliberate to an effective and just political reality. But does Qutb reject deliberation altogether?   In the next section, I will examine some parts of *Social Justice in Islam* and compare it to *Milestones* to demonstrate how Qutb transitions from theoretician to something new.

2:b Deliberating on Property and Sovereignty

Milestones departs from Qutb's earlier works, for example *Social Justice in Islam (SJI)*. Qutb's earlier works are characterized by more concrete theorizing and specifics, whereas *Milestones* is a vague work of passion. Why does it differ so much from earlier works, and how should it be characterized? In this section, I will briefly review how Qutb discusses property, a rubric of *fiqh* in *SJI*, and explain how and why *Milestones* departs from his earlier theoretical works. In *SJI* Qutb posits a vision of society, with property at its center, where a reciprocal relationship between individual and community exists as a relationship of enacting God's sovereignty on earth.

Qutb's remarks about property are insightful, especially when measured against the Western tradition. Qutb argues that, in the West, private property is an extension of one's "individuality." (Qutb 2006, 91) The centrality of property to Western political theory is paramount. Locke argues in the *Second Treatise on Government* that labor, "annexed" to property, renders property possessed by the laborer; this formula is based on the premise that one's body is one's property, thus

152

one's labor is an extension of that property and, therefore, labor appropriates property, making it private. (Locke, *Second Treatise on Government* 1980, 19) This is a central premise to Locke's notion of inalienable rights. But Qutb's discussion on property in *Milestones* is impoverished; it lacks a theoretical treatment and is shallow, especially when compared to *Social Justice in Islam*, for example. What accounts for the difference between the two texts?

Social Justice in Islam was composed in 1949. Irene Oh observes that *SJI* was written after the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights making such concepts far more salient on the global stage (Oh 2007, 8); property and the distribution thereof were a key ideological battleground for normative politics. Qutb's discussions on property in *SJI* revolve around the tensions between personal property (which is a form of personal sovereignty) and political sovereignty as in the authority of the "state." Qutb's theory of property could be thought of as a theory of stewardship. The community owns property and the property is acquired through "disposal and use," which is to the benefit of the individual and the community. Qutb says: "I have not emphasized this principle in order to teach any communisitic doctrine on property, for the right of personal ownership is firmly established in Islam." But then he adds: "The individual must remember that he is no more than a steward of this property, which is fundamentally the possession of society." (Qutb 2000, n.p.) (W. E. Shepard 1996, 130)

Qutb attempts to differentiate an "Islamic Theory of Property" from a Socialist perspective on property by arguing that by working on the property, one is entitled to the fruits (i.e., profits) thereof. But Qutb also insists that such use must

also be good for the society as a whole (Ibid), though he does not specify what this necessarily means (one can assume that it means to be "*shari'a* compliant". For example, growing grapes for wine production would not be in the best interest of "society as a whole." In the event that the "steward" does not benefit society, society may reclaim the property. In this respect, society represents God's sovereignty on earth. The individual *cannot* represent God's sovereignty in a similar manner, but the individual is endowed with property through this sovereignty.

In *SJI's* normative prescription, society's self-awareness as God's representative is presumed. By 1964, as Qutb languished in jail, he did not enjoy such a presumption. By this time, Qutb argued for the need of a "vanguard" to defeat the *jahili* order. Whereas *Social Justice in Islam* articulates a more comprehensive, detailed argument for certain "Islamic" political arrangements, it does so on the basis of a sovereign community and theoretical understanding of labor and ownership, much like in the Western tradition. Qutb abandons theory in *Milestones*.

2:c Qutb's Rhetorical "Monism"

Human sovereignty, within the Qutbian conception, requires people to be Muslim — not only nominally, but through an intuitive, integrated relationship with God's will, as embodied in the *shari'a*. In other words, God's will on earth and humanity's "purpose," are fulfilled by *acting* as Muslims in the world. In the earlier part of Qutb's career, he pursued the Islamist political project through discursive

methods. He expounded upon the nature of the Qur'an in works like *al-Taswir al-Fanni fi al-Qur'an* (*Artistic Representation in the Qur'an*), to situate the Qur'an within the literary and scholastic tradition. In *SJI*, Qutb addresses the nature of property and ownership within the larger context of the Cold War and the competing ideas of capitalism and socialism. In so doing, Qutb hoped to enlighten Muslims through, essentially, scholarship. *Milestones* signals the end of this attempt by Qutb and his embrace of an existentialism, more akin to Kierkegaard than Maududi, though Qutb, I do not believe, read much western existentialism.

Leonard Binder's brief treatment of Qutb in *Islamic Liberalism* comes closest to engaging Qutb's metaphysics seriously. Binder notes that Qutb laments the dualism of "theory" and "practice." (Binder 1988, 188) Qutb rejects any system not fully integrated into the Islamic vision. This means that one cannot, for example, combine "secularism" with the "Islamic society," for anything partially *jahili* is fully *jahili*. (Ibid, 179–80) Binder refers to this rejection as "rhetorical monism." He argues that Qutb sees Islam as essentially one in "theory and practice," or more accurately as only practice — and Binder is correct. Binder is also correct in observing that *Milestones* departs from Qutb's earlier works.

But Binder insists upon two related points that obscure the philosophical origins of Qutb's views. First, Binder argues that Qutb seems to be "heavily influenced by existentialism." Second, Binder claims that for Qutb the Islamic society was "not to be accomplished via some epistemological device, but by means of an ontological integration." (Ibid, 189) In terms of the first premise, I see no evidence that Qutb was familiar with existentialism as a scholastic tradition in any

sophisticated way. He famously read Alexis Carrel and was certainly aware of

Nietzsche, who enjoyed some fame in the Arab world at time. (Calvert 2010, 92) But

Qutb's thought grows out of his mystical inclinations interacting with his

experiences in the world.

Binder's second premise is also skewed into a false distinction. For a

pantheist, like Qutb, epistemology and ontology are fundamentally the same. To be

in the world is to be a witness to God, while being a witness to God is the only basis

of being in the world. To be and to know are one and the same. This is Sufism.

While Qutb spent the last few years of his life in jail, it was apparent to him that

argument, dialectical reasoning, university training, even ideological

propagandizing had failed. Qutb died before the '67 war, which many scholars

argue made way for the rise of Islamism against Arab nationalism. So *Milestones*

shifts in emphasis from didactic tracts on the "Islamic ideology"(as seen in his

earlier works) to an elitist work, written in such a way that only those who have

"experienced God" could understand, even though that was not how it was received.

Thus Qutb speaks of the vanguard as opposed to the community. It is important to

stress claims that Qutb was deeply informed by western thought must be

approached with caution, much of his thinking is an inevitable outgrowth of Islamic

intellectual history.

Section 2 Conclusion

From *Social Justice in Islam* to *Milestones*, Qutb's writings transform from theoretical and ideological tracts into a mystical revolutionary *pathos*. In the intervening years Qutb composed his highly influential commentary on the Qur'an; and during that time, much of which was spent in prison, Qutb lost faith in the idea that the masses could be cajoled through writings. Rather, Qutb gained faith in a special elite of Muslim society: those with insight, touched by *tawhid*, who could faithfully carry out Islamic convictions. Much has been said of Qutb's notion of the "vanguard" and jihadist groups like al-Qaeda. That is not my interest here. I see Qutb's emphasis on a vanguard as akin to emphasis on *khass* in Islamic philosophy.

The idea that only an elite is capable of "understanding the truth" and carrying out a mission to that end is endemic to Islamic history, not exclusively of course, but vividly and on multiple fronts. For example, of the Ismailis it is said that the "secrets of truth" were revealed in only a highly "secretive, exclusionary and hierarchical manner." (Groff 2007, 20) Ismaili interpretation of the revealed text demonstrated that many of the literal prescriptions of the *shari'a*, such as fasting and ritual worship, were in fact devices for social utility and organization. I believe Sayyid Qutb, though a devout Muslim no doubt, likewise did not concern himself with the more formal aspects of the *shari'a*, and this can be seen in its largely absent character in his works.

I have insisted that Sayyid Qutb is a pantheist, with deep esoteric views. In classical Islamic philosophy, religion could at times be seen as for the masses

('*amm*), a metaphoric way for people to access the truth through ritual, while restraining hedonistic appetites. For the philosophers, however, the "inner" truth (*batin*) is reserved for those intellectually able to comprehend their meanings only. Scholars such Leo Strauss and Muhsin Mahdi thought this of al-Farabi (Druart 2016). Al-Ghazali in fact divides humanity into three categories: '*amm*, *khass*, and *khass al-khawass* (elite of the elite); these distinctions draw "on an elitist strain in Islamic social and intellectual history that has its origins in late Umayyad and early Abbasid times." (Brown 2006, 97) Brown points out that this usage was standard for Sufis, by which they express *khassa* "in its abstract meaning of intimacy with God through the term *khususiyya*, a word equated with sainthood (*wilaya*)."(Ibid, 101)

I do not believe that Qutb drew on this tradition in the classical way, but I do believe that he grappled intuitively with this distinction based on his esoteric metaphysics and his experience with revolutionary politics as a failure in his lifetime. This is why *Milestones* focuses on the vanguard concept and abandons ideological theorizing when compared to earlier works. In the following section I will demonstrate how this interpretation of *Milestones* might be gleaned from Qutb's central concepts of "sovereignty" and "ignorance" and how they are transitioned into "method" (*minhaj*).

Sayyid Qutb's Shift in Emphasis from Thinking to Praxis

Praxis refers to action; it may also be thought of as the antithesis of contemplation. Whereas contemplation can be thought of as meditative, it may also

be thought of as analytical. By analysis, concepts are clarified and more logically arranged, providing cogent arguments. But arguments are rhetorical at best, and may even dissuade from action through the constant dialectic of revisiting an argument.

Culture as the Central Problematic

Culture is knowledge of behavior, and in a globalized world, culture is contentious. Globalization renders culture potentially and perpetually "inauthentic," since each instant is one of supposed syncretism, or more exactly "Westernization." Modern radicals, like Qutb, are compelled to address culture as the root cause of an "ignorance" to social change, and in Qutb's writings there is always the insistence that things must change. Overlooked in Qutb studies are the striking similarities between Qutb's thought and that of radical Marxists like Georg Lukács —similarities that must be explained. For example, Lukács argues in *History and Class Consciousness*:

> Only when consciousness stands in such relation to reality can theory and practice be united. But for this to happen the emergence of consciousness must become the *decisive step*, which the historical process must take towards its proper end (an end constituted by the wills of men, but neither dependent on human whim nor the product of human invention). The historical function of theory is to make this

step a practical possibility. (Lukács 1971, 2)

Now consider this passage from Qutb's *Milestones* (1964):

> The function of this Divine system which is given to us — we, who are
>
> callers to Islam — is to provide a certain style of thinking, purified
>
> from all those *jahili* styles and ways of thinking which are current in
>
> the world and which have poisoned our culture by depriving us of our
>
> own mind. If we try to change this religion in a way which is alien to
>
> its nature and which is borrowed from the ways of the predominant
>
> *Jahiliya*, we will deprive it of the function it has come to perform for
>
> humanity and we will deprive ourselves of the opportunity of getting
>
> rid of the yoke of the *jahili* ways current in our time …. I therefore
>
> repeat that the Islamic belief should at once materialize into a
>
> practical movement and from the very instant this come into being,
>
> the movement should become a real representation and an accurate
>
> mirror of its belief. (Qutb, 2006, 54)

Qutb is talking about changing culture. His reference to "styles and ways of
thinking which are current in the world" is an objection to the culture at large in
Egypt (at least) in the 1950s and '60s. Marx's interest in culture was advanced by
his commitment to change society. The reciprocity between the "lack of
revolutionary action" and the role of dominant beliefs, perceptions, values and
expectations is the very basis of Marx's critique of the superstructure. But Marx

160

also faced a problem: how could a human be a product of their environment, while at the same time overcoming the environment to produce radical change? Marx attempted to untie this paradox by expounding on his concept of *praxis*, which "is what creates given human reality and by the same token extricates human reality from the current situation." (Rotenstreich 1965, 98) Whether or not Marx succeeds in overcoming Hegelian idealism here is not what is of significance.[27] Qutb is facing the exact same problem: culture is the 'culprit' and yet concomitantly the 'object' of constructive critique, the eventual vehicle of revolution. Qutb seeks the "right" culture, which "mirrors" true knowledge, and which will result in the ability to act in the world. The problem is agency. But the "knowledge is power" paradigm raises its own fundamental problems: namely, how does one prevent discourse on knowledge from becoming merely talk? Whether academic, intellectual, or theoretical, ideology, as a discursive technique, always carries with it the demand to be scrutinized, tested, and critiqued. In the case of this eventuality, the radical faces the same problem: how does one prevent ideology from becoming merely another subject up for continuous debate and inactive reflection? Thus Qutb's and Lukács's obsession with "method." How does ideology become anything more than just another aspect of the culture at large?

Lukács mentions "method" (or some variation thereof) 329 times in *History and Class Consciousness* alone. Qutb, in the much shorter Milestones, employs the term (*minhaj*) 81 times. "Method" is an alibi, it encourages the reader to think of action, as opposed to deliberating further on whether the ideology in question is

---

[27] For an overview of this discussion see Dupré 1980 Dupré, Louis, "Marx's Critique of Culture and Its Interpretations," in *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Sep., 1980), pp. 91---121.

'true' or 'not.' For Lukács the purpose of theory is to provoke action and revolution; even if incorrect, it provokes the conscious subject out of his state of conceptual complacency — the hegemonic hold of the culture — and into a state of inquiry. Then and only then can humans free themselves from the monopolization of knowledge, sustained by dominant social institutions that insist on the natural state of the world and its immutable character — in short, the reality that the culture purportedly reflects.

"Materialist dialectic is a revolutionary dialectic" Lukács says, "for the dialectical method, the central problem is to *change reality*." So long as theory turns on the merits of claiming explanatory power, "the merits of forming 'fluid' concepts becomes altogether problematic: a purely 'scientific' matter. The theory might then be accepted or rejected in accordance with the prevailing state of science without any modification at all to one's basic attitudes to the question of whether or not reality can be changed." Finally, Lukács dismisses the use even of criticism within Marxism; its reliance on the intellectual enterprise moves "counter to the essential sprit of dialectics," which is action. (Lukács 1971, 4) Or as Slavoj Žižek says: "A 'world-view' by definition designates the 'contemplative' stance of ideology with which Marxist revolutionary engaged theory has to break." (Žižek 2000, 155)

Likewise, Sayyid Qutb is wary of theory and intellectualized discourses about change. In describing the virtues of the "Qur'anic generation," Qutb argues their superiority derived from a pursuit of action, rather than the extravagance of possessing metaphysical knowledge. He describes what he repeatedly refers to as the Islamic "method." Qutb says:

This understanding — the understanding that instruction is for action — opened the doors to spiritual fulfillment and to knowledge. If they had read the Qur'an only for the sake of discussion, learning and information, these doors would not have opened. Moreover, action became easy, the weight of responsibilities became light, and the Qur'an became a part of their personalities, mingling with their lives and characters so that they became living examples of faith — a faith not hidden in intellects or books, but expressing itself in a dynamic movement, which changed conditions and events and the course of life. (Qutb, 2006, 32)

Milestones is in many ways an attempt to overcome the limitations of *Social Justice in Islam* (1948), which relies heavily on standard references to the Islamic *sunna*. The *sunna*, as a corpus of statements and elaborations on ritual, *can* act as a set of formal actions with which one must simply comport. In other words, in *SJI* we find an attempt to counter the prevailing conditions of Egypt and Arab society at the time — a "heresy" for Qutb — with an "orthodoxy" of tradition. *Milestones* engages in a much more concrete way with "knowledge/culture" as the central problematic facing revolutionary Muslims, and moves well beyond "orthodoxy." Here we find themes similar to those in Marxism: changing conditions, society, and insistence on the contingency of knowledge in the form of culture.

Section 3 Conclusion

By comparing Qutb to Marxist theorists, we essentially come full circle and see how Qutb struggled with the central problem of revolutionary thought: How does one overcome education, beliefs or authority to change the world? In short, how does one change culture when they are a product of culture? Some assets the Qutb has at his disposal are mystical 'truths,' typical for a religious thinker that are hidden or obscured by the culture at large, which is identified with 'ignorance.' By comparing Qutb to Lukács, Qutb's shift from theory to praxis becomes clear in its purpose and as part of the trajectory of radical thought in general. All radical thinkers are confronted by the problem of action as opposed to inaction.

Conclusion

This chapter has been a survey of Qutb's thought in regards to one general theme: How does a revolutionary reconcile truth claims with power and culture, often thought of as "obscuring" such claims? Though Qutb's time in America may not have been the exact point he became a radical, I argue it is the time wherein he was most aware of the power of culture to 'delusion' people from what he thought of as 'truth,' 'freedom,' and even 'happiness.' I have argued that Qutb has deep esoteric views, but those views do not pertain to the hidden meaning of ritual, even in Islam, if not especially in Islam. As we see, Qutb spends little to no time elaborating on ritual in a way that a *salafi* would or even a *sufi*, Qutb is concerned with hidden

dimensions only insofar as they pertain to revolutionary political action.

Two things stand out vividly in this chapter: One, Qutb shifts from a general theoretician to one who emphasizes praxis later in life, though the inclinations can be found in his *tafsir*. We see this, for example, in how Qutb treats property in *Social Justice* as opposed to how he articulates *Milestones* in general. Secondly, that shift entails certain emphases in regards to thinking and acting, something that Binder referred to as 'rhetorical monism;' I have argued, however, that this monism is not merely rhetorical, it is theological and ontological. Further, I believe the tendency to treat Qutb as merely a radical epigone, who imposes western theoretical structures onto Islamic concepts is false. Qutb's thinking stems from Islamic concepts themselves, which we find in classical Islamic thinking, though Qutb is not scholastically continuing the classical tradition and is concerned with totally modern issues.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This study has been an excursion into comparative theory, Islamic philosophy and theology, as well as radical thought. Sayyid Qutb stands out as one of the few Islamist, as well as perhaps Islamic, thinkers of the 20th century who demands such a comparative approach. Qutb's thought has too often been treated at face value, with too much emphasis placed on terms like *hikmiyya* and *shari'a*, rather than on the substance of his political theory.

Indeed, Qutb did not write sophisticated tracts, but that does not diminish his highly successful writing style, which was accessible and popular. This dissertation scaled, downward, the wall of the proverbial iceberg largely beneath the surface of his logic and political project. In this sense, Qutb's project can be explained simply, he summoned as many theological concepts (*fitra*, for example) as he could to make humans autonomous of culture, so that they may change the world. Three rubrics organizes how this thesis yields certain information and analyses about Qutb: First, Qutb as political theorist. Secondly, Qutb as Islamic thinker and, lastly, Qutb as radical thinker.

Qutb as Political Theorist

As we see in chapter two and more specifically three, Qutb challenged hegemonic political concepts of his time. Of the nation-state, Qutb considered it an ethno-centric 'false idol,' but concomitant to these political concepts are cultural

values that Qutb sees as underpinning political authority. For example, in chapter three we see that Qutb argues for 'natural gender roles,' these roles, presumably correspond with the human fitra and fitra is the only source of truth, legitimacy and sovereignty for Qutb.

Because Qutb approaches politics with concern for certain concepts that are 'essential' in their nature, for example, the idea humans have an essential nature, investigating foundational beliefs are important. In chapter two, we can see that Qutb's political ideas are largely informed by a theological outlook, wherein his pantheistic tendencies are suggestive of a mystical utopian vision.

Qutb as Islamic Thinker

Qutb was one of the most original Muslim thinkers of the 20th century. Certain themes inform scholarship on Qutb, one of them being he was heavily influenced by Maududi. I see less influence than often argued for, Qutb's *tafsir*, for example, stands in stark contrast to Maududi's commentary on the Qur'an. I believe the times influenced Qutb more than any one single scholar or even pre-modern thinker. Again, Sivan makes the case that Ibn Taymiyya's influence was preponderant due to the rise of printing technologies and the resuscitation of classical texts in the early 20th century. A close look at Qutb's actual beleifs complicates any insistence that Qutb merely re-articulated Ibn Taymiyya for modern times.

Like Iqbal, al-Afghani and 'Abduh, as well as others, modernity fashioned

167

Qutb's thinking and to see similarity or dissimilarity between these thinkers is to see differences in interpreting modernity, as much as Islam. Qutb's greatest contribution to Islamic thought is his abandoning of classical *tafsir* to render the Qur'an a living texts, which speaks to modern conditions. Qutb's greatest fault as an Islamic thinker is his de-contextualization of the Qur'an, wherein he takes it, essentially whole cloth, and applies to the modern world and its conflicts, which are now re-casted as the same plight and tribulations of Muhammad, the deliverer of Islam. But this does not make Qutb a simplistic thinker or a *salafi*, even though his emphasis on the *salaf* may suggest this understanding, his metaphysics is more in line with Ibn al-'Arabi than Ibn Taymiyya.

Qutb as Radical Thinker

Finally, seeing Qutb as a radical thinker, is, I believe, the most rewarding way, in terms of understanding his project, to assess him. Again, modernity plays a huge role here, as well as the emergence of the modern state. Whether we compare Qutb to Spinoza, a radical theologian or Lukács, a radical Marxist, we see the same effort being put forth; Qutb wants to reform religion to animate his political vision, while criticizing culture as superstructure, as something that "suppresses" genuine freedom.

What is most striking about Qutb's evolution from literati to radical is his shift from writing to action, embodied in his execution and martyrdom. Even if one eschews the concept of martyrdom, it is difficult to deny Qutb practiced what he

preached. He was willing to die for his beliefs, his gnostic religiosity buttressed his attitude in this respect. But Qutb abandoned the ambitions of his youth, which revolved around recognition of his literary talents, in favor of becoming a revolutionary, who failed, but who may have gained a recognition that outlasts his peers.

Bibliography

'Abd al-Wahhab, Muhammad. *Kitab al-Tawhid.* Translated by Ismail Faruqi. Beirut: Holy Koran Publishing House , 1979.

Abdel-Malak, Kamal, ed. *American in An Arab Mirror: Images of America in Arabic Travel Literature.* New York: St. Martin, 2000.

Abdullah, Aslam. *Qur'an's Message for Humanity.* August 17, 2017. https://www.islamicity.org/6509/qurans---message---for---humanity/.

Abu Zahra, Muhammad. *Tarikh al-Madhahib al-Islamiya.* Cairo : Dar al---Fikr al---'Arabi, N.D.

Abu-Rabi,' I.M. *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World.* Albany: SUNY Press, 1996.

Akhavi, Shahrough. *The Middle East: The Politics of the Sacred and the Secular.* New York: Zedbooks Books, 2013.

Al-Afghani, Jamal al-Din. *An Islamic Response to Imperialism.* Edited by Nikki Keddie. Translated by Nikki Keddie and Hamid Algar. Berekely: University of California Press, 1983.

Al-Albani, Nasir al-Din. *The Salah: In Light of the Prophet's Tradition*. Kuala Lampur: Islamic Books, 2005.

Al-Bazzaz, A.R. "Islam and Arab Nationalism" in *Arab Nationalism: An Anthology,* edited by Sylvia Kedourie. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1962.

Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid. *The Niche of Lights.* Translated by David Buchman. Provo: Brigham Young, 1998.

Al-Ghazali, Muhammad. *A Thematic Commentary on the Qur'an.* Herndon : International Institute of Islamic Thought , 2000.

—. *A Thematic Commentary on the Qur'an.* Translated by Ashur Shamis. Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1997.

Al-Husri, Sati. "Muslim Unity and Arab Unity" in Arab Nationalism: An Anthology. Edited by Sylvia Kedourie. Los Angeles, 1962.

Al-Shatibi, Abu Ishaq. *The Reconciliation of the Fundamentals of Islamic Law.* Translated by Imraan Nyazee. London: Garnett Publishing, 2011.

Al-Tabari, Abu Jafar. *The Commentary on the Qur'an.* Translated by J. Cooper. Oxford:

Oxforc University Press, 1989.

Amin, Qasim. *The Liberation of Women.* Translated by S.S. Peterson. Cairo: American University Cairo Press, 2005.

As-Sadr, M. B. *Lessons in Islamic Jurisprudence.* Translated by R. Mottahedeh. Oxford: Oneworld, 2003.

Avery, Peter, et al, ed. *The Cambridge History of Iran.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Averroes. *Tahafut al-Tahafut.* Cambridge: Gibb Memorial, 1987.

Bashkin, Orit. "'Abd al-Raziq, 'Ali." In *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Islamic Political Thought,* edited by P., et al Crone. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.

Bergesen, Albert, ed. *The Sayyid Qutb Reader.* New York: Routledge, 2008.

Binder, Leonard. *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Black, Antony. *The History of Islamic Political Thought.* London: Routledge, 2001.

Brown, J.C. "The Last Days of al-Ghazali and the Tripartite Division of the Sufi World" *The Muslim World* 96 (January 2006): 89-113.

Calvert, John. *Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Carre, Olivier. *Mysticism and Politics: A Critical Reading of Fi Zilal al-Qur'an.* Translated by William Shepard. Leiden: Brill, 2003.

Chittick, William. "Ebn al-'Arabi" in *Encyclopedia Iranica.* Vol. VII, edited by Ehsan Yarshater, 664-670. Columbia University, 1996.

—. "Ibn 'Arabi." In *History of Islamic Philosophy*, edited by S.H. Nasr and O. Leaman. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Curtis, Michael. *Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Orientail Despotism in the Middle East and Asia.* New York: Cambridge, 2009.

Dekmejian, R. H. ""Resurgent Islam and the Egyptian State"." In *The Middle East and North Africa: Essays in Honor of J.C. Hurewit*, edited by Reeva Simon. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.

Dillon, J, and L. Gerson. *NeoPlatonic Philosophy: Introductory Readings.* Indianapolis:

Hackett Publishing Co., 2004.

Doumato, E.A. "Jahiliya." In *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, edited by John Esposito. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Druart, Therese-Anne. "al-Farabi." in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward Zalta. Standford: Standford University Press, 2016.

Žižek, Slavoj. "Georg Lukács as the Philosopher of Leninism." In *Tailism and Dialectics*, by Georg Lukács, translated by Esther Leslie. London: Verso, 2000.

Esposito, John. *Islam and Politics.* London: Oxford, 1984.

Euben, Roxanne. "Comprative Political Theory: An Islamic Fundamentalist Critique of Modernity." *Journal of Politics* (University of Chicago Press) 51, no. 1 (Feb 1997).

—. *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism, A Work in Comparative Political Theory.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Rahman, Fazlur. *Islam.* Chicago: University of Chicago, 2002.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays.* New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Gellner, Ernest. *Plough, Sword and Book.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Groff, Peter. *Islamic Philosophy A-Z.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

Haddad, Yvonne. ""The Qur'anic Justification for an Islamic Revolution: The View of Sayyid Qutb"." *Midde East Journal* 37, no. 1 (1983).

—. "Sayyid Qutb: Ideologue of Islamic Revivial." In *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, edited by John Esposito. Oxford, 1983.

Hallaq, Wael. *The Impossible State.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

Hourani, Albert. *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Husayn, Taha. *Future of Culture in Egypt.* New York: American Council of Learned Socities, 1954.

Ibn Abbas, Abdullah. *Tanwir al-Maqbas.* Translated by Mokrane Guezzo. Amman: Royal Ahl Al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought, 2016.

Kahteran, Nevad. "Fitra." In *The Qur'an: An Encylopedia,* edited by Oliver Leaman. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Keddie, Nikki. *An Islamic Response to Imprerialism.* Berekely: University of California Press, 1983.

Ibn Khaldun. *Al-Muqqadimah.* Edited by N.J. Dawood. Translated by Franz Rosenthal. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

Khatab, Sayed. *The Political Thought of Sayyid Qutb: The Theory of Jahiliya.* London: Routledge, 2006.

Knysh, Alexander. *Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam.* Albany: SUNY Press, 1999.

Landau, J.M. "Abu Naddara." In *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. edited by P., et al Bearman. Leiden: Brill, 2012.

Laoust, H. "'Abd al-Wahhab, Muhammad." In *Encyclopedia of Islam*. Brill.

Levine, Michael. *Pantheism: A Non-Theistic Concept of Deity.* New York: Routledge, 1998.

Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding.* London: T Tegg & Son, 1836.

—. *Of Civil Government & Toleration.* London: Cassel & Co., 1895.

—. *Second Treatise of Government.* n.p.: The Floating Press, 2016.

—. *Second Treatise on Government.* Edited by C.B. MacPherson. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1980.

Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971.

Macdonald, D.B. "Fitra." In *Encyclopedia of Islam*. Leiden: Brill, 2012.

Mallat, C. *The Renewal of Islamic Law: Muhammad Baqer as-Sadr, Najaf and the Shi'i International.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

March, Andrew. "Taking People as They Are: Islam as a "Realistic Utopia" in the Political Writings of Sayyid Qutb." *The American Political Science Review* (APSA) 104, no. 1 (Feb 2010): 189---207.

Mill, J.S. *On the Subjection of Women.* Mineola: Dover, 1997.

Morris, Chris. *The Social Contract Theorists: Crtical Essays on Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau.* Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 1999.

Mousalli, Ahmed. *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Ideological and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb.* Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1992.

Murata, S., Chittick, William. *The Vision of Islam.* St. Paul: Paragon House, 1994.

Oh, Irene. *The Rights of God: Islam, Human Rights and Comprative Ethics.* Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007.

Peterson, Samiha S. "Introduction." In *The Liberation of Women and The New Women: Two Documents in the History of Egyptian Feminism*, by Qasim Amin. Cairo: American University Cairo Press, 2005.

Piquet, Caroline. "The Suez Comapny's Concession, 1854-1956: Creating Modern Infrastracture, Destroying the Potential of the Local Economy." *Business and Economic History* 1, 2003.

Qutb, Sayyid. *Amrika min al-Dakhil bi Minzar Sayyid Qutb.* Edited by 'Abd al-Fatah Khalidi. Jeddah: Dar al-Manarah, 1986.

—. *fi zilal al-Quran .* Translated by Adil Salahi. Vol. 2. The Islamic Foundation, 2015.

—. *In the Shade of the Qur'an.* Edited by Adil Salahi. Translated by Adil Salahi. Vol. 18. 18 vols. London: Islamic Foundation, 2009.

—. *Milestones.* Edited by A.B. al-Mehri. Birmingham: Maktabah, 2006.

—. *Social Justice in Islam.* Edited by Hamid Algar. Translated by John Hardie and Hamid Algar. Oneonta, NY, 2000.

—. *The Islamic Concept and Its Characteristics.* Indianapolis: American Trust Publication, 1991.

Renan, E. "Islam and Science: A Lecture." Translated by Sally Ragep. n.p. 2011.

Rogan, Eugene. *The Arabs: A History.* New York: Basic Books, 2009.

Rohde, Achim. *State-Society Relations in Ba'athist Iraq: Facing Dictatorship.* London: SOAS Routledge Studies, n.d.

Rotenstreich, Nathan. *Basic Problems of Marx's Philosophy.* Indianapolis: n.p., 1965.

Rousseau, J.J. *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality.* Dover Publications, 2004.

—. *Social Contract & Discourses.* Edited by G.D.H. Cole. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1913.

Roy, Oliver. *Holy Ignorance: When Religion and Culture Part Ways.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Saud, Laith. "Interpretive Methods in Islamic Political Thought." *Journal of Comparative Islamic Studies.* Vol. 1, No. 1, 2005.

—."Islamic Political Theology"." In *An Introduction to Islam in the 21st Century*, edited by Aminah McCloud, Scott Hibbard and Laith Saud. London: Wiley---Blackwell, 2013.

Schmitt, Carl. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on th Concept of Soviegnty.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Shaarawi, Hoda. *Harem Years: Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist.* New York: Feminist Press, 1987.

Shepard, William. ""Sayyid Qutb's Doctrine of Jahiliya"." *IJMES* 35, no. 4 (NOV 2003): 521---545.

—. *Sayyid Qutb and Islamic Activism: A Translation and Critical Analysis of Social Justice in Islam.* Leiden: Brill, 1996.

—. "Islam and Ideology: Towards a Typology." *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, no. 19 (1987).

Shinar, P., and W. Ende. ""Salafiyya"." In *Encyclopedia of Islam*, edited by et al. P. Bearman. Brill, 2012.

Sivan, Emmanuel. *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

Solingen, Etel. *Scientists and the State: Domestic Strcutures and International Contexts.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Stewart, Devin. "The Portrayal of an Academic Rivalry: Najaf and Qum in the Writings and Speeches of A. Khomeini." In *The Most Learned of the Shi'a: The Institution of the Marja 'Taqlid*, edited by L. Walbridge, 216---229. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Tahtawi, Rifa'a, Rafi. *An Imam in Paris: An Account of Stay in France by an Egyptian Cleric.* Translated by David Newman. London: Saqi Books, 2011.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication for the Right's of Women.* London: Walter Scott,

n.d.

Yovel, Yirmiyahu. *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Adventures of Immanence.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.