

THE THOUGHT OF SAYYID QUTB

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INTRODUCTION

Sayyid Qutb: The Man, His Life, and His Significance

Sayyid Qutb was born in 1906 in the province of Asyut, which is located in southern Egypt. His parents were both deeply religious people who were well-known in the area. From his years as a young child until the age of 27, he experienced a rigorous education. Qutb's evident desire for knowledge continued throughout his life. He began his elementary education in a religious school located in his hometown village. By the age of 10, he had already committed the entire text of the Qur'an to memory.¹ After transferring to a more modern government-sponsored school, Qutb graduated primary school in 1918. Due to his interests in education and teaching, Qutb enrolled into a teacher's college and graduated in 1928. Next, he was admitted into Dar al-Ulum, a Western-style university which was also attended by Hasan al-Banna, an Arab-Islamic leader who Qutb would later join in the Muslim Brotherhood.²

After his graduation from Dar al-Ulum in 1933, Qutb began his teaching

career and eventually became involved in Egypt's Ministry of Education. The Ministry sent him abroad to the United States to research Western methods of teaching. He spent a total of two years in the United States from 1948 to 1950. During that time, Qutb studied at Wilson's Teachers' College on the east coast before moving west and earning a M.A. in education at the University of Northern Colorado.³ Qutb's strong conviction that Islam was superior to all other systems was made clear in his work *Social Justice in Islam*, which was written prior to his trip. Nevertheless, many scholars believe that it was during his trip to the United States that Qutb became convinced of the West's spiritual and moral bankruptcy. In "The America I Have Seen", a personal account of his experiences in United States, Qutb expresses his admiration for the great economic and scientific achievements of America, yet he is deeply dismayed that such prosperity could exist in a society that remained "abysmally primitive in the world of the senses, feelings, and behavior."⁴

Qutb's rejection of the West would lead him towards a more radical agenda in Egypt that affirmed his Islamic beliefs. Upon return to Egypt in 1950, he joined the Muslim Brotherhood. The cause of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna, had much in common with Sayyid Qutb's anti-West

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¹ Berman, Paul. "The Philosopher of Islamic Terror". *New York Times*, March 23, 2003.

² Husain, Mir Zahair. *Global Islamic Politics* (New York, 2003), pg.74.

³ Abdel-Malek, Kamal ed. *America in an Arab Mirror* (New York, 2000), pg.10.

⁴ Qutb, Sayyid. "The America I Have Seen" (New York, 2000), pg.11.

attitude. The Brotherhood was established in reaction to the Western dominance over Egypt at the time. Al-Banna and the Brotherhood believed that the solution to the Western problem lay in a return to Islam. The Brotherhood posed a serious threat to the secular Egyptian monarchy. As a result, the monarchy banned the organization and eventually assassinated al-Banna in 1949. Due to al-Banna's death, Qutb became editor of the Brotherhood's weekly paper and he soon emerged as the foremost voice for their cause. At the same time, Abdul Nasser's nationalist movement was a popular alternative to the monarchy. Nasser's opposition to the monarchy was based on pan-Arab nationalist grounds; however, the Brotherhood found an ally in Nasser despite their different views on the significance of Islam. As a result, Qutb began to work as a liaison between the Brotherhood and Nasser's Free Officers Movement. With the help of the Muslim Brotherhood, Nasser successfully overthrew the monarchy in 1952. Some Muslims expected Nasser to assign Qutb the job of reorganizing the education system, but Nasser was quick to turn on his former Islamic allies.⁵ In 1954, Nasser arrested Qutb and other leaders of the Brotherhood for plotting against him.⁶

Qutb was released soon after his first arrest, but was rearrested and spent 10 years in prison. It was during this time that Qutb completed *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, his extensive and comprehensive commentary on Islam's holy book.⁷ Today, *In the Shade* is the most commonly read commentary on the Qur'an.⁸ Qutb's deepest and most

profound writings are contained in this work. Although he had completed half of *In the Shade* prior to his imprisonment, he spent all 10 years adding and revising it with a more penetrating approach. The emotion of his writing reflects the physical torture he experienced and the psychological torture that resulted from the murder of fellow Brotherhood members. Meanwhile, the tone of *In the Shade* reflects his disappointment that a military government could mistreat thousands of members of the Muslim Brotherhood without fear of popular recourse. After considering what had taken place, Qutb concluded that the common Muslim had adopted a Western conception of faith as abstract theory that is not always relevant to practical conduct.⁹ He was eventually released in 1964, soon after the circulation began of another book called *Milestones*. Four sections of *Milestones* are taken from *In the Shade*, and the rest is drawn from letters that Qutb sent from prison. Although it was written for a select 'vanguard' of Islamic activists, *Milestones* is Qutb's most popular work. It outlines Qutb's political philosophy, which is based upon the concept that all earthly sovereignty belongs to God alone. Because the book directly threatened the legitimacy of Nasser's government, Qutb was rearrested in August 1965 and sentenced to death.¹⁰ After he was hanged in 1966, Qutb was considered a martyr by many Muslims because he died at the hands of the same government whose legitimacy he denied.

The symbolic nature of Qutb's death caused an explosion of interest in his work. Students, aware of the government's condemnation of Qutb, were known to have secretly copied *Milestones* by hand.¹¹ At the time, Qutb's ideas were assimilated into the

⁵ Berman, Paul. "The Philosopher of Islamic Terror". *New York Times*, March 23, 2003.

⁶ Husain, Mir Zahair. *Global Islamic Politics*, pg.74.

⁷ Due to an incomplete translation process, this study of Qutb is limited to using *In the Shade's* commentary on Surahs 1-7.

⁸ Qutb, Sayyid. *Social Justice in Islam* (New York, 2000), pg.7.

⁹ Qutb, Sayyid. *In the Shade of the Qur'an* (The Islamic Foundation, 2003), vol.1, pg.xiii.

¹⁰ Husain, Mir Zahair. *Global Islamic Politics*, pg.74.

¹¹ Qutb, Sayyid. *Milestones* (Indianapolis, 1990), pp.i-iii.

decisions of many Muslim leaders in Syria, Lebanon, Tunisia, and the Sudan who were sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood.¹² Although Qutb was a Sunni Muslim, his message of a politicized Islam was influential to Ayatollah Khomeini and the Shiite revolution in Iran.¹³ Qutb's political message was so potent 30 years ago in part because he voiced a deep philosophical criticism of the two superpowers at that time, the United States of America and the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union has since dissolved, yet Qutb's critique of America and Europe, which he collectively refers to as the "West", remains extremely powerful today.

Consequently, Sayyid Qutb remains a significant and influential thinker in the Muslim world to this day. Professor Muhammad Qutb, Sayyid's brother, was a teacher and mentor to the young Osama Bin Laden, who has grown to lead the radical Islamic terrorist movement. Today's radical Islamic groups, such as al-Qaeda and Islamic Jihad, have borrowed much from the thought of Qutb in justifying their vision for the world and the violence they promote. In his introductory chapter to *Milestones*, Qutb wrote with urgency and warned that "Mankind today is on the brink of a precipice...because humanity is devoid of those vital values for its healthy development and real progress".¹⁴ This failure he attributed to the prevalent theories of both the East and West which the Muslim people had allowed to go unchallenged. Similarly, many of today's Muslims resent the power of the West and view it not only as a physical enemy, but also as a philosophical and ideological one. They feel that the West, the United States in particular, still controls their civilization; as a result,

they yearn for what they view as liberation from the West and its values. These desires are undeniable and manifest throughout the Middle East.

The recent terrorist attacks in the United States have called attention to al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups which seek to destroy the West by any means necessary. The writings of Sayyid Qutb have provided Muslim leaders like Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri with a foundation for the philosophical defense of a staunch and intense dislike of the West and its ultimate consequence, terrorism. The United States and other European powers are presently capable of militarily defeating belligerent Islamic regimes and groups. However, unless the West has a deeper understanding of the ideas which bring about support for terrorist activity, those ideas will continue to resonate within the hearts of certain Muslims and continue to perpetuate violence. Unless the West can respond to the philosophical arguments of men like Sayyid Qutb, its victory over groups like al-Qaeda can never be total and final. Therefore, this thesis is written to be a fair and concise presentation of the thought of Sayyid Qutb as it is relevant to today's political world. It is up to the people of the West and their leaders to fire back the next philosophical shot.

¹² *Social Justice in Islam*, pg.11.

¹³ Kramer, Martin. "Fundamentalist Islam at Large". *Middle East Quarterly*, June, 1996.

¹⁴ *Milestones*, pg.5.

CHAPTER 1

Qutb's Critique of the West

Qutb's fundamental criticism of all systems of life which he views as non-Islamic is that they are "jahiliyyah". Jahiliyyah is ignorance of divine guidance. Jahiliyyah encapsulates Qutb's entire critique of the West, the Soviet Union, Nasser's government, and any government which does not follow God's divine guidance. For Qutb, in the final analysis, each of these regimes is fundamentally the same because they ignore God's authority over man and his actions. By ignoring God's revelation, man rebels "against the sovereignty of God on earth".¹⁵ Qutb sees the world in black and white. There are Islamic societies and *jahili* societies. Islamic societies live the true life, submitting to God and completely conforming to his divine guidance in all matters. Meanwhile, jahili societies ignore God's guidance and submit to man-made laws and conform to man-made ways of life. To fully comprehend the meaning of jahiliyyah, we must begin with Qutb's understanding of the Qur'an's account of the beginning of the world.

Man was sent by God to establish His authority on earth, for God told the angels, "I am appointing a vicegerent on earth" (Qur'an 2:30). Hence, man was established as the master of earth, and everything created in it is for his benefit. Man has control over the material world; he is its master, not slave. Man was ranked higher than the angels because God ordered them to "prostrate themselves before Adam" (Qur'an 2:34). However, one angel refused. This angel's name was Iblis, equivalent to the Satan of Christianity. Therefore, Iblis was the first non-believer and for Qutb, the first promoter of jahiliyyah. Qutb states that

this began the long struggle between "Iblis, the epitome of evil, and man, God's vicegerent on earth."¹⁶ Man would always win this struggle as long as he followed God's divine guidance.

Nevertheless, man soon lost the first battle with Iblis by disobeying God's guidance to not eat from a particular tree (Qur'an 2:35). Both man and Iblis descended from Paradise to earth as a result, but God made a significant declaration: "Guidance shall reach you from Me. Those who follow My guidance shall have nothing to fear nor shall they grieve, but those who deny and gainsay Our revelations shall have the fire, wherein they shall abide" (Qur'an 2:38-39). God forgave man for his first choice of jahiliyyah, but sends him to earth and reminds him that divine guidance will come. God firmly commands man to follow His divine guidance or he will suffer. In this way, man's authority on earth was never intended to be separated from God. Without God's divine guidance, man loses his authority and legitimacy as a ruler over earth. By ignoring divine guidance, he rebels against God's sovereignty on the earth. Furthermore, he loses his ability to live harmoniously on earth.¹⁷

As a devout Muslim, Qutb believes that Muhammad was sent as a messenger of God's divine guidance. That guidance is found in Muhammad's transcription of the Qur'an; it is God's final guide for man to live a full and harmonious life that is in accordance with his nature. Thus, those who ignore it are guilty of jahiliyyah just as Adam was when he ignored God's message to not eat from the tree. But Muhammad is not the first messenger, he is actually the last. Throughout human history men have disobeyed God, but God has sent man help whenever he falls into jahiliyyah:

¹⁵ *Milestones*, pg.8.

¹⁶ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.1, pg.61.

¹⁷ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.1, pp.59-66.

“When this state of affairs is reached (jahiliyyah), God sends a messenger to human beings explaining to them the very same truth they had had before sinking into jahiliyyah. Some of them write their own destruction, while others are able to spare themselves by returning to the truth of the faith. These are the ones...who listen to their messenger as he says to them: ‘My people, worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him.’(Qur’an 7:59, 65, 73, 85).”¹⁸

Therefore, jahiliyyah results whenever man ignores the divine commands giving by God’s messengers. Qutb uses Surah 7 as an extensive example of how truth (Islam) and falsity (jahiliyyah) have battled throughout human history. He believes that this Surah “portrays how those in the procession of faith try to rescue man every time he strays far away from the right path.”¹⁹ These rescuers sent by God include Noah, Hud, Salih, Lot, Shu’ayb, and Moses. Each of these prophets came to their people to bring them back to God and an acceptance of His divine guidance. Hud was a prophet that came to the people of ‘Ad, near modern day Yemen, who were a small group of descendants of Noah that had survived with him in the ark. Prophet Salih went to the advanced city of Thamud, which is near Syria, because their material progress had led them away from God. Meanwhile, Shu’ayb went to Maydan because the people had developed their own man-made business laws without regard for God.²⁰ In Surah 7, each of these men stressed the same basic concept to their people: “Worship God alone: you have no deity other than Him”

(Qur’an 7:59, 65, 73, 85). They were sent to do this after the people “had deviated from the principle of monotheism which was already established in their community by their earlier prophet or messenger.”²¹ According to Qutb, this message is the unifying concept of the divine faith throughout human history, which culminates in the prophet Muhammad. Like Moses, Noah, Hud, Shalih, Lot, and Shu’ayb, Muhammad was sent to save people from jahiliyyah by calling for the recognition of one God and submission to Him.

Although God has continued to deliver this message throughout history, people have always had the choice to reject His divine guidance. People can either fully submit themselves to the commands of God, or they can choose their own path. To illustrate this point and the consequences that result from disobedience to God, Qutb refers back to Qur’an 7:85-92. These verses describe the events that occurred in the town of Maydan after Shu’ayb was sent by God to bring belief back to the people. Shu’ayb pleads with the people to “not spread corruption on earth” by disobeying God, for they “should be guilty of fabricating lies against God, if we were to return to your ways after God has saved us from them.”²² With these words, Shu’ayb makes it clear that it would be wrong for the people of Maydan to reject God’s message because a return to their old laws would be to ignore God’s divine guidance. In other words, the people have a clear choice between following God or following themselves (jahiliyyah). In response, the leaders of Maydan told their people that “If you follow Shu’ayb, you will indeed be losers” (Qur’an 7:90). As a result, an earthquake shook the town the next morning, killing those who rejected Shu’ayb. In the end, those who

¹⁸ *In the Shade of the Qur’an*, vol.6, pp.122-23.

¹⁹ *In the Shade of the Qur’an*, vol.6, pg.122.

²⁰ *In the Shade of the Qur’an*, vol.6, pp.133-134,138.

²¹ *In the Shade of the Qur’an*, vol.6, pg.124.

²² *In the Shade of the Qur’an*, vol.6, pp.118-119.

rejected Shu'ayb and God's divine guidance were "indeed the losers" (Qur'an 7:92).

Qutb considers this Qur'anic story to be reflective of the consequences of jahiliyyah throughout human history. Muhammad acts as the successor to Shu'ayb in the contemporary world. Just as Shu'ayb came to bring divine guidance to Maydan, Muhammad acts as the final prophet who came to bring divine guidance to the entire world. His message is universal and final for all of mankind, for Muhammad declares "Mankind, I am indeed God's Messenger to you all. It is to Him that sovereignty over the heavens and earth belongs...Believe, then, in God and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet...And follow him, so that you may be rightly guided" (Qur'an 7:158). Therefore, any people who reject Muhammad and Islam in effect reject God and have fallen into jahiliyyah. For Qutb, it is clear that Western civilization has rejected Islam and refuses to accept the divine guidance that God provided through Muhammad. Before it can be fully understood why Qutb argues that the West has rejected Islam like the people of Maydan did, two concepts must be explained.

The first concept relates to the nature of Islam and what it means to truly accept divine guidance. Qutb argues that true acceptance of divine guidance can only come through unconditional submission to God: "Islam, the religion of the whole universe, means submission to the system God has laid down for life".²³ This type of submission begins with a confession of faith which accepts the message of Noah, Hud, Salih, Lot, Shu'ayb, Moses, and Muhammad: "La ilaha illa Allah" ("There is no God except Allah").²⁴

However, Qutb asserts that this confession means nothing unless it is

followed by its practical consequences. Qutb claims that this confession of faith implies a full submission to God that has no bounds, for "In truth, God's guidance is the only guidance" (Qur'an 6:71). In his submission, man should implement the way of life God has sent to man through Muhammad, the Qur'an, and its laws. Through these means, Qutb believes that God has provided man "divine guidance concerning everything... including faith, morals, values, standards, systems, and laws."²⁵ In other words, God has provided him with a system of life. If a man is obedient to this system of life, he will never do something that is prescribed outside of God's guidance. When he follows his own desires or the guidance of other humans, he obeys himself or another person. For a Muslim, obedience is worship. Because obedience belongs to God alone, to do anything outside of God's guidance would be to worship another deity. To worship another deity through your actions would thereby falsify a confession of "La ilaha illa Allah".

However, Qutb does not view God's system of life as an elaborately detailed system that governs literally every single action of man. Although he never directly rejects such thinking, Qutb does not advocate a strict Islamic way to do such everyday activities as brushing teeth and dressing oneself. He believes that whatever is not encoded in the Qur'an does not have to be strictly regulated. However, the Qur'an commands men to live a public life that is fully Islamic. Public life must be Islamic because it involves fellow men, and a Muslim should treat his fellow man with dignity. Because Islam offers the only system of life that fully respects man's dignity, it should govern relationships between all men. By proclaiming that there is no other God and submitting to His

²³ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol. 2, pg.135.

²⁴ *Milestones*, pg.63.

²⁵ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.5, pg.207.

guidance in public and private affairs, a man commits himself to the worship of God alone. Qutb believes that this full submission is the only way to truly accept Islam and reject jahiliyyah.

A common response, especially for Western thinkers, would be that an Islamic acceptance of divine guidance by an individual is not necessarily in conflict with Western values. Just as many devout Christians live in nations governed by Western values, Islamic believers can do the same. Western society is tolerant of all religions and does not discriminate based on belief. Why should an individual profession of faith come into conflict with the larger societal order? Qutb's response to this question is of supreme importance to understanding his thought and his critique of the West.

Qutb argues that obedience to any man-made government and its laws is to worship the same men who created it. Thus, a true Muslim would be rejecting his God by submitting to a *jahili* government. Qutb labels this symptom of jahili society as *shirk*, which is Arabic for "associating false gods with Allah."²⁶ *Shirk* is a sin that God condemns severely: "For a certainty, God does not forgive that partners should be associated with Him, but He forgives any lesser sin to whomever He wills. He who associates partners with God has indeed gone far astray" (Qur'an 4:16).

Qutb argues that the false gods of a Muslim in the United States would be the President, Congress, Supreme Court, and the Constitution which empowers them. Although he may not consciously consider them to be his gods, a Muslim cannot serve God alone if he acknowledges the authority of such jahili institutions. Nor can a Muslim follow divine guidance in all practical matters if he observes the laws of a

government which is founded on man-made theories.²⁷ Unless he publicly ignores the man-made laws, inevitably he will be forced to worship privately and isolate himself spiritually. He will be unable to share Islamic relationships with fellow men because of the Western separation of church and state. If he cannot publicly live by his faith, a Muslim will be living a lie. His relationships with fellow men will not be fully Islamic because his worship must be confined to the mosque. He cannot enforce *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) in his community. He cannot use public means to convert others to his faith. Hence, he will deny the sovereignty of his God because he must accept the authority of a man-made Constitution which restricts his faith. There will be an inevitable conflict between the demands of his government and his commitment to following God in all his actions.

Since such a conflict exists, Qutb believes that living under a non-Islamic government is a type of slavery where "the cost is paid out of man's very humanity, because man does not fulfill himself if he submits to another human being." American government claims that it protects life, liberty, and property; however, Qutb responds that whoever believes a government in which men "usurp God's authority" can protect such things is "living in self-delusion".²⁸ They are delusional because a true Muslim cannot have liberty in a jahili society. He is not free to serve his God because he has to live by man-made laws and recognize their authority instead of God's. Consequently, his life is not protected because it is being used to ignore God and his laws as prescribed in the Qur'an. Just as the people of Maydan who rejected God lost their lives, he who submits

²⁶ *Milestones*, pg.37.

²⁷ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.7, pg.150.

²⁸ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.6, pp.148-49.

himself to a man-made government rejects God's authority and are "indeed the losers" (Qur'an 7:92).

Furthermore, Qutb claims that jahili government not only has a negative effect on the individual, but it also destroys society as a whole. The government shapes the ideas, habits, values, and overall social order. The thought of Maulana Mawdudi, a fellow Islamic thinker, was very influential in molding Qutb's belief that the government is the most defining aspect of society. Qutb quotes Mawdudi to make this point:

"...the whole question of human well-being depends entirely on who exercises control over human affairs. A train runs only to the destination determined by its driver. All passengers can travel only to the same destination, whether they like it or not. In the same way, the train of human civilization travels where those who exercise power dictate."²⁹

Therefore, if government is separated from God, all of society and its institutions will be as well. Men will not be able to be fully Islamic because they cannot form public institutions in accordance with God's law.

According to Qutb, religion should act as the ideological ideal which defines the social order. No divine religion was intended to be confined to the individual and spiritual realm of society. In fact, Qutb considers such a concept to make "mockery of the omnipotence of God" because it suggests that God is unable to control and govern earthly life and activity.³⁰ If religion governs only certain aspects of life and society but not the whole, it becomes fragmented and suggests that it only is a

half-truth. These conceptions of the role of religion in society neglect the entire purpose of religion, which is to establish a "working contact between mankind and the Divine Reality" that allows men to create harmony, not division, between belief and practice.³¹

Qutb quotes the Qur'an to highlight the point that religion is intended to be a full system of life:

"Mankind was one single nation, and God sent Messengers with glad tidings and warnings; and with them He sent the Book in truth, to judge between people in matters wherein they differed" (2:213).³²

He argues that this passage testified to the common origin of humanity at the beginning of time. According to Qutb, humanity began "as a single community, living according to the same code and upholding similar beliefs." Then humanity diverged and grew apart, developing differing customs and practices. Qutb argues that in this passage, the Qur'an explains that God sent messengers and the Qur'an (the Book in truth) to reunify humanity under one system of life. Because it is human nature to disagree, it was necessary that God send the Qur'an to put forth a unified system of life. In this way, divergence would be eliminated and humanity could return to its original unity. The Qur'an would provide the basis on which differing systems of life would be refuted, and a single human community could emerge once again. Thus, Qutb believes that mankind will lack harmony and purpose unless it lives under a government that uses the Qur'an to create a fully Islamic social order. Otherwise, humanity will continue to differ in its societal practices,

²⁹ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.6, pp.149-150.

³⁰ Qutb, Sayyid. *Islam: The Religion of the Future* (Kuwait, 1984), pp.19-20.

³¹ *Islam: The Religion of the Future*, pg.22.

³² *Islam: The Religion of the Future*, pg.31.

thereby alienating itself from its common origin.³³

Qutb recognizes that the concept of religion constituting an entire system of life completely conflicts with the Western concept of separation of church and state. He argues that the West was the first civilization to introduce a split between religion and society, belief and practice. Due to Western dominance, Qutb claims that societies all over the world have divorced faith from practical life and ostracized it to the point where it has become impotent.³⁴ He strongly believes that this split has created a permanent condition of jahiliyyah in the West that has spread throughout the world, thereby creating numerous negative consequences. He characterizes the West's separation of religion and society as a "hideous schizophrenia". He views it as a condition that has evolved due to "unfortunate circumstances" in the history of Christianity and Western civilization.³⁵

For Qutb, the West's affliction with hideous schizophrenia originates in the life of Jesus and His disciples' interpretation of His teachings. He believes that Judaism was a Divine system of life; however, the Jews had developed an incorrect habit regarding ritual and their interpretation of the Mosaic Law. Jesus was sent to correct these problems, and He promoted a gentler and spiritually pure understanding of Mosaic Law. God sent Jesus to affirm the Jewish faith, not to create a new religion of which He would be the centerpiece. However, the Jews misunderstood and rejected Jesus' teachings and had Him crucified. After the crucifixion, the Jews and the followers of Jesus had such anger towards each other that the two camps became separate from each other. The new Gentile converts were equally hated by the Jews who rejected

Jesus. Thus, Qutb argues that "despite the fact that the first Christians sought merely to renovate Judaism through a slight modification of its laws", the Christians were rejected with vehemence. Because of their isolation from the Jews, the Christians developed a more radical message. The Christian Bible became almost completely separated from the Old Testament although it continued to be considered Scripture. At the same time, the Divine law of Judaism that had once governed practical life was lost. Christianity became a wholly spiritual message that separated itself from the Mosaic Law that preceded it.³⁶

However, Qutb believes that it was still possible that Jesus' true message could have survived these initial problems. The intense fervor of the persecutions by both the Jews and the Romans ended any chance of this. The disciples and their followers were forced into hiding to protect their lives. The times demanded such secrecy that the Christian scriptures were haphazardly put together. The accounts of Jesus' life could not be verified; hence, false legends and narratives were mixed with the authentic Gospel message. With this faulty Scriptural foundation, the growing Christian movement was destined to stray away from God's divine intent. Qutb has strong words concerning the Apostle Paul, believing him to have a conception of Christianity "adulterated by the residues of Roman mythology and Greek philosophy." Qutb mentions the Incarnation as an example of mythology being used to explain Jesus' life. Meanwhile, Paul's separation of faith and works reflects the muddling of God's revelation with Platonic concepts of the real and the ideal. Paul's acceptance of Plato led to the complete abandonment of the Mosaic

³³ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.1, pp.313-314.

³⁴ *Social Justice in Islam*, pg.20.

³⁵ *Islam: The Religion of the Future*, pg.33.

³⁶ *Islam: The Religion of the Future*, pp.36-37.

law, which was God's guide for practical life.³⁷

Christianity's triumph under Emperor Constantine allows Qutb to explain the faith's transition from its faulty conception to being part of a hideous schizophrenia. The simple fact is that Constantine was never a true believer. He lived a life of debauchery and irreverence towards God. It was not until moments before his death that he was baptized. Throughout his rule, high government officials mirrored his practices. They pretended to be Christians, but continued to practice paganism and idolatry. Society became hypocritical by proclaiming Christianity as the state religion while continuing with its old immoral habits. The development of Christian principles and their application to the social order became nearly irrelevant. By the time that Rome had reached its height of power, society had drifted even further away from God. Romans worshipped the power and wealth which they had acquired while using the Cross as their symbol on the battlefield. The Roman people and its leaders indulged in lustful behavior, sensual pleasure, and gluttonous appetites. Rome declined and was in need of moral regeneration.³⁸

The Church attempted to save society. However, Qutb argues that it reacted in a way that further destroyed the Christian ideal. The Church did not choose to show society how to incorporate faith into everyday life; rather, it turned to monasticism. Christianity's answer to Roman decline was to separate itself further from society. Monasticism is a practice that Qutb considers to be unnatural. It is a "sharp deviation from man's nature" because of its embrace of celibacy, poverty, and consequent rejection of the physical world.

Monasticism stood in strong contrast with the moral bankruptcy of mainstream society, thereby making itself out to be a symbol of human perfection. Qutb argues that it is not human perfection because it suppresses man's potential and deprives him of his role as God's "vicegerent on earth" (Qur'an 2:30). Instead of solving the problem, Qutb believes that monasticism allowed debauchery to co-exist with it. Society was split between the two extremes, each side perpetuating the other. Even the clergy of the church had difficulty meeting the demands of asceticism. As a result of its self-denial and rejection of this world, monasticism failed as a practical moral code for Christianity. Society and religion continued to drift from one another.³⁹

Sadly, when the Church attempted to acquire political influence, it did so at the expense of its members. For example, the collection of indulgences, based on the false concept that Jesus gave the Church the power to forgive sins, was used to add to the wealth of the Church. Qutb argues that such exploitation allowed the temporal leaders, who were in a power struggle with the papacy, to use the people against the Church: "They resorted mainly to unveiling the scandals of the clergymen, exposing their clandestine perfidy and personal debauchery, which had been disguised behind priestly robes and ecclesiastical ritual."⁴⁰

Qutb argues that the hideous schizophrenia of "separation of religion from the social order" became forever entrenched into Western civilization once the Church began to establish dogmas that contradicted logic and declared war on scientific inquiry. The Church began this destructive process when it declared itself theologically infallible and the lone interpreter of Scripture. By

³⁷ *Islam: The Religion of the Future*, pp.38-40.

³⁸ *Islam: The Religion of the Future*, pp.41,45-47.

³⁹ *Islam: The Religion of the Future*, pp.47-50.

⁴⁰ *Islam: The Religion of the Future*, pp.50-51.

doing this, it prevented anyone from questioning its new dogmas and doctrines, many of which Qutb considers to have been “incomprehensible, inconceivable, and incredible.” Qutb offers the Church’s teaching on the Eucharist as an example. He believes that the Eucharist had no precedent beyond a traditional consumption of bread and wine during Easter; nevertheless, the Church pushed the idea of transubstantiation. These dogmas were not open to rational discussion. Qutb argues that the irrational nature of these dogmas forced the Church to claim that they were “divine mysteries”. Next, the Church began to authorize clergy to develop theories about natural laws that they believed were in accordance with Christian teaching. The result was a creation of scientific concepts that would not be able to stand the test of time. Nevertheless, some brave scientists did challenge the Church’s conceptions of the universe. The Church considered these challenges to be heresy. The development of the Inquisition and the ensuing bloodshed made honest scientific inquiry and religion mutually exclusive. Qutb believes that at this point Christianity had clearly ceased to be a true religion because it had declared war on rationality and reality. It had become incompatible with practical life and could not act as a viable guide for the social order.⁴¹

For Qutb, the Protestant Reformation represented the acceptance of the concept that religion could not act as a system of life in Europe. Religion had become a personal affair that was predominately spiritual instead of practical. The West’s hideous schizophrenia forced it into a permanent jahiliyyah. Even if the West wanted to end its schizophrenia, Qutb does not believe that Christianity is able due to so. Through Paul, its doctrines have embraced a Platonic

“theory of opposition” in which the earth opposes heaven, worship opposes labor, spirit opposes body, and so on.⁴² However, he points out that despite Western dominance, numerous consequences of its hideous schizophrenia make it a failed civilization.

Western values are commonly understood as liberal democratic; they include the protection of individual rights, limited government, and the rule of law. Qutb views these values as misshapen philosophical concepts which are outgrowths of jahiliyyah. When the West pushes faith into a corner, Qutb argues that it alienates God from society, thereby rejecting faith as part of the social order. Without faith acting as the defining aspect of the social order, society forces itself into a materialist system of life. When Qutb refers to Western materialism, it should not be confused with a communist critique of capitalism. Rather, Qutb views all non-Islamic societies as materialist, whether capitalist or communist. He makes this claim because all non-Islamic societies fail to merge the spiritual side of man with his material side. Without faith acting as a guide, society will be guided by its bodily instincts. Hence, Qutb argues that the West views life through a materialist lens.

Indeed, the first philosophical criticism that Qutb has of the West is its materialist understanding of human nature. The West views man’s rationality as the characteristic which distinguishes him from animals. Thus, it orders society based on man’s ability to reason and govern his own actions. From the Islamic perspective, this idea reeks of jahiliyyah. For Qutb, man is unique because he is a spiritual being. Although man is rational, his rationality is not his highest attribute. In fact, God provided man with rationality so he could be

⁴¹ *Islam: The Religion of the Future*, pp.52-57.

⁴² *Social Justice in Islam*, pg.42.

a believer. Verses 2:31-33 of the Qur'an explain how God "taught Adam the names of all things" as well as "the secrets of what is in the heavens and the earth". Qutb explains that in this passage, God distinguishes man from both the angels and the animals by giving him cognition and rationality.⁴³ However, at no time does God tell man that his rationality frees him from service. Instead, man's rationality is to be used *towards* his service since without it, man cannot interpret nor implement God's divine guidance. Nevertheless, the West abuses man's rationality by using it as a tool of rebellion. When man relies on his rationality, he inhibits himself from following divine revelation. Reliance on rationality allows man to act as an autonomous being. Such a concept is antithetical to Islam. Man is not autonomous; he must be obedient to God. If he uses reason as his guide, man will obey himself and rebel against the sovereignty of God.

Qutb believes that another symptom of the moral sickness of the West is its acceptance of the philosophy of pragmatism. He views it as a materialist philosophy because it approves of any action as long as it results in material gain. If anything is acceptable as long as it produces material benefit, morals become relative. As a result, the West is directed by material desires rather than moral objectives. Qutb argues that the West has become dominated by pragmatism because it is grounded in Roman tradition. According to Qutb, Rome lived by the doctrine that all other peoples were to be conquered or exploited for the material benefit of the mother country. It was through these imperialistic means that it developed its material decadence, which the Romans considered to be a glorious achievement. Because anything was

permissible in the acquisition of this glory, morals were expendable and relative. Following the Roman tradition of imperialism, Qutb claims that the West has disregarded morality in its quest for material progress.⁴⁴

The West's materialist outlook will also destroy its ability to harvest the benefits of its material progress. Although the West has progressed on a technological and scientific level, Qutb believes it has become a sterile civilization due to its lack of spiritual values. Without moral objectives, the West is incapable of utilizing its scientific progress in a way that benefits society. Qutb does not condemn material progress in itself. Progress benefits man as long as it is in accordance with Islamic faith. Furthermore, progress is obligatory because it glorifies God and assists man in his role as vicegerent.⁴⁵ If man did not attempt to progress materially, Qutb claims he would be squandering the tools which God gave him. However, the West detaches science from God. By doing so, the West has forced itself into a destructive cycle. Every time that it takes a step forward, the West will encounter societal problems because it will not use technology in the way that God intended. Because Western society ignores the spiritual needs of man, material progress will fail to satisfy basic human needs. According to Qutb, the West will soon slow its progress and destroy itself from the inside. When the physical and spiritual are divided, society experiences suffering. Eventually, the West will become so alienated from its spiritual nature that it will either turn against itself or be eclipsed by a spiritually superior Islamic civilization.

According to Qutb, the West's conception of the world as entirely sensory is another manifestation of its materialist

⁴³ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.1, pg.60.

⁴⁴ *Social Justice in Islam*, pp.280-282,315-316.

⁴⁵ *Milestones*, pg.8.

philosophy. By denying man's spiritual senses, man lowers himself to the level of the animals. Qutb claims that this materialist thinking "drags man back to an irrational existence...What is peddled as 'progressive thought' is no more than dismal regression."⁴⁶ It is regression because it reverts back to man's perception of life prior to God's revelation. Qutb claims that despite what the West may believe, human reality is so complex that God never intended man to understand it on his own; it was for this reason that His divine guidance was so essential.⁴⁷ Because of the West's understanding of human nature, society worships man's rationality and his supposed autonomy. Unlike the West, Qutb views the difference between man and animal as vertical, not horizontal. As long as man ignores his spiritual nature and makes decisions based on bodily impulse, he becomes reliant on material objects just as the animals do. Consequently, his system of life will be centered around the material, and he will become like an animal. Although this materialist life may give him temporary pleasure, it denies his dignity and his ability to live a full life in accordance with his spiritual nature. Western civilization attempts to provide for the spiritual side of man at times, but it rarely allows it to be applied to practical life.

Qutb argues that the West's materialist philosophy has led it to a state of animalism. Western values are animal values because they fail to elevate man above the materialist level of the animals. Just as animals govern themselves by material impulse, so does the West. Qutb points to Western families, sexuality, capitalism, freedom, and natural law as evidence of its animalist values.

First, Qutb harshly criticizes the Western family. Although the rotting of Western morality did not begin with the family, Qutb believes the family has been infected with the disease of jahiliyyah. Because "the family system and the relationship between the sexes determine the whole character of society", Qutb views the jahiliyyah of the Western family as indicative of the sickness of the larger society. According to Qutb, the purpose of the family is to raise children in an environment that will pass Islamic moral values to the next generation. However, the West has degraded the role of the family. The root cause of this degradation is in the way that women are treated in the West. Qutb claims that Western relationships revolve around lust, passion, and impulse. Women have disregarded their duty to rear children and have become objects of sexual pleasure. In the essay "The America I Have Seen", Qutb describes the way women act in the United States:

"The American girl is well acquainted with her body's seductive capacity. She knows it lies in the face, and in expressive eyes, and thirsty lips. She knows seductiveness lies in the round breasts, the full buttocks, and in the shapely thighs, sleek legs and she knows all this and does not hide it...Then she adds to all this the fetching laugh, the naked looks, and the bold moves, and she does not ignore this for one moment or forget it!"⁴⁸

In this description it is clear that Qutb is disgusted that the female not only leaves her body uncovered, but that she also actively uses it as a weapon. By using their bodies in this manner, women are prone to be treated

⁴⁶ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.1, pg.35.

⁴⁷ *Islam: The Religion of the Future*, pg.110.

⁴⁸ "The America I Have Seen", pg.22.

by men as sexual objects rather than dignified child-bearers. While Qutb has harsh words against the American woman's seductiveness, he also criticizes the way that American men use their muscular build to woo women. He cites an article in a magazine which surveyed different women, coming to the conclusion that the majority were attracted to men with "ox muscles". Such public discussion of sensuality is an example of what Qutb argues is the "sexual primitiveness" of the West.⁴⁹

Because both sexes view their relationship in such an overwhelmingly sexual manner, Qutb finds that the Western family is in disarray. The gender roles have become muddled and women no longer fulfill their obligation to be dedicated mothers on both the physical and spiritual levels. Instead, he argues, women have dedicated themselves to work. They view dedicated motherhood as squandering their talents and abilities. Qutb points to this concept as a manifestation of the backward materialist values of Western society, where "material production is regarded as more important, more valuable and more honorable than the development of human character."⁵⁰ When all these factors are meshed together, Qutb believes that it is no surprise that the high rates of divorce and illegitimate children are considered mainstream and acceptable in the West. He even cites a contemporary scandal of the time, the Profumo affair, as an example of the West's moral bankruptcy. The affair between Profumo and the Russian agent Keeler was not condemned because it was sexually immoral; the sexual aspect was actually considered somewhat acceptable. The problem was that it involved secret intelligence information. Also, when writing *Milestones*, Qutb identified the gaining

acceptance of homosexuality as another example of the animalistic sexual permissiveness that typifies Western society. Due to this permissiveness, Qutb asserts that the Western family has become impotent as a positive moral force.⁵¹

The economic outgrowth of Western animalism, capitalism, comes from an amalgamation of pragmatism and Roman tradition. Qutb criticizes the West's use of capitalism because it leads to the sacrifice of moral values in the name of material gain. While Qutb's critique of capitalism sounds socialist at first, it should be understood within an Islamic context. Because God is the only true owner of any object, society is obliged to use property for the glory of God and the good of the Muslim community. In this sense, private property is not inviolate because society has been commanded by God to use its material possessions for the gain of all instead of individual profit:

"...the individual is in a way a steward of his property of behalf of society; his tenure of property is more of a duty than an actual right of possession. Property in the widest sense is a right that can only belong to society, which in turn receives it as a trust from Allah who is the only true owner of anything."⁵²

Taking this viewpoint, Qutb claims that private ownership becomes more theoretical than practical. Qutb also claims that Islam conflicts with capitalist principles in its condemnation of usury and its commandment to pay the zakat, a tax that helps provide for those in poverty. Therefore, Qutb does not criticize Western capitalism on purely socialist grounds, but he does believe that the concept of a free market

⁴⁹ "The America I Have Seen", pg.22.

⁵⁰ *Milestones*, pg.83.

⁵¹ *Milestones*, pg.83.

⁵² *Social Justice in Islam*, pg.132.

shows how devoid the West is of a sense of economic justice. The economic realm should be ruled by God's law just as all other aspects of society are.

Qutb argues that the West's understanding of freedom is further evidence of its animalism. Although men may exercise self-government in a liberal democracy, they are slaves rather than freemen. According to Qutb, Western man is enslaved by man. In effect, he is both a slave to himself and other men. He is a slave to himself in the sense that self-government allows him to legislate his own desires, which are ignorant of God's law. He is a slave to other men because he lives under a man-made system. Men legislate what other men can or cannot do; hence, Muslims are denied the ability to worship God with full submission. For Qutb, this is anything but freedom because Muslims cannot follow Shari'ah law. Rather than exhibiting the dignity of man, this brand of freedom denies it. The law of God was prescribed to free men from service to other men, yet Western jahiliyyah denies men the opportunity to free themselves.⁵³

The West believes that man's freedom exists in accordance with natural law. Such an understanding of natural law is another animalistic idea that Qutb criticizes. Qutb believes that God created the cosmos and structured it in a harmonious way. All of the cosmos and earth work in accordance with God's natural law. God's nature not only governs the biological and physical, but it extends to the human realms of life, like politics and society. Qutb agrees with Western thought up to this point; however, they depart at this juncture. The West argues that the natural laws governing humanity can be discerned through reason. For Qutb, this is another example of how jahiliyyah permits the West to delude itself into believing that

man is autonomous. Qutb argues that just as God ordered nature, he ordered human life through the Shari'ah:

“He Who has created the universe and man, and Who made man subservient to the laws that also govern the universe, has also prescribed the Shari'ah for his voluntary actions. If man follows Shari'ah it results in a harmony between his life and his nature... Each word of Allah... is part of the universal law and is as accurate and true as any of the laws known as the 'laws of nature'... Thus, the Shari'ah given to man to organize his life, is also a universal law, because it is related to the general law of the uni-verse and is harmonious with it.”⁵⁴

Shari'ah is a universal law just like gravity is a universal law. Because man is spiritually distinguished from the animals, in addition to physical laws, God provided the Shari'ah as the higher law to govern man. The Shari'ah allows men and society to work in harmony just as the rest of nature does. If humanity chooses to ignore the Shari'ah, it will live like animals, for society will become an uncivilized jungle that is in a constant state of war. Society will inevitably fall into constant conflict and suffering because man's rationality is incapable of providing answers. Qutb quotes the Qur'an to prove the failures of rationality, for “Had the Truth follow their (men's) opinions, the heavens and earth and whosoever is in them, would surely have been corrupted” (Qur'an 23:71).⁵⁵

Because Qutb emphasizes the significance of the Shari'ah as God's code of law, the question arises as to which school of

⁵³ *Milestones*, pp.80-81.

⁵⁴ *Milestones*, pp.74-75.

⁵⁵ *Milestones*, pp.73-78.

Islamic jurisprudence he belongs. The multiple versions of Islamic law would cause a problem if a society attempted to institute Shari'ah. Although he never explicitly says so, Qutb does not seem to belong to the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, or Hanbali schools of Islamic law. When discussing Qur'anic laws, for example, Qutb often presents multiple viewpoints of a particular problem from scholars of differing schools. In the end, Qutb desires that Shari'ah be instituted, regardless of which school is given preference. His goal is to implement the Qur'an and establish an Islamic state; the problem of differing schools of law is a secondary concern for him that he never answers clearly.⁵⁶

In today's Western world, Qutb would likely point to postmodernism and cultural relativism as signs that Western society will collapse from within. However, Qutb saw signs of such developments in the writings of Westerners during his lifetime. In *Islam: The Religion of the Future*, he calls them "voices of alarm...warning mankind of its catastrophic end under the white man's faithless civilization."⁵⁷ An example of these voices of alarm is Dr. Alexis Carrel, a Nobel-prize winning surgeon who wrote in his 1939 book *Man the Unknown* that:

"Man should be the measure of all. On the contrary, he is a stranger in this world that he has created. He has been incapable of organizing this world for himself, because he did not possess a practical knowledge of his own nature. Thus the enormous advance gained by the sciences of

inanimate matter over those of living things is one of the greatest catastrophes ever suffered by humanity. The environment born of our intelligence and our inventions is adjusted neither to our stature nor to our shape. We are unhappy. We degenerate morally and mentally..."⁵⁸

Here, Qutb sees a Westerner who acknowledges the dangerous disconnection between human needs and material progress. However, in the end of his discussion, Dr. Carrel concludes that a deeper scientific commitment to understanding human behavior would solve the problem. For Qutb, Dr. Carrel's solution shows how incapable the West is of solving its own problems. Because of its schizophrenia and poor judgment of the needs of mankind, it does not turn to God for the answers. Instead, it looks to solve problems on human terms and through further disconnect between God and society. The thinkers of Western society can offer no viable solutions because of the moral restrictions of secular society. Consequently, they provide jahili answers to jahili problems. Instead of turning to divine guidance, the West perpetuates its own failure.

In the end, Qutb believes the West's continued ignorance of divine guidance in solving social problems will destroy it. As evidence, he cites several Qur'anic stories of societies that were relatively prosperous, yet remained jahili:

"Salih said to his people, 'Do you think that you will be left secure forever here among these things—among gardens and fountains, farmland, and palm trees with juicy fruit? And that you will always be able to carve dwellings out of the

⁵⁶ This issue is further addressed in Chapter 3, pp.42-44.

⁵⁷ Qutb's use of "white man" here is unusual, and does not reflect a racist viewpoint. In many of his works, he emphasizes that Islam embraces all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality.

⁵⁸ *Islam: The Religion of the Future*, pp.80-81.

mountains with the same great skill? Be, then, conscious of Allah, and obey me, and pay no heed to the counsel of those who are given to excesses- those who spread corruption on earth instead of setting things right.” (Qur’an 26:146-152)

The Qur’an tells other similar stories of prosperous jahili societies that are condemned by God. Qutb views the West as the contemporary version of such a society. Through divine guidance, Islam, not the animalist and materialist West, will bring progress that fulfills human needs.

Western jahiliyyah is a rebellion against the sovereignty of God; it neglects man’s spiritual needs, thereby perpetuating suffering and disharmony throughout the world. Due to the dominance of this evil and corrupt society, Qutb believes that Islam must dismantle the West from its position of authority. In *Milestones*, Qutb sets the stage for this momentous battle between Islam and the West:

“Islam cannot accept any compromise with jahiliyyah, either in its concept or in the modes of living derived from this concept. Either Islam will remain, or jahiliyyah; Islam cannot accept or agree to a situation which is half-Islam and half-jahiliyyah. In this respect Islam’s stand is very clear. It says that truth is one and cannot be divided; if it is not truth, then it must be falsehood...Command belongs to Allah, or else to jahiliyyah. The Shari’ah of Allah will prevail, or else people’s desires.”⁵⁹

⁵⁹ *Milestones*, pg.112.

CHAPTER 2

Jihad: A Universal Declaration of Freedom

Qutb envisioned the upcoming battle between Islam and the West, and he wrote that the battle would be part of jihad. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the term ‘jihad’ has received more attention than ever before in the non-Islamic world. The traditional Islamic definition for jihad is to struggle in the cause of God. It is introduced in the following passage:

“Let them fight in God’s cause- all who are willing to barter the life of this world for the life to come. To him who fights in God’s cause, whether he be slain or be victorious, We shall grant him a rich reward. And why should you not fight in the cause of God and the utterly helpless men, women, and children who are crying, “Our Lord! Deliver us from this land whose people are oppressors, and send forth to us, out of Your grace, a protector, and send us one that will help us.” (Qur’an 4:74-75)

This passage offers a reward to all those who fight in God’s cause. These fighters are being called for by people living in a land of oppression. However, the passage has caused Muslims to develop different theories as to what it means to struggle in the cause of God and when it is proper to do so. Jihad can be interpreted as a call to missionary work and peaceful conversion of oppressed non-believers. On the other hand, it can be interpreted as a command to engage in violent war against all non-believers at all times. Qutb’s understanding

of jihad takes elements from both perspectives and merges them together.

Qutb’s understanding is unique from traditional interpretations because he views jihad as primarily political in nature. He argues that the oppression described in Qur’an 4:74-75 is oppression caused by a jahili social order. However, it would be incorrect to call Qutb’s version of jihad merely political. To do so would show a shallow understanding of Qutb’s thought; it would be a view of Qutb through a Western lens. For Qutb, political issues are spiritual issues; there is little separation between the two. In other words, jihad is not distinctly political by its nature; rather, everything in human life is spiritual by nature and thereby political.

When using the definition of jihad as “struggling in the cause of God”, two main questions arise. First, what does it mean to “struggle”? Second, what is the cause of God? Qutb’s critique of Western society is closely linked to his answer to the second question. The lack of active faith in Western civilization creates a need for drastic change throughout the entire world. Because society has strayed so far away from its original Godly purpose, it has begun to oppress mankind, and some action must be taken to change it. Hence, Qutb argues that the cause of God is to “establish His order and way of life in the world.”⁶⁰ Muslims are commanded to fight those who do not submit to one God: “Fight them until there is no more oppression, and submission is made to God alone” (Qur’an 2:193).

According to Qutb, the cause of God is to end oppression by creating a social order that is purely Islamic. Such a social order will be governed by the laws of the Shari’ah and the spiritual principles of the Qur’an.⁶¹ This is a serious and complete

⁶⁰ *In the Shade of the Qur’an*, vol.3, pg.224.

⁶¹ Qutb’s vision of this ideal Islamic society will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

overhaul of the social order. The cause of God cannot aim to make only small changes, for no compromises can be made when men struggle to establish truth. Qutb argues that jihad is inherent in the nature of Islam because Islamic faith demands total submission, which necessarily includes social relationships and public life. As a practical code for living, Islam cannot be relegated to merely the theoretical realm, for it becomes meaningless. For these reasons, the cause of God (Islam) demands that a completely Islamic social order be established.⁶²

Because he views non-Islamic society as oppression, Qutb believes that jihad is a “universal declaration of the freedom of man from slavery to other men and to his own desires.”⁶³ Jihad acts as the transforming moment between jahiliyyah and Islam. It rejects the slavery that occurs in jahiliyyah and proclaims that man deserves to be free. Qutb claims that man finds his freedom in the laws of God which have come through His divine revelation. Unless he lives by this divine guidance, he will be enslaved to his own bodily desires. The best illustration of this concept comes in Qutb’s criticism of Western society and culture. Because God’s laws do not define the social order, the West has misused sexuality. The family has lost its moral purpose because it has been enslaved to human impulse. In this sense, jihad is waged to return man to his Godly purpose. It seeks to free men from slavery to their impulses, which has caused them to suffer.

Qutb makes it clear that jihad must be waged universally. It is universal because all human beings deserve to be free. God does not limit himself to a particular country, sex, or race of people. He desires that the entire human race reject jahiliyyah and accept God’s guidance, for if the entire

human race were to do so, the world would live harmoniously and in accordance with human nature. The universality of Qutb’s message is significant. At a time when most Islamists had the limited goal of ending Western influence in the Muslim world, Qutb stressed that the Islamic message was more than a regional solution. He not only desired that the West lose its influence in the Middle East, but he also desired that Westerners themselves be freed. He believed that the people of the West were oppressed in the same way as Middle Easterners. He believed that if they were exposed to Islamic society, they would be attracted to it also. By proclaiming jihad as a universal cause, Qutb declared Islam as an alternative civilization for all people, not only Muslims.⁶⁴

If God’s cause is the establishment of a universal Islamic social order, the second question that must be addressed is how men should struggle for the cause. To understand Qutb’s view of jihad, it is useful to compare it to the view of Ayatollah Khomeini, perhaps the most successful political Islamist. Khomeini believed that jihad must begin with the ‘Supreme Jihad’, which is the purification of the individual soul. A Muslim must rid himself of “any tie or link binding [him] to this world in love” before he wages jihad against any external forces.⁶⁵ In other words, Khomeini believes that jihad must be waged internally first, and then externally. Meanwhile, Qutb holds the opposite understanding, which he largely adopted from Mawdudi’s work *The Moral Foundation of the Islamic Movement*. He argues that jihad must be waged first against the external, for the sake of the internal. A man’s soul is so strongly linked to society and his environment that he is incapable of cleansing his soul unless the external

⁶² *Milestones*, pg.51.

⁶³ *Milestones*, pg.47.

⁶⁴ *Milestones*, pp.48,61.

⁶⁵ Khomeini, Ruhollah. *Islam and Revolution* (Berkeley, 1981) pg.357.

permits it. If society excludes the spiritual from the practical, man cannot relate to other humans on a spiritual level. He will be incapable of reaching his spiritual potential because he cannot enjoy the benefits of a spiritual community that integrates Islam into every aspect of life. It is this spiritual community which God intended to exist. When man's environment is Islamic, "every good value becomes well established and begins to yield fruit."⁶⁶ Islamic social influence will contain and eventually annihilate evil and sin. It is for this reason that Muslims must establish a fully Islamic society; for without it, they can reach neither spiritual perfection nor full submission to God. Thus, Qutb believes that the jihad must first aim to remove the obstacles that prevent the Islamic social order from arising.⁶⁷

Jihad creates an environment that allows Islam to prosper as a practical system of life. It creates this environment by abolishing "the organizations and authorities of the jahili systems which prevent people from reforming their ideas and beliefs, forces them to follow deviant ways, and make them serve other humans instead of their Almighty Lord."⁶⁸ It is obligatory to wage jihad against the obstacles in the way of an Islamic state because all men have the right to serve God alone. Hence, Muslims are obliged to free their fellow man. If a Muslim does not wage jihad against jahiliyyah, he fails to recognize the right of his fellow man to serve God alone.⁶⁹

Qutb claims that jihad is waged against institutions and organizations, not against individuals. Jahili institutions are the enemy, not the people who live under the jahili system. Indeed, humans are always the

beneficiaries of jihad. The main jahili institutions that Qutb refers to as targets of jihad include government organizations that possess power over jahili society and allow society to conform to non-Islamic ideals. Qutb commands Muslims to wage jihad by striking "hard at all those political powers that force people to bow to their will and authority, defying the commandments of Allah, and denying people the freedom to listen to the message of Islam, and to accept it even when they wish to do so."⁷⁰ As noted above, it is difficult to determine exactly what Qutb considers to be a political power. Because he views all institutions that affect the social order as political, Qutb seems to identify all public organizations as targets worthy of jihad.

By stating the objective of jihad as a removal of the institutions that act as obstacles to the establishment of a fully Islamic society, Qutb raises a number of issues. The first issue is the issue of compulsion. Qur'an 2:256 explicitly states that "There shall be no compulsion in religion"; therefore, people should not be forced into conversion. Qutb argues that the establishment of an Islamic society does not violate this commandment. Qutb does not believe that the destruction of jahili society causes anyone to convert to Islam by force. From his perspective, Qutb believes that the abolition of jahili institutions will "free those people who wish to be freed from enslavement to men".⁷¹ It does not force others to change their hearts. Furthermore, Qutb proclaims freedom of belief to be "man's most precious right in this world... any infringement of this right, direct or indirect, must be fought even if one has to kill for it."⁷² Because this freedom is of such value, Muslims must fight jahiliyyah to obtain it. Although the abolition of

⁶⁶ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.6, pg.150.

⁶⁷ For further explanation why full submission is impossible under a jahili system, please refer to pp.11-13.

⁶⁸ *Milestones*, pg.45.

⁶⁹ *Milestones*, pg.61.

⁷⁰ *Milestones*, pg.49.

⁷¹ *Milestones*, pg.45.

⁷² *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.1, pg.273.

jahiliyyah causes Islam to be the dominant faith, Islamic society does not use physical force to compel non-believers to convert. Qutb views the compulsion rule as applying to conversion through violent or coercive threat, but not to social pressure. He does not believe that jihad compels men coercively; rather, it destroys jahili institutions by force, not people who commit jahiliyyah.⁷³

Another issue is whether or not there are limits on means in jihad based upon ethical considerations. Qutb derives the ethical restrictions of jihad from the accounts of those close to Muhammad. The Prophet made a number of statements which act as an outline for ethical conduct in war. First, Muhammad once ordered that no women or children be killed during combat. Second, he forbade the looting and mutilation of dead bodies. He is quoted as saying: "Proceed to fight in God's name and for His cause. Fight those who deny God. Take the initiative but do not commit any acts of treachery, do not mutilate your victims, and do not kill any children." Third, he once said that striking the face of an opponent should be avoided. Fourth, he forbade intentional slow killing.⁷⁴

While it is preferred that these ethical guidelines be followed, all of them can be justifiably overruled if they are pursuant to the foremost guideline of jihad: "oppression is even worse than killing" (Qur'an 2:191). Oppression, which Qutb claims exists wherever God is not recognized as sovereign, is a worse evil than any type of killing. Therefore, if it is necessary to kill innocent women or children to dismantle jahili society, it is justified. Although such a blunt statement cannot be found in Qutb's writings, it is the logical extension of his thinking. This does not mean that jihad should be conducted without

regard for ethical guidelines. It does mean, however, that such violations are excusable if essential to the victory of Islam.

Although Qutb wrote about the significance of jihad for Islam, he did not write extensively about the specific means or methods of jihad. Because he stressed the importance of adapting means to societal changes, it is likely Qutb did so intentionally. It is significant to remember that Qutb did his writing from within the walls of an Egyptian prison. He saw himself as a prophet, not as a tactician. In *Milestones*, he predicts the emergence of a vanguard which would use the book as their guide. The vanguard would use *Milestones* to guide them while "marching through the vast ocean of jahiliyyah which encompasses the entire world."⁷⁵ Qutb wanted the vanguard to develop their own strategies, depending on the particular circumstances they faced. However, this does not mean that he provided no guidance for his vanguard. Some general guidelines for jihad can be derived from Qutb's writings on the topic.

The two methods Qutb prescribes for waging jihad against jahili institutions are preaching and 'movement'. Preaching is the process of waging a war of ideas on the philosophical plane. It is the non-violent promotion of Islamic beliefs through public speech, demonstrations, and missionary work. Preaching can be used in small ways, such as attempting to convert friends or other individuals to Islam. Any attempt to dismantle jahili institutions by attacking the ideas behind them constitutes the preaching method of jihad. Preaching is essential to jihad because it provides ideological justification. Without a war of ideas, jihad would be unsubstantiated violence.

On the other hand, Qutb says that preaching by itself is not enough because "those who have usurped the authority of

⁷³ *Milestones*, pg.45.

⁷⁴ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.1, pp.270-73.

⁷⁵ *Milestones*, pg.9.

Allah and are oppressing Allah's creatures are not going to give up their power merely through preaching."⁷⁶ Along with preaching, jihad must employ movement. Qutb defines movement as the method of jihad which "tackles material obstacles".⁷⁷ It is the war of ideas put into action; thus, movement is *violence* against jahili institutions. Although he knows that movement requires violence, Qutb is reluctant to call it so by name. Instead of violence, Qutb views movement as the necessary consequence of preaching. Just as a Muslim contradicts his faith if he submits to jahiliyyah, a Muslim contradicts his preaching if he refuses to physically put his words into action. Faith must have practical consequences, even if it means that violence is inevitable. Qutb regrets that violence must be used to achieve the objectives of jihad. He wrote that "It is not that Islam loves to draw its sword and chop off people's heads with it. The hard facts of life compel Islam to have its sword drawn and to be always ready and careful."⁷⁸

Qutb stresses that preaching and movement must go hand in hand for jihad to be successful in defeating jahiliyyah. He attributes this necessity to the human condition. Because human reality requires that spiritual and physical reality coincide, neither method of jihad can be successful on its own. Qutb also claims that jihad must remain progressive. By progressive jihad, he means that Muslims must adapt the methods of preaching and movement to fit each unique stage in the war against jahiliyyah. There is no particular formula for jihad that will work in every case. Because Islam is a practical cause, Qutb believes that jihad must change its balance between preaching and movement over time.⁷⁹

Qutb argues that jihad must be waged at all times because it is inherently eternal: "Jihad... was not something accidental to the particular period which witnessed the advent of Islam. It is a permanent need, inherent in the nature of the Islamic faith."⁸⁰ Jihad is an unending state of war because "truth and falsehood cannot co-exist on this earth".⁸¹ Qutb once again views the world in black and white when discussing jihad. Just as there is only jahil society or Islamic society, there is only truth and falsehood. According to Qutb, the existence of truth endangers falsehood by its very nature. As long as truth exists, evil cannot rest without the fear of being overtaken. Similarly, Islam will continue to threaten and attack jahiliyyah as long as man inhabits the earth. Qutb also refers to the Qur'an and the Sunnah⁸² to show the permanent need for jihad. If jihad had been a temporary need of Islam in its beginning stages, he argues, it would not have been explained in such detail and with such emphasis in the Qur'an. Furthermore, the Sunnah would not quote Muhammad as stating that "He who does not take part or at least contemplate taking part in a campaign of jihad until the end of his life meets his death holding to a branch of hypocrisy."⁸³

Jihad is not only unending according to Qutb, but it also should be waged by all Muslims who are able. Qutb believes that the following verse from the Qur'an gives his claim justification. "Those who believe fight in the cause of God, and those who reject the faith fight in the cause of evil. Fight, then, against the friends of Satan" (Qur'an 4:76). This verse states simply that believers (Muslims) must fight in the cause of God (jihad). If they fail to do so, they are

⁷⁶ *Milestones*, pg.48.

⁷⁷ *Milestones*, pg.48.

⁷⁸ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.3, pg.282.

⁷⁹ *Milestones*, pg.45.

⁸⁰ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.3, pg.281.

⁸¹ *Milestones*, pg.53.

⁸² The Sunnah is the Islamic account of Prophet Muhammad's life.

⁸³ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.3, pg.281.

not true believers. In this sense, a Muslim's willingness to become a jihadist is the greatest test of his faith. Furthermore, the Qur'an states that a Muslim who is capable of waging jihad is obligated to do so. If he remains passive and fails to free himself and others from oppression (jahiliyyah), he will face eternal damnation. Meanwhile, those who willingly sacrifice their lives and possessions for the cause of God will be rewarded by God:

“Those of the believers who remain passive, other than the disabled, are not equal to those who strive hard in God's cause with their possessions and lives. God has exalted those who strive hard with their possessions and their lives far above the ones who remain passive. To each God has promised the ultimate good, yet God has preferred those who strive hard over those who remain passive with a mighty reward: degrees of honor, forgiveness of sins and His grace...To those whom the angels gather in death while they are still wronging themselves, the angels will say: ‘What were you doing?’ They will answer: ‘We were oppressed on earth.’ [The angels] will say: ‘Was not God's earth so spacious that you might have migrated to settle elsewhere?’ Such will have their abode in Hell, a certainly evil end. Excepted are the men, women, and children who, being truly helpless, can devise nothing and find no way. These God may well pardon...” (Qur'an 4:95-99)

Qutb argues that this significant passage explains the sacrifice required of those who wage jihad. They must be willing to sacrifice their life and become a martyr for their faith. The passage also extends the

obligation of jihad to those who are being oppressed on earth. Qutb believes that the only people excused from jihad in this passage are the disabled, elderly, women, and children who have no possible way to help themselves. They may be physically limited, have duties to their family, or be unable to decide for themselves.⁸⁴

Qutb desired that his vanguard arise and lead the Muslim community into a jihad that would transform the entire world from jahiliyyah to Islam, falsehood to truth, spiritual slavery to freedom. By declaring all men free from oppression, Qutb dreamt that jihad would create an environment upon which an ideal Islamic society could be established. With all institutions belligerent and antithetical to Islam destroyed, Muslims could live in full submission to God. The next step in Qutb's dream is the establishment of an ideal Islamic society where mankind can again become “one single nation” (Qur'an 2:213).

⁸⁴ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.3, pp.279-285.

CHAPTER 3

The Ideal Islamic Society

While Qutb believes that the ultimate goal of jihad is to establish an Islamic society, he does not view this ideal society as new. His vision is a restoration, not an innovation. According to Qutb, this revival aims to restore society to its original Godly intent. God created society to worship Him as its sovereign and follow His guidance in full submission. Hence, the reemergence of an Islamic society is a restoration of two societies in history: the first community of mankind and the first Qur'anic generation that lived under Muhammad.

As stated in Qur'an 2:213, humanity began as a single community that had similar beliefs and lived by the same code. This first human community was Adam, Eve, and their offspring. For Qutb, the significance of the first community is that it shows that humans share the same origin because we are members of the same family of Adam. Qutb claims that this original human family was tightly-knit and had a uniform belief that God was sovereign. As this original community grew over time, it evolved and new cultural norms began to develop. Qutb argues that God intended for the original community to grow and evolve. Because God understood human nature, He knew that men would differ in their opinions. Consequently, He sent prophets to the people to establish the truth and help them discern between truth and deviation. The prophets were to establish truth through "the Book" (Qur'an 2:213). Qutb claims that the Book is not only the Qur'an, but all revelation given from God to mankind since the creation of the first community. Hence, each of the prophets from Noah to Muhammad taught, in essence, the same Book of God. The Book taught that only

God is sovereign; in other words, it taught the falsity of jahiliyyah. Nevertheless, communities rejected God, His Book, and His prophets by continuing in jahiliyyah. Qutb views Islamic society as a restoration of the original community, which was unified under God's authority prior to the deviation of jahiliyyah.⁸⁵

The creation of an ideal Islamic society would also be a restoration of what Qutb refers to as the 'unique Qur'anic generation'. This generation was made up of the first Muslims and the community in which they lived. Qutb believes that no community before or since has reached the excellence of this generation.⁸⁶

Qutb argues that this first generation of Muslims is unique for three significant reasons which must be emulated by the new Islamic society. First, they followed the Qur'an *alone* as their guide. Qutb claims that they derived their entire system of life, both as individuals and as a community, from the Qur'an. He emphasizes that they did not rely on the Qur'an out of ignorance; they were aware of other cultures and civilizations like Roman, Greek, Persian, Indian, Chinese, Christian, and Jewish. Rather, they chose the Qur'an because it was a pure spring of knowledge from God. While other Islamic societies have used the Qur'an, Qutb argues that they have not followed the example set by the first Muslims:

"This generation drank solely from this spring and thus attained a unique distinction in history. In later times, other sources mingled with it. Other sources used by later generations included Greek philosophy and logic, ancient Persian legends and ideas, Jewish scriptures and

⁸⁵ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.1, pp.312-314.

⁸⁶ *Milestones*, pg.11.

traditions, Christian theology, and in addition to these, fragments of other religions and civilizations. These mingled with the commentaries on the Qur'an and with scholastic theology, with jurisprudence and its principles. Later generations after this generation were brought up and trained with this mixed source, and hence the like of this generation was never witnessed again."⁸⁷

It is significant that Qutb not only mentions that non-Islamic ideas were mingled with the Qur'an, but goes further to include Islamic scholastic theology and jurisprudence. Although the comparison is not totally accurate, as Protestantism calls for a return to Scriptural textualism, Qutb desires that Islam return its focus to the Qur'an and away from scholasticism. Although an inference, it seems that Qutb also believes Muslims have become too focused on jurisprudence, especially because it is corrupted by non-Islamic ideas. His writings give the impression that although he does not entirely reject jurisprudence, he believes it has caused an unnecessary disunity in Islam.

Therefore, in Qutb's ideal Islamic society, all Muslims would unify and then derive laws textually from the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Qutb is in agreement with traditional Muslim thought that Shari'ah, which is the way of life prescribed by the Qur'an and the Sunnah, must become law for the Islamic community. While Qutb emphasizes that the first generation looked to the Qur'an alone, he argues that the Sunnah should also be used because it is derived directly from the actions of Muhammad. Because Muhammad's whole character

is equivalent to the Qur'an,⁸⁸ the use of the Sunnah does not distract from the Qur'an; rather, it is a practical extension of its spiritual teachings.

Qutb does depart from traditional Muslim thought, however, when he implies that jurisprudence is both a distraction and was corrupted by non-Islamic ideas in its formation. One piece of evidence is that he never allies himself with the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, or Hanbali schools of Islamic law. This is a surprising choice for a serious Islamic thinker who emphasizes the significance of Shari'ah. By not allying himself with any school, Qutb implies that none of the schools have a proper understanding of Shari'ah. Therefore, it is likely that Qutb would desire that when the new Islamic society is established, a pure version of Islamic law be implemented which derives itself directly from the Qur'an. From this pure stream of knowledge, society must "derive [its] concepts of life, and [its] principles of government, politics, economics and all other aspects of life."⁸⁹

At first, it seems odd that Qutb was not clear about his stance on the topic of Islamic jurisprudence. The most likely answer to this issue is that Qutb understood that he was at odds with traditional Islam on the topic. Clearly, Qutb wanted to create a unified Islamic movement that had a legitimate chance to succeed. It logically follows that he would be hesitant to expose an issue which would have potential to create disunity. Furthermore, it could have led to the labeling of his ideas as deviant by a majority of Muslim thinkers. It is probable that because of these self-defeating risks, Qutb did not clearly define his views on Islamic jurisprudence.

⁸⁷ *Milestones*, pg.13.

⁸⁸ Aisha, the wife of Muhammad, when asked about his character, is quoted as saying that "His character was the Qur'an" (*Milestones*, pg.12).

⁸⁹ *Milestones*, pg.16.

The second characteristic of the first generation of Muslims is that they had living faith because they regarded the Qur'an as an instruction book. Qutb argues that the nature of the Qur'an is considerably different from that of the Bible. Most Christians view the Bible as a book for spiritual reflection and self-examination. It is not a practical guide for life. For example, Jesus preaches that "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for you whole body to be cast into hell" (Matthew 5:29 NKJV). When a Christian reads this passage, he does not interpret it literally and proceed to remove his eye the next time he looks lustfully at a woman. In this sense, the Qur'an is unique. As stated in Verse 17:106, it was revealed gradually so that the people could recite it in intervals. Qutb argues that the gradual revelation allowed each Muslim to implement it into his practical life:

"None of them came to the Qur'an to increase his knowledge for the sake of knowledge itself or to solve some scientific or legal problems, or to improve his understanding. Rather he turned to the Qur'an to find out what the Almighty Creator has prescribed for him and for the group in which he lived, for his life, and for the life of the group. He approached it to act on what he heard immediately, as a soldier on the battlefield reads 'Today's Bulletin'..."⁹⁰

Gradual revelation is also significant because each portion was directly related to the current needs of the Muslim community. Hence, revelation was practical and intended for literal application. The new Islamic society should restore this view of the

Qur'an, and reject any form of Islam that is merely theoretical, abstract, and reflective.

Lastly, the first Muslims, once they embraced Islam, separated themselves from jahiliyyah immediately and completely. Qutb believes that they fully rejected any jahili environment and clung to Islam and the Qur'an. They did not compromise or mix their Islamic instructions with the instruction of jahili society. Because they no longer put value in jahiliyyah, "no pressure from the jahili society could have any effect on [their] firm resolve."⁹¹

Qutb stresses this point in *Milestones* because he felt that most Muslims during his time were compromising with jahiliyyah and mixing many of its beliefs and ideas with Islam. He writes on this point with emotional fervor which is reflective of his discontent:

"Today too we are surrounded by jahiliyyah. Its nature is the same as during the first period of Islam, and it is perhaps a little more deeply entrenched. Our whole environment, people's beliefs and ideas, habits and arts, rules and laws is jahiliyyah, even to the extent that what we consider to be Islamic culture, Islamic sources, Islamic philosophy, and Islamic thought are also constructs of jahiliyyah! This is why the true Islamic values never enter our hearts, why our minds are never illuminated by Islamic concepts, and why no group of people arises among us equal to the caliber of the first generation of Islam."⁹²

Similar to Lenin's refusal to compromise with capitalism through trade unionism, Qutb demands that the modern Islamic

⁹⁰ *Milestones*, pg.13.

⁹¹ *Milestones*, pg.15.

⁹² *Milestones*, pg.15.

movement refuse to concede anything to jahili societies, especially the West. Therefore, the construction of Qutb's Islamic society would start and end with the Qur'an. The demands and desires of jahili nations would play no role, even if it caused violent war. Qutb's view on this is reflective of his belief that truth and falsehood cannot co-exist. Hence, truth (Islam) loses its superiority the moment it takes on any attributes of falsity (jahiliyyah).

Just as the first Muslims created a community with faith as its foundation, so should the new Islamic society. Qutb claims that this spiritual foundation comes through the confession of "La ilaha illa Allah" ("There is no god except Allah"). Each member of Islamic society must make this confession and live by it. If they live by this confession, Qutb claims that Islamic society can then buildup its own institutions and practices into a fully Islamic society, with every aspect under God's sovereignty. Society should be based on belief because it is man's distinguishing attribute. According to Qutb, Islamic society will not pay heed to nationalism, class, or race. It will be a community of believers. Qutb claims that Islamic society will be greater than any other because it bases itself on spirituality. Islam's focus on spirituality is all-inclusive for humankind and brings out man's most noble characteristics. Qutb argues that nationalist, materialist, and ethnic societies base themselves on attributes that man has in common with animals. Consequently, they put a ceiling on societal progress and prosperity. Although Western societies may have reached high-levels of economic prosperity, they suffer morally and spiritually because of their ignorance of man's need for the spiritual.

Qutb argues that Islamic society will be the most civilized because it will give true freedom, which is spiritual freedom, to each individual. It ensures true freedom by

ending man's enslavement to other men as they experience in jahiliyyah. Islam frees them to worship God alone. Qutb believes that this type of spiritual freedom creates a freedom of conscience that destroys the barriers between God and man. While living life according to the demands of other men and man-made law, humans are incapable of fully understanding God because they are prohibited from worshipping him in complete submission. However, in Islamic society, man will be able to devote all thought and action to God, thereby giving him the opportunity to meet his highest spiritual potential.⁹³

Obviously, Qutb's version of freedom is much different than the Western view. For Qutb, true freedom must begin with spiritual freedom because all other things flow from it. Therefore, all people would be free to choose their faith in Islamic society. However, if they choose Islam and make the confession of faith, they must live under the laws of Shari'ah which will govern the society. In Qutb's view, their free moral choice of faith obligates them to live out that faith. Those who do not choose Islam are free to do so; however, they must also live under Islamic law. For Qutb, their free spiritual choice does not entitle them to disobey God's law and openly disobey His sovereignty. Islamic society has a responsibility to implement the truth:

"Among those whom we have created there is a community who guide others by means of the truth and with it establish justice. As for those who deny Our revelations, We will lead them on, step by step..." (Qur'an 7:181-182)

Although men can choose to reject Islam in their hearts, the community of believers is

⁹³ *Social Justice in Islam*, pp.53,57-58.

obligated to guide them towards Islam. Therefore, non-believers will also live under the same laws. Even if they do not realize it, Qutb claims that they have the same spiritual freedom as the Muslim. The difference is that they enslave themselves by their own free will while the Muslim uses his freedom to serve God.⁹⁴

In accordance with the above principles of freedom, Christians, Jews, and members of other religious groups would be permitted to practice their faith within limits. They may practice their faith until it infringes upon the Islamic nature of society. Once non-believers take actions which jeopardize the faith of Muslims, those actions will not be tolerated by the government. In practice, non-believers would be treated similarly to how they are treated in present-day Iran. For example, although their faith would be looked down upon by the community, Christians would be allowed to meet and worship privately. However, they could not mark their meeting place with a cross because it would infringe upon the spiritual purity of the Islamic community. Also, non-believers could consume alcohol behind closed doors. However, in the presence of a Muslim, they would be expected to abstain. If they did not abstain, it would infringe upon the Muslim's soul because there are no barriers between the internal soul and the external environment.

According to Qutb, Islamic society also provides for human equality of all kinds. The Qur'an teaches in Surah 4 that no human is superior in origin or nature, for all were created from the same human soul. Muhammad also said that "People are all as equal as the teeth of a comb."⁹⁵ Hence, there will be social equality of the classes. Once the human conscience is free, both the poor

and rich will desire equality because they will realize that it is God's will. All races will also be treated equally because God's revelation was universal for people of all skin colors.

Islam has been harshly criticized for its unequal treatment of women. Qutb argues that Islamic "has guaranteed to women a complete equality with men with regard to their sex."⁹⁶ Because men and women were created from the same soul, they have no inherent inequality. However, their differing physical endowments give the sexes different practical roles in society. Due to their maternal responsibility, women must tend to the family and the raising of children. Males have no such child-bearing physical qualities; therefore, he is able to attend to work and societal affairs. As a result of their differing roles, men and women develop differing abilities. Man's attention to societal issues causes him to become more intellectual, thoughtful, and reflective. Meanwhile, woman's focus on her family will cause her to grow in emotions and sentimentality. Qutb argues that wherever physical attributes and the resulting roles are identical, the sexes are treated the same. To prove this point, he mentions that women may choose their husband and dowry (Qur'an 2:231, 4:28). It is thereby implied by Qutb that Islamic society would permit women to work and vote until they became mothers. Qutb realizes that the West views Islamic equality as sexism. In response, he argues that the West establishes equality only in economic terms. Meanwhile, Islam provides a holistic spiritual equality that recognizes the differing qualities of the sexes⁹⁷

Along with the principles of freedom and equality, Islamic society will follow the principle of mutual responsibility. Qutb

⁹⁴ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.6, pp.281-282.

⁹⁵ *Social Justice in Islam*, pg.71.

⁹⁶ *Social Justice in Islam*, pg.73.

⁹⁷ *Social Justice in Islam*, pp.73-79.

believes that mutual responsibility must exist on several levels. First, the individual must have responsibility towards himself. This is his personal responsibility for the status of his soul. He must keep his soul true to the Islamic faith while living out his faith in all his actions. Second, the individual has responsibility towards his family. For Qutb, the family is the most important unit of society. It nurtures spiritual growth by teaching morality and faith, and it acts as a model for the larger societal family. It is for this reason that Islam has established rules regarding inheritance; just as a child inherits the physical and mental traits of his parents, he has a right to their material possessions.⁹⁸

The individual and society also have responsibilities towards each other. The individual should oversee the welfare of society. His work adds to the prosperity of society; in this way, his work fulfills his obligations to himself, his family, and society. Nevertheless, man cannot do anything he pleases, for he is responsible to society. In the same way, society is responsible to all individuals. It must protect the whole of society, so that individuals cannot direct it for their own interests. To illustrate this point, Qutb uses a story attributed to Muhammad. In the story, a group was traveling on a ship. One man struck an axe in the place where he stood and said he could do what he wished with his place. The group had no choice but to restrain him, for they would all die if they let him do as he wished. Hence, individuals have freedom to do as they please; however, if their actions are evil or detrimental to society as a whole, the society is responsible to protect the welfare of all individuals. Islamic society has this responsibility because it is a unified community of

believers. It cannot passively accept evil, for it must stand for truth.⁹⁹

Accordingly, Islamic society is responsible for the care of its weak members. For this reason, all members of society pay the *zakat*. The *zakat* is a charitable tax that is paid to provide for those who cannot provide for themselves. Qutb claims that “if any individual pass the night hungry, the blame attaches to the community because it did not bestir itself to feed him.”¹⁰⁰ Qutb compares Islamic society to one body because it is a community of believers. As Muhammad taught, the sufferings, hunger, or evildoing of one member of the community is felt by all others. Therefore, the whole community is responsible for resolving each issue.¹⁰¹

One of the major difficulties with Qutb is that he is unclear which issues are to be resolved by an Islamic government, and which issues are to be resolved by groups of believers who act on their own. Although an inference, it seems that wherever individuals cannot act on their own, Qutb provides that the government must step in to resolve an issue. Qutb does outline several social morality laws which must be implemented. Due to its responsibility to keep society clean, virtuous, and pleasing to God, Islamic government must implement such laws. Qur’an 24:19 provides for punishment of slanderers although it prescribes no specific punishment. It is likely that in these cases, the government would need to prescribe an appropriate punishment. However, in other instances such as adulterers where Qur’an 24:2 prescribes a specific punishment of one hundred lashes, a group of believers could act on their own initiative. On the question of how believers can judge the guilt of adulterers, Qur’an 24:4 specifically demands four witnesses. If someone accuses another

⁹⁸ *Social Justice in Islam*, pp.86-88.

⁹⁹ *Social Justice in Islam*, pp.86-88.

¹⁰⁰ *Social Justice in Islam*, pg.89.

¹⁰¹ *Social Justice in Islam*, pg.90.

of adultery yet cannot produce four witnesses, they are to be flogged with eighty lashes. Because the Qur'an clearly states its laws, there is no need for government involvement. By asking all believers to live directly by the words and laws of the Qur'an, Qutb implies that groups could act justifiably on behalf of the whole society without the intervention of a government in these cases.¹⁰²

Qutb also mentions a number of Qur'anic laws for which it is difficult to determine guilt or prescribe an appropriate punishment. These include commandments that regulate greetings (4:86), prohibit using the face to show disdain towards others (31:18), and prohibit derision, insults, and spying (49:11-12). Qutb refers to these laws as part of the social code which should govern Islamic society. It is likely that violation of these laws would not be directly punished. Rather, individual Muslims would correct the mistakes of their fellow Muslims in these cases through verbal means and spiritual consultation.¹⁰³

In his writings on politics and government, Qutb does not lay out a comprehensive plan for Islamic government. He does provide several principles that help in determining its powers and structure. The first principle is that Islamic government is the rule of God. Qutb argues that Islam gives no man sovereignty, for God is the only sovereign. Unlike past Christian governments which considered its kings to be divinely ordained, Islamic government itself is not divine. From this principle flows the idea that Islamic government implements Shari'ah; its authority begins and ends with this responsibility: "If he upholds the law and sees that religious duties are observed, then he has reached the limit of his powers."¹⁰⁴ Qutb stresses that,

therefore, rulers have no privileges, for all people stand equal before the law of God. Rulers must be just in their choices, and no oppression can be tolerated.¹⁰⁵

Another principle for Islamic government is that there must be consultation between the ruler and the community. When a law is clearly stated in the Qur'an or from the Sunnah, consultation is unnecessary. Those laws must be abided by all people. However, if there is no clear text for establishment of a law, consultation should be used. Consultation allows for *ijtihad* (one's own judgment) to be used among many Muslim. Qutb does not establish a clear method for consultation between the rulers and the people. Instead, he leaves it up to the individual situation of the community for them to determine. Qutb warns, however, against abuses of using *ijtihad* through consultation:

"No one is allowed to devise a law on his own and then claim that it accords with the Shari'ah...a sincere attempt must be made to know the will of Allah...This right [to know the will of Allah] cannot, however, be delegated to a person or group desirous to establish their own authority in the name of Allah, as was the case in Europe under 'the Church.' There is no 'Church' in Islam; no one can speak in the name of Allah except His Messenger, peace be on him."¹⁰⁶

Ijtihad must not be used as an excuse to neglect any form of consultation with the people. Qutb strongly warns against an Islamic theocracy that strays away from God and becomes a tyranny. It appears that Qutb foresaw the dangers of such clerics as

¹⁰² *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.1, pp.305-307.

¹⁰³ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.1, pp.305-306.

¹⁰⁴ *Social Justice in Islam*, pg.124.

¹⁰⁵ *Social Justice in Islam*, pp.119-124.

¹⁰⁶ *Milestones*, pg.70.

Ayatollah Khomeini. He warns that power cannot go unchecked, and that no man can be considered divinely influenced. Divine power lies in the Shari'ah alone, and all other laws must flow directly from it.¹⁰⁷

There is a need for reconciliation between two aspects of Qutb's Islamic society that have been discussed thus far. Qutb first establishes that the community is responsible for the welfare of the whole society. It acts as a single body; the welfare of each individual affects the welfare of the whole. Therefore, there is a need for the government to act on behalf of society when individuals cannot resolve their own issues. However, Qutb demands that the government only act as the implementer of Shari'ah. For Qutb, this potential problem is resolved as long as the government understands that new laws not included in the Shari'ah can be legislated only if they flow from the principles of the Shari'ah. Otherwise, the government will have given God's legislative authority to others. Qutb does not clarify who should determine which created laws are in agreement with the Shari'ah and which are not.¹⁰⁸

In *Social Justice in Islam*, Qutb indirectly states that rulers should be elected by democratic vote. It is possible that he viewed this as a way to discriminate legitimate legislators from those who transgress the Shari'ah. He says that the ruler "occupies his position only by the completely and absolutely free choice of all Muslims; and they are not bound to elect him by any compact with his predecessor."¹⁰⁹ When the community becomes dissatisfied with a ruler, his rule must end. Nevertheless, Qutb does not provide for a completely democratic system. The system is fundamentally based on the Shari'ah, so a ruler must be removed if he transgresses the

law, even if the community approves of his choices. Once again, it is unclear who will make such a determination.¹¹⁰

Like all other aspects of Islamic society, the economic system will also be governed by the principles of Shari'ah. Qutb claims that the Islamic economy has two objectives. Its first objective is the welfare of the individual, and the second is the welfare of society as a whole. It accomplishes both by legislating practical laws that help maintain an economically fair, just, and prosperous society. It also encourages men to be moral in their economic choices. For example, individuals should not waste money on things like gambling and other forms of sinful entertainment. Qutb also believes that if Islamic society basis itself upon a confession of faith by each individual, the economy will mold itself to be more egalitarian. If a Muslim has devout faith, he will not choose to exploit others for his own benefit. He will also choose outlets, such as alms-giving, for any excessive wealth which he may acquire. If he does not on his own accord, Qutb believes that the community has a responsibility to do it for him. This takes no governmental action, but rather can occur by the actions of individual citizens. Of course, if individuals in the community fail to take action, Qutb would likely approve of the government stepping in to implement God's commandments against luxury and exploitation. As much as is possible, Qutb also believes that Islamic society will have no class distinctions.¹¹¹

Despite the socialist appearance of these economic ideas, Qutb claims that Islam protects the right of individual ownership of property. It does this by protecting him from theft and robbery. However, this understanding of ownership is different from the Western understanding.

¹⁰⁷ *Social Justice in Islam*, pg.122; *Milestones*, pg.70.

¹⁰⁸ *Milestones*, pp.67-70.

¹⁰⁹ *Social Justice in Islam*, pg.121

¹¹⁰ *Social Justice in Islam*, pp.121-122.

¹¹¹ *Social Justice in Islam*, pp.127-128,158-159,164.

For Qutb, a Muslim's right to private property is more theoretical than practical. Although he owns and possesses it, the individual is supposed to act as a steward of his possessions on the behalf of society. His possession is more of a duty than a right. Therefore, if he uses his property in a way that is considered un-Islamic, he forfeits his right to ownership. Qutb summarizes this view by stating: "The fundamental principle is that property belongs to the community in general; individual possession is a stewardship which carries with it conditions and limitations."¹¹² His rights are reliant on fulfillment of his economic duties to society because all property is owned by God in the larger sense. Although an inference, Qutb implies that fellow Muslims should be the first to attempt to correct misuses of property by individuals. Then, if individual Muslims cannot correct a problem on their own, government must intervene. If a particular misuse becomes widespread, the government should then create regulations to prevent further misuses of property. Qutb argues that this contrasts with the Marxist system because it does not mean common ownership; rather, it means responsible private ownership that is enforced through regulation.¹¹³

Islam also outlaws usury and enforces payment of the zakat. Qutb argues that these two commandments go hand-in-hand: one representing rejection of the evil of exploitation; the other representing the good of charity. Usury is condemned in Qur'an 2:275-281. Qutb argues that economic systems that permit usury become usury-based because they endorse the concept that the objective of life is to gain wealth and enjoy its material rewards. As a result, usury creates misery and suffering for many people while only benefiting a small

group of moneylenders. It creates distrust between fellow humans and allows them to view each other as economic objects rather than spiritual brothers. Although some Muslim countries have allowed usury in the past, Qutb denounces such permissiveness as "pure humbug aimed at deceiving the public".¹¹⁴ He believes that Islamic society must eliminate all forms of usury and interest.¹¹⁵

Meanwhile, Islamic society will enforce the payment of the zakat. Those who may claim zakat include the poor, destitute, collectors of the zakat (who derive their salary from it), new converts to Islam, slaves, debtors, social workers, and refugees. Qutb views the zakat not as just an act of pity. On the level of the individual, it also acts as a way for the believer to cleanse his soul and improve his spiritual condition. On the level of society, it creates a sense of love, unity, and higher purpose.¹¹⁶

Ultimately, the success of Qutb's Islamic society relies upon the faith of each individual. Throughout his writing, Qutb expresses his belief that Islam is in perfect accordance with human nature. As a result, he believes that as long as each individual has sincere, genuine, and devout faith, society will work in harmony. It is for this reason that he implies distrust for a monolithic Islamic state that controls the actions of the people. The government should not be controlling their actions. It should act on behalf of their faith. His belief is that with the removal of jahili institutions which inhibited the spiritual consciousness of the people, the government would only have to act in a limited number of ways. Initially, the government may have to act strongly to establish God's system of life. But for Qutb and his Islamic society, it will

¹¹² *Social Justice in Islam*, pg.137.

¹¹³ *Social Justice in Islam*, pp.132-134; *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.1, pp.451-452.

¹¹⁴ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.1, pg.455.

¹¹⁵ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.1, pg.450-456.

¹¹⁶ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.1, pg.432-437; *Social Justice in Islam*, pp.165-166.

be anything but a tyranny. The community of believers will approve and desire such action because their faith demands it. Then over time, God's system of life will become so engrained in the hearts and habits of the people that governmental intervention will become unnecessary.

CONCLUSION

“This is the Way”

Sayyid Qutb's thought offers Muslims a comprehensive worldview. Qutb presents Islam as a comprehensive system of life, for “To God belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth; and indeed God encompasses everything” (Qur'an 4:126). It is because of its comprehensive nature that modern Islamic radicalism, using Qutb as a philosophical foundation, must be understood as more than an ideology of hate. Qutb lays out a road to victory for Islam. This is not just a message of hate for many Muslims. For them, it is a message of hope.

Qutb begins laying out the road by describing what Islam must reject and move away from. This is the jahiliyyah of Western civilization, which Qutb brands as a demented evil. The West represents society and man without God. However, this is not a hopeless and changeless situation for Qutb. Islam must use jihad as the mechanism of change. Jihad will be waged with the aim of returning society to God. Then at the end of the road, Qutb offers his visionary Islamic society, as utopian and far-fetched it may be to the Western thinker. This society reunites man under God's sovereignty.

For Qutb and Islamic radicalism, Islamic society is more than an alternative to the West. It is the ideal which every Muslim must be willing to give his life for. It is the final destiny of every Muslim to witness the triumph of God's system of life. He may witness this triumph on earth through the establishment of an ideal Islamic society. Even if a Muslim fails to achieve this type of earthly victory, he achieves victory because “the highest triumph is the victory of the soul over matter, the victory of belief

over pain, and the victory of faith over persecution.”¹¹⁷

It is in the hope of this final victory of Islam that Qutb offers more than a hateful ideology for Muslims. With the hope of victory comes the duty of each Muslim to serve God to the fullest extent. Qutb illustrates the price of this duty with chilling emotion in the concluding chapter of *Milestones* entitled “This is the Way”. He begins with the Qur’anic story of the ‘Makers of the Pit’. The unbelievers who commit jahiliyyah persecute the believers and the truth of Islam through the use of a pit of fire:

“By the heavens with constellations; by the Promised Day; by the witness and the witnessed; doomed were the makers of the pit, abundantly supplied with fuel, as they sat by it and the believers (burnt alive). (Their torturers) were outraged with them only because they believed in Allah, the All-Powerful, the All-Praise-worthy, He to Whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth. And Allah is Witness over everything.

Indeed, for those who persecute the believing men and women, and later do not repent, is the penalty of Hell; for them is the penalty of burning. As for those who believe and do good deeds, theirs are Gardens through which river flow, and this is the great triumph.” (Qur’an 85:1-11)

Through this story, Qutb forewarns Muslims of the persecution that will result if they attempt to overthrow jahiliyyah and establish Islam. It is through persecution, which may result in death, that the Muslim

witnesses the victory of Islam. According to Qutb, regardless of the earthly results, the death of a Muslim for the cause of Islam is a triumph. Qutb explains that like the believers in the pit, all Muslims can achieve victory through persecution, torture, or death:

“It was possible for these believers [in the pit] to save their lives by giving up their faith, but with how much loss to themselves, and with what a great loss to all mankind? They would have lost and would have denied the great truth. But life without belief is worthless, and life without freedom is degrading...This was that noble truth, the great truth, that the believers realized...while the fire was licking them and burning their mortal frames. This noble truth triumphed over the torment of the fire.”¹¹⁸

As explained in Chapter 2, Qutb claims the Qur’an teaches that each Muslim is obligated to serve God in full submission through the waging of jihad. Thus, Qutb argues that every true Muslim must become a willing martyr if his or her death is pursuant to the victory of Islam. For Qutb, this is “The Way” to the victory of Islam.

The connection between Qutb’s view of martyrdom and the modern problem of suicide bombings is clear. Through his writings, Qutb lifts martyrdom as glorious and blissful victory. Martyrdom becomes the inevitable hope of Islam. Likewise, modern radical Islam views suicide bombings and terrorism, which they believe is pursuant to the victory of Islam, as a glorious type of death. Through death, the Muslim believes that he triumphs and realizes his hope in God.

¹¹⁷ *Milestones*, pg.131.

¹¹⁸ *Milestones*, pg.131

In this respect, Sayyid Qutb acted as a model for modern Islamic radicalism. There is no doubt that this man practiced what he preached. He taught Islam from his jail cell and refused to do otherwise, even though it cost him his life. Western civilization must do more than the study the writings of Sayyid Qutb to understand the threat of modern Islam. The West must also study the face of Qutb as he received his death sentence from the Egyptian court. It is reported that when Qutb learned of his fate, a smile appeared across his face. In this smile, Qutb illustrates the greatest danger of radical Islam. Whether by combat, execution, or suicide, death for Islam is a joyous victory in itself.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, vol.3, pg.xviii.

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