The Thought of Sayed Qutb: A Critique

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Abstract

The main objective of this study is to prove two fundamental points: the first one is that Sayed Qutb (1906 - 1966), the Islamic thinker, bears the intellectual responsibility as regards the emergence of the extremist religious groups in Egypt, on the ground that these groups are influenced by the legitimate vindication and religious interpretations set forth by Sayed Qutb in his famous book *Maalim Fi Al-Tariq* (Land marks on the Road). It is well known that Qutb cited in this book, according to his conception of Islamic Law, the methods that should be followed to set up the Islamic society and hence the state, on the debris of contemporary political systems or the state of Paganism, by what he called "The faithful clique", or the organized Islamic movement. It was thus believed that this book represents the source which supplied the extremist religious groups with the legitimacy of the principle of Jihad (Holy War) against Pagan society which does not rule by what the Almighty Allah set down, in Hukm - U - Allah, which implies infidelity of both society and state, and hence the duty to abolish them.

The second point is that Sayed Qutb has failed in supplying Islamic political thought and hence the Muslims, with a real content of thought which would improve their intellectual status as represented by Islamic society and the Islamic state.
There is general agreement among academic researchers, that Sayed Qutb (1906-1966), the Islamic thinker, bears the intellectual responsibility as regards the emergence of extremist religious groups in Egypt, on the ground that these groups are influenced by the legitimate vindication and religious interpretations set forth by Sayed Qutb in his famous book, *Maalim Fi Al-Tariq* or Land marks on the Road. It is well known that Qutb cited in this book, according to his conception of Islamic Law, the methods that should be followed to set up Islamic society and hence the state on the debris of the contemporary political systems or the state of Paganism, by what he called "The faithful clique" or the organized Islamic movement. It was thus believed that this book represents the source which supplied the extremist religious groups with the legitimacy of the principle of Jihad (Holy War), against Pagan society which is not governed by what the Almighty Allah set down in Hukm - U - Allah, which implies the infidelity of both society and state, and hence the duty to abolish them.¹

Some researchers described the book *Maalim Fi Al Tariq* as an "ideological dungeon", because Sayed Qutb wrote it when he was suffering torture in jail.² Others think that the concept of the infidelity of the Egyptian society and political system was fomented among members of the Muslim Brothers Movement, when they were undergoing the ordeal of torture in prison during the era of Jamal Abdul Naser.³ Another group of researchers contend that from the theoretical point of view, it is unjust to blame Sayed Qutb alone for the idea of violence because the then leader of the Muslim Brothers Movement, Hassan Al-Hudhaibi, approved the circulation of the book among the members of the movement, as part of their educational programme.⁴ Moreover, some other sources indicate that the Egyptian leader Jamal Abdul Naser did not find any reason to prevent the publication of the book.⁵ Added to this is the fact that Qutb himself did not charge the society with infidelity as the other arbitrers did.⁶ In point of fact, he asked "The faithful clique" to practice some kind of communication with the other groups surrounded by ignorant Jahilia.⁷

The concept of religious ideology was deeply rooted in the thought of Sayed Qutb during 1951 - 1965, when he deserted the study of literature and joined the Movement of Muslim Brothers. After that he started writing on a series of topics which reflected his adoption of new religions, i.e. "Al-Salam Al-Alami Wa-Al-Islam" (International peace and Islam), "Hatha Al-Din," (This religion), "Al Mustaqbal Li-Hatha Al-Din", (The future is for this religion), "Dirassat Islamiya" (Islamic Studies), and "Fi Zillal Al-Quran", (In the shades of the Quran). He topped his efforts by writing his famous book, *Maalim Fi Al-Tariq*, where he strongly criticized the idea of isolating Islam from the state, as is advocated by secularists in Egypt. He then called for the establishment of the Islamic society.⁸
If we look into the political life of Qutb, we can say that his ideological firmness started in the early fifties when he adopted a strict standpoint towards the Islamic system to be followed in Egyptian society.

"It is Islam or no Islam.... it is the struggle that never dies down, and martyrdom for the sake of Allah". These are Qutb's words. Prior to that, his political life was unstable. He joined the nationalist party "Misr Al Fatah", which he later left because he did not find anything that distinguished it from other political parties in Egypt. "Then he drifted towards literary studies and joined the Muslim Brothers Movement without full adoption of its Islamic concepts. This may be because after the Egyptian revolution of 1952, he joined the Maalim Fi Al-Tariq movement which impressed him with its socialistic ideas of the revolution. His relations with the free officers at that time perhaps hindered his fusion of Islamic ideology with the movement." His adaptation of the theory of socialism is very clear in his book "Maarakat Al-Islam Wa Al-Rasmia", (The battle of Islam with capitalism). Finally, he reached the absolute conviction that "Islam is an indivisible entirety" and that societies anywhere at any time are either "Islamic" or "Pagan" and there is nothing except Islam.

It took Sayed Qutb forty years to declare that Muslims today live in a state of Paganism (Jahilia), similar to that witnessed by Islam in its early days, if not much worse. He concluded that "even most of what we consider as Islamic culture, Islamic philosophy, and Islamic thinking .... are a product of this "Paganism". Thus, "our first duty should be changing the basis of the Pagan state which runs the society".

A contemporary researcher observes that Qutb succeeded in utilizing a strict logical methodology within a framework of religious imagination, and that he was the first Islamic intellectual who made a clear distinction between two kinds of societies, distinguishing the characteristics of each of them. In addition, he declares that Sayed Qutb fully clarified that "Al-Hakimmia li-Allah" or, " the uppermost governing is by Allah".

The execution of Qutb during the Abdul-Naser era helped the creation of a state of sanctification of his personality. This seems normal because of the prevailing conviction among the members of the religious groups, that his execution was martyrdom in itself. Martyrs have a special rank in Muslim sentiments because they represent an eternal symbol which enlightens the road for those who follow. This may have partly resulted in inculcating a positive bias towards Qutb's work, and hence, relative lack of a critical enquiry into his work.

The aim of this study is to try to prove that Sayed Qutb failed in supplying Islamic political thought, and hence the Muslims, with a real content of thought which would improve their intellectual status as represented by Islamic society and the Islamic state.
The state of sanctification has impeded the ability of many Muslim intellectuals to present a neutral and scientific evaluation of Qutb’s thought. This sentiment deprived these studies and researches of the logic of rationality, which is considered the core or the backbone of any academic research, even if it has any connection with religious text.

Regional Intellectualism

In spite of the fact that Islamic thought is a worldwide phenomenon, the followers of religious movements deal with it from a territorial standpoint. Religious groups tend to work according to the facts of territorial actuality. This may explain the differences in the working methodologies of the Muslim Brothers Movement, from one country to another, according to the viewpoint of each group within the political system it belongs to. One can observe that its style of work in Syria differs completely from that in Egypt and Tunis as well as in the Arabian Gulf.

The Muslim Brothers Movement, which first appeared in Egypt in 1928, under the leadership of Hassan Al-Banna, originated from this state of affairs, and endeavored to solve its own problems while employing the general Islamic ideas it utilized. The movement still works for the Egyptian area. It would not be exaggeration to say that it exploited, and still does exploit, the common Islamic sentiments for its own benefit, within Egyptian society.

Almost all that Sayed Qutb has written originated from and expressed the Egyptian state of affairs. When he spoke about the Pagan society or Al-Mujtama’a Al-Jahili, the speech turned to the Egyptian society in which he lived, and the system that should be changed was the Egyptian one represented by Jamal Abdul-Naser. When talking about social justice, what is meant is social life in Egyptian society, such as notorious exploitations and the loss of rights of workers and peasants, as well as malproduction and other factors. All these ideas are embodied in his book "Ma’rakat Al-Islam Wa-Al-Ra’smalia". Within this context, one of the contemporary researchers wrote the following: "Qutb’s thought is considered one of the Egyptian political alternatives towards addressing the problems of society". This thought did not come out of thin air but developed in a historical and social environment which influenced the thought and was influenced by it. That means that some elements of his thought constituted a response to the then prevalent material and intellectual environment enriched by the writer’s personal experience in spite of the relative independent character from that of the group.

One can say that this is normal because of the fact that Egyptian society is the most modern among the contemporary Arab societies, and it did not preclude the expression of Qutb’s judgements. According to him, what applies to Egyptian society applies to other Arab societies. However, the fact cannot be
ignored, that Sayed Qutb’s thought did not really take into consideration the social, political, and economic problems in these societies, although they were more miserable than those in Egypt.

**Non-original Intellectualism**

"The driving point from the existing reality and changing it", or what is called in Arabic language "Al-Mufasala", is a decisive result which Sayed Qutb did not reach by his own reading of Islamic thought and history. He borrowed the idea from the readings of the Pakistani thinker Abu-Al-Ala Al-Mawdoodi, which were full of phrases such as "Hakimiat-U-Allah" or Uppermost Governing is by Allah, and Paganism or Jahiliya. Worth noting here is the similarity in the life experiences, on the social and political levels, of both Qutb and Mawdoodi, which led to the similarity of thought. In this respect one can compare Qutb’s book "Social justice in Islam" which he wrote when he was free enjoying his full civil rights, with Al-Mawdoodi’s book "Towards a peaceful revolution" which contained many researches and lectures, which advocated dealing with the heterogeneous Indian society through graceful appeal, and attempting to reform society by peaceful methods. The two books do not describe society as Pagan (Jahili), nor advocate its demolition along with the establishment of Islamic society on its ruins. On the other hand, Qutb’s book, *Maalim Fi Al-Tarih* came after torture in prison, and was described by Qutb himself as the book which contains the essence of any opinions on the basis of which I led the group ... it was a working plan and the answer to the question: What to do? Similarly, Al-Mawdoodi’s books "Principles of Islam", "The four nomenclatures", "The Islamic Government" and others reveal that violence in his thought came into being after the eviction and imprisonment imposed on him by the leaders of the new Pakistani regime, following the separation from India. Sayed Qutb acknowledges the influence of Mawdoodi’s books on him. He read these during his stay in prison, and he refers to "Principles of Islam", in particular, when putting forward his points of view on the formation and characteristics of Muslim society.

The concepts such as "Al-Hakimia" and "Jahilia", that Qutb expressed in his book *Maalim Fi Al-Tarih* did not appear in the thought of the Muslim Brothers Movement or that of its leader, Hassan Al-Banna. On the other hand, Al-Azhar, the most important religious institution in the Muslim world, rejected all the ideas expressed in the book, describing it as an invitation for destruction, and in contrast with Islamic concepts. However, the concept of Islamic society, was clear in Qutb’s mind since the fifties when he wrote his book "Islamic Studies", and he repeated his ideas about this society, like Al-Mawdoodi, to give a complete picture.
The result of this trial was a total failure, as it was with Al-Mawdoodi, who always starts with postulates which he believes in and facts which he does not discuss, then carries through these beliefs and facts with his own logic, ending up with specific conclusions that satisfied him.\textsuperscript{32} Sayed Qutb and others who read Al-Mawdoodi's book are blamed for isolating the religious texts from the context.\textsuperscript{33} Therefore, many factions in the sphere of Islamic revivalism still sanctify the ideological phrasings of Al-Mawdoodi regarding Indian society between 1937-1941, when India was a British colony with a Hindu majority.\textsuperscript{34}

Non-originality in Qutb's thought becomes apparent when he lifted the predicaments of Al-Mawdoodi from its peculiar Indian circumstances, and employed it in the contemporary Arabic and Islamic sphere which is completely different. In fact, Qutb dealt with some of these predicaments with more extremism when he refused Arab nationalism "Al-Qaumia Al-Arabia" in general, while Al-Mawdoodi only refused political nationalism on which the Indian Congress Party based its appeal for the unity of India.

Al-Mawdoodi did not refuse the so called "civilized nationalism" and advocated a future India based on the social acceptance of all races and religious sects. His judgement of infidelity, Takfeer, was limited to the state which was non-Islamic in values and laws. Sayed Qutb judged a nation as infidel except for the faithful clique who considered his book \textit{Maalim Fi Al-Tariq} as a guide.\textsuperscript{35}

In this manner, Sayed Qutb is a mere transcriber. Apart from amputation and partitioning in copying from Al-Mawdoodi, and unawareness of the topics discussed by Al-Mawdoodi concerning his society, Qutb failed in recognizing the state of affairs in the Arab World or even in Egyptian society. Instead of presenting a comprehensive conception about how to reform, he resorted to an extremist invitation for disentanglement through isolation and cancelling of the political system by violence. It is also noted that Qutb did not refer to the topics discussed by Hassan Al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brothers Movement, which stand completely in contrast with the thought of Qutb himself.\textsuperscript{36}

The refutation of society, and the call for demolishing it on the grounds of its Paganism, is an easy task and does not need any intellectual innovation. Authenticity in thought is inherent in the degree of ability to create the appropriate methodology for understanding the existing reality even if it is semi-Islamic, and to strive intellectually to change its social, political, economic and cultural terminology and to achieve the Islamic sphere and conception. This explains Qutb's failure to determine a clear conception of the system of the Shura or political consultation, and the role of the Islamic block or the faithful clique in society.
Islamic Shura

In spite of the fact that Qutb discussed the concept of the Islamic Shura in his writings, he failed to embody it into a practical political system, as has been done in Western democracy. The word "Shura" appeared as an emotional concept aiming to arouse the spirit of the glorious past of the Orthodox Caliphate. Qutb called for the cancellation of the role of the human being as an intellectual value and to replace him by Allah. This call stands in contradiction with the concept of freedom and democracy, as well as with the disavowal of the role of the human being in legislation. At the same time he insisted on the role of man in the formation of Allah's kingdom on earth, through the application of divine method and speaking up against justice and tyranny, and returning rule to the nation. Sayed Qutb never asks how man can achieve all that on the one hand, and yet accept the idea of the cancellation of his role in legislation, let alone Qutb's call for demolishing the society in which this human being lives.

Sayed Qutb loses his ideological logic when he insists on taking a middle way between the kingdom of Allah and the kingdom of man, searching for faith which should be settled first in the hearts of believers. Many questions arose concerning this issue, such as the period between lack of faith and its renewal, the political systems man has to deal with until the formation of Allah's kingdom, the possibility of establishing Allah's kingdom on earth without the efforts of the human being. Leaving these questions without clear and substantial answers demonstrates the ambiguity of Qutb's thought. Qutb says, "Whenever Muslims have faith truly established in their hearts, then the Islamic system develops by itself". Sayed Qutb had no answer as to how this happened.

Advocating a theoretical conception like "Shura" without giving it an institutional framework only arouses Muslim sentiments without anything useful and practical. Qutb, however, never admits his failure. In fact he accepted the existing reality when he said, "Every era has its needs, necessities and style of life". Furthermore, he admitted the right of the nation to choose its president on the basis of the existing relationship between the two parts through the concept of the "Contract" and "Proxy". Because of his inability to get out of the dilemma of the religious text, Qutb could not advocate the imposition of the principle of "Shura" upon the ruler. In other words, he refused to deal with democracy and the sovereignty of the nation, because it is a western concept coming from the Pagan West which does not rule by what Allah set down.

The failure of Qutb to give a definite opinion on the degree of coerciveness of the "Shura", and his abiding by the traditional view of the jurisprudents, included also his standpoint as regards the means by which "Shura" could be achieved. He did not take into consideration the cultural differences between the Prophetic and Orthodox Caliphate state, and the modern one. He could not
comprehend the difficulty of the practical application of the "Shura". In the past it was easy for the Caliph to call on the tribal leader in the mosque for advice and consultation. In view of this incomparable situation, Qutb is compelled to use the political terminology of modern times, saying, Should Shura be practised through voting in all matters or only some of them, or by voting by only the influential people "Ahl Al-Hal Wa Al-Aqd" or through the representatives of unions, universities and different syndicates? Is it through verbal or written voting? All this is left to be determined by the circumstances of each nation and the human experience which achieves "Shura" at its best levels.⁴¹

Qutb does not ask when, how, and where these experiences will take place. Is it certain that the experiment of the religious order will succeed? Qutb does not bother to comment on the wrong actions of most of the caliphs in Islamic history. He also refuses to admit that the Orthodox Caliphate lasted only a few years, not more than twenty, if we exclude the years of sedition. The Caliphate which Qutb calls for as an alternative to the existing Western political system, has no real existence at the present time. This is why he fails to determine the way by which it could be known as to who should take the Caliphate. Qutb claims that this person is known to "Ahl Al-Hal Wa Al-Aqd" and the public, and hence he does not need to declare himself.⁴² In fact it seems that Qutb is talking about the society of the village, not the society of the modern state. What he propagated is unrealizable even in a city - state. Then he goes into unreality when he states that "fear of Allah" is the final guarantee in achieving justice.⁴³

It is clear that Qutb decided to take the easy way out of reality by denying it. In this way he thinks that he had got rid of all the ideological paradoxes which oppose his ideological treatises which are inappropriate for recent times. Qutb is, in fact, ignoring the realities of history, denying the facts of society, and refusing to make use of the richness and diversities of human experiences.⁴⁴ In other words, Qutb's methodology represents a Utopian and non-realistic vision of history and civilization. It is a mental image isolated from the facts of life.⁴⁵

It is clear that the political and social writings of Qutb about the concept of "Shura" and the Caliphate, as well as the publications of the preceding jurists such as Al-Mawardi and Ibn Taymiya, were held back in the book because of their incapacity to harmonize with reality, and the failure to crystallize these conceptions into a tangible political and social reality.

Conclusion

The cultural value of any thought is determined by the degree of its contribution to the development of society, towards better life, irrespective of the size of the society under consideration. The "Utilization" of the Islamic appeal method within a non-Islamic reality has been an original principle in the
history of Islamic appeal, since the era of the Prophet and the followers of the Orthodox Caliphs. One can mention the Medina constitution which the Prophet concluded with the Jews and polytheists, according to which the Prophet recognized these sects as an "Umma" nation with its own characteristics. Historical sources also tell us that the Prophet changed his mind about re-establishing the foundations of the Holy Kaba after the Mekka conquest, because of the inexperience of the people in theism. Moreover, the Orthodox Caliphs dealt with various events according to the Quranic verse "Appeal for the path of Allah by wisdom and the good preachment". Al-Nahl-125. Muslims did not adopt Jihad or the Holy War Quranic verses, except against polytheists after informing them through good preachment. If we look into the publications of the jurists such as "Al-Ahkm Al-Sultaniya" and "Al-Siyash Al-Shariya", we do not find any call for Jihad against Muslims inside their society, even if they committed abominable actions. Nor do we find any claim for excluding them from society on the ground of prevalence of abominable actions. Moreover, all the companions of the Prophet, both partisans and jurists, dealt with the Islamic countries which ignored religious rules in politics. For example, Umawiyes and Abbasiys in the past, and more recently the Ottoman state were treated as Islamic countries. No religious scholar appealed for their abolition or even called to fight them. All the religious movements in the contemporary Arab World, except that of Hizb Al Tahrir and the religious movements that adopt Qutb's thought, such as Al-Takfir Wa Al-Hijra and Jamaat Al-Jihad, are convinced that the only way to achieve the Islamic goals of society and its laws, is by making use of the tools available in the existing political system, such as freedom of speech, information, and political parties. This can be combined with the conclusion of alliances with other parties, in order to join the parliament and deal with society's problems with full awareness, in order to change society from inside, by practicing politics through constitutional channels, accepting the principle of political pluralism. All these can be done without estranging the people by calling on them to discard and demolish the society they live in.

The thought of Sayed Qutb is still active among many religious groups which adopt the idea of "Jahilia" and "Hakimia". They strive hard to destroy the existing state and construct an Islamic state on its ruins. Promoting mutual understanding with these groups is the responsibility of the active Islamic movement in the Arab World, through the appeal for public debate. The political systems in the Arab countries seem to be unwilling to engage in debate with these groups which are described as extremists, and sometimes terrorists, in mass media. This is normal because any political system, irrespective of its nationality, does not accept the existence of any party, religious or secular, which calls for its destruction.
The affliction of conflict between the groups which adopt the fundamentalists' concepts, and the Arab political systems, will continue to exist in contemporary Arab societies until the principle of political sharing is achieved and the principle of political pluralism is accepted by all. When this happens, all the ideas of Qutb would be rejected and denied.

Foot Notes

13. Ibid., p. 70.
14. All the publications of Sayed Qutb which were written during 1953-1965 follow in one direction which is the formation of Islamic society, or according to Sayed Qutb "the Kingdom of Allah on earth".
15. Ma lim Fi al-tariq, p., 1510.
16. Ibid., p., 188.
17. Loc. cit.
18. M. Fadhallaah, op. cit., pp. 210-211.
19. The main problem of most researchers on Islamic thought is their apprehension to criticize the thought of those who depend on the religious text in their interpretations, in order not to be accused of secularism or infidelity. There is another group of researchers who consider Qutb as one of the "Sacrosancts" which should not be dealt with.
22. M.H. Diyab, op. cit., pp. 19,24-25. See also Sayed Qutb, Markaz Al-Islam wa Al-Rasmalah, Cairo 1979, Qutb derives all his evidence from Egyptian Society.
24. Ibid., p. 257.
25. Translated and prepared by Dar Al-Uroba for Islamic appeal, Lahore, Pakistan, 1968.
27. M.H. Diyab, op. cit., pp. 94.
34. Ibid., p. 17.
35. Some researchers recognize a contradiction between the thoughts of Hassan Al-Banna and Sayed Qutb. Those differences were a result of the circumstances of each one. See Tariq Al-Bishri, "Malim Al-Umma Li-Fikr Al-Siyasi Al-Islami Fi Al-Tariq Al-Muasir", in A. Al-Nefeesi, op cit., p. 137.
36. S. Qutb, Haza Al-Din, 9th, ed. Cairo 1987 pp. 5-9, and Dirasat Islamiya op. cit. p. 16.
39. Al-Adala Al-Ijtima'a Fi Al-Islam, p. 82, and Al-Salam Al-Alami wa Al-Islam, pp. 122-123.
41. Nahw Majtam Islami, p. 141.
42. M. Fadhalih, op. cit., p. 173.
43. Al-Aqal Al-Ijtima'a Fi Al-Islam, p. 86.
44. M. Diyab, op. cit., p. 105.
45. Ibid.