

Sayyid Qutb: The Life and Legacy of a Radical Islamic Intellectual

James Toth

New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 382 pages.

Sayyid Qutb's influence upon radical Islamic movements during the second half of the twentieth century is undeniable and has long been recognized. Recent interest in the rise of radical Islam has led to a number of publications on him, including a biography by James Calvert and several pieces that analyze certain aspects of his ideology and writings. James Toth's new text, which presents a general biography of Qutb, seeks to combine these functions by emphasizing the trajectory of his literary career along with offering a topical analysis of the major themes found within his writings. At the same time, Toth provides a fresh and comprehensive evaluation of the career and impact of this famous Islamist ideologue.

The book is divided into two main sections, the first of which describes Qutb's life story from his childhood in Upper Egypt through his secular writing career, increasing radicalization, involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood, prison years, and eventual execution by the Egyptian government in 1966. The second section, which provides a detailed analysis of his ideology, draws heavily from his writings and is arranged thematically. In it, Toth touches on such important topics as Qutb's interpretation of Islam, his view of it as a revitalization movement, his vision for an Islamic society and economic system, and his understanding of the Islamic state and history. The book also includes a lengthy appendix, with special sections that provide short biographies on prior Islamic writers who influenced Qutb's thinking as well as summaries of his views on women/family, *dhimmi*s (non-Muslims living in a Muslim society), and apologetics. It concludes with a detailed collection of notes as well as a comprehensive bibliography and index.

Rather than presenting Qutb's move toward radicalism as a sharp departure from his prior values and beliefs, Toth seeks to ground his convictions within the context of his childhood in a small Upper Egyptian village and to identify consistent themes that reoccurred throughout his career. During his approximately fifteen years as a literary critic, Qutb focused on poetry and associated himself with the *Diwan* school of literary criticism led by his mentor Abbas al-'Aqqad. This school emphasized modernity, individualism, and secularism, three principles that he would reject later on during the radical phase of his career. Yet he was always a person of strong convictions, one who had an abiding religious orientation, an interest in pedagogy, and a some-

what utopian aesthetic. Qutb would always look back fondly on his childhood and the conservative values that he had learned in the village.

Qutb lived during a turbulent time, for Egypt was trying to break free of western (particularly British) dominance and chart its own course as an independent nation. Many of his intellectual contemporaries were attracted to western ideas and cultural norms. However, as British influence continued to dominate the country during the 1930s and early 1940s, a reality that culminated in its use of Cairo as a base for its war in North Africa during World War II, Qutb increasingly began to believe that Egypt needed to break free from western materialism and secularism and return to its Islamic roots. The author traces this transition in a thorough discussion of Qutb's writings, and particularly his *Social Justice in Islam* (1948), which Qutb himself revised five times during the remaining years of his life.

For Toth, this book reflects the "moderate Islamism" phase of Qutb's development. He says that it expresses the ideologue's growing conviction that only Islam can solve the existing social problems because only it presents the perfect divine plan for humanity, as opposed to all of the man-made solutions that have so miserably failed to establish a just and righteous society. The author contrasts *Social Justice in Islam* with the longer *In the Shade of the Qur'an* and the better known *Signposts on the Road*. At its core, he writes, *Social Justice* presents "a social democratic program" and is not, "like *Signposts*, a revolutionary proclamation" (p. 64). He believes that *Social Justice* allows the reader to understand the more positive side of Qutb's vision for society, rather than simply focusing upon the things he was against, such as westernization and secularism.

Nevertheless, Toth does not downplay the significance of Qutb's growing radicalization. He refers several times to the "Kharijite" elements of his developing worldview and discusses the influence of the South Asian Islamists Abu al-A'la Mawdudi (d. 1979) and Abu al-Hasan Ali Nadwi (d. 1999), as well as the medieval Hanbali scholar Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328), upon Qutb's thought during the late 1940s and early 1950s. Toth devotes several pages to the ideologue's two-year visit to the United States, pointing out that "when Qutb left Egypt, he was a moderate Islamist and a social democrat. When he returned, he was an extreme radical" (p. 65). Yet, at most, the author sees this trip as "reinforc(ing) (Qutb's) preconceived pessimism toward Western civilization" (p. 68). Rather, it was the "deepening of Egypt's own crises" that would "turn his potential militancy into a reality" (p. 68).

Upon his return, Qutb found "a country that was falling apart, afflicted with poverty, disaffection and unrest" (p. 72). By now he was thoroughly convinced that the source of these problems was Egypt's failure to implement "true

Islam.” Toth discusses his move toward an alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) during the early 1950s, followed by the Free Officers’ Coup of 1952 and the MB’s eventual falling out with the government of Gamal Abdel Nasser. In the end, Sayyid Qutb would be rounded up with other MB members in late 1954 and spend more than nine years in prison, before his temporary release in May 1964. But despite being repeatedly tortured and increasing health problems, ironically these years would prove to be very productive for his career as a leading Islamist ideologue – he would finish his “magnum opus,” the six-volume Qur’anic commentary *In the Shade of the Qur’an* and his short but extremely influential Islamist tome *Signposts on the Road*.

There is little doubt that Qutb’s prison experiences intensified his radicalization. During this period he appears to have concluded that Egypt as a whole, along with its leadership, was in a state of *jāhiliyah* (spiritual ignorance). His prison writings, the most radical of his lifetime, often seem to suggest violence as the only solution to the ongoing problems plaguing the Muslim world. In fact, *Signposts* became “the principal source of evidence presented at Qutb’s Military Court trial in 1966,” after his re-arrest during August 1965 (p. 88). It was on the basis of this evidence that he was convicted and sentenced to death in August 1966. After refusing to renounce his doctrine, he was hanged on August 29, 1966, thus ensuring his status as a martyr for the movement and adding increased legitimacy to his message.

Toth analyzes this message in extensive detail in part 2, where he identifies the main elements of Qutb’s Islamic vision. He employs a comprehensive and at times somewhat repetitive approach in an apparent attempt to demonstrate the ideology’s cohesive nature and to justify Qutb’s reputation as the ideologue of modern Islamism. This analysis is supported by frequent (and sometimes lengthy) citations from the original sources. Indeed, the author’s extensive familiarity with the breadth of Qutb’s work makes this book a very valuable addition to our understanding of his volatile and influential career. Toth highlights elements of this ideologue’s thought that are often overlooked, such as his strong sense of economic justice, belief that Islam teaches balance and moderation, and practical view of Islam as a faith movement rather than just a collection of rules and rituals.

In terms of discussing Qutb’s long term-influence, Toth’s text is somewhat less detailed. The analysis that he does provide is offered in a twenty-five-page epilogue presented in a somewhat disordered chronological manner. It jumps thirty years forward from Qutb’s execution to the late 1990s, when Toth states that Egypt’s “domestic Islamist militancy ... was thought to have come to a halt” (p. 235). He then moves back to the early 1970s, traces the movement’s progress through the 1990s, and finally ends up in 2010 and begins to

move through the Arab Spring to the hopeful democratic period that existed in Egypt at the time the book was published (2013). Through it all, the author notes Qutb's enduring legacy in terms of the varying ways that Egyptian Islamists have interpreted his writings since his death.

Although not an easy read, Toth's text is an important addition to the study of radical Islam in the modern age and is of particular interest to readers who wish to learn more about the life and teachings of the twentieth century's leading Islamist ideologue.

Stephen Cory
Departments of History and Religious Studies
Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH