

Who Was Sayyid Qutb?

[abridged from the book, The 'Wahhabi' Myth by Haneef James Oliver]

"Sayyid Qutb had no knowledge of the fundamental or subsidiary matters of Islam." - Shaykh Muhammad Naasir ad-Deen al-Albaanee

Sayyid Qutb (1906-66) was born in a small town in Upper Egypt and moved to Cairo as an adolescent in order to further his education. Qutb began to write in the late 1920s as a poet and literary critic, writing about social and political matters from a secular standpoint. By 1948, Qutb changed his mode of writing, and began to write from a more Islamic perspective, according to the limited knowledge of Islaam that he had. Social Justice, his first Islamic book, was published in 1949.

After his return from a two-year study tour in the United States that ended in 1950, Qutb joined al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun (the Muslim Brotherhood), becoming one of their leading spokesmen. After the movement openly opposed the government of Jamal Abdul Nasser, Qutb essentially spent the rest of his life in prison after 1954, except for a brief period in 1964-65. After being temporarily released, Qutb was re-apprehended, tried and executed for treason in 1966.

Qutb's lack of knowledge in Islam coupled by his jailing led him to change his understanding of Islam according to the circumstances he was faced with. Consequently, his writings became more and more radical as time went by. Eventually, his revolutionary ideology of takfir (excommunication) and setting out against the authorities became ingrained in the minds and hearts of a new generation of youth who were looking for something greater than the failed way of al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun. To this day, Qutb is considered to be the head of this ideology for all insurrectionary groups.

His new-fangled way of understanding Islam is evident in his attempt to write a tafsir (explanation) of the Qur'aan called Fee Thilaalil-Qur'aan (In the Shade of the Qur'aan). Qutb was not interested in following the traditional approach of explaining the Qur'aan, which is to firstly refer to the Qur'aan itself for other verses which clarify the meaning, then the Hadeeths of the Prophet (may Allaah raise his rank and grant him peace) which deal with the meanings of specific verses, or if this does not exist, to refer to the explanations of his companions. Hence, it cannot be referred to as a tafsir in the conventional sense.

Referring to the explanations of the companions is a legislated matter in Islaam, because they witnessed the revelation of the Qur'aan and were taught its understanding and application by the one to whom it was revealed. Consequently, they were commissioned to transmit the texts of the Qur'aan and Haadeeths that we read today and were also charged with the responsibility of retaining the explanations of the texts as well as their causes and occasions of revelation.

Instead of referring to these important sources, Qutb used his own opinions to explain the Qur'aan – over and above these sources. Consequently, this tafsir contains numerous errors which the Salafi scholars have already clarified for the people.

Because of his ignorance of the orthodox system of Islamic belief, Qutb came up with a hodgepodge of statements collected from all of the various Islamic sects

which have sprung up since the earliest years of Islamic civilization. Far from being upon the creed of the "Wahhabis", Qutb was influenced by the Mu'tazili/Sufi philosophical school of thought which prevails in that area of the Middle East. This system of belief runs completely contrary to the so-called "Wahhabi" creed.

Since he abandoned the methodology of returning to the understanding of the Prophet (may Allaah raise his rank and grant him peace) and his companions when approaching the texts of the Qur'aan and Sunnah, Qutb became engrossed in the faults and sins of those around him, particularly those of the rulers.

As the Islamic groups such as al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun sought to usurp the authority of the Egyptian rulers, the government responded by clamping down on them, sometimes in brutal ways. This environment caused Qutb to form a particular outlook of the world, and his absence of proper grounding in the methodology of the early rightly-guided Muslims caused him to fall into the dangerous orientation of expelling people from the fold of Islaam due to their sins...

Sayyid Qutb's ignorance of the fundamentals of Islaam led him to utter the following statements of perilous excess, "Today, we are in jahiliyah (the days of ignorance), like that which was prevalent at the dawn of Islaam, in fact more severe. Everything around us is jahiliyah..."

Shaykh Saalih al-Fawzaan, one of the great scholars of this time, was asked whether it is permissible to use the term jahiliyah in an unrestricted manner upon the present-day Islamic societies, to which he answered:

The general jahiliyah went away when the Messenger of Allaah (may Allaah raise his rank and grant him peace) was sent. So it is not permissible to employ it upon the Islamic societies in a general sense. As for applying something from its affairs upon individuals or upon some groups and societies, then this is permissible and allowed. Indeed, the Prophet (may Allaah raise his rank and grant him peace) said to one of his companions, "Verily you are a man who has jahiliyah in him." And he (may Allaah raise his rank and grant him peace) said, "My nation will not leave off four affairs of jahiliyah: Pride in noble descent, cursing the lineage, seeking rain through the stars, and wailing over the dead."

Elsewhere, Qutb said, "The time has reverted back to its original form on the very day this religion came to mankind with the phrase 'There is no deity worthy of worship other than Allaah.' For mankind has apostatized and gone to the worship of the servants..."

This extreme belief led Qutb to conclude that "the (Islamic) Nation has ceased to be in existence and has not been perceivable for a very long time." In fact, Qutb went to such lengths of extremism that he refused to pray the obligatory Friday congregational prayer, believing that its obligation was no longer binding due to the fact that there was no Caliph ruling over the Muslim lands. In his book "The Secret History of al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun, Ali Ashmawi said, "And the time for the obligatory Friday congregational prayer arrived so I said to him (Qutb), 'Let us leave and pray,' and it was a surprise that I came to know – and for the first time – that he did not use to pray the Friday prayer."

Even the heads of al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun, such as Dr. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, bear witness to the menace of Qutb and his followers:

“And it was in this period that the books of the martyr, Sayyid Qutb appeared, the books that represented his final thoughts (in ideology, before his death). Those which justified the takfir (excommunication) of (whole) societies... the breaking of all sentimental attachments to society, breaking off ties with others, and the announcement of a destructive jihaad against the whole of mankind. And showing contempt against the inviters who call for lenience and softness, accusing them of idiocy, and being defeatist... He made this manifest, in the most clear manner in the tafsir (explanation of the Qur’aan), Fee Thilaalil-Qur’aan, in the 2nd edition and in Ma’alim fit-Tariq (Milestones), and the bulk of it is taken from Thilal and Al-Islam wa Mushkilatil-Hadharah and others.”

The senior Salafi scholars have clearly alerted the Muslims to these mistakes, which are far from limited to issues of takfir (excommunication). When asked for his opinion about whether or not it was correct for people to keep a copy of Qutb’s commentary of the Qur’aan in their houses, Shaykh Muqbil Ibn Haadee al-Waadi’ee, the great Yemeni scholar replied:

“As for the book ath-Thilal and the writings of Sayyid Qutb – may Allaah have mercy upon him – then we advise that they not be read at all, because some people from Jamaa’atut-Takfir and some of the youth who were conceived by Jamaa’atut-Takfir were a direct product of the writings of Sayyid Qutb, may Allaah have mercy upon him. And Sayyid Qutb was merely considered a writer, he was not considered a mufassir (explainer of the Qur’aan).”

The late Shaykh Muhammad Ibn Saalih al-’Uthaymin, one of the leading scholars of this century, was asked about the books of Sayyid Qutb, particularly Fee Thilaalil-Qur’aan (In the Shade of the Qur’aan) and Ma’alim fit-Tariq (Milestones), wherein he replied:

“My statement – may Allaah bless you – is that whoever is sincere to Allaah, His Messenger, and his brother Muslims, then he should encourage the people to read the books of those who have preceded us, from the books of tafsir (explanation of the Qur’aan) and other than (the books of) tafsir. These books contain more blessings, are more beneficial and are much better than the books of the later ones. As for the tafsir of Sayyid Qutb – may Allaah have mercy upon him – then it contains great calamities, however we hope that Allaah pardons him. It contains great calamities...”

Evidently, the senior Salafi scholars have clarified the overabundance of calamitous errors which are contained within Sayyid Qutb’s books. They have spoken about the subjects which have been mentioned in this book, and they have spoken about other areas of creed which Qutb fell into error in, which have not been mentioned in this book. Anyone who still insists on hanging on to certain personalities from amongst the Islamic “thinkers” such as Sayyid Qutb, Abu Alaa Maududi, and Hasan al-Banna, and refuses to reject the deviation of the contemporary groups and movements, has removed themselves from the methodology of Salafism, even if they attempt to ascribe themselves to it.