

**Chapter 26**  
**Sayyid Qutb and the Rebirth of Contemporary Islam**  
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**Chapter summary**

Although virtually unknown in the West, Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) is widely recognized as the most influential Muslim writer of the twentieth century. Born in Egypt, he came to see himself as a citizen of a new Islamic civilization he believed represented the wave of the future. His books/writings are widely read throughout the Muslim world today as the most articulate summation of Sunni Islam in modern times and also among Shia Muslims and other smaller Islamic sects in Iran. Qutb's appeal is his offer of a vision of a new Islamic world within reach yet quite distinct from the corrupting influence of Western culture.

Qutb came from an old and pious Muslim family of landowners who were experiencing financial difficulties as a result of changing conditions at a time when Egypt was ruled by the British. His birth coincided with the stirring of Egyptian nationalism among the educated and wealthy elite. The nationalism of Mustafa Kamil eventually sought the complete independence of Egypt from foreign control and influences, particularly that of the British, and founded the National Party.

Qutb was attracted by a secular nationalism similar to that established by Kamil based on European nationalism and lacking direct religious motivation. Consequently, there was no direct link between his religious background and developing political ideology. He attended Dar al-Ulum (junior college) as did Hasan al Banna (1906–1949), who found inspiration in the Sufi movement and founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1926. The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) was an anticolonial liberation movement that sought to restore Egypt's independence and the dignity of Islam by rooting its politics in Muslim tradition. It became so successful that in ten years it had over half a million members in Egypt alone, with its ideas spreading far beyond that country's borders.

After the establishment of Israel in 1948, the MB sent volunteers to fight in Palestine against the Israelis and agitated against the Egyptian government. Both the Egyptian president and Banna were assassinated in the conflict.

What influence this had on Qutb is unclear. While he did not directly identify with the MB, its ideas were beginning to penetrate his thinking. Initially an unbelieving schoolteacher, he nonetheless regularly read the Qur'an although in his younger days he was attracted more by its literary style and poetry than its content/teaching. Although he began with secular sympathies, he was gradually drawn toward traditional Islam.

The corruption of the Egyptian government and ongoing British imperialism helped stir a passionate interest in social justice within Qutb and he wrote critically regarding the West and Egyptian politicians. His thinking was profoundly impacted by the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent ethnic cleansing of Palestinians by Israeli forces which he believed was a gross injustice. Qutb accepted a scholarship to the United States where for two years at Colorado State College he studied the American educational system. His time in the U.S. brought him closer to the MB and confirmed his views of the West. Stated bluntly, he was repulsed by what he considered a lawless society that lacked civilization. His book *Milestones*, which some believe is one of the most influential books on Muslim belief ever penned, claimed the U.S. was a doomed society.

For Qutb, what was true of the U.S. was true of the Western world in general. It had gone back to a pre-Islamic state of ignorance known as jahiliyyah, an Arabic term used in the Qur'an to describe paganism/apostasy. He claimed America was steeped in jahiliyyah and thus, for all good Muslims, the first task was to replace this decadence with Islamic ideas and traditions. Such a transformation would take time, of course, thus Muslims needed a strategy. After returning to Egypt from America in 1952, Qutb joined the MB, becoming its most articulate spokesman. His involvement with a politically oriented religious organization led to clashes with the government and he spent over ten years in jail prior to eventually being executed in 1966, accused of attempting to overthrow the state. Clearly, Qutb hoped to see the establishment of an Islamic state while the Egyptian government was primarily interested in using his case as a show trial to discredit the MB. In the end, Qutb became a martyr for Islam.

Qutb's literary output was enormous throughout his Islamic years. Besides Milestones, his most important contribution was an enormous and erudite commentary on the Qur'an entitled *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, much of which he wrote in prison. Enormously popular in its English edition, it systematically expounds Muslim doctrine in a manner similar to Christian commentaries on the Bible. His later writings supply evidence that his views on Islam became increasingly traditional and antimodern.

For Qutb, Islam was a rational religion which, through the sheer force of its message, was eventually destined to rule the world. Nevertheless, he expressed a traditional Muslim view of religious tolerance, believing conversion should not be forced. His tolerance, however, was limited within the confines of Islamic law—he firmly believed in the necessity of creating a Muslim society dominated by devout Muslims who apply Islamic law to all citizens for their own good. For Qutb, there is no separation between church and state; all of life is to be governed by Sharia law.

Based on the Islamic thinking he adopted, Qutb viewed Christianity as having been born in a colonial society dominated by Rome and Roman law. As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, it was impossible for Christians to impose their law on the empire. Under St. Paul, Christians turned inward, offering a spiritual solution to the world's problems. The Romans were heirs of a pagan culture, but Christians accommodated themselves by proclaiming the separation of church and state.

To Qutb, the separation of church and state was completely unacceptable; it meant an abdication of responsibility on the part of Christians that allowed paganism to remain triumphant in a Christian society. As a result of the spread of Western European colonial thought, such attitudes had penetrated the Muslim world leading many Muslims to believe such thinking was "scientific." Qutb believed an Islamic revolution was necessary to restore Islam to its rightful place in society since life had embraced a blind belief in science and soul-destroying materialism. Man was not worshipping God but materialism, therefore it was the duty of Muslims to preach the law of God and bring all humans into submission to him.

To do this, Muslims needed to return to God's one true revelation to humankind, the Qur'an, and to the example of the Prophet contained in the Hadith. Qutb appealed to the ancient doctrine of abrogation to explain apparent contradictions in the Qur'an and blamed Jews for placing doubts in the minds of Muslims. He taught that although there is no compulsion in religions, the goal of all Muslims is to establish a state guided by God's law where people can

freely choose to become Muslims because their natural tendencies to disobey God's laws are restrained by the state. Thus, "no compulsion" does not mean that Muslims cannot use force to establish Islamic rule; on the contrary, jihad is a legitimate means of extending Muslim domain and thus the rule of God's law.

Assessing Qutb is an exceptionally difficult task. On one hand, it is claimed that his works are intended to build bridges between the Muslim community and the rest of society. Yet, Ayman al-Zawahri (b. 1951), one of the cofounders of Al Qaeda and the man likely to be appointed successor to the late Osama bin Laden (1957–2011), considers himself a disciple of Qutb. Despite the natural tendency to view such zealots as terrorists only, the depth of their religious devotion should not be overlooked; in their minds, they are acting out of personal devotion and piety. Unless we understand this key dynamic, it is impossible to understand the dynamics of militant Islam. Despicable as terrorist actions may be, there is a logic to the actions of groups such as Al Qaeda that is rooted in their particular interpretation of the Qur'an; such interpretation is solidly based in the work of Qutb and similar writers. There can be no doubt regarding the influence of Qutb on the Al Qaeda movement. Finally, there are some remarkable similarities between Qutb's work and the so-called Traditionalist school of writers and thinkers such as Guénon and Schuon who were so concerned to articulate arguments against modernity.