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The Philosopher of Islamic Terror

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I. In the days after Sept. 11, 2001, many people anticipated a quick and satisfying American victory over Al Qaeda. The terrorist army was thought to be no bigger than a pirate ship, and the newly vigilant police forces of the entire world were going to sink the ship with swift arrests and dark maneuvers. Al Qaeda was driven from its bases in Afghanistan. Arrests and maneuvers duly occurred and are still occurring. Just this month, one of Osama bin Laden's top lieutenants was nabbed in Pakistan. Police agents, as I write, seem to be hot on the trail of bin Laden himself, or so reports suggest.

Yet Al Qaeda has seemed unfazed. Its popularity, which was hard to imagine at first, has turned out to be large and genuine in more than a few countries. Al Qaeda upholds a paranoid and apocalyptic worldview, according to which "Crusaders and Zionists" have been conspiring for centuries to destroy Islam. And this worldview turns out to be widely accepted in many places -- a worldview that allowed many millions of people to regard the Sept. 11 attacks as an Israeli conspiracy, or perhaps a C.I.A. conspiracy, to undo Islam. Bin Laden's soulful, bearded face peers out from T-shirts and posters in a number of countries, quite as if he were the new Che Guevara, the mythic righter of cosmic wrongs.

The vigilant police in many countries, applying themselves at last, have raided a number of Muslim charities and Islamic banks, which stand accused of subsidizing the terrorists. These raids have advanced the war on still another front, which has been good to see. But the raids have also shown that Al Qaeda is not only popular; it is also institutionally solid, with a worldwide network of clandestine resources. This is not the Symbionese Liberation Army. This is an organization with ties to the ruling elites in a number of countries; an organization that, were it given the chance to strike up an alliance with Saddam Hussein's Baath movement, would be doubly terrifying; an organization that, in any case, will surely survive the outcome in Iraq.

To anyone who has looked closely enough, Al Qaeda and its sister organizations plainly enjoy yet another strength, arguably the greatest strength of all, something truly imposing -- though in the Western press this final strength has received very little attention. Bin Laden is a Saudi plutocrat with Yemeni ancestors, and most of the suicide warriors of Sept. 11 were likewise Saudis, and the provenance of those people has focused everyone's attention on the Arabian peninsula. But Al Qaeda has broader roots. The organization was created in the late 1980's by an affiliation of three armed factions -- bin Laden's circle of "Afghan" Arabs, together with two factions from Egypt, the Islamic Group and Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the latter led by Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's top theoretician. The Egyptian factions emerged from an older current, a school of thought from within Egypt's fundamentalist movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, in the 1950's and 60's. And at the heart of that single school of thought stood, until his execution in 1966, a philosopher named Sayyid Qutb -- the intellectual hero of every one of the groups that eventually went into Al Qaeda, their Karl Marx (to put it that way), their guide.

Qutb (pronounced KUH-tahb) wrote a book called "Milestones," and that book was cited at his trial, which gave it immense publicity, especially after its author was hanged. "Milestones" became a classic manifesto of the terrorist wing of Islamic fundamentalism. A number of journalists have dutifully turned the pages of "Milestones," trying to decipher the otherwise inscrutable terrorist point of view.

I have been reading some of Qutb's other books, and I think that "Milestones" may have misled the journalists. "Milestones" is a fairly shallow book, judged in isolation. But "Milestones" was drawn from his vast commentary on the Koran called "In the Shade of the Qur'an." One of the many volumes of this giant work was translated into English in the 1970's and published by the World Assembly of Muslim Youth, an organization later widely suspected of participation in terrorist attacks -- and an organization whose Washington office was run by a brother of bin Laden's. In the last four years a big effort has been mounted by another organization, the Islamic Foundation in England, to bring out the rest, in what will eventually be an edition of 15 fat English-language volumes, handsomely ornamented with Arabic script from the Koran. Just in these past few weeks a number of new volumes in this edition have made their way into the Arab bookshops of Brooklyn, and I have gobbled them up. By now I have made my way through a little less than half of "In the Shade of the Qur'an," which I think is all that exists so far in English, together with three other books by Qutb. And I have something to report.

Qutb is not shallow. Qutb is deep. "In the Shade of the Qur'an" is, in its fashion, a masterwork. Al Qaeda and its sister organizations are not merely popular, wealthy, global, well connected and institutionally sophisticated. These groups stand on a set of ideas too, and some of those ideas may be pathological, which is an old story in modern politics; yet even so, the ideas are powerful. We should have known that, of course. But we should have known many things.

II. Qutb's special ability as a writer came from the fact that, as a young boy, he received a traditional Muslim education -- he committed the Koran to memory by the age of 10 -- yet he went on, at a college in Cairo, to receive a modern, secular education. He was born in 1906, and in the 1920's and 30's he took up socialism and literature. He wrote novels, poems and a book that is still said to be well regarded called "Literary Criticism: Its Principles and Methodology." His writings reflected -- here I quote one of his admirers and translators, Hamid Algar of the University of California at Berkeley -- a "Western-tinged outlook on cultural and literary questions." Qutb displayed "traces of individualism and existentialism." He even traveled to the United States in the late 1940's, enrolled at the Colorado State College of Education and earned a master's degree. In some of the accounts of Qutb's life, this trip to America is pictured as a ghastly trauma, mostly because of America's sexual freedoms, which sent him reeling back to Egypt in a mood of hatred and fear.

I am skeptical of that interpretation, though. His book from the 1940's, "Social Justice and Islam," shows that, even before his voyage to America, he was pretty well set in his Islamic fundamentalism. It is true that, after his return to Egypt, he veered into ever more radical directions. But in the early 1950's, everyone in Egypt was veering in radical directions. Gamal Abdel Nasser and a group of nationalist army officers overthrew the old king in 1952 and launched a nationalist revolution on Pan-Arabist grounds. And, as the Pan-Arabists went about promoting their revolution, Sayyid Qutb went about promoting his own, somewhat different revolution. His idea was "Islamist." He wanted to turn Islam into a political movement to create a new society, to be based on ancient Koranic principles. Qutb joined the Muslim Brotherhood, became the editor of its journal and established himself right away as Islamism's principal theoretician in the Arab world.

The Islamists and the Pan-Arabists tried to cooperate with one another in Egypt in those days, and there was some basis for doing so. Both movements dreamed of rescuing the Arab world from the legacies of European imperialism. Both groups dreamed of crushing Zionism and the brand-new Jewish state. Both groups dreamed of fashioning a new kind of modernity, which was not going to be liberal and freethinking in the Western style but, even so, was going to be up-to-date on economic and scientific issues. And both movements dreamed of doing all this by returning in some fashion to the glories of the Arab past. Both movements wanted to resurrect, in a modern version, the ancient Islamic caliphate of the seventh century, when the Arabs were conquering the world.

The Islamists and the Pan-Arabists could be compared, in these ambitions, with the Italian Fascists of Mussolini's time, who wanted to resurrect the Roman Empire, and to the Nazis, who likewise wanted to resurrect ancient Rome, except in a German version. The most radical of the Pan-Arabists openly admired the Nazis and pictured their proposed new caliphate as a racial victory of the Arabs over all other ethnic groups. Qutb and the Islamists, by way of contrast, pictured the resurrected caliphate as a theocracy, strictly enforcing shariah, the legal code of the Koran. The Islamists and the Pan-Arabists had their similarities then, and their differences. (And today those two movements still have their similarities and differences -- as shown by bin Laden's Qaeda, which represents the most violent wing of Islamism, and Saddam Hussein's Baath Party, which represents the most violent wing of Pan-Arabism.)

In 1952, in the days before staging his coup d'etat, Colonel Nasser is said to have paid a visit to Qutb at his home, presumably to get his backing. Some people expected that, after taking power, Nasser would appoint Qutb to be the new revolutionary minister of education. But once the Pan-Arabists had thrown out the old king, the differences between the two movements began to overwhelm the similarities, and Qutb was not appointed. Instead, Nasser cracked down on the Muslim Brotherhood, and after someone tried to assassinate him, he blamed the Brotherhood and cracked down even harder. Some of the Muslim Brotherhood's most distinguished intellectuals and theologians escaped into exile. Sayyid Qutb's brother, Muhammad Qutb, was one of those people. He fled to Saudi Arabia and ended up as a distinguished Saudi professor of Islamic Studies. Many years later, Osama bin Laden would be one of Muhammad Qutb's students.

But Sayyid Qutb stayed put and paid dearly for his stubbornness. Nasser jailed him in 1954, briefly released him, jailed him again for 10 years, released him for a few months and finally hanged him in 1966. Conditions during the first years of prison were especially bad. Qutb was tortured. Even in better times, according to his followers, he was locked in a ward with 40 people, most of them criminals, with a tape recorder broadcasting the speeches of Nasser 20 hours a day. Still, by smuggling papers in and out of jail, he managed to continue with his writings, no longer in the "Western tinged" vein of his early, literary days but now as a full-fledged Islamist revolutionary. And somehow, he produced his "In the Shade of the Qur'an," this gigantic study, which must surely count as one of the most remarkable works of prison literature ever produced.

Readers without a Muslim education who try to make their way unaided through the Koran tend to find it, as I have, a little dry and forbidding. But Qutb's commentaries are not at all like that. He quotes passages from the chapters, or suras, of the Koran, and he pores over the quoted passages, observing the prosodic qualities of the text, the rhythm, tone and musicality of the words, sometimes the images. The suras lead him to discuss dietary regulations, the proper direction to pray, the rules of divorce, the question of when a man may propose marriage to a widow (four months and 10 days after the death of her husband, unless she is pregnant, in which case after delivery), the rules concerning a Muslim man who wishes to marry a Christian or a Jew (very complicated), the obligations of charity, the punishment for crimes and for breaking your word, the prohibition on liquor and intoxicants, the proper clothing to wear, the rules on usury, moneylending and a thousand other themes.

The Koran tells stories, and Qutb recounts some of these and remarks on their wisdom and significance. His tone is always lucid and plain. Yet the total effect of his writing is almost sensual in its measured pace. The very title "In the Shade of the Qur'an" conveys a vivid desert image, as if the Koran were a leafy palm tree, and we have only to open Qutb's pages to escape the hot sun and refresh ourselves in the shade. As he makes his way through the suras and proposes his other commentaries, he slowly constructs an enormous theological criticism of modern life, and not just in Egypt.

III. Qutb wrote that, all over the world, humans had reached a moment of unbearable crisis. The human race had lost touch with human nature. Man's inspiration, intelligence and morality were degenerating. Sexual relations were deteriorating "to a level lower than the beasts." Man was miserable, anxious and skeptical, sinking into idiocy, insanity and crime. People were turning, in their unhappiness, to drugs, alcohol and existentialism. Qutb admired economic productivity and scientific knowledge. But he did not think that wealth and science were rescuing the human race. He figured that, on the contrary, the richest countries were the unhappiest of all. And what was the cause of this unhappiness -- this wretched split between man's truest nature and modern life?

A great many cultural critics in Europe and America asked this question in the middle years of the 20th century, and a great many of them, following Nietzsche and other philosophers, pointed to the origins of Western civilization in ancient Greece, where man was said to have made his fatal error. This error was philosophical. It consisted of placing an arrogant and deluded faith in the power of human reason -- an arrogant faith that, after many centuries, had created in modern times a tyranny of technology over life.

Qutb shared that analysis, somewhat. Only instead of locating the error in ancient Greece, he located it in ancient Jerusalem. In the Muslim fashion, Qutb looked on the teachings of Judaism as being divinely revealed by God to Moses and the other prophets. Judaism instructed man to worship one God and to forswear all others. Judaism instructed man on how to behave in every sphere of life -- how to live a worldly existence that was also a life at one with God. This could be done by obeying a system of divinely mandated laws, the code of Moses. In Qutb's view, however, Judaism withered into what he called "a system of rigid and lifeless ritual."

God sent another prophet, though. That prophet, in Qutb's Muslim way of thinking, was Jesus, who proposed a few useful reforms -- lifting some no-longer necessary restrictions in the Jewish dietary code, for example -- and also an admirable new spirituality. But something terrible occurred. The relation between Jesus' followers and the Jews took, in Qutb's view, "a deplorable course." Jesus' followers squabbled with the old-line Jews, and amid the mutual recriminations, Jesus' message ended up being diluted and even perverted. Jesus' disciples and followers were persecuted, which meant that, in their sufferings, the disciples were never able to provide an adequate or systematic exposition of Jesus' message.

Who but Sayyid Qutb, from his miserable prison in Nasser's Egypt, could have zeroed in so plausibly on the difficulties encountered by Jesus' disciples in getting out the word? Qutb figured that, as a result, the Christian Gospels were badly garbled, and should not be regarded as accurate or reliable. The Gospels declared Jesus to be divine, but in Qutb's Muslim account, Jesus was a mere human -- a prophet of God, not a messiah.

The larger catastrophe, however, was this: Jesus' disciples, owing to what Qutb called "this unpleasant separation of the two parties," went too far in rejecting the Jewish teachings.

Jesus' disciples and followers, the Christians, emphasized Jesus' divine message of spirituality and love. But they rejected Judaism's legal system, the code of Moses, which regulated every jot and tittle of daily life. Instead, the early Christians imported into Christianity the philosophy of the Greeks -- the belief in a spiritual existence completely separate from physical life, a zone of pure spirit.

In the fourth century of the Christian era, Emperor Constantine converted the Roman Empire to Christianity. But Constantine, in Qutb's interpretation, did this in a spirit of pagan hypocrisy, dominated by scenes of wantonness, half-naked girls, gems and precious metals. Christianity, having abandoned the Mosaic code, could put up no defense. And so, in their horror at Roman morals, the Christians did as best they could and countered the imperial debaucheries with a cult of monastic asceticism.

But this was no good at all. Monastic asceticism stands at odds with the physical quality of human nature. In this manner, in Qutb's view, Christianity lost touch with the physical world. The old code of Moses, with its laws for diet, dress, marriage, sex and everything else, had enfolded the divine and the worldly into a single concept, which was the worship of God. But Christianity divided these things into two, the sacred and the secular. Christianity said, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's." Christianity put the physical world in one corner and the spiritual world in another corner: Constantine's debauches over here, monastic renunciation over there. In Qutb's view there was a "hideous schizophrenia" in this approach to life. And things got worse.

A series of Christian religious councils adopted what Qutb thought to be irrational principles on Christianity's behalf -- principles regarding the nature of Jesus, the Eucharist, transubstantiation and other questions, all of which were, in Qutb's view, "absolutely incomprehensible, inconceivable and incredible." Church teachings froze the irrational principles into dogma. And then the ultimate crisis struck.

IV. Qutb's story now shifts to Arabia. In the seventh century, God delivered a new revelation to his prophet Muhammad, who established the correct, nondistorted relation to human nature that had always eluded the Christians. Muhammad dictated a strict new legal code, which put religion once more at ease in the physical world, except in a better way than ever before. Muhammad's prophecies, in the Koran, instructed man to be God's "vice regent" on earth -- to take charge of the physical world, and not simply to see it as something alien to spirituality or as a way station on the road to a Christian afterlife. Muslim scientists in the Middle Ages took this instruction seriously and went about inquiring into the nature of physical reality. And, in the Islamic universities of Andalusia and the East, the Muslim scientists, deepening their inquiry, hit upon the inductive or scientific method -- which opened the door to all further scientific and technological progress. In this and many other ways, Islam seized the leadership of mankind. Unfortunately, the Muslims came under attack from Crusaders, Mongols and other enemies. And, because the Muslims proved not faithful enough to Muhammad's revelations, they were unable to fend off these attacks. They were unable to capitalize on their brilliant discovery of the scientific method.

The Muslim discoveries were exported instead into Christian Europe. And there, in Europe in the 16th century, Islam's scientific method began to generate results, and modern science emerged. But Christianity, with its insistence on putting the physical world and the spiritual world in different corners, could not cope with scientific progress. And so Christianity's inability to acknowledge or respect the physical quality of daily life spread into the realm of culture and shaped society's attitude toward science.

As Qutb saw it, Europeans, under Christianity's influence, began to picture God on one side and science on the other. Religion over here; intellectual inquiry over there. On one side, the natural human yearning for God and for a divinely ordered life; on the other side, the natural human desire for knowledge of the physical universe. The church against science; the scientists against the church. Everything that Islam knew to be one, the Christian Church divided into two. And, under these terrible pressures, the European mind split finally asunder. The break became total. Christianity, over here; atheism, over there. It was the fateful divorce between the sacred and the secular.

Europe's scientific and technical achievements allowed the Europeans to dominate the world. And the Europeans inflicted their "hideous schizophrenia" on peoples and cultures in every corner of the globe. That was the origin of modern misery -- the anxiety in contemporary society, the sense of drift, the purposelessness, the craving for false pleasures. The crisis of modern life was felt by every thinking person in the Christian West. But then again, Europe's leadership of mankind inflicted that crisis on every thinking person in the Muslim world as well. Here Qutb was on to something original. The Christians of the West underwent the crisis of modern life as a consequence, he thought, of their own theological tradition -- a result of nearly 2,000 years of ecclesiastical error. But in Qutb's account, the Muslims had to undergo that same experience because it had been imposed on them by Christians from abroad, which could only make the experience doubly painful -- an alienation that was also a humiliation.

That was Qutb's analysis. In writing about modern life, he put his finger on something that every thinking person can recognize, if only vaguely -- the feeling that human nature and modern life are somehow at odds. But Qutb evoked this feeling in a specifically Muslim fashion. It is easy to imagine that, in expounding on these themes back in the 1950's and 60's, Qutb had already identified the kind of personal agony that Mohamed Atta and the suicide warriors of Sept. 11 must have experienced in our own time. It was the agony of inhabiting a modern world of liberal ideas and achievements while feeling that true life exists somewhere else. It was the agony of walking down a modern sidewalk while dreaming of a different universe altogether, located in the Koranic past -- the agony of being pulled this way and that. The present, the past. The secular, the sacred. The freely chosen, the religiously mandated -- a life of confusion unto madness brought on, Qutb ventured, by Christian error.

Sitting in a wretched Egyptian prison, surrounded by criminals and composing his Koranic commentaries with Nasser's speeches blaring in the background on the infuriating tape recorder, Qutb knew whom to blame. He blamed the early Christians. He blamed Christianity's modern legacy, which was the liberal idea that religion should stay in one corner and secular life in another corner. He blamed the Jews. In his interpretation, the Jews had shown themselves to be eternally ungrateful to God. Early in their history, during their Egyptian captivity (Qutb thought he knew a thing or two about Egyptian captivity), the Jews acquired a slavish character, he believed. As a result they became craven and unprincipled when powerless, and vicious and arrogant when powerful. And these traits were eternal. The Jews occupy huge portions of Qutb's Koranic commentary -- their perfidy, greed, hatefulness, diabolical impulses, never-ending conspiracies and plots against Muhammad and Islam. Qutb was relentless on these themes. He looked on Zionism as part of the eternal campaign by the Jews to destroy Islam.

And Qutb blamed one other party. He blamed the Muslims who had gone along with Christianity's errors -- the treacherous Muslims who had inflicted Christianity's "schizophrenia" on the world of Islam. And, because he was willing to blame, Qutb was able to recommend a course of

action too -- a revolutionary program that was going to relieve the psychological pressure of modern life and was going to put man at ease with the natural world and with God.

V. Qutb's analysis was soulful and heartfelt. It was a theological analysis, but in its cultural emphases, it reflected the style of 20th-century philosophy. The analysis asked some genuinely perplexing questions -- about the division between mind and body in Western thought; about the difficulties in striking a balance between sensual experience and spiritual elevation; about the steely impersonality of modern power and technological innovation; about social injustice. But, though Qutb plainly followed some main trends of 20th-century Western social criticism and philosophy, he poured his ideas through a filter of Koranic commentary, and the filter gave his commentary a grainy new texture, authentically Muslim, which allowed him to make a series of points that no Western thinker was likely to propose.

One of those points had to do with women's role in society -- and these passages in his writings have been misinterpreted, I think, in some of the Western commentaries on Qutb. His attitude was prudish in the extreme, judged from a Western perspective of today. But prudishness was not his motivation. He understood quite clearly that, in a liberal society, women were free to consult their own hearts and to pursue careers in quest of material wealth. But from his point of view, this could only mean that women had shucked their responsibility to shape the human character, through child-rearing. The Western notion of women's freedom could only mean that God and the natural order of life had been set aside in favor of a belief in other sources of authority, like one's own heart.

But what did it mean to recognize the existence of more than one source of authority? It meant paganism -- a backward step, into the heathen primitivism of the past. It meant life without reference to God -- a life with no prospect of being satisfactory or fulfilling. And why had the liberal societies of the West lost sight of the natural harmony of gender roles and of women's place in the family and the home? This was because of the "hideous schizophrenia" of modern life -- the Western outlook that led people to picture God's domain in one place and the ordinary business of daily life in some other place.

Qutb wrote bitterly about European imperialism, which he regarded as nothing more than a continuation of the medieval Crusades against Islam. He denounced American foreign policy. He complained about America's decision in the time of Harry Truman to support the Zionists, a strange decision that he attributed, in part, to America's loss of moral values. But I must point out that, in Qutb's writings, at least in the many volumes that I have read, the complaints about American policy are relatively few and fleeting. International politics was simply not his main concern. Sometimes he complained about the hypocrisy in America's endless boasts about freedom and democracy. He mentioned America's extermination of its Indian population. He noted the racial prejudice against blacks. But those were not Qutb's themes, finally. American hypocrisy exercised him, but only slightly. His deepest quarrel was not with America's failure to uphold its principles. His quarrel was with the principles. He opposed the United States because it was a liberal society, not because the United States failed to be a liberal society.

The truly dangerous element in American life, in his estimation, was not capitalism or foreign policy or racism or the unfortunate cult of women's independence. The truly dangerous element lay in America's separation of church and state -- the modern political legacy of Christianity's ancient division between the sacred and the secular. This was not a political criticism. This was theological -- though Qutb, or perhaps his translators, preferred the word "ideological."

The conflict between the Western liberal countries and the world of Islam, he explained, "remains in essence one of ideology, although over the years it has appeared in various guises and has grown more sophisticated and, at times, more insidious." The sophisticated and insidious disguises tended to be worldly -- a camouflage that was intended to make the conflict appear to be economic, political or military, and that was intended to make Muslims like himself who insisted on speaking about religion appear to be, in his words, "fanatics" and "backward people."

"But in reality," he explained, "the confrontation is not over control of territory or economic resources, or for military domination. If we believed that, we would play into our enemies' hands and would have no one but ourselves to blame for the consequences."

The true confrontation, the deepest confrontation of all, was over Islam and nothing but Islam. Religion was the issue. Qutb could hardly be clearer on this topic. The confrontation arose from the effort by Crusaders and world Zionism to annihilate Islam. The Crusaders and Zionists knew that Christianity and Judaism were inferior to Islam and had led to lives of misery. They needed to annihilate Islam in order to rescue their own doctrines from extinction. And so the Crusaders and Zionists went on the attack.

But this attack was not, at bottom, military. At least Qutb did not devote his energies to warning against such a danger. Nor did he spend much time worrying about the ins and outs of Israel's struggle with the Palestinians. Border disputes did not concern him. He was focused on something cosmically larger. He worried, instead, that people with liberal ideas were mounting a gigantic campaign against Islam -- "an effort to confine Islam to the emotional and ritual circles, and to bar it from participating in the activity of life, and to check its complete predominance over every human secular activity, a pre-eminence it earns by virtue of its nature and function."

He trembled with rage at that effort. And he cited good historical evidence for his trembling rage. Turkey, an authentic Muslim country, had embraced secular ideas back in 1924. Turkey's revolutionary leader at that time, Kemal Ataturk, abolished the institutional remnants of the ancient caliphate -- the caliphate that Qutb so fervently wanted to resurrect. The Turks in this fashion had tried to abolish the very idea and memory of an Islamic state. Qutb worried that, if secular reformers in other Muslim countries had any success, Islam was going to be pushed into a corner, separate from the state. True Islam was going to end up as partial Islam. But partial Islam, in his view, did not exist.

The secular reformers were already at work, throughout the Muslim world. They were mounting their offensive -- "a final offensive which is actually taking place now in all the Muslim countries. . . . It is an effort to exterminate this religion as even a basic creed and to replace it with secular conceptions having their own implications, values, institutions and organizations."

"To exterminate" -- that was Qutb's phrase. Hysteria cried out from every syllable. But he did not want to be hysterical. He wanted to respond. How?

VI. That one question dominated Qutb's life. It was a theological question, and he answered it with his volumes on the Koran. But he intended his theology to be practical too -- to offer a revolutionary program to save mankind. The first step was to open people's eyes. He wanted Muslims to recognize the nature of the danger -- to recognize that Islam had come under assault from outside the Muslim world and also from inside the Muslim world. The assault from outside was led by Crusaders and world Zionism (though sometimes he also mentioned Communism).

But the assault from inside was conducted by Muslims themselves -- that is, by people who called themselves Muslims but who polluted the Muslim world with incompatible ideas derived from elsewhere. These several enemies, internal and external, the false Muslims together with the Crusaders and Zionists, ruled the earth. But Qutb considered that Islam's strength was, even so, huger yet. "We are certain," he wrote, "that this religion of Islam is so intrinsically genuine, so colossal and deeply rooted that all such efforts and brutal concussions will avail nothing."

Islam's apparent weakness was mere appearance. Islam's true champions seemed to be few, but numbers meant nothing. The few had to gather themselves together into what Qutb in "Milestones" called a vanguard -- a term that he must have borrowed from Lenin, though Qutb had in mind a tiny group animated by the spirit of Muhammad and his Companions from the dawn of Islam. This vanguard of true Muslims was going to undertake the renovation of Islam and of civilization all over the world. The vanguard was going to turn against the false Muslims and "hypocrites" and do as Muhammad had done, which was to found a new state, based on the Koran. And from there, the vanguard was going to resurrect the caliphate and take Islam to all the world, just as Muhammad had done.

Qutb's vanguard was going to reinstate shariah, the Muslim code, as the legal code for all of society. Shariah implied some fairly severe rules. Qutb cited the Koran on the punishments for killing or wounding: "a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear." Fornication, too, was a serious crime because, in his words, "it involves an attack on honor and a contempt for sanctity and an encouragement of profligacy in society." Shariah specified the punishments here as well. "The penalty for this must be severe; for married men and women it is stoning to death; for unmarried men and women it is flogging, a hundred lashes, which in cases is fatal." False accusations were likewise serious. "A punishment of 80 lashes is fixed for those who falsely accuse chaste women." As for those who threaten the general security of society, their punishment is to be put to death, to be crucified, to have their hands and feet cut off, or to be banished from the country."

But Qutb refused to regard these punishments as barbarous or primitive. Shariah, in his view, meant liberation. Other societies, drawing on non-Koranic principles, forced people to obey haughty masters and man-made law. Those other societies forced people to worship their own rulers and to do as the rulers said -- even if the rulers were democratically chosen. Under shariah, no one was going to be forced to obey mere humans. Shariah, in Qutb's view, meant "the abolition of man-made laws." In the resurrected caliphate, every person was going to be "free from servitude to others." The true Islamic system meant "the complete and true freedom of every person and the full dignity of every individual of the society. On the other hand, in a society in which some people are lords who legislate and some others are slaves who obey, then there is no freedom in the real sense, nor dignity for each and every individual."

He insisted that shariah meant freedom of conscience -- though freedom of conscience, in his interpretation, meant freedom from false doctrines that failed to recognize God, freedom from the modern schizophrenia. Shariah, in a word, was utopia for Sayyid Qutb. It was perfection. It was the natural order in the universal. It was freedom, justice, humanity and divinity in a single system. It was a vision as grand or grander than Communism or any of the other totalitarian doctrines of the 20th century. It was, in his words, "the total liberation of man from enslavement by others." It was an impossible vision -- a vision that was plainly going to require a total dictatorship in order to enforce: a vision that, by claiming not to rely on man-made laws, was going to have to rely, instead, on theocrats, who would interpret God's laws to the masses. The most extreme despotism was all too visible in Qutb's revolutionary program. That much should have been obvious to anyone who knew the history of the other grand totalitarian revolutionary projects of the 20th century, the projects of the Nazis, the Fascists and the Communists.

Still, for Qutb, utopia was not the main thing. Utopia was for the future, and Qutb was not a dreamer. Islam, in his interpretation, was a way of life. He wanted his Muslim vanguard to live according to pious Islamic principles in the here and now. He wanted the vanguard to observe the rules of Muslim charity and all the other rules of daily life. He wanted the true Muslims to engage in a lifelong study of the Koran -- the lifelong study that his own gigantic commentary was designed to enhance. But most of all, he wanted his vanguard to accept the obligations of "jihad," which is to say, the struggle for Islam. And what would that mean, to engage in jihad in the present and not just in the sci-fi utopian future?

Qutb began Volume 1 of "In the Shade of the Qur'an" by saying: "To live 'in the shade of the Qur'an' is a great blessing which can only be fully appreciated by those who experience it. It is a rich experience that gives meaning to life and makes it worth living. I am deeply thankful to God Almighty for blessing me with this uplifting experience for a considerable time, which was the happiest and most fruitful period of my life -- a privilege for which I am eternally grateful."

He does not identify that happy and fruitful period of his life -- a period that lasted, as he says, a considerable time. Perhaps his brother and other intimates would have known exactly what he had in mind -- some very pleasant period, conceivably the childhood years when he was memorizing the Koran. But an ordinary reader who picks up Qutb's books can only imagine that he was writing about his years of torture and prison.

One of his Indian publishers has highlighted this point in a remarkably gruesome manner by attaching an unsigned preface to a 1998 edition of "Milestones." The preface declares: "The ultimate price for working to please God Almighty and to propagate his ways in this world is often one's own life. The author" -- Qutb, that is -- "tried to do it; he paid for it with his life. If you and I try to do it, there is every likelihood we will be called upon to do the same. But for those who truly believe in God, what other choice is there?"

You are meant to suppose that a true reader of Sayyid Qutb is someone who, in the degree that he properly digests Qutb's message, will act on what has been digested. And action may well bring on a martyr's death. To read is to glide forward toward death; and gliding toward death means you have understood what you are reading. Qutb's writings do vibrate to that morbid tone -- not always, but sometimes. The work that he left behind, his Koranic commentary, is vast, vividly written, wise, broad, indignant, sometimes demented, bristly with hatred, medieval, modern, tolerant, intolerant, paranoid, cruel, urgent, cranky, tranquil, grave, poetic, learned and analytic. Sometimes it is moving. It is a work large and solid enough to create its own shade, where Qutb's vanguard and other readers could repose and turn his pages, as he advised the students of the Koran to do, in the earnest spirit of loyal soldiers reading their daily bulletin. But there is, in this commentary, something otherworldly too -- an atmosphere of death. At the very least, it is impossible to read the work without remembering that, in 1966, Qutb, in the phrase of one of his biographers, "kissed the gallows."

Martyrdom was among his themes. He discusses passages in the Koran's sura "The Cow," and he explains that death as a martyr is nothing to fear. Yes, some people will have to be sacrificed. "Those who risk their lives and go out to fight, and who are prepared to lay down their lives for the cause of God are honorable people, pure of heart and blessed of soul. But the great surprise is that those among them who are killed in the struggle must not be considered or described as dead. They continue to live, as God Himself clearly states."

Qutb wrote: "To all intents and purposes, those people may very well appear lifeless, but life and death are not judged by superficial physical means alone. Life is chiefly characterized by activity, growth and persistence, while death is a state of total loss of function, of complete inertia and lifelessness. But the death of those who are killed for the cause of God gives more impetus to the cause, which continues to thrive on their blood. Their influence on those they leave behind also grows and spreads. Thus after their death they remain an active force in shaping the life of their community and giving it direction. It is in this sense that such people, having sacrificed their lives for the sake of God, retain their active existence in everyday life. . . .

"There is no real sense of loss in their death, since they continue to live."

And so it was with Sayyid Qutb. In the period before his final arrest and execution, diplomats from Iraq and Libya offered him the chance to flee to safety in their countries. But he declined to go, on the ground that 3,000 young men and women in Egypt were his followers, and he did not want to undo a lifetime of teaching by refusing to give those 3,000 people an example of true martyrdom. And, in fact, some of those followers went on to form the Egyptian terrorist movement in the next decade, the 1970's -- the groups that massacred tourists and Coptic Christians and that assassinated Egypt's president, Anwar Sadat, after he made peace with Israel; the groups that, in still later years, ended up merging with bin Laden's group and supplying Al Qaeda with its fundamental doctrines. The people in those groups were not stupid or lacking in education.

On the contrary, we keep learning how well educated these people are, how many of them come from the upper class, how wealthy they are. And there is no reason for us to be surprised. These people are in possession of a powerful philosophy, which is Sayyid Qutb's. They are in possession of a gigantic work of literature, which is his "In the Shade of the Qur'an." These people feel that, by consulting their own doctrines, they can explain the unhappiness of the world. They feel that, with an intense study of the Koran, as directed by Qutb and his fellow thinkers, they can make sense of thousands of years of theological error. They feel that, in Qutb's notion of shariah, they command the principles of a perfect society.

These people believe that, in the entire world, they alone are preserving Islam from extinction. They feel they are benefiting the world, even if they are committing random massacres. They are certainly not worried about death. Qutb gave these people a reason to yearn for death. Wisdom, piety, death and immortality are, in his vision of the world, the same. For a pious life is a life of struggle or jihad for Islam, and struggle means martyrdom. We may think: those are creepy ideas. And yes, the ideas are creepy. But there is, in Qutb's presentation, a weird allure in those ideas.

VII. It would be nice to think that, in the war against terror, our side, too, speaks of deep philosophical ideas -- it would be nice to think that someone is arguing with the terrorists and with the readers of Sayyid Qutb. But here I have my worries. The followers of Qutb speak, in their wild fashion, of enormous human problems, and they urge one another to death and to murder. But the enemies of these people speak of what? The political leaders speak of United Nations resolutions, of unilateralism, of multilateralism, of weapons inspectors, of coercion and noncoercion. This is no answer to the terrorists. The terrorists speak insanely of deep things. The antiterrorists had better speak sanely of equally deep things. Presidents will not do this. Presidents will dispatch armies, or decline to dispatch armies, for better and for worse.

But who will speak of the sacred and the secular, of the physical world and the spiritual world? Who will defend liberal ideas against the enemies of liberal ideas? Who will defend liberal principles in spite of liberal society's every failure? President George W. Bush, in his speech to Congress a few days after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, announced that he was going to wage a war of ideas. He has done no such thing. He is not the man for that.

Philosophers and religious leaders will have to do this on their own. Are they doing so? Armies are in motion, but are the philosophers and religious leaders, the liberal thinkers, likewise in motion? There is something to worry about here, an aspect of the war that liberal society seems to have trouble understanding -- one more worry, on top of all the others, and possibly the greatest worry of all.

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