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THE IMPOSSIBLE UTOPIA:

CONTRADICTIONS IN QUTB'S VISION

Sayyid Qutb dreamt of utopia. His entire ideology, his thirty volume Qur'anic commentary, and all his popular publications point towards the establishment of a perfect Islamic society. He envisioned a society based on love and cooperation, complete submission to God, perfect democracy, and social justice. Three passages summarize his vision of the Muslim community and the roles of the leaders in this community:

[Individual Muslims] must form themselves into an active, harmonious and cooperative group with a separate and distinct existence. Like the limbs of a human body, all individuals in this group work together to strengthen its foundation, and to enable it to expand and defend itself against any external attack which threatens its existence.[152]

When belief in La ilaha illa Allah [trans: there is no God but God] penetrates into the deep recesses of the heart, it also penetrates through the whole system of life, which is a practical interpretation of this faith. By this means, those who believe are already pleased with the system which this faith uniquely determines and therefore submit in principle to all the laws and injunctions and details even before they are promulgated. Indeed, the spirit of submission is the first requirement of this faith. Through this spirit of submission the believers learn the Islamic regulations and laws with eagerness and pleasure. As soon as a command is given, the heads are bowed and nothing more is required for its implementation except to hear it.[153]

The believers in this faith must be autonomous and have power in their own society, so that they are able to implement this system and enforce its laws. Moreover, power is also needed to legislate laws according to the need of the group as these arise in its day-to-day affairs. [154]

Qutb describes an ideal but impossible society. This community will function as one body, Shari'a will permeate every aspect of life, and the leaders will only serve the people and the Shari'a. The community functions together like a flock of birds. Acting in perfect harmony and agreement, the community anticipates and accepts every law. Each person has already submitted to God and will therefore follow His law without question. When everyone follows one God and one law, there can be no deviation or disagreement. The citizens, then, have complete

autonomy and the leader merely states the wishes of the united populace. And underlying these essential attributes is the basic assumption that every person in the community will be free and autonomous.

Qutb's community looks beautiful on paper. He describes this utopia as real and attainable, but this perfect society can exist only in his imagination. He promises loving peace, universal acceptance, a smooth democracy, and absolute freedom for the entire world, but his definitions conflict with Western ideals. And far worse, his philosophy is an illusion. Built on contradictions, it is impossible to implement in the real world. In this chapter, I will show how these essential attributes of the ideal community contradict human nature, the lessons of history, and the circumstances of the modern world.

FORCE THEM TO BE FREE

Qutb's concept of freedom fails for many reasons: it contradicts itself, non-Muslims within the community can never be truly free, and, though he envisions universal reception to his philosophy, Westerners will never accept his ideology because it contradicts their preestablished concepts of freedom. Qutb shatters his own concept of freedom through the act of describing it. Islam, he says, liberates people from external pressures and invites them to its spiritual message. It appeals to their sense of reason, and gives them complete freedom to accept or reject it. This freedom, however, does not mean that they may "elevate their desires into gods, or that they may willingly remain in the servitude of other human beings, some men lords over others." [155] He claims all members of the community will have complete freedom from tyranny, oppression, injustice, inequality, and material desires. But under this law, he dictates what is and is not a god and forbids human servitude. He simultaneously imposes a human law and a limit on freedom - people are free to be anything but servants, and he, a human, sets the definition of servitude.

Qutb's concept of freedom similarly collapses when applied to the non-Muslims in the community. He claims people are free to choose any faith, but must pay a tax and submit. The battle with non-Muslims ends, he says, when "they pay the jizya [156] with willing submission and feel themselves subdued" for "there is no compulsion in religion." To whom must the non-Muslims submit? If they submit to God, they are Muslims. [157] This would be coercion into religion. If Qutb means that non-Muslims must submit to the community, this is jahiliyya, the lordship of some men over others. Under this 'freedom,' the non-Muslim has only two choices because a person must either convert or pay the tax and may not avoid Islam completely. To the unbeliever, both options are the

same: either submit to a religion they do not see as divine or submit to the authority of other men. Either way, they must submit to human authority and contradict Qutb's definition of freedom. Qutb's concept of freedom can only extend to Muslims, and even then it is not complete freedom. The community is not truly plural or equal for it does not grant the same freedoms to Muslims and non-Muslims.

The contradiction in Qutb's ideology is rooted in a one-sided view of humanity. Qutb believes there is only one correct choice: conversion. He believes that the righteous Christians, 'the true monotheists,' converted to Islam as soon as they heard the Qur'an, so he is convinced that, given complete freedom, all people will immediately flock to Islam. The 'freedom to choose' is based on his belief that there is only one possible choice.

FREEDOM FOR PEOPLE WHO NEVER ASK QUESTIONS

Qutb hopes to liberate non-Muslims around the world, but his ideology of freedom does not extend to them. Eliminating obstacles will not lead most non-Muslims to Islam. Destruction of their institutions will only arouse their anger and hatred. Qutb's belief that most individuals will immediately convert reveals his limited perspective and denial of pluralism. The only way to impose this "freedom," is to command it. History shows that theocracy often becomes tyranny. On this subject, Peter Berman makes a good point:

[Qutb's community] was an impossible vision -- a vision that was plainly going to require a total dictatorship in order to enforce: a vision that, by claiming to not 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.[158]

Qutb assumes that power will not corrupt Muslim leaders. Their faith, he believes, will make them moral. But history shows that no matter how well meaning and idealistic the philosophers, a society that depends on fundamental goodness and morality of humans will immediately fall to tyranny.

Berman, however, forgets the closest modern example of "Qutb's revolutionary program": Iran. Creation of the Shari'a state in Iran reveals one of the greatest problems with the implementation of Qutb's philosophy: the Shari'a. Qutb proposes that the Islamic state will follow the Shari'a in all aspects of life.

The Shari'a, however, is complex and often contradicts itself. Multiple interpretations are always possible, so someone must decide which interpretation is correct. In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini called his theory of government *velayat-i faqih*, government by jurisprudence. Islamic scholars interpreted the Shari'a and the government imposed their decisions on the masses. [159] Qutb's theory could also be called government by jurisprudence - like the Iranian system, his utopia requires leaders to interpret the law for the masses. But, in this system, who provides checks and balances on the leaders? If the leaders believe they speak for the masses and expect the citizens to think as a unified whole, what outlet exists for political dissent?

QUTB'S VISION A REALITY? THE EXAMPLE OF IRAN

Through massive protests, Iranians ousted the shah in 1979 to create an Islamic republic. For the next three years secular and religious parties competed for control of the country. Then in 1982, the group of ayatollahs led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini established complete control of Iran.

For over a decade Khomeini had criticized the shah from exile, preaching that the shah was a tyrant and his rule was contrary to Islam. Khomeini had preached that it was indeed possible to form an Islamic community based on the Shari'a alone. We cannot know for sure if Khomeini ever read Qutb for he never references him [160], but clear parallels exist between their ideologies. Khomeini does not use the term *jahiliyya*, but he outlines the same type of struggle towards the same ends. He describes his mission in the same language that Qutb uses. "In order to attain the unity and freedom of the Muslim peoples," he writes in his book *Islam and Government*, "we must overthrow the oppressive governments installed by the imperialists and bring into existence an Islamic government of justice that will be in the service of the people." [161] Both Qutb and Khomeini lived under oppressive monarchies and saw Islamic government as the path to freedom and representation for all citizens.

Also like Qutb, Khomeini acknowledged the need for social leadership. Qutb saw that his society would require new leadership and he envisioned a democratic ruler who would serve as a single voice for all the people. The ruler's job would be to execute the Shari'a and to guide, unite, and strengthen the community. "[The rulers would know] that the true source of authority is Allah alone and they are only His trustees," [162] Qutb explains. In *Islam and Government*, Ayatollah Khomeini described the role of the leader in his ideal society in exactly the same terms: "The rulers are subject to a certain set of conditions in governing and administering the country, conditions that are set forth in the Noble Qur'an and the

Sunna of the Most Noble Messenger.... Islamic government may therefore be defined as the rule of divine law over men."[163] For both men, the ruler served both God and men, acting as the voice of the Shari'a and the populace. If all the citizens are Muslims, Qutb and Khomeini assume, the voices of the people and the rulers will speak in harmony with the words of the law.

In the post-revolutionary process of creating an Islamic Republic in Iran, Khomeini sat on the Assembly of Experts, a popularly elected council of imams. After the new political leaders drafted a constitution, they submitted it to the Assembly for revision and ratification. The Assembly completely rewrote the constitution to give complete control of the government to the ulema. Under the new constitution, the people elected the president and national assembly, but nonelected religious leaders held the final authority. The body appointed Khomeini to a lifelong term as Supreme Islamic Jurist in 1982. Together with the Council of Guardians, a group of twelve imams, Khomeini interpreted the law on behalf of the Hidden Twelfth Imam.[164] As the Supreme Islamic Jurist, Khomeini had the power to appoint half of the guardians and to oversee all their decisions. He personally held complete control of the entire government. He held the power to appoint and dismiss the military commanders, to veto the presidents' election, and to veto any legislation that did not conform to the Shari'a. By establishing and assuming this position, he realized his ideal society: a society in which all rights and laws were based "one hundred percent on Islam"[165] - on his interpretation of Islam.

Unlike the examples that Berman gives - the Nazis, the Fascists, and the Communists -- Iran under Khomeini did not exactly fall into tyranny. The ruling imams did often act in their own interest and did not always consider the needs of the people, but Khomeini himself did not exploit his extreme power or become a dictator. He dutifully performed his role, making decisions on major legal and religious questions. Iran, however, proved that the Shari'a state is not the easy and natural utopia that Qutb envisioned. First, the difficulties of implementing the Shari'a became obvious. For example, during the revolution, many peasants had lost their land. Wealthy landowners held large properties while the peasants had nothing. The government proposed sweeping land reforms in observance of the Islamic principles of social justice and just distribution of wealth. However, members of the ulema, many of whom held large properties, protested, claiming that the Shari'a protected their right to private property. If the law contradicts itself, promising land to peasants while protecting the land of the rich, how can any government claim to follow the law in every decision? The land reform legislation never passed.[166]

Second, not every person living in this perfect Islamic society was satisfied with its laws. The ulema found that traditional family

life was more important than the emancipation of women. Women lost the right to initiate divorce, to pursue many professions, and now faced arrest if seen in public without the hijab. Women could not work, travel, or attend school without their husbands' permission. The ulema created new laws to force everyone to conform to their vision of Islamic virtue. The punishment for immodesty or immorality ranged from lashing to prison to public stoning. The ruling ulema deemed newspapers and radio stations that questioned their legitimacy unIslamic and shut them down. The regime alienated many youths as well by banning Western music and media, public dancing, and "impure" elements of society.[167]

Most importantly, the system of "authoritarian populism" did not allow any form of dissent. Most people supported Khomeini and his policies -- in that way, the system resembled Qutb's idea of autonomy of the body of people. For those who did not support Khomeini, however, the government employed the Revolutionary Guards, bands of men who beat, arrested, and executed dissenters. The Revolutionary Guards targeted political opponents as well as people who refused to follow Khomeini's strict interpretation of the Shari'a. The guards roamed the streets at night to watch for illegal satellite dishes, women without the hijab, and public dancing, and to listen for illegal Western music. In Qutb's utopia, there was no dissent, no need to enforce laws, for "the believers learn the Islamic regulations and laws with eagerness and pleasure. As soon as a command is given, the heads are bowed and nothing more is required for its implementation except to hear it." [168] The real Shari'a state, with its roaming guards, prisons, censorship, and public stonings, was a far cry from Qutb's utopia, from the society that moved like a single body. Utopia in Iran failed for the same reasons that Qutb's utopia would fail. This real Shari'a state was free only for those who agreed with the rulers and their interpretations of the Shari'a. Is it freedom if there is no way to dissent? And even if everyone were unanimous, what is the point of a democracy if there are no dissenters?

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Unanimity, leadership and freedom are not the only problems in Qutb's ideology. He bases every step along the path to his utopia on contradiction. Qutb says to depose leaders and battle jahiliyya but not to attack the slaves of jahiliyya. The leaders and the elite, however, don't fight wars. The soldiers are common men who follow the orders of the leaders. How can Muslims attack a government without hurting the people they are trying to free? How does the peaceful and humble message of Islam agree with the forceful deposition of political opponents? The Shari'a presents another problem. Hundreds of years after the death of the end of revelation, new issues arise that the Qur'an does not anticipate - for example, the Qur'an does not include traffic ordinances. More

importantly, the Shari'a requires some form of interpretation. Qutb denies the need for an interpreter: "There is no excuse for anyone to understand that government in Islam requires anything more than enforcing the Islamic Shari'ah..." The example of Iran, however, illustrates that not everyone understands religious law in the same way, and the law often contradicts itself. Someone must choose between land reform for social justice or the protection of private property. Practically, the leader cannot extract the complete law from the Qur'an and traditions without interpretation.[169]

Qutb's philosophical concepts contain internal contradictions that prevent them from practical implementation in social life. How does one attack a government without hurting people? How can Muslims be active and offensive but humble and loving? How can they force people to be free?

The only way to bring the illusion to life is to mutilate it. In the example of Iran, Khomeini did not base his mission on Qutb's work, but on his own interpretation of Islam. Many modern fundamentalists, however, do attempt to carry out Qutb's vision. In this respect, Qutb's language is dangerous. Worse than an ideology of theocracy, his words, read out of context, lead to violence and murder: followers read selectively and lose sight of the complete message. Followers misinterpret Qutb's writings because they are contradictory - they are impossible to interpret and implement correctly.

Qutb was an idealist dreamer, full of impossible ideas - impossible, but not evil. Suffering in prison, he wanted freedom and justice for every human being. He didn't want others to suffer as he did. Pushed into existence in the hands of the militants, however, Qutb's idealism turns to radical violence.