

## IV

## THE PURE SPRING?

## QUTB'S METHODS OF INTERPRETATION

Sayyid Qutb spent ten years in prison with his memory of the Qur'an to comfort and occupy him. Through his own torture and the suffering he saw around him, he dreamed of a perfect world, a world where all people would be free and equal. He found the basis for this world in the Qur'an. Qutb believed this perfect community to be the self-evident theme of the Qur'an, obvious to any reader who read the Qur'an as a whole.[170] He believed all the chapters related to this one theme, this one overall goal of Islam. Individual passages established the details of structure, organization, and implementation of the true Muslim state.[171] He wrote a thirty-volume commentary to expound on the details of this clear truth.

## RETURNING TO THE PURE SPRING

Qutb saw the community of the Prophet as the perfect civilization and asked, why was the umma perfect during the first years of Islam? Why were the first believers able to live in complete obedience to God and perfect cooperation with each other? Was the Prophet's presence necessary? In Milestones, he proposes the answer,

Had the person of the Prophet, peace be on him, been absolutely essential for the establishment and fruition of the message, Allah would not have made Islam a universal message, ordained it as the religion for the whole of mankind, given it the status of the last Divine Message for humanity, and made it a guide for all the inhabitants of this planet in all their affairs until the end of time.[172]

God would not have provided instructions that were impossible to follow for Muslims after the death of Muhammad. Muhammad served only to communicate and reinforce the message. He recounts this hadith to support his belief: "When someone asked the Mother of the Faithful 'Aisha, may Allah be pleased with her, about the character of the Prophet, peace be on him, she answered, "His character was the Qur'an." [173] According to Qutb, the Qur'an provides all the guidance that a person or a community could need. God's message stands alone and needs no explanation, promotion, or intermediary. Muhammad was only a man, and because the Qur'an surpasses human

knowledge, the Prophet has no special claim of understanding or influence on the revelation.[174] The believer needs no guidance but the Book. If the first community of Muslims did not rely on Muhammad's guidance, why cannot modern Muslims return to the perfect umma?

The first believers, answers Qutb, established a perfect society because they drank from a "clear spring,"[175] the pure, unpolluted Qur'an. Later, the spring became mixed with other sources: "Greek philosophy and logic, ancient Persian legends and ideas, Jewish scriptures and traditions, Christian theology, and, in addition to these, fragments of other religions and civilizations." [176] Islamic jurisprudence, Qur'anic commentaries, and soon all Islamic theology mingled with these other forms of thought. In Qutb's reasoning, non-Qur'anic traditions -- traditions born of jahili sources -- polluted Islam. Muslims today cannot live in the same utopia of the first believers because they follow a tainted Islam.

Hundreds of years of tafsir stand on jahili foundations, says Qutb. Tafsir, the process of interpretation, elucidation, and clarification of verses in the Qur'an, began with the Prophet, who was both reciter and interpreter of the Qur'an. In the next thirteen hundred years, tafsir expanded into a complex science with many branches and schools.[177] Qutb rejects these schools and advocates a return to the foundation, a return to the pure spring. "We must remove ourselves from all the influences of the jahiliyyah in which we live and from which we derive benefits. We must return to that pure source from which the first generation derived its guidance, free from any mixing or pollution." [178] Qutb claims to see through all the pollution of the last thirteen hundred years and offers to guide the reader to this pure version of Islam. The only accurate way a person can interpret the Qur'an, he says, is to disregard all jahili interpretation and rely on the Qur'an itself and a few of the most trustworthy sayings of the Prophet -- only those almost universally accepted as accurate. [179] The truths of the Qur'an are self-explanatory, he says, self-evident to any person with clear sight.[180] Qutb does not see his interpretation as interpretation at all - just a logical examination of the true themes of the Qur'an. He does permit "carefully delineated" ijtihad, independent interpretation of the legal injunctions of the Qur'an, as long as the interpreter focuses on the Qur'an alone. Even this, though, only allows a superficial understanding, not the apprehension of greater truths and themes. Qutb believes that only he and a few others have seen the light of truth and understand the greater meaning of the Qur'an. As Euben puts it, "Qutb assumes for himself (and for perhaps a few other select Muslims) the status of one who has ceased to watch shadows on the wall, one who has ascended beyond the mouth of the cave and into the blinding light of the sun." Qutb believes that most people are still trapped in jahiliyya and cannot disentangle their minds from corrupting

influences.[181] Therefore, Qutb ironically implies that a Muslim cannot see the "self evident truth" of the Qur'an without his guidance.[182]

Qutb has not been the only modern scholar to disregard the centuries of Qur'anic commentary and look back to the roots of Islam. Like fundamentalists, many modernists also return to the foundational text and disregard the interpretations of traditional commentators. Modernist scholar Abdulaziz Sachedina believes that thirteen hundred years of tradition and interpretation have emphasized the negative implications of the Qur'an - violence and antipluralism - because of societal influences. These aspects, he says, are rooted in culture and not theology. Sachedina also has a vision of a free Islamic state, but his vision is different than Qutb's: "Islam does support functional secularity, some kind of separation of jurisdictions that allows religion to remain beyond government's intervention. These separate jurisdictions allow the necessary freedoms for all citizens." [183] Like Qutb, Sachedina finds freedom for all people by returning to the roots of Islam, but he presents a different kind of freedom than Qutb's utopia: in his vision, freedom for all is the secular state, while in Qutb's it is the Islamic state. And Sachedina engages in debate with the commentators of the past while Qutb writes them off unconditionally as products of jahiliyya, thereby giving his own work exclusive authority.[184] Both men return to the early sources and find opposite paths to a free and peaceful society. Their different interpretations prove that there is no one true Islam.

## IS QUTB'S SPRING PURE?

Qutb hates philosophers. In *The Islamic Conception and Its Characteristics*, Qutb argues that any form of philosophy encroaches on the realm of God.[185] Philosophers presume to understand a reality beyond human understanding and thereby draw the need for scripture and unquestioning obedience into doubt. Philosophers question divine truths using their merely human capabilities. Humans need reason, says Qutb in *The Islamic Conception*, only to find Islam and to understand that it is the only true path. A truly logical person will use his logic to understand the limit of his own understanding. He will embrace God's whole truth without question because he understands that divine truth is beyond his reason. Philosophers, however, in their presumptions of superhuman understanding, call Islam and divine truth into question.[186] Euben writes, "Given Qutb's insistence on the limits of human reason, philosophy thus appears both methodologically and epistemologically antagonistic not only to Islam but to the very truths of human existence." [187] Like jahiliyya, philosophers attempt to destroy Islam and undermine humanity. Philosophy runs through the ocean of jahiliyya, the

corruption that has flooded into Islam and polluted its pure meaning.

But Qutb, of course, is a philosopher, even though he claims that he only expounds the pure truth of God. He claims that he does not interpret at all: he presents the pure spring. He distilled Islam from jahiliyya and he describes the one eternal truth. After discussing the boundaries between science and faith, he writes, "Even this is not my personal opinion...This is the decision of Allah and His Messenger..." [188] Qutb removes himself from the process of interpretation.[189]

When Qutb claims that he alone has access to God's one truth, that he alone can see through the forces of jahiliyya and that his reading is, therefore, not an interpretation at all, he removes all possibility for dissent and invalidates any other interpretation.

Is it possible to read the Qur'an without interpreting? In the introduction to the English translation of *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, translator Manazir Ahsan writes,

[O]n matters where the Qur'an does not provide more than basic information and the Prophet has also not provided any clear indication or details, unlike some mufassirin, [those who undertake tafsir, interpretation,] [Qutb] scrupulously avoids speculation, and refrains from putting forward any subjective judgments or opinions. Not only does he carefully avoid unnecessary legal polemics, he also refuses to engage in speculative tafsir arguing for or against various schools of philosophical thought, his main concern being to present the clear messages of the Qur'an as expounded by the Prophet, his Companions, and scholars of earlier generations." [190]

The translator sees the work as fact, unbiased elaboration and clarification of the basic Qur'anic principles and themes. In his book *The Qur'an and its Interpreters*, Mahmoud Ayoub characterizes Qutb's commentary as unfettered by outside influences, "a conscious effort to remain within the purview of the Qur'an." [191] Has Qutb found the original intention of the Qur'an? Has he discovered the pure spring and escaped the influences of jahiliyya?

In *The Enemy in the Mirror*, Roxanne Euben asks the obvious question: what special knowledge does Qutb have that allowed him to escape the "false consciousness" of jahiliyya?

His indictment of jahiliyya ... has reflexive force. Although he is quite alert to the complex of influences and circumstances that condition interpretations with which he disagrees, Qutb's tendency to regard truth and falsity as self-evident inures him to the conditionality of his own interpretation...[W]ithout a hint of self

consciousness, Qutb claims to see clearly what the rest of us cannot.[192]

Qutb claims a unique view of the truth, says Euben. He claims to identify the corrupting forces and sees through them to the pure unitary truth. He does not stop to question his own influences.

In reality, of course, jahiliyya influences Qutb too - could anyone completely strip his or her thought of every intellectual influence? As Euben observes, "Qutb is preoccupied with such distinctively 'modern' phenomena as Enlightenment philosophy, socialism, and liberalism, unintentionally incorporating many of the terms and concerns of these discourses while insisting on philosophical 'purity.'"[193] Qutb's entire thought process, "the reification of Islam, the understanding of social systems in terms of dynamic social processes, the incorporation of an idea of progressive (if contingent) historical change, the pronounced concern for social justice...and the very concept of modern jahiliyya," stems from his modern consciousness, even as he claims to return to the roots of Islam. [194] In addition, much of Qutb's philosophy is a reaction: Qutb reacts against Westernization, Nasserism, and the bankruptcy of modern secular liberalism. Just as he unconsciously forms his thought in the shape of modern social discourse, he forms his thought against modern systems. Either way, these "jahili" movements shape his thought.

A couple examples will show that Qutb not only brings his modern consciousness into his interpretation, but also stretches passages and engages in contradictory methods of interpretation in order to prove his interpretation is correct, often reading against the clearest meaning of the verses. First, an example from Euben: Qutb believes that both men and women possess equal capacities for piety and obedience to God, and are therefore equal in the most important respect. But how can he resolve that with the Qur'an?

[H]ow does Qutb's distinction here square with the Qur'anic passages which clearly state, for example, that men have 'precedence' over women; that men are to receive double the inheritance of women; and that the testimony of one man equals that of two women?... Qutb thus confronts two dilemmas with regard to gender. First he must show that certain Qur'anic passages mean something different from what they seem to say. And second, he must convince his readers that such a task is not an act of interpretation but is, in fact, the discovery of the 'true Islam.'[195]

How does Qutb attempt this? Euben provides a quote from Social Justice in Islam to explain Qutb's treatment of the subject.

As for the relation between the sexes, Islam has guaranteed to women complete equality with men in regard to sex, and it has allowed no discrimination except in some incidental cases relating to endowments, customs or responsibilities, none of which affect the actual situations of the two sexes. So whenever endowments and customs and responsibilities are equal, and whenever they are different, discrimination between the sexes follows accordingly.[196]

Thus, according to Qutb, men and women are equal in the eyes of God; inequalities are due only to their unequal circumstances, unequal physical abilities, and unequal roles. Qutb claims that there is no discrimination - except when discrimination is necessary. And why do men and women have unequal abilities and unequal roles? God created humans and endowed them with abilities and God outlined their roles in the Qur'an. Women are equal in the eyes of God, but God created them with unequal abilities and roles? These discoveries, readings against the obvious meaning of the text in order to support his preexisting view, are not discoveries of the true meaning. They are the twisting and stretching of interpretation - interpretation to fit his main theme: the establishment of a perfect community. For his community to be perfect, every person must be equal and have a defined role. With this theme always in his sight he interprets any passage to support it.

Another example shows that Qutb not only interprets individual passages towards his theme, he warps the entire science of interpretation to allow him to support his one truth. Manazir Ahsan believes that Qutb's refusal "to engage in speculative tafsir arguing for or against various schools of philosophical thought" allows him to "present the clear messages of the Qur'an as expounded by the Prophet, his Companions, and scholars of earlier generations." The refusal to engage in this type of tafsir, however, does not lead to the presentation of a clear message - in fact, it produces the opposite result. In other words, Qutb's rejection of the traditional schools of interpretation does not mean that he does not interpret. On the contrary, this refusal allows him to oscillate between them, at different moments drawing from different genres of interpretation, using whichever method allows him to arrive at his predetermined interpretation. He goes so far as to shift between two modes in the interpretation of a single passage. An example from volume 7 of *In the Shade of the Qur'an* in which Qutb deals with the role of the believer in holy war reveals how Qutb's rejection of established methods of interpretations allows him to extract whatever meaning he chooses from the text.

Before showing how Qutb disregards traditional methods of interpretation, I will provide a brief explanation of these traditional methods. Before showing how Qutb manipulates the science of abrogation, I will explain how other scholars employ this science.

The Qur'an is replete with internal contradictions. For example, both 16:125 and 9:29 address the Muslim's role and responsibilities in spreading Islam. 16:125 enjoins non-violent means of spreading the message of Islam. "Summon to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good admonition and argue against them with what is better, for your Lord knows best who has strayed from His path and who has been guided." [197] In this sura, God instructs the believers to dialogue with unbelievers. There is no injunction toward violence, for God is the ultimate judge. Scholar al-Wahidi supports the traditional view in placing the revelation of this verse immediately after the Battle of Uhud in 625 C.E. [198]

Five years after receiving 16:125, Muhammad received this revelation: "Fight those who believe not in God nor the Last Day, nor forbid, nor profess the religion of truth from among the People of the Book until they give the jizya tax by hand, being subdued." Traditional scholars date verse 9:29 to 630 C.E. after the raid on Tabuk. In this verse, God orders the Prophet and his companions to fight the pagans until they submit. How do interpreters deal with contradictions like this?

Historically, Muslims have relied on the life and sayings of the prophet, the hadith, for assistance and guidance in interpreting the Qur'an and resolving its internal contradictions. The Qur'an is not arranged in the chronological order of revelation, but by chapter length. Interpreters must therefore rely on hadith to determine which passages came last in chronological order. A chain of transmission links each account to a direct witness. Muslim historians analyze each source and determine whether each individual is trustworthy. Scholars only recognize hadith transmitted through a chain of reputable sources. One widely accepted mode of interpretation, naskh, abrogation, presupposes that the passage that Muhammad received last is true for all time. Previous verses, those that have been abrogated, relate to specific circumstances within the early Muslim community and are therefore no longer valid. This, however, leads to one of the greatest difficulties in interpreting the Qur'an. Mahmoud Ayoub summarizes the problem: "[A]mong Muslim scholars there is no general agreement as to what verses are abrogated and by what verses." [199] If interpreters cannot be sure which verse came last, they cannot decide which injunctions hold true for all time. For many verses, however, most scholars agree on an overall timeframe and therefore agree on the final eternal injunctions. Most scholars believe Muhammad received 9:29 five years after receiving 16:125, so 9:29 abrogates. Muhammad died in 632 C.E., so many scholars believe this was the last revelation concerning war that he received and therefore is true for all times and all places to follow. [200]

Some scholars, however, emphasize the importance of the historical context of each verse. This school of interpretation looks

to occasions of revelation, asbab al-nuzul, to determine whether a verse has a general or specific meaning: some verses may be true for all times and places while some are true for a particular time or person only. The asbab al-nuzul tell which are which. This method of interpretation puts less emphasis on the complete annulation of a verse and seeks to find the situations to which each verse would apply.[201] These scholars resolve contradiction without abrogation by positing that each passage reflects a specific circumstance during the Prophet's career. The role of the jurist, in their view, is to consider each ruling in light of specific circumstances because there is often no one correct ruling for all people at all times. For example, Muhammad received the earlier verses that prescribed non-confrontation while the Muslim community was still small and weak. According to this genre of interpretation, the community should avoid war at any time it is weak and fight only when it is strong.[202]

Muhammad received Sura 8 after the Battle of Badr in 624 C.E, a year before verse 16:125. According to scholars of the naskh genre, this verse has been abrogated. Qutb indirectly addresses issues of abrogation in his commentary on verses 8:39-40 that read,

Fight them until there is no more oppression, and all the submission is made to God alone. If they desist, God is certainly aware of all they do. But if they turn away, know that God is your Lord Supreme. How splendid is this Lord Supreme, and how splendid is the Giver of support.

The description of the role of the believer in jihad and destroying oppression is obviously crucial to Qutb's philosophy. In the following commentary, he writes,

This is the purpose and the limit of jihad, or struggle for God's cause, not only at a particular time, but at all times. The statements related to jihad and the laws of war and peace in this surah are not the final ones. The final version is that included in Surah 9, Repentance, or al-Tawbah. On the other hand, Islam is a positive movement which deals with human situations employing means that are suitable for different situations. Moreover, it is a well structured movement that uses fitting means and methods for every stage. Nevertheless, we have here a statement that lays down a permanent principle that defines the objectives and the confrontation between Islam and un-Islamic social set-ups. This is embodied in the verse which says: "Fight them until there is no more oppression, and all submission is made to God alone. (Verse 39)[203]

In this commentary, Qutb says that 8:39-40 is both true for all times and abrogated by a later verse. When he says that Sura 9 gives the final version, he stands within the traditional bounds of

naskh and agrees with the general consensus that this verse has been abrogated. But then he says that 8:39-40, though abrogated, "lays down a permanent principle." How is this possible? If he believes this verse has been abrogated, it cannot apply to some situations or lay down a permanent principle. Then he states that Islam provides different injunctions for different times, now looking at the verse from the asbab al-nuzul perspective. Can asbab al-nuzul resolve this difficulty? If the verse has been abrogated, could it still retain meaning in certain circumstances? Or has it been abrogated by the permanent injunction in Sura 9? Either way, whether he believes the verse abrogated or applicable only to some situations, how can he claim that it holds truth for "all times"? What is Qutb doing in his interpretation of this verse?

In the quote above, Qutb attempts to separate the verse into two intentions: revealing the laws of war and defining actions for the believer in jihad. The laws of war and peace change in the next sura - the laws in Sura al-Anfal are temporary and invalidated by abrogation. The role of the believer, however, was not abrogated. This verse describes the correct action for any times the believers find themselves in this particular circumstance. As Muslims now face the same jahiliyya that the earliest Muslims faced, the sura establishes the objectives of jihad for all modern Muslims. And because Qutb believes this battle with jahiliyya will never end, the verse becomes true for all time - the particular circumstance of its revelation is eternal. Qutb uses naskh to invalidate the verse and asbab al-nuzul to give the same verse continuing significance - he draws conclusions out of the same passage using different means at the same time. This method allows Qutb to preserve an important foundation of his philosophy, freeing the unbelievers from oppression -- a goal that the wording of 8:39 supports -- while supporting the rules of war in Sura 9. Also, this method allows him to remain within the mainstream genre of naskh. Qutb steps back and forth between two genres of interpretation to extract the meaning he needs to prove his argument. Refusing to choose between methods of interpretation does not mean Qutb does not interpret. Instead of choosing one method or the other, Qutb chooses both and alternates to suit his need. Not only is this an interpretation -- an interpretation that employs not one but two hermeneutical modes -- it is an impossible method that refuses to acknowledge any concrete meaning in text.

To this point I have used the English word "interpretation" and the Arabic word "tafsir" to describe the process of analyzing, explaining, elucidating, and commenting on the Qur'an. Tafsir, however, is only one of the two possible branches of interpretation of the Qur'an: tafsir and ta'wil. Early commentators used the terms interchangeably, but over time, the meanings diverged. Tafsir came to describe "the general elucidation of a verse with respect to discovering its exoteric meaning and application." [204] Tafsir often centers on understanding of a specific verse, deciphering the

language, or interpreting legal codes within the Qur'an. Tafsir is unveiling. Ta'wil, on the other hand, is concerned with the general and specific meanings of the text. Ta'wil looks for broader themes, esoteric meanings, the "final purpose, meaning, or end of a thing." [205] The difference between the two, "according to some commentators, is that tafsir is concerned primarily with the transmission (riwaya) of tradition, whereas ta'wil is concerned with the deeper comprehension (diraya) of the inner meaning of the sacred text." [206] Ta'wil allows the commentator greater freedom, though often commands less respect as a valid interpretation. "It has been through ta'wil that Muslim scholars and mystics were able to bring the Qur'an into the hearts, imagination, and total life experience of the masses. ... [A mu'awwil (esoteric exegete)] enjoys the infinite scope of his imagination..." [207] Qutb would deny that his description is esoteric - indeed, he purports it as the clear, obvious truth. In reality, however, he presents much more than that. Qutb works towards one goal and brings the Qur'an to support that goal. He employs his imagination to interpret every passage towards that goal. He brings the Qur'an into the "hearts, imagination, and total life experience of the masses." He moves beyond the words on the page into an interpretation for modernity, an interpretation for his own political agenda. How does Qutb's style of interpretation compare to that of other commentators? Is Qutb's style closer to ta'wil or the tafsir of traditional commentators?

## ALL VERSES POINT TO ONE THEME

In *The Qur'an and its Interpreters*, Mahmoud Ayoub compares a range of schools of tafsir, "examples of juristic, Mu'tazili, philosophical, and mystical tafsir" as well as Shi'i and modern tafsir. [208] Ayoub compares Qutb's interpretation of 2:276 to 2:281, the usury verses, to the interpretations by other commentators. Ibn Kathir, for example, attempts to place the verse in the historical context and establish a background of hadith. Both Ibn Kathir and Nisaburi examine the meaning of the language and ask what possible significances the word *riba*, usury, could have. Tabari expounds on the punishment for usury. Numerous commentators focus on the intended audience for these verses. In short, each commentator focuses on the individual verses, attempting to extract the exact meaning, history, and implication of the prohibition of usury.

Qutb alone takes a different path. He pulls the verses into a modern social context. Ayoub quotes Qutb:

God speaks the truth, for we see no society practicing usury but that it loses comfort, blessing, happiness, and contentment. One may see affluence on the surface, production, and many resources, yet blessing is not in the magnitude of resources, it is

rather in the wholesome quiet and secure enjoyment of these resources. One can observe the frustration, unhappiness, and fear which exist in the rich nations. We have pointed to the psychological disturbance which wealth magnifies rather than being able to cure. From these nations, unrest, fear and trouble flow into the world at large where humanity lives in continuous fear of conflagration." Sayyid Qutb then contrasts this situation with the society organized on the principle of sharing with contentment and almsgiving God's boundaries and his favors.[209]

Unlike these other commentators, Qutb uses these verses as more examples for his one main theme - the establishment of a utopian society on earth. Instead of focusing on the meaning of the individual verses, exploring the significance of the word *riba* like Nisaburi, analyzing the context like Ibn Kathir, or considering the judicial implications of the verse like Tabari, Qutb applies these verses to modern times and reads into them an attack on capitalism, Western society, and Westernization.

Qutb crosses over the vague line into *ta'wil*, engaging his imagination, vision, and bending the verses to fit his own time. He searches for the final purpose, the one true meaning. Though he claims this is the obvious truth, his reading in fact grasps for the deeper, broader-reaching meaning. In light of Ayoub's definition of *ta'wil*, I would further specify Euben's characterization of Qutb. He does not only interpret and then deny the act of interpretation - he denies that his *ta'wil*, his loose and esoteric interpretation, is anything but the pure, self-evident truth.

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Qutb departs from centuries of interpretations and commentaries on the Qur'an, calling them polluted.[210] He illuminates the pure, uncorrupted Qur'an. He offers the pure spring as it flowed in the time of the Prophet. This is the dangerous contradiction underlying Qutb's entire theology: Qutb believes that his interpretation is not an interpretation, only a literal reading for modern times. According to his reading, other religions, philosophers, interpreters, sects, and societies are jahili, so he is the only true Muslim and only his reading conveys the intended meaning. "Even this is not my personal opinion," Qutb writes. "...This is the decision of Allah and His Messenger..." [211] Qutb removes himself from the process of interpretation and thereby silences discourse and debate.[212] He can answer any argument and support any claim by claiming, "It is that way because God says so."

Qutb hates philosophers but enters into esoteric speculation, as I have shown. He hates jahiliyya, but his interpretation reflects modernity. He denies that his interpretation is an interpretation at

all. His words take on an authority above all others. Many readers, even his translator, believe he espouses the one truth.

Qutb must portray his interpretation as the presentation of the one clear truth of the Qur'an because his portrayal of Islam depends on the assumption that there is only one truth. Euben writes,

Qutb implicitly suggest that without the possibility of unitary knowledge - and in particular acknowledgement of a moral unity it terms of which we can organize human life - humanity is cut adrift, doomed to a knowledge that is purely positivistic and instrumental.[213]

Without one clear truth, one guiding light for all people, human beings have no hope of escaping the "hideous schizophrenia" of jahiliyya. To establish one unified community for the entire world, a community without dissent, there must be one clear and concrete truth. Qutb's entire philosophy and mission rests on a belief in the existence of a single truth.

## INTERPRETING THE QUR'AN AS A WHOLE

Most interpreters lost the true meaning of Islam because they are steeped in jahiliyya, says Qutb, but he sees another problem with their methods of interpretation. Elite scholars, the ulema, exegeted the passages line by line, even word by word, and broke the continuity of the Qur'an. The discussions were "erudite" over analyses and did not apply to the real world.[214]

Qutb diverges from the traditional format of Qur'anic commentary. Traditional commentaries focus on the individual significance of each verse, each word. Qutb's commentary, however, looks different. He begins with broad histories and overviews and explains his entire philosophy before he even quotes the Qur'an. When he does turn to verses, he works in the opposite direction of a traditional interpretation: instead of analyzing each verse, he employs them as support within the text of his argument. Qutb has already indicated the major themes of the Qur'an, he knows the goal of the Qur'an, and he knows where the verses point before he even begins to quote them. The Qur'an is the background for his argument, the foundation of a pre-established philosophy. Unlike the "erudite" scholars who focus on theology and jurisprudence, Qutb writes a manual for action with *In the Shade of the Qur'an*. *Milestones*, then, is the logical next step: he has stripped most of the Qur'anic basis from his philosophy and presented the major themes as a concise guide. *Milestones* is simple and easy to read. Understanding its concepts requires only a basic understanding of the Qur'an and Islam. The book is

powerful, uplifting, and inspiring, completely unlike the meticulous, "erudite" theological commentaries of many ulema.

Qutb is not the only interpreter to look for broad themes: modernist scholars like Fazlur Rahman put forth interpretations based not on individual words or passages, but on a general understanding of overarching themes.[215] The goal of Muslim modernists is to reconcile Islam and the Western world, to revitalize Islam in the modern world and extend its scope. They seek to improve the world by bringing Islam to modern society, by revealing the progressive, non-violent ideals buried under centuries of tradition. Interpreting the Qur'an in terms of broad themes creates a practical model, a straightforward image of Islam with which the reader can actively engage. The interpretation becomes a manual for action.

In addition to this method of interpretation, Qutb shares some goals with the modernists. Both advocate forms of democracy, and cite shura, consultation, as a mandate for representative government. They support personal freedoms, moral societies through individual responsibility and spiritual satisfaction, racial diversity, and community ties. Qutb is not the only modern interpreter who believes Islam has a place in government. Sachedina, for example, believes that a moderately religious government will rule fairly and help establish unity between the government, individual, and community. Both believe that fitra can guide individual morality and uphold ethics and order within the community. [216] Both claim to support religious freedom. In fact, Sachedina quotes Qutb to summarize his own interpretation of the non-compulsion verse: "Sayyid Qutb regards the verse as 'the manifestation of God's favor toward humankind,' because the message upholds dignity and respect for individual autonomy in the matter of guidance and error in belief." [217] If both Sachedina and Qutb write manuals for the perfect society with similar goals, why is Qutb considered a dangerous fundamentalist while Sachedina is considered peaceful and progressive?

The visions of Qutb and Sachedina diverge when actually implemented in the community. Qutb implies that everyone, if truly free, will choose Islam, while Sachedina's community reflects progressive Western bias: religious diversity is not only tolerable, but enriches the community. This is an example of the fundamental difference between Qutb and other modernists: instead of attempting to bring Islam to modernity through compromise, Qutb wants to bring modernity under Islam.

The modernists and fundamentalists outline their visions for the ideal community, but regardless of the differences, history suggests that a perfect community, Islamic or otherwise, is an impossible dream, an idealist illusion. Would Qutb's utopia succeed while all other large-scale utopias in history failed? Too

often, leaders imposed utopian doctrine by force. Force required prisons, torture, and mass executions. The record of history shows that Qutb's community would end in oppression and disaster like all other enforced utopias. While Sachedina argues that a peaceful, secular Islamic state is possible and is the intention of the Qur'an, Qutb argues that the establishment of the pure Islamic state is the only correct choice for all of mankind and Muslims must fight to create this state. After destroying the obstacles, all people, he believes, will enter the community. This, then, is the difference between the two interpreters: Sachedina says the community is possible, while Qutb says God mandates the community as the command of God.

Qutb may be dangerous, but for different reasons than CNN's terrorism analysts tell us. Qutb is an idealist - he does not command violence and, like other 20th century modernists, he dreams of a utopian state. His utopian state, however, is not secular but Islamic. The danger in Qutb's thought is his denial of the validity of all other interpretations of the Qur'an. All real Muslims, he says, must agree with him. In the absolutism of his vision, Qutb most resembles other political thinkers of the modern era. Unlike them, however, he relies on religious discourse - not the secular principles of the Enlightenment - to ground his arguments. Indeed, the combination of his hermeneutic certainty - his denial that his interpretation is an interpretation -- and his demand for universal application share more with European utopian theorists of the extreme Left and Right than it does with the theological traditions of Muslim ulema of either the modern or pre-modern era. His is the only truth, the truth that God intended. But his vision is an interpretation, ta'wil -- Qutb uses the Qur'an as a springboard for his imagination and creates a dream world. Welcoming all people into his dream world becomes forcing his world upon all people. He turns the invitation to utopia into an order, forcing it onto Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Still, Qutb shuns violence. Love is his fundamental motivation, the reason behind his entire project. As we have seen, there are no non-violent means of bringing the entire world today into an Islamic umma. But, instead of collapsing as an impossible contradiction, his philosophy spread. He became "the father of Islamic fundamentalism" because readers chose to ignore the platform of love and the commands against violence. Why do his readers read selectively? Why do they ignore the purpose of his mission?