

IN THE SHADE OF DEATH – A CRITICAL READING OF SAYYID QUTB’S QUR’ANIC EXEGESIS

Introduction

Sayyid Qutb earned his reputation as the ideological guide of modern militant Islamism because of a slim tract that earned him his death sentence. Known to the English-speaking world variously as “Milestones” or “Signposts along the Way” (*Ma’alim fi al-Tariq*), Qutb’s death made the work an ‘icon-text’ for many militant Islamist movements.¹ The impact of the work must be understood in the shadow of his martyrdom. Ideologically, the 1964 manifesto promoted a Leninist scheme whereby the vanguard of the proletariat would inspire the masses with a transformative revolutionary consciousness inspired by the Qur’an. The pure Qur’anic generation (*al-jil al-Qur’an*) would first divorce itself from the fallen society of Nasserite Egypt and prepare for the overthrow of illegitimate regimes, which feigned Muslim piety but promoted infidel systems. Urging the construction of a truly Islamic order (*al-nizam al-Islami*), its message motivated at least one failed and suicidal uprising in Egypt barely a decade later, mounted by the *Jama’at al-Takfir wa al-Hijra* (Society of Excoriation and Exodus/Repentance and Holy Flight).

Consistently apocalyptic and adversarial in tone and substance, Qutb’s manifesto was destined to attract an audience of committed militants and curious malcontents. On the other hand, Qutb’s comprehensive and wide-ranging Qur’anic exegesis, “In the Shade of the Qur’an” (*Fi Zilal al-Qur’an* and hereafter referred to as *Zilal*), has mustered a wider and more heterodox audience in the Middle East and beyond.² Meditative and confrontational in turns, in its original form, *Zilal* comprises a unique compendium of *tafsir* (Qur’anic exegesis) spanning some eight volumes.³ Yet *Zilal* is not merely a product of pious concentration on the Qur’an. *Zilal* exhibits elements of autobiography, albeit expressed indirectly, and it is resolutely political and ideological in a good number of its interpretations of the holy text. It was the commanding *Zilal* that provided the rich lodestone for the shorter manifesto’s call for a Qur’anic revolution.

Qutb began composing his magnum opus in 1951, soon after his conversion to Islamism but before his hardening into a radical. Qutb's final work spanned the entire Qur'an, which is divided into 30 parts of roughly equal length to facilitate recitation over the nights of a month, especially the month of Ramadan. Qutb completed his Qur'anic commentary during more than a decade of imprisonment for involvement in the notorious secret cell of the Muslim Brotherhood. He had been implicated in an assassination plot against the populist radical Egyptian President Gamel Abdel Nasser. The secret cell, and more generally, the Brotherhood, served as the prototype for modern, militant Sunni Islamist movements. Its centerpiece ideology of *Salafism* undertook a radical re-interpretation of the faith. It drew from what it imagined to be the well-springs of the faith and sought to emulate Islam's 7th century antecedents by reifying the way of the pious forebears (*al-salaf al-salih*).

Although written from the perspective of Sunni fundamentalism, the pan-Islamic appeal of Qutb's *tafsir* is attested by the fact that it was translated into Persian and even made an impact on Ayatollah Khomeini, the father of modern Shi'ite fundamentalism. In the Sunni world, the redaction and propagation of Qutb's work was undertaken by Sayyid Qutb's brother Muhammed Qutb, a key figure behind the *sahwa* (Islamist awakening) in Saudi Arabia, which reconciled Sayyid Qutb's and the Muslim Brotherhood's *salafism* with the *salafism* of *Wahhabism*.⁴ Muhammed Qutb worked hard to make his brother's *Salafism* palatable to his Saudi hosts. Qutb's *tafsir* enjoys a reputation as the one of the most popular and reader-friendly *tafsir* available. Along with Persian, it has been translated into Urdu, Bengali, Malay and Turkish.⁵ The first part translated into English was Part 30, or the final part (*juz'* 'amm or the last 1/30th)⁶ which begins with *surah* 78 and ends with *surah* 114.

Overall, *Zilal*'s appeal rests on its author's adroit use of *adeeb* (literary) methods to generate interest in an ideologically charged interpretation of the Qur'an. It conditions its adherents to see a bipolar world of difference and division pit between pure Islam and modern paganism. My own analysis restricts itself to Qutb's exegesis of the final 1/30th of the Qur'an. It contains the most number of *surahs* since these are mainly sign-passages

and short *surahs*. These closing *surahs* are nearly all from the earliest revelations at Mecca and form a distinct group of apocalyptic signs, events, warnings and cataclysms of the end-times (*al-akhira*) or doom as well as fundamental questions of belief and creed (*aqidah*).⁷ This section was published in book form around 1979. It accounts for 5% of his entire exegetical commentary, but is also the key entrée for many in the Muslim world who seek a rediscovery of their faith. Qutb believed that the early Meccan experience, a large part of which is contained in this section, provided powerful lessons for modern Islamic revolutionary practice.⁸ I will examine his exegetical language and tone, how it establishes its authority as the text of a doomed martyr, as an ideological document and the effectiveness of its arguments. I also pay some attention to its shaping in circumstances of imprisonment, although many of my conclusions in this regard are admittedly speculative and incomplete because I have focused on a single part and have not had the benefit of original, field research related to the circumstances of Qutb's exegetical composition in prison.

Tone

Zilal's hallmark style as *tafsir* is its remarkably skilful interpenetration of pulpit pronouncement and its intimacy of voice. The artful shifts in register are true to its form as 'activist exegesis', where theology and politics are freely mixed. *Zilal* does not soft-peddle a dichotomous separation of a sacred Islamic system and the profane ideologies of capitalism and communism. However, the hard-line political and the antinomian ideological discourse of *Zilal* are relieved by Qutb's personal address and consistently accessible prose.

When not railing in dichotomous mode, Qutb's *tafsir* features a sensitive close-reading and interpretation of passages from the Qur'an. Not infrequently he sounds more like a cultivated and engaging literary critic than an uncompromising, radical Islamist. This is especially true when Qutb teases out the aesthetic power of the Qur'an, which he is always quick to qualify is provided in service of a higher ideal. This occasional geniality provides the reader with respite from the numbing harshness of his more

doctrinal strictures and ideological posturing, and perhaps even permitted a refuge for Qutb, who produced his work in prison conditions where the writing of his *tafsir* was his only privilege. Ironically, Qutb was allowed to complete his *tafsir* because of a legal decision. His publisher had proceeded with litigation against the government for its decision to prevent Qutb from carrying out the terms of a pre-imprisonment contract.⁹

Recalling his own experience when he read the final portion of the Qur'an, Qutb outlines its distinctive, thematic unity in his commentary on *surah* 78 (The Tiding/*An-Naba*):

“The thirtieth part of the Qur'an has a special, distinctive color. All the *surahs* it includes are Makkan, except two...they form a single group with more or less the same theme. They have the same characteristics of rhythm, images, connotations and overall style. They are indeed, like a persistent and strong knocking on a door, or loud shouts seeking to awaken some people who are fast asleep, or some drunken men who have lost consciousness, or are in a night-club, completely absorbed with their dancing or entertainment. The knocks and shouts come one after the other.”¹⁰

Qutb continues with a series of exclamatory imperatives:

“Wake up! Look around you! Think! Reflect! There is a God! There is planning, trial, liability, reckoning, reward, severe punishment and lasting bliss. The same warning is repeated time after time...(t)hey may wake up once or twice to say obstinately, “No!”. They may stone the person warning them or insult him and then resume their position of inattention. He shakes them anew”¹¹

I have quoted the paragraph at some length because it captures the intimacy of tone, conversational style and sharp immediacy of Qutb's *tafsir*. There is perfect blend of form and content as Qutb conveys the effect of a series of brisk knocks to the reader. It is not a facetious point to make to say that Qutb's *tafsir* was perhaps the first in the history of Qur'anic exegesis to compare the effect of the Meccan *surahs* to the brusque awakening of men in night-clubs. For the alienated, the language and tone of Qutb's *tafsir* can be beguiling, as his work rides on a form associated with traditional religious credentials but avoids a sclerotic outcome by making a direct connection with the reader.

Establishment of Authority

Zilal derives its authority in part by appropriating the traditional form known as *tafsir* (scholarly Qur'anic exegesis). *Tafsir* refers to an interpretive literature as well as a discipline of learning devoted to the correct understanding and interpretation of the text of the Qur'an. *Tafsir* can be divided into two broad categories:

- (a) *tafsir bi-l-riwaya* (exegesis by transmission), also termed *tafsir bi-l-ma'thur* (by authority) performed by *taqlid* (following the badge of authority).
- (b) *tafsir bi'l-ra'y* (by sound opinion), which is exegesis done by *ijtihad* (effort of independent reason) based on sound sources, also labeled as *tafsir bi-l-diraya* (by knowledge).

Proponents of such specialized learning are known as *mufasssirin*. Unlike the traditionalists, Qutb does not list all the variant interpretations and mechanically indicate his preference.¹² Qutb himself did not seek to be compared to the traditional *mufasssir*. Nevertheless, traditionalists accuse him of deviance in not following the basic criteria of *tafsir* and practicing *tafsir madhmum* (blameworthy interpretation) instead.¹³ In his introduction to the English translation of part 30 of *Zilal*, Muhammad Qutb declares: "The book is a "campaign of struggle" because it is, indeed, much more than a "commentary" on the Qur'an".¹⁴

Qutb's style of exegesis would not have been completely unfamiliar to its readers. *Zilal* certainly owes a debt to the pioneers of modern Qur'anic exegesis, Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida, who developed the so-called *tafsir al qur'an al-hakim al-musamma Tafsir al-Manar*,¹⁵ the "rational school" which sought for the first time to

make exegesis relevant to the contemporary situation. Qutb derived from Rida and Abduh the value of “scriptural analysis focusing upon a concern for the reader, rather than an exclusive preoccupation with the text itself”.¹⁶ He also saw the value of a discourse level analysis of the Qur’an performed by Abduh and Rida, where commentary focused on blocks of verses or entire *surahs*, rather than the traditional focus on a word-by-word or phrase-by-phrases exegesis such as that of medieval commentators like Muhammad bin Amr al-Husain al-Baydawi (d. 1209).¹⁷

Yet the *tafsir* also charts its own course as Qutb seeks to establish his own authoritative discourse. Qutb goes a step beyond Abduh and Rida, whose *tafsir* sought to harmonise Western science and reason with the message of the Qur’an, even as they insisted on Islam’s distinctness from the West. For Qutb, the burden of measuring up lay with the West. The mountain of the West must come to Muhammad.

Qutb’s own harsh prison experiences give his *tafsir* an authority and weight of personal experience that many traditional exegetes lacked. The aberrant conditions of a Nasserite regime prison at the height of its confrontation with an as-yet unreconstructed Muslim Brotherhood could not help but find its way into Qutb’s work and worldview. Qutb’s physical condition made him especially vulnerable in prison. Along with many other incarcerated Muslim Brothers he experienced extreme privation and even torture at the hands of his military prison wardens.¹⁸ A 1957 prison massacre, where almost a third of the Muslim Brother population in Qutb’s prison were either killed or wounded, had a profound impact on him.¹⁹ In a sense, this outlook reflected the prison perspective that Qutb endured, where much of his view of the outside world was determined by what his jailers provided him. In such a situation, it is not surprising that Qutb discounts human governance in favor of the divine. His commentary on Surah 96 (The Blood Clots/*al-Alaq*) makes the point forcibly, noting that “it refers to every obedient believer calling men to follow the path of Allah and to every tyrant who forbids prayer, threatens to punish the believers and act conceitedly.” This is the first *surah* revealed to the Prophet

Muhammad and Qutb undoubtedly found strong resonances in its references to the tyranny of man and his henchmen and God who was prepared to call out the guards of hell.

Intended Audience

Qutb was not interested in addressing a western audience or the political and social elite of Muslim nations. He found little positive to say about Western civilization and culture and cultivated a conscious and unapologetic supremacist posture. A key audience for Qutb are all those who identify themselves as Arabs but are asked to forget their Arab-ness to help carry “the message of a forceful and all-comprehensive faith, (to be) delivered to humanity with mercy and compassion.”²⁰ Qutb expresses his concern in another section of his *tafsir* on *surah* 103 (The Declining Day/*al'Asr*) that raising the “banners of race”²¹ will compound the weakness of the worldwide community of Muslims.

More broadly, Qutb targets a wider Muslim audience, or at least the buried sense of religious identification in his intended audience. He is certainly not writing for an audience of *ulema* or clerics, but the *homme moyen sensual* who has lost his way in the thicket of modernity. Sayyid Qutb's own stated objective in writing the *tafsir* was to produce a document that spoke directly to Muslims and would be lodged in their consciousness (*hiss*). In 1954, a book by a Muslim Brother²² lamented that no truly useful *tafsir* existed except for that of Abduh and Rida and the *mufassir* Ibn Kathir (died 1373 C.E.), whose works remain very popular. He said that there was a need for a *tafsir* to make clear pronouncements about the “vital message” of the Qur'an.²³ Qutb apparently took up the challenge. His *tafsir* would serve as a living guide for a true Islamic society to emerge, which Qutb explains in the following way:

“We need, more than ever, to perceive the Qur'an as a propelling, dynamic and lively document....it no longer represents in our consciousness that type of life that actually took place on earth in the history of the Muslim community. We do

not remember anymore that the Qur'an was the daily preoccupation of the recruited Muslim from which guidance for action and execution were derived. The Qur'an has met its death-bed in our consciousness (*mata al-qur'an fi hissina*)...What is required is for the Qur'an to establish in the Muslim consciousness and life".²⁴

Echoing the thought of an influential mentor, the Pakistani extremist reformer Abu al-Ala Maududi,²⁵ Qutb's operating assumption is that all necessary guidance for man can be found in the *shari'a*, the laws of God, and not man-made laws. Maududi's political theory asserted belief in the *al-hakimiyyah* (governance) of God and the *al-jahiliyyah* (pagan ignorance) of societies.²⁶ The primary *fitnah* (disorder) is the rejection of *shari'a* as the sole source of legislation on earth.²⁷ Against the 'paper jurisprudence' (*fiqh awraq*) of the traditional *ulema* and *fuqaha*, the scholars of traditional Islam, Qutb sets his own 'dynamic jurisprudence' (*fiqh haraki*) which wrestles with real-life issues that confront the emerging Muslim community.²⁸ The motif of dynamism (*harakiyah*) and vigor is set against the torpor of traditional exegesis, which in Qutb's view has lost touch with the natural well-springs of the religion and the *homme moyen sensuel*. Qutb is not interested in scholastic quibbling, but seeks to turn his reader's mind to the problems confronted by the religion as it was revealed in its original context. As Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi puts it in his perceptive analysis of Qutb's Qur'anic exegesis, "The Qur'an must be understood, not for the sake of accumulating more knowledge or its artistic beauty, but for the sake of a personal and political revolution."²⁹

In his study on "The Multiple natures of *Da'wa*",³⁰ Egdūnas Račius characterizes Qutb's *tafsir* as a form of "intra-ummaic *da'wa*" aimed more at "re-converting" Muslims or creating born again Muslims than in converting new Muslims. Qutb's *tafsir* on the last part of the Qur'an certainly seems concerned with those who have strayed from the path rather than bringing in new converts,³¹ especially those from the West, who might require a different kind of invitation to embrace Islam in the first instance more as "spiritual rejuvenation" than as a "political program".³²

However, at another level, Qutb's *tafsir* is also addressed to the select few, or the vanguard, who have begun to carry out the political revolution, rather than the average

returnee to Islam who has just initiated a revolution of conscience. For example, Qutb notes that in the Meccan *surahs* of the Qur'an, there was no promise or discussion of earthly victory. Believers were only promised victory in the after-life in heaven, while the disbelievers were punished with Hell. The task of the Meccan *surahs* was to train the hearts of its adherents and to prepare them for the arduous task of propagating the faith, which still lay ahead.³³ He explains that the verses of victory are the Medinan verses, which were all revealed after the fact. The mention of earthly victory was thus not a promise of success but merely an example of success for subsequent generations to "have an actual, definite and practical example of the Islamic way of life".³⁴ Qutb is addressing those in the Islamist movement who may have been discouraged by a string of defeats at the hands of their Nasserite tormentors. Many of them, like Qutb, would be languishing in harsh prison conditions, an anti-climax after performing their terrorizing propaganda by deed or fury for God (*ghadba lil-allah*).

Qutb's *tafsir* had to find an answer for the idealists disappointed by a series of failures. Finding Qur'anic sanction for human suffering, Qutb highlights its inevitability: "Indeed, we have created man in affliction" in *surah* 90 (The City/*Al Balad*) or *surah* 84 (The Rending/*Al-Inshiqaq*), "O man, you are striving to your Lord laboriously, and you will duly meet him". According to Qutb's compensatory interpretation, those entrusted with the mission of leading the others towards the Islamic order must not expect earthly rewards. Instead, they should be prepared to endure all forms of privation (*fitnah*) with no expectation of relief or earthly victory. Qutb rationalizes their suffering by pointing out that after being toughened by their tribulation (*fitnah*), God may deem them fit enough to carry out their mission and grant them earthly victory in achieving a truly Islamic order (*nizam*) or "ethico-social world order".³⁵

Effectiveness of Argument

In Qutb's scheme of history, where a mystified and hallowed period of the past is eternally present, the Medinan phase of creating legislation and founding a new society is preceded by the crucial, early Meccan phase where the creed (*aqidah*) was first built in "a revolution of conscience".³⁶ For Qutb, the beginning of Revelation is the "demarcation line in the history of mankind".³⁷ From a strictly logical point of view, Qutb's argument on the need for a literal revolution of conscience back to the past rests on the classic fallacy of *consensus gentium* where the asseverated ideals of the past are held up as an incontrovertible truth. Yet, we are not merely dealing here with a secular manifesto but the interpretation of a religious text that is bound to be couched in deeply emotive terms. Given the powerful hold in Muslim imagination of the purity of the early Meccan era, especially the mystique of the Prophet and the pristine era of his Companions³⁸, Qutb's return to the original context of Revelation is *de rigueur*. In Qutb's reckoning, the true *ummah*, or community of Muslims, has been dormant for centuries. For Qutb, the challenges faced by the novel creed (*aqidah jadidah*) in establishing itself amidst the hostile *jahiliyah* (Ignorance) of the 7th century pre-Islamic Hijaz have re-surfaced in the 20th century. The present is ripe for a missionary 're-call' of Islam and a revival of the *ummah*, the worldwide society of Muslims. Reconstructing the new society of Muslims compels a return to the earliest stage of Meccan Islam with a re-committal to the original creed (*aqidah*).³⁹

The operational effectiveness of Qutb's *tafsir* lies in its arrogation of a specific role in this process, as a form of *tafsir al-haraki* (dynamic exegesis) that seeks to revive, energise and move the masses from passivism to a reawakened sense of their Muslim identity and on the basis of this towards activism. This makes Qutb's work, especially Part 30, a key plank of the modern Islamic *da'wa* (call to mission) movement. Qutb's *tafsir* on *surah* 98 (The Clear Proof/*al-Bayyinah*) underlines the transformative value of the first "new message" from God. The Prophet himself was a clear proof of the validity of the message. Thus, the missionary goal of Islamic resurgence is not merely a call to arms but a 're-call' to Islam. It is thus perhaps no accident that in recent years, which

have been characterized by the *da'wa* movements of Islamic revivalism, the first part of the *Zilal* to be translated and made widely available in English also happens to be its penultimate part 30. Qutb writes that this part of the Qur'an is "drawn with images which leave a stunning effect".⁴⁰ Without the sense of a catastrophic final judgment, the creed would lack the power of warning and of a final sanction.⁴¹

Relating *surah* 89 to contemporary concerns, Qutb compares the pagan ignorance (*jahiliyyah*) of pre-Islamic Arabia and its compulsion to accumulate wealth as a recurrent feature of all Ignorant societies including the present age.⁴² Indeed, a key concern for Qutb was to highlight Islam's relevance as an alternative, positive and sustaining system (*manhaj takaful wa ijabi*)⁴³ to the prevailing orthodoxies of capitalism and communism. Indeed, for Qutb, what set Islam apart from the other systems is, *inter alia*, its intense concern for social justice. In his *tafsir* on *surah* 83 (The Stinters/*al-Mutaffifoon*), he describes the conditions faced by the Islamic call in Mecca the 7th century. He points out that the pagan Meccans realized that the new faith threatened their way of life and their core interests as well as the values of pagan ignorance (*Jahiliyyah*). In other words, they recognized that Islam contained a revolutionary potential. According to Qutb, those who obstruct the path of Islam at any time realize, that "the pure and straightforward Islamic way of life endangers their unjust order, interests, hollow structure and deviant practices".⁴⁴

Qutb looks forward to the "second rebirth of humanity", similar to the one announced by God's privileging of the pious over the powerful. He regrets that this "Divine standard ceased to operate after the whole world had been overwhelmed by the tide of Ignorance".⁴⁵ Writing at the height of the Cold War, Qutb points out that in the US a man's value is judged by the size of his bank balance while in the Soviet Union, a man is worth less than a machine, and in the lands of Islam, alien Ignorant (*jahili*) values predominate. According to Qutb, the only hope that remains is for a new Islamic movement to "rescue mankind from the clutches of Ignorance."⁴⁶

Qutb's dichotomous world-view between modern *jahili* values and true Islam is a classic example of what logicians call the black-and-white fallacy. Qutb mounts many of his arguments by deploying acute distinctions that do not rest on any factual support and by refusing any middle path between these extremes. In an early essay, the popular Qatar-based, Egyptian sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who was a contemporary of Qutb and who was also jailed by Nasser, extensively critiqued this dichotomous and extremist world-view on religious grounds, noting that it was a feature of the Khawarij sect in Islam.⁴⁷ Qaradawi was especially concerned about the extremist groups like the Excoriation and Exile group that Qutb's writing had inspired by advocating a strict separation between the system mandated by God and the *jahili* system created by man.

For example, on *surah* 109 (The Disbelievers/*al-Kafiroon*), Qutb explains the theological distinctiveness of Islam. Amidst pagan quibbling over the nature of the Revelation, he notes that the black-and-white sharpness and decisiveness of Surah 109 was revealed to clear up once and for all "to demarcate monotheism (*tawhid*) from polytheism (*shirk*), and to establish a true criterion, allowing no further wrangling or vain arguments".⁴⁸ Qutb goes on to outline the key requirement for anyone who seeks to invite others to embrace Islam. The vanguard who calls others to embrace the faith on the way to re-establishing the true Islamic system must detach themselves from Ignorant (*jahili*) surroundings. According to Qutb, no half-measures, conciliation, compromises or adjustment is possible. For those who seek adjustment or compromise with the caller, he must tell them "You have your own religion, and I have mine".⁴⁹ Qutb's ideal callers to Islam must brook no compromise, in the fashion of the first callers to Islam. This fundamentalist prescription sets them apart from those Muslims who follow the Western system and worldview but claim to follow Islam. In Qutb's scheme, religion is not merely confessional affiliation but behavior, culture, a way of life and a system that regulates man's conduct. *Tawhid* is the totalizing concept which makes religion and society indivisible.⁵⁰ It sweeps away the legitimacy of all other systems and all other creeds.

In his reading of *surah* 112 (Purity of Faith/*Al Ikhlas*) Qutb views God as the supreme fountainhead of *tawhid* from which all other causes flow.⁵¹ According to Qutb, the Qur'an takes pains to establish this basic truth in the Muslim conception of faith. And Qutb tells us that when a person liberates himself from belief in anything but the one Truth, he undergoes a remarkable transformation:

“By disregarding all apparent causes and connecting matters directly with the will of Allah, a feeling of relief gently penetrates the human heart so that it knows the only Saviour from whom it can ask whatever it wishes and by whom it is rescued from all fears.”⁵²

Tawhid for Qutb was the supreme concept that negated any man-made system. It assures that everything man needs or wants can be found through the correct posture of faith.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, *Zilal* rehearses at a personally and politically religious level the combat between the good of a pristine Islam and the evil of all other profane systems. Produced in tough conditions, the politics of Qutb's prison *tafsir* was not ever likely to acknowledge the possibility of accommodation. In addition, his view of the West and the regimes it supported had been drawn from a static picture gained during his stint in the US of the late forties – which Qutb had condemned as materialistic and immoral in his American travelogue “The America that I have seen”. Protecting a beleaguered Islamic identity and the integrity of a totalizing faith called for a revolution that returned the *ummah* to its Qur'anic roots. In a sense, Qutb's *tafsir* recalls Marx's rebuke to western philosophers: “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”⁵³ For Islamists at least, Qutb's execution by Nasser elevated him to martyrdom, assuring the legitimacy of his writing. His piety and his sacrifice have been mythologised, with a new generation of militant Islamists encouraged to study his works through glowing tributes such Al-Qaeda number two Ayman Zawahiri's verdict on Qutb:

“Sayyid Qutb became an example of sincerity and adherence to justice. He spoke justice in the face of the tyrant (Gamal Abdul Nasser) and paid his life as a price for this. The value of his words increased when he refused to ask for pardon from Gamal Abdul Nasser. He said his famous words, “the index finger [which holds the prayer breads] that testifies to the oneness of God in every prayer refuses to request a pardon from a tyrant”.⁵⁴

That Qutb lived out and died for his beliefs lends an aura of legitimacy and authority to his writing. In the morbid imagination of Ayman Zawahiri, *Zilal*'s politics and ideology intersect with the extra-textuality of Qutb's autobiography, written with his own blood. Seen in this light, Qutb's *tafsir* serves not only as a pungent critique of passivism, but as an activist exegesis that boasts a powerful identity between thought and deed.

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¹ Carre, Olivier, *Mysticism and Politics – A critical reading of Fi Zilal al-Qur'an by Sayyid Qutb* (1906-1966), Translated from the French by Carol Artigues and Revised by W. Shepard, (Boston 2003), p. 13

² For example, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* is taught as a set *tafsir* text in some Islamic Colleges. For example, in South Africa, to take merely one example of its influence, see http://www.icosaco.za/courses/bth_degree/tafsir_301.php. Interestingly, the American Qur'anic scholar Amina Wadud Mushin has used Qutb's *Zilal* for her emancipatory, gendered readings of the Qur'an, even as Al-Qaeda number two Ayman Zawahiri had expressed his profound identification with other aspects of Qutb's writing.

³ Moussalli, Ahmed S, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Ideological and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb* (Beirut, 1992), p. 48

⁴ Giles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds – Islam and the West* (London, 2004), p. 175-176.

⁵ Preface to Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, Revised Edition, Volume 1, Surah 1-2, Islamic Foundation 2003, xii.

⁶ The references to the Qur'anic text in translation are from *Zilal*.

⁷ Other parts of Qutb's *tafsir* have also been translated and serialized in *daw'a* (call to mission) literature in the United Kingdom, with Parts 1-10 recently published in book form by the Islamic Foundation in London.

⁸ Carre, Olivier, *Mysticism and Politics – A critical reading of Fi Zilal al-Qur'an by Sayyid Qutb* (1906-1966), Translated from the French by Carol Artigues and Revised by W. Shepard, (Boston 2003), p. 19

⁹ Mousalli, p. 35.

¹⁰ *Zilal*, p. 3

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² See Riddell, Peter, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World – Transmission and Responses* (Singapore, 2003), p. 94.

¹³ The conventional periodisation of exegesis divides exegesis into four phases; exegeses up to the end of the 1st century (A.H.), exegeses from the second to the end of the 4th century A.H. by the *mutaqaddimun* or the early scholars, exegeses of the *muta'akhkhirun* or the later scholars from the fourth century onwards and then the moderns like Muhammed Abduh and Rashid Rida. Qutb tends to be categorized as an activist or a radical exegete and the late, legendary mufti of Egypt, Shaiykh Ibn Baz has proscribed Qutb's *tafsir*.

¹⁴ *Zilal*, Introduction, p. xi.

¹⁵ See Carre, p. 13. Exegetic commentary of the wise Qur'an named *Tafsir al-Manar*. *al-Manar* (the Beacon) was a journal started by Rashid Rida that served as the vehicle for modernist, *Salafi* ideas.

¹⁶ Riddell, p. 86

¹⁷ Riddell, p. 95

¹⁸ Mousalli for example cites a Syrian newspaper report that claims in 1955, soon after Qutb was imprisoned, a “trained military dog was let loose at him, which, holding his thighs with his jaws, dragged him back and forth”, p. 34.

¹⁹ Mousalli, p.36

²⁰ *Zilal*, p. 305

²¹ *Zilal*, p. 280.

²² Mitchell, Richard, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (Oxford, 1993), p. 238.

²³ *Ibid*

²⁴ Quoted in Ibrahim M Abu-Rabi, *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (New York 1996), p.195

²⁵ Maududi's magnum opus was a more traditional piece of *tafsir*, *Tafhim al-Qur'an* (“Towards Understanding the Qur'an”), produced over three decades. Maududi's work is aimed more at the non-Arab literate audience, and is popular in the South Asian context and among those who have studied in the *madrassas* of Pakistan. Despite its impressive scope and grasp of early Islamic history, Maududi's work does not match the inimitable style or the unique balance between the personal and the political and ideological aspects of Qutb's *tafsir*. Maududi is more reticent in mixing theology and politics than Qutb, although Maududi provides a more comprehensive explanation of key Qur'anic concepts than Qutb.

²⁶ Moussalli, p. 36

²⁷ Abu Rabi, p.197

²⁸ Abu-Rabi, p. 197

²⁹ Abu-Rabi, p.181

³⁰ Egdūnas Račius, *The Multiple Nature of the Islamic Da'wa*, Academic Dissertation, October 2004, University of Helsinki, Faculty of Arts, Institute of Asian and African Studies, Arabic and Islamic Studies and Vilnius University, Institute of International Relations and Political Science. Available at <http://ethesis.helsinki.fi/julkaisut/hum/aasia/vk/racius/themulti.pdf>

³¹ Racius, p. 178

³² Racius cites Abdul Hakim Murad, in his study of *Da'wa* contained in “Islam at the New Millennium”, who observes: “Westerners are in the first instance seeking not a moral path, or a political ideology, or a sense of special identity - these being the three commodities on offer among the established Islamic movements. They lack one thing, and they know it – the spiritual life. Thus, handing the average educated Westerner a book by Sayyid Qutb, for instance, or Mawdudi, is likely to have no effect, and may even provoke a revulsion. But hand him or her a collection of Islamic spiritual poetry, and the reaction will be immediately more positive. It is an extraordinary fact that the best-selling religious poet in modern America is our very own Jalal al-Din Rumi. Despite the immeasurably different time and place of his origin, he outsells every Christian religious poet.”, p. 124.

³³ *Zilal*, p. 99

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ "Ethico-social world order" is Fazlur Rahman's phrase from "Major Themes of the Qur'an", p.63

³⁶ *ibid*, p. 172

³⁷ *Zilal*, p. 222

³⁸ Ironically, in his pre-Islamic phase as a literary critic, Sayyid Qutb had attacked some personalities from the Rashidun era in *Kutub wa-Shakhsiyyat* (Books and Personalities), 1946. When this writing was brought many years later to the attention of the former Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia Shaikh Ibn Baaz, he reportedly said "This is an error and a mistake which is not disbelief. For his revilement of some of the Companions or just one of them is evil (*munkar*) and sinfulness (*fisq*) and he deserves to be given exemplary punishment for it – we ask Allaah to pardon him – however, if he reviled most of them and declared them sinners then he would become an apostate, because they are the Carriers of the Revelation. When he reviles them then this means that he is reviling the legislation." See www.allaahuakbar.net/scholars/ibn_baaz/ibn_baaz_on_sayyid_qutb.htm

³⁹ *ibid*, p. 173

⁴⁰ *Zilal*, p. 5

⁴¹ See Fazlur Rahman, "Major Themes of the Quran" (Chicago, 1980), especially Chapter Six on "Eschatology" for a different interpretation from Qutb on the reforming value of "The Hour". In general though, Qutb hews closer to the traditional interpretation of Islam which points towards the Day of Doom as the main motivating factor for human belief and conduct in the earthly world.

⁴² *Zilal*, p. 167.

⁴³ Abu-Rabi, p. 183.

⁴⁴ *Zilal*, p. 90.

⁴⁵ *Zilal*, p. 53

⁴⁶ *ibid*

⁴⁷ See Yusuf Qaradawi's essay "Extremism", translated and reproduced in *Liberal Islam – A Sourcebook*, edited by Charles Kurzman, (Oxford, 1998).

⁴⁸ *Zilal*, p. 329.

⁴⁹ *Zilal*, p. 331.

⁵⁰ Mousalli, p. 74-75

⁵¹ *Zilal*, p. 351

⁵² *ibid*.

⁵³ Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach (Thesis XI)*, (1845)

⁵⁴ Serialized excerpt from Ayman Zawahiri's "Knights under the Prophet's Banner", London Al-Sharq al-Awsat, FBIS-NES-2002-0108.