

Significant Person



Sayyid Qutb

Overview

- Historical Context
- Life and Education
- Impact on Islam

Historical Context

Significant Person – Sayyid Qutb

Egypt in 19th Century

- Egypt was invaded by Napoleon in 1798
- With the counter-intervention of the British, French were thrown out of the country
- In the chaotic aftermath, Albanian Muhammad Ali became the Ottoman governor of Egypt



Egypt in 19th Century

- Muhammad Ali, tried to modernise Egypt.
 - Seen as the father of modern Egypt
- He built a new army, new factories with machinery.
- He devised a new tax system.
- The whole Egyptian society was altered.



Egypt in 19th Century

- The new economic system destroyed village economies.
- There were peasant rebellions 1820s, 1846-1854, 1863-1865.
- Throughout 19th century, Muslim scholars lost their influence on public policy.



Egypt in 19th Century

- Modernisation and building eventually bankrupted the country and led to foreign-managed debt administration in 1875.
- An Egyptian army took control of the country in 1881
- Britain took over the country in 1882 and declared Egypt as a colony of Britain.



Responses to the Changes in Egypt

- Egypt depended on Britain for military and foreign policy.
- As a result, Egyptian leaders were not able to continue with modernisation of the country.
- Meanwhile, the Ottoman Empire collapsed after World War I in 1918.
- The new Turkish republic abolished the caliphate in 1924. This sent shock waves across the Muslim world.
- In 1928, Muslim Brotherhood was founded by Hasan al-Banna, who called for restoration of Islamic principles, return to the Qur'an and Islamic piety.

Responses to the Changes in Egypt

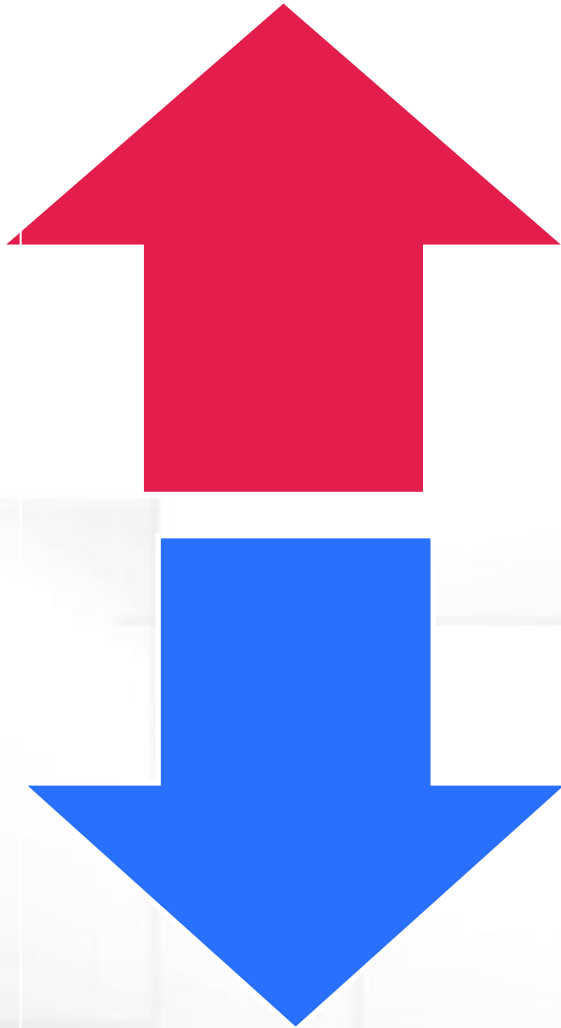
- The Brotherhood established clinics, schools, mosques and even work opportunities.
- By 1948-49, Muslim Brotherhood became the flag bearer of grievances against British influence and the failure of the secular regime.
- Hasan al Banna was assassinated in 1949.



Responses to the Changes in Egypt

- After World War II, Egypt failed to stop the establishment of Israel. Egyptian army was defeated in 1948 by Israel.
- In 1952, Free Army Officers led by Muhammad Naguib, Jamal Abd al-Nasser and Anwar Sadat took over the country.
- In 1956, Britain, French and Israel attacked Egypt to control the Suez Canal. The Anglo-French forces had to retreat with the help of America and Russia.
- All this made General Nasser the leader for the Arab world.
- Nasser crushed and persecuted Muslim Brotherhood.

The Two Responses



Islamic Revivalism (Tradition)

This response saw Islam as a solution to the modern problems of Muslims; the Quran gave importance to reason and free use of the mind.

Therefore, Muslims had to become scientifically and technologically competent

Nationalism (Modernism)

This response directly opposed the Islamic response.

Wanted to modernise and develop Egypt.
Felt Islam was holding back this progress.

The Two Responses

- The abolishment of the Caliphate, was seen as a major catastrophe to hit the Muslim world.
- The colonisation of Egypt by Britain was seen as a major catastrophe to Egypt.
- The secularisation of Egypt was seen as a major catastrophe to the Egyptians who believed Islam would solve their spiritual and worldly problems.
 - Sayyid Qutb was such an individual.

Life and Education

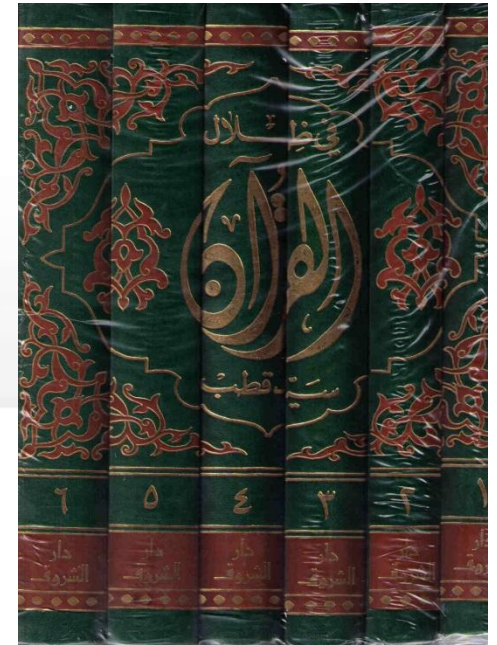
Significant Person – Sayyid Qutb

Early Life

- Sayyid Qutb was born in 1906.
- He received a traditional Muslim education as a child. He memorised the entire Quran by the age of ten.
- He then studied at Dar al-'Ulum in Cairo, to receive a modern, secular education.
- He qualified as an Arabic-language teacher and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1939.
- For six years he worked as a teacher and an inspector of schools for the Egyptian ministry of education, but then left his job and devoted his time to freelance writing.

Works

- He wrote novels, poems and a book called *Literary Criticism: Its Principles and Methodology*.
- His early writings reflected a 'Western-tinged' outlook on cultural and literary questions
- Early 1940s, Qutb started to write on religious subjects.
- He wrote "Expression of the Qur'an and Scenes from the Day of Judgement"

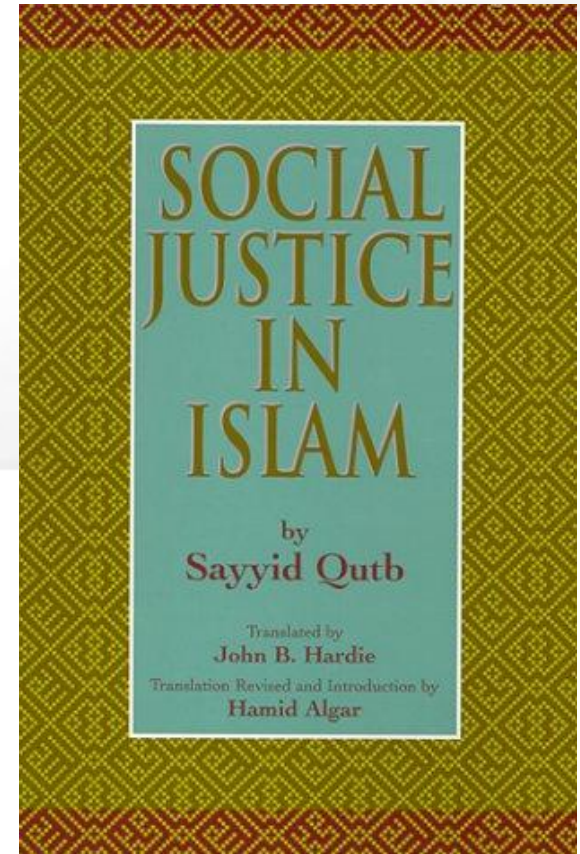


Qutb and the West

- In 1948, he went to the USA to study educational curricula at Colorado State College of education and earned a master's degree.
- The materialistic nature and lack of spirituality in US society was disappointing for Qutb's initial ideas of the West.
- He cut his stay short and returned to Egypt in 1951.
- After his return to Egypt, Qutb joined the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest Islamic movement of its time, and became the chief editor of the Brotherhood's newspaper.

Changed Outlook

- Some argue that his stay in USA was pivotal in his changed outlook.
- More correct observation is that he would have become increasingly religiously aware before he went to USA.
- His USA trip would have given him the opportunity to compare and contrast the Islamic social system and the Western society.
- In 1949, he published 'Social Justice in Islam'.



Brotherhood Vs Secular Regimes

- What is more pivotal is the oppression Islamic revival movements received at the hands of authoritarian secular regime in Egypt.
- The leader of the Muslim Brotherhood Hassan Al-Banna was assassinated by secret police in 1949.
- The situation became worse with the rise of Jamal Abd al-Nasser to power in 1952 and the ensuing crack down on all religious movements particularly the Muslim Brotherhood.

Imprisonment

- Qutb wrote a comprehensive modern commentary on the Qur'an titled *In the Shade of the Qur'an*.
- In this work he gave a literary and social analysis of the Qur'an which makes it unique and original in the field.
- This first volume appeared in 1952 and later was completed.
- He was imprisoned in 1954.

Imprisonment

- After his release from prison, Qutb published a controversial book, *Milestones* (1965).
- *Milestones* proposed a radical transformation of Muslim society, not merely a reform.
- In his view, Egypt has become a *jahiliya* (ignorance) society – went back to ignorance of prior to Islam. The primary task of Muslims were to retreat (*hijra*) and excommunication (*takfir*) of the false Muslims and struggle to reconvert Egypt back to true Islam.

Death

- It was the publication of this book in 1965 that led to his re-arrest with the accusation of conspiracy against the Egyptian President.
- He was tried and rapidly sentenced to death based upon many excerpts from his book.
- He was asked to sign a petition seeking mercy from Nasr the President. Qutb replied:

If I have done something wrong in the eye of God, I do not deserve mercy, but if I have not done anything wrong, I should be set free without having to plead for mercy.
- He was executed by hanging in 1966 at the age of 59.

His Contribution

Significant Person – Sayyid Qutb

Literary Contribution

- Qutb left behind a total of **24 books**,
- Including several novels, several books on literary arts' critique, on the education of adults and children, and several religious books
- The famous 30 volume commentary of the Qur'an, which is seen as a valuable addition to the discipline of Qur'anic commentary.

Qutb and Modern Interpretations

- Qutb has been interpreted in some parts of the Western media, as an intellectual precursor to fundamentalist movements of the 1980s to the present.
- In this view, Qutb is argued to be a theorist of Islamic extremism.
- One can find some ideological connections between Qutb's thought and radical fundamentalist groups.

Qutb and Modern Interpretations

- These include;
 - Qutb's advocacy of an Islamic theocracy as the only legitimate state
 - His justification of jihad in the conflict against non-Islamic governments
 - His uncompromising opposition to Western culture and values

Father of Islamic Fundamentalism?

- Context
 - Colonisation
 - Sudden change from Islamic to secular government
 - Tension between secular and religious movements in Egypt
- Imprisonment
 - His imprisonment, isolation and torture have very much shaped his thinking and ideology

Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad states *'persecution of the members of that society as well as Qutb's arrest and imprisonment led to a radicalisation of his thought'*

Two Different Approaches

Bottom Up approach

Said Nursi (d.1960)
Focus on the internal first then move upwards to the governmental level

EDUCATION

Sayyid Qutb (d.1966)
Focus on the external (society/government) then move down to individual level

REVOLUTION

Top Down approach

Significant Person – Sayyid Qutb

Summary

- Sayyid Qutb has to be studied within the social and political context of his time.
- He has made significant contribution to modern commentary of the Qur'an especially from a sociological perspective.
- While there was a radical change to his outlook, it is questionable to call him the father of Islamic fundamentalism.
- Rather, Qutb's tragic execution is seen by Muslims as unjust and he is believed to be a martyr. This made him a symbol for Islamic activists in the second half of the 20th century.

Questions?

THANK YOU

Significant Person – Sayyid Qutb