

THE STRUGGLE OF MUSLIM IDEOLOGUES AGAINST OPPRESSIVE REGIMES: RETHINKING THE CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

Sociologists have developed several theories to understand the role of religion in the society and the ways in which religion interacts with other social institutions and cultural norms. The conflict perspective on religion, as viewed by Karl Marx, posits that religion functions to maintain social inequality and reinforce the power of the ruling class by promoting false consciousness and distracting the oppressed from their true economic and political conditions. Marx famously described religion as the opium of the masses because he thought that it offered a false sense of comfort to the exploited people, preventing them from recognizing the true source of their suffering and mobilizing to overthrow their oppressors. This article examines the revolutionary ideas of Muslim ideologues—namely, Maulana Mawdudi, Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutub—and attempts to prove that contrary to what conflict theorists argue and believe, revolutionary Muslim ideologues have used religion to mobilize their exploited population to rise up and overthrow oppressive regimes.

Keywords: Oppression, Conflict, Jihad, Colonization, Karl Marx, Emancipation, Social Justice, Jahiliya, Muslim Brotherhood.

INTRODUCTION

Sociological perspectives on religion help us to understand the social, cultural, and institutional factors that shape religious beliefs, practices, and organizations. These perspectives allow us to examine how religion influences and is influenced by other aspects of society, such as politics, economics and gender. Here are some of the most prominent sociological theories on religion.

Functionalist theory: This theory views religion as a serving important function for society, such as providing a sense of community, promoting social stability, and offering guidance for morally acceptable behavior (Kendall, 2014). According to functionalist theory, religion helps maintain social order and meet the psychological and emotional needs of individuals.

Symbolic Interactionist Theory: this theory focusses on the ways in which individuals use religious symbols and beliefs to create and maintain social relationships and to make sense of their experiences. According to symbolic interactionist theory, religion is personal and subjective phenomenon that is shaped by individual experiences and social interactions (Kendall, 2014).

Rational choice theory: this theory views religion as a form of exchange between individuals and their religious organizations, in which individuals exchange resources such as time, money and devotion in return for benefits such as a sense of community, emotional support and spiritual guidance (Kendall, 2014).

Weber's Theory of Religion and Capitalism: this theory argues that the rise of capitalism in western societies was facilitated by the development of a religious ethic that emphasized individual responsibility, hard work, and the accumulation of wealth (Kendall, 2014). According to Weber, this

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religious ethic created the cultural conditions that allowed for the growth of capitalism and development of modern industrial society.

Conflict Theory: This theory views religion as a source of conflict and divisions in society, as different religious worldviews compete for power and influence. According to conflict perspective, religion can serve as a means of oppression and control, as dominant groups use it to justify their positions of power and to maintain their dominance over subordinate groups (Kendall, 2014). These are some of the most prominent sociological theories on religion and they offer different perspectives on the role of religion in society and the ways in which it interacts with the social institutions and cultural norms.

Conflict theorists argue that different religious groups compete for power, influence, and resources, leading to conflict and struggles between different religious communities. For instance, conflict theorists might point out that the ongoing conflict between different religious groups in some societies, such as between Christians, Muslims and Jews in the Middle East. Similarly, the ideology of jihad has been used by some Muslim communities as a means of resisting colonial rule and fighting against imperial powers. Jihad has been seen as a religious duty to defend the Islamic community and to resist the injustices and oppression inflicted by Christian colonial powers. In the late 19th and 20th centuries, some Muslim leaders and scholars in colonized countries such as India, Indonesia and North Africa called for defensive jihad to resist colonial rule and to preserve their religious, cultural and political independence. In these cases, the concept of jihad was used as a means of unifying and mobilizing the Muslim community and as a symbol of resistance against colonial oppression.

Western historians have been astounded by how quickly Islam arose and spread. The amazing growth of Islam has long been seen by Muslims as a miraculous demonstration of its veracity and a historical confirmation of its claims, as well as a manifestation of God's direction (Esposito, 2003). However, the failure of many contemporary Muslim republics after European colonization from the 18th to the first part of the 20th century provided a significant threat to this concept.

According to Karl Marx, religion functions to maintain social inequality and reinforce the power of the ruling class by promoting false consciousness and distracting the oppressed from their true economic and political conditions. Marx famously described religion as the opium of the masses because he thought that it offered a false sense of comfort to the exploited people, preventing them from recognizing the true source of their suffering and mobilizing to overthrow their oppressors (Marx, & Engels 2012). However, contrary to what conflict theorists argue, Muslims used religion to mobilize their exploited population to overthrow oppressive regimes.

Many Muslims came to the conclusion that Muslim dependence on the West and Western supremacy were caused by their lack of faith and deviation from the path of Islam, while some Muslims realized that Islam had lost its glory and significance. This was a potent argument that inspired holy fighters to fight (jihad) to re-direct the Muslim community the righteous way of life. Muslim resistance to European colonization sparked a fresh discussion regarding what jihad actually is.

Religion as the Ideology of the Oppressed

Islamic modernists and groups like the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt and Pakistan's Jamaati-Islam (Islamic Society) strove to combine religious reform and political mobilization. Islamic activist groups called for jihad against British imperialism and unjust Muslim rulers as a way to define their battle. On the ideologies that inspired modern activists and terrorists, volumes have been written. While a thorough discussion is difficult here, Hasan al-Banna, Mawlana Mawdudi, and Sayyid Qutub are three important intellectual-activists who deserve our attention since they had a remarkable influence on the growth of the contemporary Islamic reform agenda.

They exercised remarkable influence on the future generations both in direct manner and indirect way. All around the Muslim world, their writings have been published and spread. They have published brief booklets and audiocassettes to spread their thoughts. Their views on Islam, the Islamic revolution, jihad, and contemporary Western civilization have had an impact on the leadership of the majority of significant Islamic movements, both mainstream and extreme, violent as well as nonviolent (Esposito, 2003). They reframed Islam as a comprehensive ideology to address the issues facing contemporary Muslims, and as a result, they created a version of Islamic ideology that has been so widely adopted that it has been unintentionally incorporated into the Islamic discourse the world who would typically distance themselves from Islamic movements.

Few in the West or in their own communities paid significant attention when Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949) founded the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Mawlana Mawdudi (1903-1979) founded the Jamaat-i-Islami in his homeland, Pakistan. Al-Banna and Mawdudi agreed that change would take time to manifest. Their main goal was to educate future generations despite expecting rejection and persecution. They succeeded in fulfilling their objective extremely well.

Al-Banna and Mawdudi's theories were expanded upon and radicalized by Sayyid Qutub (1906–1966). Qutub developed an ideology that included all of the significant historical manifestations of jihad, from Muhammad's reforms to the ferocity of the Assassins and the Kharijites. Soon the principles of Mawdudi's Jamaat-i-Islami and Banna's Brotherhood—often seen through the lens of Qutub's more radicalized version of Islam—became the main inspirations for new activist groups throughout the Islamic world (Esposito, 2003).

Despite being a member of a revivalist tradition that dates back centuries, all three men's reactions were contemporary. They were fundamentalist in the sense that they went back to Islam's roots and foundations. But in answer to the problems of the contemporary world, they revised Islamic texts. Their use of science and technology as well as their strategies, tactics and procedures of organization all demonstrate this. In fact, a large number of Islamic activists are graduates of contemporary universities and hold professional leadership positions in organizations such as journalists, university professors, engineers, doctors.

Mawdudi views both the offensive and the defensive aspects of Jihad as holding equal significance. According to him, it is offensive because Muslim must maintain power in order to enforce Islamic ideology. However, he argues that the purpose of Jihad not attacking the opposing principles and ideas (Mawdudi, 1998). Scholars like Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran and Sayyid Qutub in Egypt expound on Mawdudi's views on the nature of jihad.

Al-Banna and Mawdudi both tried to cooperate with the system, but their organizations' expansion and the confederation of rulers and regimes landed them into a fierce battle against governments. Following World War II, the Arab world intensified its antagonistic attitude towards British oppression and the unjust policies practiced by the Egyptian government. The first minister was assassinated in 1948 by a member of the Brotherhood; Hasan al-Banna was killed in 1949 by secret police squad (Mitchell, 1993).

Mawdudi and his religio-political party often remained in clash with the government, yet they successfully manage to perform their functions. In fact, even though Mawdudi had been executed, his conviction was overturned at one point. Even though Pakistan was dominated by military regimes, there was never as much official persecution as there was in Egypt or much of the Arab world. When it comes to Pakistan, its judiciary enjoyed relatively more independence. The Jamaat continued to function as an opposition within the democratic set-up until recently. On the other hand, the oppression of the Muslim Brotherhood under Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt did not eradicate radical Islam but it rather gave birth to extremist Islamic organizations.

The importance Sayyid Qutub played in the resurgence of the Muslim religion cannot be overstated. Extremist Muslims all across the globe admired him. A wide range of militants, from the assassins of Anwar Sadat to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda adherents, have been influenced by and inspired by his transformation from a well-educated intellectual, government official, and supporter of the West to a militant activist who attacked the Egyptian and American governments and defended the legitimacy of militant jihad.

Just as Mawlana Mawdudi's political and revolutionary interpretation of Islam was a historical response to the then in vogue social and political events and circumstance, Sayyid Qutub's interpretation of Islam was a response to the militant intersection between the tyrannical Egyptian state and the Brotherhood in the late 1950s and 1960s.

Qutub transformed al-Banna's Mawdudi's doctrine into a rejection of their revolutionary call to arms as a result of Gamal Abdel Nasser's persecution of the Brotherhood. He would continue to be celebrated as a symbol of martyrdom the Islamic renaissance much like al-Banna. He was a devoted Muslim who committed the entire Quran to the memory when he was a child. Early in life, he started writing on diverse aspects of Islam and the incumbent Government in Egypt. He got his book, *Islam and Social Justice*, published in 1948. In his book he claimed that Islam had its own social norms and values. Furthermore, he warned Muslim community of the perils of Christianity, which believes in separation of church and state. He considered communism's atheism as an equal hazard (Toth, 2013).

Qutub travelled to the US in last parts of 1940s. This turned out to be a pivotal moment in his life, changing him from a fervent supporter of the West to its harsh critic. His time spent in America resulted in a cultural shock that turned him into a more devout adherent of Islam and persuaded him of the Western world's moral depravity and decline. He was horrified by its racism, which he personally experienced due to his dark complexion, as well as its materialism, sexual openness and prostitution, excessive use of alcoholic beverages (Toth, 2013). His opinions on America are well-articulated in his contemporary writings.

He denounced capitalism because of being replete with exploitations and monopolies. He argued that capitalism confers certain freedoms on the individuals but it is devoid of kinship obligations and responsibility other than that imposed by law, a materialistic attitude that kills the spirit, animal-like behavior that you call "free sex mixing," vulgarity that you call "emancipation of women," and evil and fanatical racial discrimination (Qutub, 1978).

Two historical events took place when Qutub was there in the United States of America: First, Jews established the state of Israel and the United States endorsed it: Second, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union broke out. During this period, the movement of Egypt even deviated from the idea of founding an Islamic political order under Nasser's leadership. In America, Qutub also felt misled by what he perceived to be pro-Jewish, anti-Arab coverage in news articles and movies that promoted hatred of Arabs and Muslims. As a last blow, Hasan al-murder Banna's occurred during these years in America, significantly weakening the Muslim Brotherhood. Qutub joined the Muslim Brotherhood shortly after his return to Egypt.

In the Brotherhood, Qutub swiftly established himself as a powerful voice and its most influential ideologist despite the developing relationship with a repressive Egyptian government. After being imprisoned and subjected to torture for his suspected involvement in a botched assassination attempt on Nasser, he gradually more extremist and belligerent. Qutub observed a massacre while imprisoned in which 25 Muslim Brotherhood members were martyred and approximately fifty were seriously wounded; this incident reinforced his view that the Egyptian government was anti-Islamic and required overthrow.

Incredibly prolific author Qutub published nearly forty works, several of which were rendered into numerous languages, including English and Persian. They are still widely available. The reader may be lifted to the greatness of Islam by Qutub's fiery manner, which "provoked massive emotions of dignity, solidarity, unity, and universality." He was also capable of provoking harsh criticism, outrage, and repulsion with his manner (Lawrence, 2001).

Qutub created a revolutionary vision during his ten years in the prison which was equivalent of a concentration camp, which was documented in Milestones. His Milestones was taken as sufficient evidence for inciting the people to rise up in rebellion and consequently he was sentenced to death for his rebellious vision. The influence of his revolutionary was demonstrated by the fact that Milestones owners in Egypt at one point faced arrest and charges of sedition. Many of al-Bann's Mawdudi's essential ideas were appropriated by Qutub, revised, and repurposed in order to inspire Muslims to extreme action. Today's extremist rhetoric of revolutionaries, from Khomein to Bin Laden, is heavily influenced by his ideals.

For the Muslim world's Islamic movements to function in oppressive, non-Islamic governments and society, Qutub formulated revolutionary strategies. He says that in order to revitalize the Muslim community, which is being crumpled by the corrupt rulers who are not even remotely connected to Islamic teachings but nevertheless refer to themselves as the Muslim leaders," a revolutionary ideology is necessary (Qutub, 1978). Like Ibn Taymiyya before him, he draws a clear crystal distinction between good and evil forces. There are those who submit to God's dominion and those who reject it. The former is known as the party of God and the latter is called the party of Satan. According to him, no middle ground exists.

Those who invite people to the fold of Islam shouldn't let themselves be confused about the nature of Jahiliyyah and the nature of Islam. They should fully grasp the essential characteristics of Dar-ul-Harb and Dar-ul-Islam since tsuspensions in this connection will lead to errors. In reality, there is no Islam in a country where Islam is not practiced, where its Shariah is not functional as law, and where its way of life and regulations are not followed. Furthermore, there is no Dar-ul-Islam in such country (Qutub, 1978). Mawdudi strongly influenced Qutub, who saw the need to create a distinct community of faithful Muslims inside the corrupt and faithless society:

How may the process of Islam revision be started? There should be a vanguard who embarks on the journey with a clear goal in mind and who then continues walking along the path while navigating the choppy waters of the vast ocean of Jahiliyyah, which has since passed the end of the earth. His Milestones was meant for the vanguard, which he believed to be an imminent reality that was about to be materialized (Qutub, 1978). The real Muslims, or the Islamist Overseers (haraka), would establish a righteous society in an un-Islamic civilization similar the way Muhammad (peace be upon him) did. He revolutionized a society which was utterly engulfed in ignorance and unbelief (Esposito, 2003). Their training methods would resemble those of the first generation of Muslims, according to Qutub, whose instruction was derived entirely from the Quran.

We must also derive our principles of governance, political beliefs, economic principles, and all other elements of life from it (Qutub, 1978). Because "our primary goal is to alter the behaviors of this society... to exterminate the fundamentals of the Judeo-Christian system, a system that is fundamentally at odds with Islam and that prevents us from leading the kind of lives that are intended for us by our Creator." (Qutub, 1978). Qutub demonized all modern cultures as un-Islamic and anti-Islamic by using the traditional description of pre-prophetic Arab society, jahiliyyah—a time of ignorance:

We must liberate ourselves from the shackles of Jewish culture, Jewish ideas, Jewish customs, and Jewish leadership. We will not compromise our own principles and concepts in order to strike a deal with the current Jhili society. Our mission is not to conform to it... nor can we remain loyal to it. Never! We are on separate routes from it, and if we take even a single step in its direction, we will eventually lose our way and our aim (Qutub, 1978).

The whole world was transformed into black and white polarities by Sayyid Qutub's teachings. There were no grey shades. He maintains that the establishment of an Islamic government is a divine mandate, not an option. He vehemently argues that it is imperative that Muslims just work to immediately fulfill their supreme responsibility. Only one place can be called as the "home of Islam" (Dar-ul-Islam), that is the place where the Islamic political order is established, Shariah law is followed, God's teachings are upheld, and all followers of Islam participate in managing the political affairs through mutual consultation. The rest of the world is hostile territory (Dar-ul-Harb) (Qutub, 1978).

Qutub came to the conclusion that change inside the system was fruitless and that Islam was on the verge of breakdown given the authoritarian and oppressive Egyptian government. He strongly believed that corrupt regimes in the Muslim world will never let the divinely inspired law implemented in their lands. He maintained that the only road towards the establishment of an Islamic system was Jihad. Jihad, according to Qutub, was incumbent upon all Muslims as an armed battle in the defense of Islam against the tyrannical regimes of unjust Muslim rulers as well as the neocolonialism of the West and the East (Soviet Union). According to him, there is no middle ground. Many violent extremist organizations that were founded years after Qutub's demise have preserved his ideology in their doctrines and methods.

Qutub shared the view of Hasan al-Banna, Mawlana Mawdudi, and others that the Crusades, European colonialism, and the Cold War set the stage for the modern history of Islam and Muslims in the West. The political, economic, and religious aspects of the Western threat were all present. To him, the elite class in Muslim world, who rule their countries in accordance with Western secular principles and norms, were despicable since they threatened the religion, identity, and pristine ideals and values of their native Islamic civilization. Like al-Banna and Mawdudi, Qutub deplored secular elites, governments, and political figures as atheists against those who all sincere Muslim must initiate jihad. Qutub's revolutionary and anti-establishment rhetoric can be clearly heard in Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini thoughts (Esposito, 2003). Give the people Islam so that they may unite and transform themselves into a formidable force in order to overthrow the oppressive regime of imperialism that has been imposed upon us. Establish an Islamic government since Islam is the school of resistance. If certain leaders of Muslim countries attempt to let foreigners develop their effect, they inevitably lose their positions. Further, it is the obligation of Muslims to chastise them in whatever way they can (Munson, 1988).

The contemporary Islamic movements have taken two trajectories establish the dominance of Islam: Evolution, which involves a gradual change from below, and violent revolution, which involves the use of violence means to overthrow established ("un-Islamic") repressive regimes. In the 1970s, these movements erupted and took off like wildfire throughout the Muslim world. The apparent neutralization of the Muslim Brotherhood by Gamal Abdel Nasser in the late 1960s, which seemed to

guarantee a period of peace, was shattered by the rise of extremist organizations under his successor, Anwar Sadat.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, Muslim ideologues have often played a significant role in challenging oppressive regimes throughout history. From the early Islamic era to present day, Muslim thinkers have used their authority to mobilize and inspire resistance to injustice and oppression. Revolutionary Muslim ideologues believed that western civilization was in state of decay and that Islam provided effective solution to the contemporary political, economic and moral crises. They urged the masses to embrace Islamic ideology and reject western secularism and nationalism and successfully mobilized masses against tyrannical colonial masters as well as native pro-West secular regimes. Their revolutionary interpretations of Islam proved that religion is the ideology of the exploited people against tyrannical powers rather than opiate of the masses.

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