Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism
John Calvert

Reclaiming the evolution of an immensely powerful mind.

SAYYID QUTB (1906–1966) was an influential Egyptian ideologue credited with establishing the theoretical basis for radical Islamism in the postcolonial Sunni Muslim world. Lacking a pure understanding of the leader’s life and work, the media has conflated Qutb’s moral purpose with the aims of bin Laden and al-Qaeda. He is often portrayed as a terrorist, Islamo-Fascist, and advocate of murder. An expert on social protest and political resistance, John Calvert rescues Qutb from misrepresentation, tracing the evolution of his thought within the context of his time.

Calvert recounts Qutb’s life from the small village in which he was raised to his execution at the behest Abd al-Nasser’s regime. His study remains sensitive to the cultural, political, social, and economic circumstances that shaped Qutb’s thought—major developments that composed one of the most eventful periods in Egyptian history. These years brought the full flush of Britain’s tutelary regime, the advent of Egyptian nationalism, and the political hegemony of the Free Officers. Qutb rubbed shoulders with Taha Husayn, Naguib Mahfouz, and Nasser himself, though his Islamism originally had little to do with religion. Only in response to his harrowing experience in prison did Qutb come to regard Islam and kufr (infidelity) as oppositional, antithetical, and therefore mutually exclusive. Calvert shows how Qutb repackaged and reformulated Islamic heritage to challenge authority, including those who claimed (falsely, he believed) to be Muslim.

JOHN CALVERT is the Fr. Henry W. Casper SJ Associate Professor of History at Creighton University, Nebraska. He is the author of Islamism: A Documentary and Reference Guide, coeditor and translator of Sayyid Qutb’s A Child from the Village, and guest editor of a special issue of Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques. Published in Orbis, Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, and Muslim World, Calvert appears regularly in documentaries and on National Public Radio.

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