



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 *kufir* (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.

“Given that Sayyid Qutb is taught on a large (and increasing) number of campuses, and given that he has already been introduced to the public in bestselling books, such as Lawrence Wright’s *The Looming Tower*, the very publication of a Qutb biography is likely to attract considerable interest. This is one of the finest monographs I have read in a long time. The book not only constitutes what is likely to remain the definitive biography of Sayyid Qutb, it also offers crucial new insights on the post-1954 history of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. We are dealing with a rare book that is likely to become a classic in the field of political Islam. Outstanding.”

—Thomas Hegghammer, Harvard University



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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