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Political Theology and Sovereignty: Sayyid Qutb in Our Times¹

Abstract

This article explores the *political-theological* nature of Sayyid Qutb's theoretical design, specifically its relation to non-Western understandings of sovereignty, and its principal anomalies arising from the struggle of reconciling the notions of the modern state with undefined territorial imaginings of a religious community. Repudiating reformist variants of modernist Islam, Qutb's writings afford an alternate reading of modern sovereignty as it is reconfigured in the language of *hakimiyyah* (God's sovereignty). A political reading of sovereignty in Qutb complicates the assumed separation between political and non-political spheres. The argument recognizes a basic distinction between the idea of sovereignty in a theological sense and its political counterpart. In Qutb's design, however, the absence of determinate lines between the theological and the political leaves few autonomous social spheres outside God's law. Whilst Qutb's vision does not exhaust political Islam²—a fairly heterodox field of diverse perspectives and commitments—the appeal of his writings remains forceful, especially under conditions of Islam's perceived defensiveness in the face of secularist global modernity and its institutionalized forms. The article situates Qutb within the expanding repertoire of non-Western understandings of the political logic of International Relations.

Introduction

The rediscovery of political theology in recent International Relations (IR) discourses underscores both the infirmity of secularist renditions of the international as well as the difficulty, if not impossibility, of disentangling the mystical and the political (Paipais, 2015; Guillhot, 2010; Troy 2013). Received interventions challenge mainstream IR's long standing

and inescapable reliance on notions of *secularization* (Philpott 2002; Fitzgerald 2011), conceived either as an emancipatory rupture from the prison-house of religion promised in classic accounts (Blumenberg 1983), or as a reworked Protestant spatio-temporal resolution of the problem of reconciling universality with particularity (Walker 1993). In the received canon, secularization has always instantiated modernity's self-subsistent character, legitimating new horizons of human fulfillment. The 'modern age' decenters God in favor of humanity; it consolidates the ascendancy of Reason over Faith, and cultivates forms of individuated subjectivity no longer deformed by irrational collectivist attachments to religion. A key feature of secularization is the banishment of religion from the public realm and its relegation to the 'private'. Secularization envisions a sharp divide between a public, non-religious (or 'secular') realm and a private realm in which religion may or may not thrive. The separation of religion from the State marks its *modern* character. Secularization is also a marker of the cultural or civilizational divide between the West and Islam. Apparently absent in the Islamic Cultural Zones (ICZs),³ the inseparability of the religious and the secular casts these regions as areas of a pre-political world. The Westphalian model rests largely on a disavowal of religion, superimposing the inside/outside divide onto a religious/secular separation; modern sovereignty and secularization are indivisible in IR. Extended into international space, the secular settlement secured by/within modernity acquires a determinate and visible form. The 'return of religion' merely confirms the stubbornness of the Westphalian frame. However, it is principally in the non-Western cultural zones that this return appears to generate potent effects. Despite religion's reappearance in Western social and cultural life, it seems to rarely disturb the foundations of the liberal-secular order. On established common sense, sovereignty remains unaffected by religious distempers.

Alternatively, secularization has been seen merely as a guise for the theological origins and make-up of the political (Schmitt 1985[1922]; Löwith 1949): modernity rests

firmly on religion, unable to inaugurate a basic rupture from the latter's grasp (Gillespie 2008). Hence, all political concepts, especially sovereignty, are in essence, theological, as Schmitt (1985[1922]) famously reminds us. Recent investigations register a shift away from received Westphalian orthodoxy and its underlying ideational structures. Firstly, after decades of exile, sovereignty appears to have returned to its political-theological home. The reworking of Carl Schmitt in the IR discipline (Odysseos & Petito 2007), or the intervention by the notable Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben (Prozorov 2014), are important instances of the indivisibility of the theological and the political. Secondly, the emergence and spread of non-Western perspectives within the IR have underscored the desire to transcend the strictures of liberal-secular variants of sovereignty (Shilliam 2011; Grovogui 2002). On this view, the career of sovereignty in the postcolonial world follows different pathways. The colonial experience, notably, has left behind 'regimes of sovereignty' (Grovogui 2002), marked by notions of legitimate authority and morality that do not mirror the Westphalian ideal-type. For scholars privileging the 'pure' form of statehood found in the West in relation to the 'Third World', the perceived dissonance between domestic and external aspects of sovereignty gives the postcolonial state simply the status of 'quasi-states'. Despite their recognition as 'nation-states' internationally, postcolonial states are unable to inhabit features of proper statehood internally (Jackson 1990). Similarly, scholars with acute historical sensibility recognize a close nexus between imperialism and international law, or imperialism and sovereignty (Anghie 2005).

The present article situates the prominent Islamic thinker, Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) within this growing 'non-Western' literature on sovereignty, but it also stresses Qutb's departure from largely secularist mappings in this literature. On the whole, non-Western perspectives on sovereignty rest perilously upon secularist mappings of international space despite claims of recognizing difference and alterity. Without engaging alternative political-

theological fields, analyses of non-Western sovereignty cannot probe the deeper sources of notions of legitimate authority, justice, and rule in the Islamic world. The search for the presence or absence of ‘functional’ equivalents in postcolonial political thinking and behavior diminishes these perspectives, implicitly replicating modernization theories. Appealing mainly to Islamic discursive and political spaces, Qutb’s corpus profoundly challenges extant Western and postcolonial constructions of sovereignty. His notion of *hakimiyyah*, for instance, is a *political* reading of God’s rule, His suzerainty and His Kingdom.⁴ All human arrangements lack the essential property of sovereignty. Any attempt to institute lay sovereignty is tantamount to *shirk* (idolatry) for Qutb.

Qutb is ambivalent on the formula for establishing an Islamic State within the (post-) Westphalian system of states; he resists the temptation to sacralize sovereignty since modernity and its secular productions are inherently godless and illegitimate. No earthly model can reproduce God’s rule; the task is to embrace *hakimiyyah* in its totality. Unqualified acceptance of *hakimiyyah* might generate a more just State. In this sense, Qutb departs from ‘fundamentalist’ thinkers offering elaborate schemata for the establishment of an Islamic state. Unsurprisingly, Qutb is vehemently contested by ‘reformist’ as well as ‘fundamentalist’ protagonists of political Islam. In no small measure, Qutb’s rejection of all human constructions of sovereignty is a major source of opposition to his ideas. On Qutb’s reading, modernity is a project of re-sacralization of the state. However, since Qutb offers few clues to the riddle of transcending the crucial *distinction* between the idea of sovereignty in a theological sense and the idea of sovereignty in a political sense,⁵ he is left with an aporia of instituting *hakimiyyah* on Earth. An Islamic state would merely imitate *modernity’s re-sacralization*. On the other hand, without an Islamic state, *hakimiyyah* would remain unhinged from lay political authority.

This article interrogates this aporia in three interlinked sections. In the first section, Qutb's political theology is read, not as a sacralized variant of 'modern' sovereignty, but as the *politicization of the sacred*. Qutb's reading of Divine sovereignty tends to demonstrate remarkable features of the modern Leviathan. He is not simply inverting the modern logic of sovereignty. The second section focusses on Qutb's twin notions of *hakimiyyah* and *jahiliyyah*. These notions are critical to Qutb's project. His reworking of the traditional notion of *jahiliyyah*⁶, giving it a trans-historical, decontextualized connotation introduces a new understanding of legitimate authority. Similarly, Qutb's notion of *hakimiyyah* politicizes divine sovereignty, but also sets it apart from the world. Can the two be bridged? The third and final section briefly explores some important anomalies in Qutb's formulation, especially the cumbersome task of uniting the idea of a territorially and temporally-bound State (*dawla*) with a deterritorialized Islamic 'nation' (*Ummah*). This problem, as the Conclusion reveals, is at the heart of contemporary musings and contestations, both over the character and content of postcolonial Islamic states as well as the imagined spatialized zones of *Islamicity* or God-based rule.

Politicizing the Divine

Sayyid Qutb is recognized more as an 'Islamic' ideologue than as a non-Western, religious thinker advancing an alternative conception of sovereignty.⁷ His intervention can be reasonably situated broadly within non-Western discursive spaces opened up by critiques of secularization. The rediscovery of the merger of the political and the theological in Western thought also allows a fruitful engagement with Islamic political theology, with Qutb as its important modern exponent. With the consolidation and spread of transnational Islamic public sphere (Salvatore 2007), Qutb's project of Sovereignty acquires greater resonance despite concerted efforts to dismiss him as the 'philosopher of Islamic Terror' (Berman 2003). His 'realist utopia' (March 2010) not only embodies the political-theological element

in Islamic political thought, but its maturation and growth under conditions of globalized modernity. Qutb's reach into the transnational Muslim public sphere is facilitated by the faltering fortunes of postcolonial Muslim states, but especially the declining attractions of secular modes of governance, justice, or politics. Notable scholars (Haddad 1983; Abu Rabi 1991 & 1996; Tripp 1994; Kepel 1994; Zimmerman 2004; Musallam 2005; Calvert 2009) depict Qutb, perhaps too readily, as an 'ideologue' of an Islamic revolution. Alternatively, he can be regarded as an integral part of Islamic political theology (March 2013) in its modern instantiation. Qutb's problematic relation to modernity and his reliance on Scripture as the source of an Islamic model of state and society echoes several challenges confronting political theology in other cultural contexts. Qutb, like other 'fundamentalists', recognizes Islam as a complete 'system', a totally self-sufficient universe for moral and political guidance. This idea is articulated most forcefully in Qutb's key work, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an* (1951–1965). Rather than accommodate Islam to modernity, as Muslim reformers propose, Qutb finds no need to look outside Islam itself: the Law is enshrined in the Qur'an and the Sharia. Divine Law provides all the necessary elements for structuring social and life-worlds, harmonizing conduct with natural human tendencies and potential, and developing human capacity through knowledge-seeking and Reason. Only in his political writings, Qutb expresses the inclination to move beyond mere social reform in his quest for establishing *hakimiyyah*. Both his social and political commitments are consistent with the intellectual challenges faced by postcolonial Muslim states, but especially their failed projects to replicate Western modernity and its institutions. In particular, the authoritarian make-up of Qutb's Egypt under Gamal Abdul Nasser (1918-1970) and its secularist leanings, for Qutb, were wholly inconsistent with the ethos of Islam. This also explains Qutb's wide appeal in the contemporary context since questions of political authority, dispensation of justice, and social and moral cohesion continue to plague postcolonial Muslim states.

A key step toward rejection of reformist accommodation is Qutb's delegitimation of established religious authority. In this sense, Qutb can be regarded as a principal actor in advancing the decentralization and democratization of Islamic interpretation during the 20th century, a process that has acquired greater scope and intensity under 21st century globalizing conditions. The consolidation of a transnational Islamic public sphere under the aegis of social media is a central part of the landscape. As Robinson notes, "The authority of much scholarship from the past, has been rejected; the authority of the traditional interpreters, the 'ulama, has been marginalized" (2009: 340). Robinson's observation somewhat exaggerates the extent of marginalization since the traditional 'ulama remain important participants in the 'national' religious public spheres in the ICZs, often setting the terms of political discourse and morality. However, in the 'transnational' realm, the decentralization and democratization of religious interpretation corresponds to Robinson's categorical statement. As a result of the multiplication of interpretative centers in the ICZs, the distinction between established and lay religious authority has considerably weakened. Paradoxically, multiplication has been accompanied, not by a pluralist culture of heterodoxy, but oversimplification and *homogenization* of Faith. Complexity and ambiguity have been replaced by, what Jacob Burckhardt (1955 [1888-89]) writing in a different context calls those 'terrible simplifiers'. The experience of the divine or the cultural richness of religious tradition have succumbed to mere Belief and ritual. Qutb's wider appeal fits into this pattern in which lived practice and relaxed variants of interpretation succumb to stricter adherence and sharper divisions between 'true' and 'nominal' believers.

Although Qutb stands squarely within the tradition of Islamic political theology as its *conservative* exponent, he is actually a radical who seeks to delink Quranic interpretation from its classical roots. In this quest, in politicizing the divine, Qutb subordinates *raison d'état* to *hakimiyyah* (God's rule). From a post-Westphalian perspective, Qutb repudiates

both the assumed separation between religion and state, and popular variants of sovereignty to *hakimiyyah*. Yet, Qutb is ambiguous over the question of the territorial state. In his unrelenting attacks on nominally ‘Islamic’ states which occupy large parts of his corpus, he does not specify whether his alternate design would dispense with the nation-state. In a sense, the tension between the *Ummah* and *dawla* remains unresolved in Qutb as with other proponents of a religiously-ordained state. God’s sovereignty assumes a despatialized form and *Ummah* can only correspond to the extent of the Muslim community. By contrast, *dawla* is always a temporal arrangement and territorial (Al-Barghouti 2008). Qutb is not oblivious to the distinction between divine and lay matters, unlike the fictionalized inseparability of the religious and the secular in Islam (Sivan 1985).

Hakimiyyah and Jahiliyya

In his latest book, *The Shipwrecked Mind*, Mark Lilla provides a discussion of the ‘political reactionary’ illustrated with figures such as Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin. Qutb approximates that description with the proviso that he proposes a clear break with Classical *tafsir* (Quranic interpretation) and its reformist interlocutors, although he himself spends several years writing long commentaries on the Qur’an which make up the main body of his religious writings. Seeking a *modus vivendi* between Faith and the compulsions of modern statecraft, reformist Islam for Qutb can only reveal its feebleness. The problem is that reformists accept the terms of discourse *set by modernity*; they are merely interested in modifying Islam to meet modernity’s challenge. Although Qutb subscribes to the primacy of Divine Law, he is a *political* modernist (Voegelin 1965); he seeks to release interpretation from established sources of legitimate religious authority, especially the *ulama* (religious scholars). Qutb does not identify himself with religious authority since the ‘ulama inevitably wish to historicize and contextualize the Holy Text, often to legitimate political regime of

their times. With a transcendental message, the Qur'an cannot remain trapped in historical circumstance.⁸

Qutb's *Hakimiyyah* appears to mirror the substantive content of Islam's First Principle, namely *Tawhid* (unity). The core of this principle is the twin notion of Allah's transcendent reality and indivisibility. Qutb's principal aim is to *subordinate* social and political life to God's law as enunciated in the Quran and Sunnah, not do away with that distinction:

The division of human actions into "*ibadat*" (worship) and "*muamalat*" (transactions, social relations, dealings between peoples), which we find in the books of fiqh (jurisprudence), was introduced in the beginning merely for technical reasons in order to present different topics in a systematic manner. Unfortunately, with the passage of time, this produced the erroneous impression in people's minds that the term "*ibadah*" (worship) applies only to those actions that are included under the title "*fiqh al-ibadat*" (jurisprudence of worship). This application of the term "*ibadah*" was a grave distortion of the Islamic concept.

While Qutb's seeks to rework *Tawhid* as *hakimiyyah*, conjoining the political and the theological, his reading of *Tawhid* is fairly orthodox:

Islam begins by establishing the Oneness of Allah (Tawhid), as it is from Him that Life issues and unto Him that it turns. "Say; God is One..." (*Qur'an* 112-114). Accordingly, there is no controversy or doubt about the origin of this universe . . . Out of the Will of this One God, the whole existence has been created in the same unified manner . . . There is no intermediary between Creative Will and the created beings, nor are there multiple ways of creation, but it is the Will referred to in the Qur'an by the word 'Be' that prevails . . . The One God reigns sovereign over all beings, to Him they turn for refuge in this life, and in the Hereafter . . . The universe, with its diverse ramifications has one origin from which it is issued . . . By one Supreme rule, this

universe has been thoroughly administered in a manner that precludes any collision among its parts . . . (Qutb, *Islam and Universal Peace* 1951).

Qutb's novelty is to allow *Tawhid* to transmute into God's rule. In the presence of Divine sovereignty, 'man-made' political institutions look frail and flawed:

The basic principle upon which the Islam system is based differs from the basic principles upon which all human systems are based. It is based upon the principle that sovereignty (*hakimiyyah*) belongs to God alone, and He alone legislates. The other systems are based on the principle that sovereignty belongs to man, and it is he who legislates for himself.

These two basic principles do not coincide, and therefore the Islamic system cannot really coincide with any other system, and cannot be called anything but "Islam." (*Social Justice in Islam*, in Shepard 1992: 220).

The concept of *hakimiyyah* carries sufficient ambiguity to warrant elastic interpretation extant proponents of political Islam. Against the demands of *hakimiyyah*, all Muslim states acquire illegitimacy. Similarly, Qutb's undefined boundaries of *hakimiyyah* allow his enthusiasts ample room to visualize post-national projects that have the potential to redraw the territorial map of the ICZs. The charms of an Islamic world-state cannot be too far behind. In this sense, Qutb increasingly appears as an unheralded theorist of post-Westphalian sovereignty. Qutb's repudiation of Muslim political classes directly challenges the nation-state. It places them under severe political stress since they cannot, on Qutb's reading, find legitimacy in modern projects of redistribution, social welfare, or modernization, a direct reference to Nasser's Egypt with more contemporary relevance. In rejecting reformist Islam, Qutb's choice of language is vital. Although his language is consistent with the language deployed by other proponents of political Islam, the deliberate use of *hakimiyyah* transmits added force. It gives the idea of sovereignty affective resonance fully in accord with the majesty of the Supreme Ruler. Secular authority on this image can only appear subordinate, lacking divine glory.

Qutb's strategy of assigning newer meanings to older terms finds parallel in Blumenberg's (1983) "reoccupation of concepts". Bypassing *Tafsir*, helps Qutb reframe familiar Islamic concepts. Both *hakimiyyah* and *jahiliyyah* illustrate Qutb's strategy that entails attempts to de-historicize and to decontextualize. Conceptual history breaks out of a linear mode. "One reason for Qutb's effectiveness and influence," writes Nettler, "was the profound, masterful integration of the Qur'ān in his thought" (1994: 102). Qutb's impressive knowledge of the Islamic canon, but especially the deeper metaphysical moorings of the Qur'ān allowed him considerable autonomy to articulate newer meanings. The real effect of Qutb's rhetorical achievement lies in affording political meanings to religious terms. By using the Qur'ān verse by verse Qutb seeks "to build a theory of, and a practical programme for, modern Islam" (Nettler: 104). Qutb also parts company with traditional *tafsir* scholars by avoiding the classical style of writing. He opts for a writing style that can reach the Muslim publics. Eschewing formalism or established rules of rhetoric, Qutb's bold contributions are deeply interwoven with his belief in the sovereignty of God, a belief becoming only stronger in the face of degrading circumstances, including Nasser's brutal penitentiary.

Qutb does not began his career with a political-theological project. First and foremost, his interventions embodied the thinking of a social reformer concerned and agitated with the moral ills of society. It is in the later years that Qutb drew upon the South Asian thinker, Abul A'la Mawdudi, for conceptions of 'Islam as a Total System" and *hakimiyyah*. Mawdudi's totalizing discourse shifts Qutb's horizon more explicitly toward political theology.⁹ Now, Islam is acknowledged not only as Faith, but as a *complete system* for organizing social and political worlds. Departure from this system, for Qutb, can only lead toward moral abyss, ignorance and decadence—features of *jahiliyyah*. Mawdudi provides room for elections and consultation (Nasr 1994). Qutb, on the other hand, depends entirely on a religiously-inspired leadership to guide the *Ummah*:

The whole question of human well-being depends entirely on who exercises control over human affairs. A train runs only to the destination determined by its driver. All passengers can travel only to the same destination, whether they like it or not. In the same way, the train of human civilization travels where those who exercise power dictate. (*In the Shade of the Qur'an* [Qutb 2002-9], vol. 6:149–150).

Qutb, like Mawdudi, reads God's attributes as political qualities, but unlike his counterpart he does not countenance any accommodation with 'man-made' laws, patterns of governance, or political expedience. Mawdudi's direct involvement with a political party, procedural democracy, and alliance with the military to 'Islamize' Pakistan (Nasr 1997) stands in stark contrast to Qutb's rejectionist stand, which eventually led to torture and death at the hands of an authoritarian regime.

In rejecting the authority of traditional authority, Qutb cultivates his own theoretical garden with *hakimiyyah* as its main attraction. A political modernist, Qutb is neither opposed nor resistant to Western science, the need for political legitimacy, but especially the expenditure of political power to realize his Islamic project. What is awkward for Qutb is the problem of operationalizing *hakimiyyah* in the modern state. To be sure, *hakimiyyah* is neither a Quranic concept nor a recurrent notion in classical interpretation. A closer inspection of the elements of *hakimiyyah*, however, can freely apply to conceptions of modern sovereignty. Qutb also discards any notion of the 'two kingdoms' since there can only be One. Reading God's authority politically obviates the need for a secularized settlement. The source of all legitimate authority for Qutb is the Qur'an. Qutb bypasses Islamic law or jurisprudence as ultimate sources, but more significantly reconfigures the concept of *jihad* not as a defensive, but offensive, struggle to safeguard Muslim society (Khatab 2011). The main battle for Qutb is between *hakimiyyah* and *jahiliyyah*. In his

‘militant’ writings, Qutb’s also displays strong anti-Christian sensibilities, associating Christianity with *jahiliyyah*, which he regards as the principal corrosive force in history.

The historical landscape for Qutb is a binary construction, characterized by an endless conflict between *hakimiyyah* and *jahiliyyah*. Qutb’s historical sociology traces the decline of *hakimiyyah* to the end of the golden age of the Four Rightly Guided Caliphs. Muslim society has never managed to recover it; *jahiliyyah* has been a consistent feature of Muslim social and political worlds. Despite noteworthy achievements in science and technology, the West simply embodies a modern version of *jahiliyyah*. The defining feature of modernity for Qutb is the relegation of *hakimiyyah* to human reason. The political form of *jahiliyyah* is the modern nation-state since it arises out of a settlement between the divine and the worldly. The philosophical rationale behind *hakimiyyah* is Qutb’s appreciation of the constant human struggle between material and spiritual desires; *jahiliyya* negates the supremacy of spiritual desires:

For the life drives cannot be suppressed in every instance, and the material necessities of life cannot be eternally conquered. Of necessity, humanity yields to the pressures of these drives most of the time. Indeed, the perpetual suppression of life’s drives is not good, because Allah has created life, and he has not done so in vain, nor has he created life for humans to neglect or hinder its development. Undoubtedly, it is good for humanity to exceed its physical necessities and transcend its desire, but not to disregard life in the process. The soundest and safest way is to unleash the constitutive potentiality of human nature so that humanity can supersede the humiliating submission to its physical necessities. This is the aim of Islam when it unites the physical necessities and the passions of the spirit into a system, securing absolute individual liberty with inherent feeling and practical possibility, neglecting neither (*Social Justice in Islam*: 35).

Qutb's refutation of traditional religious authority draws from his Quranic reading of human capacity to make autonomous sense of the universe, albeit, with divine guidance. Recognition of that capacity also explains Qutb's plea for political activism, or *jihad* against *jahiliyyah*. But the world of *jahiliyyah* cannot be undone with ascetic indifference, passivity, or personal salvation. Direct political action, directed by belief in *hakimiyyah*, is a necessary element to prevent Muslim society from falling into further decline and turpitude. Qutb melds his early commitments to social reform to wholesale restructuring of society and state in his conception of *hakimiyyah*. Qutb's equates Christian ideas of personal salvation with *shirk* (idolatry). *Hakimiyyah* does not permit human-directed salvation. In a similar vein, Islamic jurisprudence (*Fiqh*) is subservient to the Qur'ān and the Sunnah—the only sources of true authority.

The world of modernity in Qutb's design is dualistic and, therefore, unable to liberate humanity from the allure of materiality or worldly power. True freedom is only possible when materiality is kept under check. *Hakimiyyah* alone offers the right passage to freedom since it resonates with the human desire for spirituality. Once surrendered to God's rule, humans can attain perfection. Their dependence on materiality can guarantee neither freedom from want nor freedom from fear. Modernity's answer to the human quest for freedom lies in materiality, an unquenchable quest. Placing *hakimiyyah* at the core of human existence liberates humanity. Spiritual happiness is not a personal matter, but ordained with Divine Guidance.

Qutb's concept of *hakimiyyah* is tangled with Mawdudi's advocacy of Islam as a 'total' system, not as just belief or ritual, or even religious practice, but as an integrated, holistic framework of awareness and conduct:

Islam, which is mandated to organize the totality of human life, does not attend to the diverse aspects of that life blindly or randomly, nor does it treat them as fragments or

parts. This is because it has a universal, integrated concept of the physical universe, life, and humanity, from which all the divisions and detailed expositions begin and return, and to which are linked all its theories, legislation, prohibitions, rituals of worship, its social relations. All these things are founded on this universal integrated concept. Islam does not improvise an opinion for every given occasion, or treat every given problem as separate from the rest of the problems (*Social Justice in Islam: 28*).

For Qutb, the ‘naturalness’ of Islam arises from its integrated view of all existence. God’s authority unites cosmological, political, and social spheres into a seamless order. Only by taking God’s authority as the constitutive principle for organizing human affairs produces social harmony, peace, and material and spiritual happiness. In contradistinction, *jahiliyyah* seeks to circumvent God’s authority either by erecting worldly idols or by peripheralizing the human desire for spirituality in favor of material desire.

Received accounts situate Qutb within an unbroken chain of social reformers delimited by “the recurring impulse to renew the faith, to return to pristine origins, to shed the accretions of time and clime, and to recapture the vigor and simplicity of prophetic times” (Binder 1988: 170). Qutb’s vision is different. He shows no inclination to excavate modernist impulses within his Faith or to modernize Islam with the secularist make-up of the Nasserite state. Qutb’s model rests on his attachment to Islam’s first generation (*Salafi*), including the Four Rightly Guided Caliphs¹⁰.

Islam cannot fulfil its role except by taking a concrete form in a society, or more precisely, in a nation. Men do not listen, especially in this age, to an abstract theory which is not materialized in a living society. From this point of view, we can say that the Muslim community has been extinct for a few centuries, for this Muslim community does not denote the name of a land in which Islam resides, nor is it a people whose forefathers lived under the Islamic system at some earlier time. It is the name of a group of people

whose manners, ideas and concepts, rules and regulations, values and criteria, are all derived from the Islamic source, so that that the Muslims' way of life is an example to all Mankind, just as the Messenger is an example to them: "And thus We made of you a community justly balanced that you may be witnesses over the nations, and the Messenger as witness over yourselves." [*Qur'ān* 2:143] (*Milestones* 7).

As mentioned, Qutb reframes *hakimiyyah* as God's rule, or *jahiliyyah* as a world of pagan ethos. The key point is that *Jahiliyyah* is no longer allotted its original meaning, namely as the state of ignorance and moral decline in pre-Islamic Arabian society but as *any* condition deviating from *hakimiyyah*. Hence, *jahiliyyah* connotes godless communist societies, Western 'democratic' societies, but also Muslim states that are Islamic only in name.

To escape the limitations of the nation-state, Qutb advances instead his own variant of humanism in which all differences between races and ethnicities are shunned. This humanism is predicated on an unconditional surrender to *hakimiyyah*. Qutb sees a natural harmony between the Divine's commandments and human action. Acceptance of *hakimiyyah* as the First Principle opens up unlimited potential for human flourishing. The spiritual and material dimensions of cosmic existence need to be harmonized. In this context, Qutb's unwavering rejection of Islamic mysticism appears consistent, since on this view mysticism is one-dimensional; it refuses to fully acknowledge of materiality as an equal aspect of the cosmic order. Echoing Mawdudi, Qutb advances a necessary link between *din* (faith) and *dunya* (worldliness) for the Muslim community to flourish. Qutb's anti-pietistic proclivities are connected to his critique of mysticism as the source of realizing God's sovereignty. His important treatise, *Milestones* (1990), clearly articulates political activism both to establish a just social order and to conform that order to God's Will.

The question of Qutb's ambivalence toward modernity lies at the heart of any meaningful scrutiny of his political theology. Exposed to modernity's apparent manifestations, both in the United States and the postcolonial context, he is acutely aware of modernity's material and ideational possibilities. How does Qutb reconcile his unshaken faith in Divine sovereignty with modernity's productions, especially the nation-state? A believer in political activism, he cannot disregard the necessary linkage between politics and an idealized Islamic order. Despite his vociferous attacks on the State, Qutb recognizes its unavoidability, both to provide social cohesion and religious belonging (*Milestones* 7) Qutb's 'realist utopia' (March 2010), therefore, is *this-worldly* despite its divinely-inspired foundations. 'This-worldly' is not the same thing as secular, but it is a domain closely intertwined with divine purpose. Ultimately though, a legitimate social and political order can only rest on Divine Sovereignty (Nettler 1996). Though Qutb shuns the idea of personal salvation, he places considerable responsibility upon the individual believer to navigate the (modern) social world:

The believer holds on to his *din* [faith] like the holder of a precious stone in a society devoid of religion, of character, of high values, of noble manners, and of whatever is clean, pure, and beautiful. The others mock his tenacity, ridicule his ideas, and laugh at his values, but this does not make the believer weak of heart. He looks from his height at those who mock, ridicule and laugh, and he says, as did Noah, one of the great souls, who preceded him on the long and bright path of faith: "You ridicule us! Yes indeed we shall ridicule you as you ridicule." [*Qur'ān* 3:196–197] (*Milestones* 125).

The individual believer's responsibility derives from God-given attributes of conscience, Reason, and self-knowledge. In discovering the secrets of the material world, the believer can spin into action (*harakah*), a prerequisite of social and moral renewal. Qutb, however, is unwilling to allow humans to interrogate the metaphysical world which is God's prerogative.

Knowledge and self-knowledge must respect humility, which assumes that God alone is All-Knower. Human beings cannot adopt a privileged stance in the endeavor to know. In fact, Qutb's conception of *jahiliyyah* rests on the idea that any practice that authenticates the primacy of human powers is *shirk*. At best, human powers are derivative and subsidiary. Faith is always superior to Reason, since Reason comes as a benefaction from God.

Qutb's unqualified Faith places him at odds with all Islamic traditions seeking to harmonize the Revealed Text with Reason, especially in certain forms of Islamic mysticism and Neo-Platonist Islamic philosophy. It also leaves the challenge of modernity unanswered: how can Qutb embrace the scientific and technical aspects of modernity without also embracing Immanence on which modernity rests? Qutb's attempted solution is to politicize the Divine, which then allows him to subordinate all other human activity as derivative. Qutb's 'political Islam', therefore, is not the project of mere Islamization, but radical transformation. In reading sovereignty within God, he can advance his totalizing vision. Action, then, geared toward the fulfillment of Divine Sovereignty is wholly legitimate.

The above interpretation requires a few addenda. In placing confidence in the individual believer, Qutb recognizes ethical constraints that are decreed in the Qur'an. Believers cannot choose any action as they please once they have acknowledged *hakimiyyah*, positionality much in vogue among several brands of extremists. While Qutb's *jihad* is both defensive and offensive, he is not merely the 'philosopher of terror'. Rather, he finds in believers sufficient cognitive capacities to acknowledge *hakimiyyah* as a *deliberate act of belief*, not blind adherence to an abstract principle. Qutb expends considerable energies to reason, persuade, and convince with argument after argument. A prisoner of his times, he is no stranger to prejudice towards the Other his world inhabits. In the final analysis, though, it is the Nasserite state that is his enemy. Given its pathologies of autocratic rule, moral laxity, and injustice, it serves as a modular type in the ICZs.

Anomalies

Qutb's resolution for translating *hakimiyyah* into a realizable project is not straightforward. In several instances he is inclined to redefine the nation-state. For him, "a Muslim's fatherland is where the Islamic faith, the Islamic way of life, and the *sharia* of Allah are dominant. Only this meaning of 'fatherland' is worthy of human beings." In this vein, Qutb revisits the notion of 'nationality' which "means belief and a way of life, and only this concept is worthy of man's dignity" (*Milestones* 109). His departure from received meanings of a territorial state and political identity corresponding to it reverberates with Islamic notions of the nation as a religious community. However, Qutb leaves the boundaries of an Islamic state undefined. This omission presents his contemporary followers enormous license to conceive of an Islamic state only as a post-Westphalian state, neither marked by fixed inside/outside demarcations, nor isomorphic relations between territory and identity.

Qutb's crusade to achieve a more just society aligned with *hakimiyyah* rests on his rejection of pietistic solutions. However, moral rectification is a necessary ingredient in the journey toward the establishment of an Islam order. Both *jihad* and *da'wah* (Call to Faith) are aspects of this journey. The distinctive element here is Qutb's self-awareness that moral exhortation in itself cannot effectively confront *jahiliyyah*. Reformist Islam places its hopes in purification, but one that is negotiated within the framework of political compromise and accommodation.

Qutb's elevation of the political to a higher status collides with conventional notions of deliberation or conciliation. To the degree that political is "a transcendent category as well as a mundane one, as Nettler notes," it was imperative that "the Godly Islamic community was necessary on earth for cosmic as well as for earthly reasons" (Nettler 1994: 108). The Qur'ān offers supreme direction, but it lies plainly upon Muslim leadership (*qiyada*) to

execute God's Will. For Qutb, it "was a combination of revealed truth and the political and social application of that truth—*Shari'a* or *aqida* or *almanhaj al-Islami*" (Nettler 1994: 108) to materialize *hakimiyyah*. The philosophical sources of Qutb's project set it apart from other variants of political Islam since in Qutb's case it has a "*metaphysical imperative* within a general cosmological conception," as Nettler stresses: "Qutb's 'political Islam' has a very different look and rationale. It pertains not only to the allegedly deracinated modern Muslim society and its problems in the period of decolonization, but to a larger order of God's organization of the cosmos" (1994:114).

Approaching Qutb as a political thinker first and a religious thinker second, allows access to the political content of his worldview. Both *jahiliyyah* and *hakimiyyah* are to be seen, then, as *political* concepts in the guise of religious language. Qutb's political theology, hence, seeks a new frontier, neither of secularization nor sacralization. If at all, it is the interjection of the political into the religious that defines Qutb's project. Binder is unaware of Qutb's political-theological attachments despite his reading of Qutb's philosophical inclinations:

Qutb insists that speculative idealism, and deductive intellectualist systems not derived from immediate religious experience, are characteristic forms of contemporary *jahiliyya*. Theoretical systems which are derived from worldly praxis and material existence alone are equally *jahili*. In this way Qutb rejects not only Marxism, but also Western philosophy, the medieval philosophies of Islam, and much Islamic legal reasoning, claiming that they represent the most insidious and reprehensible forms of the *jahili* attack on Islam (1988:179).

Missing in Binder's analysis is appreciation of the centrality of the *political* in Qutb's 'political Islam'. Indeed, if the political is approached directly as an unmediated zone of agonism, contestation, conflict, and annihilation, Qutb would meet the necessary criteria.

However, as a proponent of ‘political’ Islam that only seeks to Islamize state and society does not accurately capture Qutb’s intent.

How does Qutb resolve the problem of reconciling the claims of the Ummah with the territorial imperatives of *dawla*? Qutb’s writings convincingly express his ambivalence toward the nation-state as an ideal container of Muslim identity. Rather, his Islamic cosmopolitanism presents a different mapping, especially in *Milestones*:

The homeland of the Muslim, in which he lives and which he defends, is not a piece of land. The nationality of the Muslim, by which he is identified, is not the nationality determined by the government. The family of the Muslim, in which he finds solace and which he defends, is not blood relationships. The flag of the Muslim, which he honors and under which he is martyred, is not the flag of the country. And the victory of the Muslim, which he celebrates and for which he is thankful to Allah, is not a military victory. It is what Allah has described: “When Allah’s help and victory comes, and you see people entering into the religion of Allah in multitudes, then celebrate the praises of your Lord and ask His forgiveness. Indeed, He is the Acceptor of Repentance.” [*Qur’ān* 110:1–3] (Qutb, *Milestones*: 108).

Two sets of tensions permeate Qutb’s political theology: the relation between modernity’s immanent ethos and Transcendence; and the unresolved question of harmonizing the *Ummah* with *dawla*. In the first instance, Qutb is unable to reverse modernity both in its historical and institutional senses. Modernity is not a cyclical process or a temporary phase in the flow of events. As discontinuity and rupture modernity ushers in a world of fractured identities, coalescing humanity into discrete containers. Qutb’s attempted escape from the spatio-temporal attachments of modernity can either produce nihilism or regression. Neither

option is attractive to Qutb. The challenge for him and similar interlocutors is reject Immanence altogether without ushering in nihilistic projects of annihilation and death.

Conversely, the question of realizing the Islamic community *politically* inevitably confronts the territorial imperatives of the state. The available theoretical solution is an Islamic world-state. However, this solution entails conflict and hostility toward difference or tolerance, with limitless potential for violence directed at others who pronounce cultural or religious refusal. Qutb's intended cosmopolitan urges collide against religious exclusivism. While the community of believers cannot be fully contained within *dawla*, it is only 'nation-state' that can guarantee realization of Muslim identity, albeit inflected by particular vernacular correlates. Given the heterogeneity within the *Ummah*, that may indeed be the only viable option.

Conclusion

Qutb's political theology presents a radical contrast to largely expedient ideational and behavioral practices of the Islamic political classes. Muslim leaders offer regular pronouncements on the need to harmonize Islam with statecraft, but their publicized adherence to Islamic principles is a mere sham. For Qutb, political rule in the 'Islamic' world is illegitimate. The perceived relevance of Qutb's indictment is not limited to his spatio-temporal universe, but it also finds widespread reception in contemporary contexts. Qutb is also exonerated by the authoritarian consistency in Muslim political practice. His repudiation of personal salvation is also welcomed since Qutb provides little space for political elites to display outward piety without fulfilling the true meaning of Faith.

In broader context, an exploration into Qutb's *political* theology shows that his theology is always already political (unlike the reformists or Schmitt's version which is juridical and is about sovereignty's transcendence). Curiously, this reading suggests that Qutb is not pleading for a *theological politics* but a *political theology* within modernity with all the contradictions

inherent in such a project. Qutb displays an aversion toward Western modernity, but his project of transmuting modern sovereignty into *hakimiyyah* keeps him strictly within the modernist fold. Without an awareness of the assumed powers of the Leviathan and the *exceptional* nature of the sovereign, he would be unable to notice attributes in God that are neither sanctioned by Text or Tradition. Like Mawdudi, Qutb is able to construct a totalizing discourse in the shadow of the modern state, both in its colonial and postcolonial instantiations.

The terrain of sovereignty in the non-Western cultural zones is fraught with paradoxes and anomalies attending projects of matching territory and identity, an experience not alien to the Western world. A chief limitation of received thinking is the modularity of the Protestant settlement presumably enshrined in the Westphalian compromise. The inescapable and apparently more visible presence of religion, notably, in the ICZs, casts serious aspersions on the universality of both Westphalia and secularization claims, but also sacralisation. Yet, the immanent character of modernity produces strange solutions for protecting or promoting the spaces of religiosity. It is neither the ‘return’ of religion nor ‘revival’ that captures sustained commitments to Faith in the midst of modernity’s advances and seductions.

Qutb’s political theology raises important questions, both for conventional understandings of ‘political Islam’ and postcolonial sovereignty. Adhering to an unapologetic belief in Islam’s self-subsistence, Qutb defies the political logic of reformism. He remains unconvinced that accommodation or compromise with secular or secularized political authority would create the preconditions for Islamic renewal and renaissance. Battling opposing forces on several fronts—welfare, social reform, justice, or governance, Qutb ultimately settles on his own version of political theology as a panacea. A centerpiece of that political theology is *Hakimiyyah* that can liberate the Islamic community from the alluring advances of *jahiliyya*. Divine sovereignty, for Qutb, is not a political slogan, but a programme

for spiritual renewal, recovering the original ethos of Islam. Paradoxically, his political reading of God's sovereignty leaves the main political problem unresolved, namely the constitution and governance of community with imperfect mortals. Within the polluting environment of modernity, can a new *salafi* generation emerge that can spurn modernity's nihilism?

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² Andrew March (2015: 104) offers a capacious understanding of 'Political Islam': "Political Islam should be understood in the broadest sense possible as the range of modern political movements, ideological trends, and state-directed policies concerned with giving Islam as authoritative status in political life...Islamist trends range from left-leaning populist protest movements...to ultraconservative movements devoted more to social control over morality than to economic redistribution."

³ These zones are generally “Muslim-majority areas informed by transnational subjectivities loosely connecting varied Islamic societies around symbolic commonality, memory and historical experience. The term stressed the plurality of Islamic cultural experience, albeit distinguished by recognizable semiotic markers, without essentializing Islamic identity” (Pasha 2017: xiii).

⁴ According to Qutb, “Authority belongs to the exalted God exclusively by virtue of His divinity. For sovereignty (*al-hakimiyya*) is among the characteristic features of divinity. Whoever lays a claim to sovereignty—whether it is an individual, a class, a party, an institution, a community or humanity at large in the form of an international organization—disputes the primary characteristic of His Divinity. And whoever does so is guilty of disbelief in the most blatant manner....Laying claim to this right [to sovereignty] does not necessarily take a particular form, which alone might be deemed to remove the claimant from the fold of ‘the true faith’ (*al-din al-qayyim* [Q 12.40])....Rather, one lays claim to it...simply by...deriving laws from a source other than [God]....In the Islamic system, it is the community that chooses the ruler, thereby giving him the legal right to exercise authority according to God’s law. But [this community] is not the source of sovereignty which gives the law its legality. God alone is the source of sovereignty. Many people, including Muslim scholars, tend to confuse the exercise of power and the source of power. Even the aggregate of humanity does not have the right to sovereignty, which God alone possesses. People only [have the right to] implement what God has laid down with His authority. As for what He has not laid down, it is neither authority nor legality”. *Fi Zilal al-Quran*, 6 vols. (Beirut, 1974), iv. P. 1990 (commentary on Q 12.40) cited in Zaman (2015: 393-394).

⁵ I am thankful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this important point.

⁶ As Qutb states in *Ma’ alim*: “The fundamentals upon which the components of life and its systems are based indicate that the world today is living in *jahiliyyah*. It is the jahiliyya which could not be reduced by anything of this huge material facility, or by this magnificent material development. This *jahiliyyah* is based on transgression. It transgresses the authority of Allah on the Earth. It transgresses the rights of *hakimiyyah* (Sovereignty), the most specific characteristics of *uluhiyyah* (divinity). It depends on the *hakimiyyah* (Sovereignty) of people and makes a number of them lords to the others. This is not in the naïve fashion known to the first *jahiliyyah*, but in the form of the claim that they have the right to design conceptions, and values, laws and system separable from the program of life sanctioned by Allah” (cited in Khateb 2006: 168).