The Theological Basis of Al Qaeda

In the war against terrorism Al Qaeda and associated groups **should** be able to be swept away by military might, vigilant police forces and all sorts of undercover operations. This seems to be the view of many in the West. They will be disillusioned! The reason is that Al Qaeda and similar groups are deeply rooted in theological/ideological ideas. Unless these theological/ideological issues are properly addressed and challenged, the West will never win a war on terrorism!

Our political leaders speak of UN resolutions, weapons inspectors, multi-lateralism and a host of other things. But none of these things speak to the profoundly important issues underlying Islamic terrorism. Our religious leaders, at least as we hear them in the media, are liberal thinkers and they seem to have no concept of the war of ideas that is being fought.

The Intellectual Founder of Al-Qaeda

Although Osama bin Laden was a Saudi, the son of a director of a major construction company in Saudi Arabia, the Laden clan comes from the border region between Northern Yemen and the Abha region of Saudi Arabia. The Laden clan also has ideological roots in the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the Egyptian Islamic Group. These are two radical Islamist groups. They both have their roots in the 1960s Muslim Brotherhood movement in Egypt.

At the heart of the theology/ideology of these groups stands Sayyid Qutb – the intellectual hero of the Islamists. Sayyid Qutb is to Islamists what Karl Marx is to communists. At the heart of Qutb's writings is a commentary on the Quran called, **In the Shade of the Quran**.[1] It is 15 large volumes in English. The theological basis of Al Qaeda is taken from this work.

Sayyid Qutb's Background

He was born in Cairo in 1906 and was initially taught through a traditional 'madrassa'. By the age of ten he had memorized the Quran. Later he switched to a modern secular education.

In the 20s and 30s he was a socialist and wrote novels, poems and short stories and even a book on literary criticism. In the late 40s he studied in the USA at the Colorado State College of Education from where he received his MA. Even before going to the USA he wrote a book entitled, **Social Justice and Islam** in which he outlined some of the basic tenets of Islamic radicalism – Muslim fundamentalism.

In 1952 Gamal Abdul Nasser and a group of nationalist army officers overthrew King Farouk and Egypt became a republic. Nasser strongly advocated pan-Arabism based on socialist, secularist nationalism. Briefly Nasser and Sayyid Qutb tried to co-operate in the dream of rescuing the Arab World from the legacies of the imperial colonial powers and crushing the brand new Zionist state. Both wanted to be up-to-date on economic/scientific issues. Both wanted to restore the old Arab Empire under one ruler.

But Sayyid Qutb wanted his new empire to be based on Quranic principles. He pictured a resurrected Caliphate as a theocracy strictly enforcing the Sharia. When Nasser came to power he began to put pressure on the Muslim Brotherhood – especially after one of them attempted to assassinate one of his leaders. Some leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood went into exile. Sayyid's brother, Muhammad Qutb, was among them. He went to Saudi Arabia and became a distinguished Saudi professor of Islamic Studies. Osama bin Laden was one of Muhammad Qutb's students.

In 1954 Nasser put Sayyid Qutb in prison. He briefly released him only to imprison him again for ten years. He released him again for a few months and then finally hanged him in 1966.

It was during these years in prison that **In the Shade of the Quran** was written. Prison conditions were very bad and torture was routine. He was locked in a large cell with 40 other men. A loudspeaker broadcast Nasser's speeches for 20 hours a day! Somehow Qutb managed to smuggle out what he had written – the ideological and theological basis of Islamic revolution. In his multi-volume book he builds an enormous theological criticism of modern life and of other worldviews.

Qutb's Analysis of the World's Problems

Qutb understood that the world and human beings were in a mess. The human race had lost touch with its intrinsic nature. Man's inspiration, intelligence and morality were degenerating. Relations between the sexes were deteriorating ***"to a level lower than the animals"***. Man was miserable, anxious, hopeless and cynical. He was slowly sinking into idiocy, insanity and crime. In their unhappiness, people were turning to a mindless hedonism, to drugs, to alcohol and to existential despair.

Many thoughtful people in Europe and North America were asking deep questions after the horrors of the Second World War and the advent of nuclear war. Many pointed out the Age of Enlightenment as the fatal error in Western civilisation – an arrogant and deluded faith in the power of human reason. This error was at the root of the philosophical position of modernity. In the 50s and 60s this produced the tyranny of technology over life.

The modernity of enlightenment was a recovery of the worldview of the humanistic renaissance – from Thomas Aquinas onwards. This, in turn, was rooted in the philosophy of early Greeks such as Aristotle and Plato. This worldview was challenged by a Biblical worldview both by the early church and by the reformation – see Francis Schaeffer's book **Escape from Reason**[2] that was written at this same time.

However, Qutb didn't think the root of the problem was Greek philosophy. He thought it was the way that **Semitic thinking** had altered. He recognised that nearly 60% of the world's population is influenced by Semitic thinking – Muslims, Jews and Christians. As a Muslim, Qutb saw the teachings of Judaism (as originally given) as divinely revealed by God to Moses and the other prophets.

Judaism instructed man to worship the One God and to reject all other gods (centres of authority). Judaism also instructed man how to live in this world in a way that conformed to the will of God. This was accomplished by obeying a system of divinely mandated laws – **the Mosaic Law**.

In Qutb's view, the problem with Judaism was that, over time, it had withered into ***"a system of rigid and lifeless ritual"*** disconnected from God. So God sent another prophet – Jesus. In Qutb's view, Jesus brought much needed reform to revealed religion. What Jesus brought was a new spirituality to the legalism of Judaism. But something awful happened to the teaching of Jesus after His lifetime. Perhaps in trying to communicate to the Greek-speaking world, the followers of Jesus took, in Qutb's view, "***a deplorable course"*** and this caused the message of Jesus to be diluted and perverted.

Writing from his miserable prison in Cairo, Sayyid Qutb thought that the disciples of Jesus, in their persecutions and deaths, were never able to provide an adequate and systematic exposition of Jesus' message. So, according to him, the Gospels are badly garbled and are not divinely inspired. Accordingly, the sad result was a clear separation and animosity between Jews and Christians. So Judaism was not reformed and Christians rejected much that they should have accepted! Christians emphasised Jesus' message of spirituality and love, but they rejected Judaism's legal system. Instead they made the fatal mistake of introducing Platonism into Christianity and so separating the life of spiritual existence from physical life in the world.

In Qutb's analysis he called this, ***"the hideous schizophrenia"*** of the Christian worldview. The old Mosaic code was holistic – a unified worldview – essentially a theocracy. There were laws for an entire way of life that was theocratic – diet, dress, marriage, sex and everything else. This was linked to the worship of the unique Creator-God at the centre. "***The hideous schizophrenia"*** of Christianity in separating the secular from the spiritual is clearly wrong.

Christianity went wrong particularly in the 4th century when the Roman Empire became "Christian". Roman paganism was introduced into Christianity (idols, morals, laws etc.). Qutb sees a strong reaction to this 'paganisation' of Christianity in the monastic asceticism that arose in the 5th century. But monasticism merely perpetuated ***"the hideous schizophrenia"*** – the spiritual-secular divide. The church councils of the 4th and 5th centuries put into cement the ***"absolutely incomprehensible, inconceivable and incredible"*** teachings about the Trinity, the deity of Jesus Christ etc. All of these teachings were irrational and misguided principles resulting from the mixture of paganism with the clear teachings of Jesus.

So in the 7th century God delivered a new revelation to His prophet Muhammad to establish the true way that man, God and nature should relate to each other. Muhammad brought man back to true religion and to a holistic worldview. He re-introduced a strict legal code that integrated man with the physical world in a much better way than the Mosaic Code on which it is broadly based. Muhammad re-enforced the concept that man is God's vice-regent on earth and as such is to take charge of this physical world. In Qutb's analysis, this integrated worldview gave rise to the "scientific method" in the Arab World in the 8th – 11th centuries.

[*For a more accurate analysis of the origins of modern science see* **Re-building the Matrix**[3] *by Dr. Denis Alexander*.]

Sadly, in Qutb's analysis, after 300 years Islam **also** began to depart from its true beginnings. When under attack from the Crusaders, Mongols and others, the theocratic, holistic ideals began to crumble and they were unable to capitalise on their discovery of the scientific method. The scientific method was exported to Europe and re-enforced ***"the hideous schizophrenia"***, with the result that God and the spiritual world became completely divorced from the physical world – the church **against** science. Everything that Islam knew to be one the church divided into two.

This break eventually became final and in the Western World the result of this was a small ineffective Christianity vs an atheistic, secular humanism. In Qutb's view, the latter was winning and Christianity was doomed. But there is something worse than this! The scientific and technical achievements of the West have allowed it to dominate the world and inflict its ***"hideous schizophrenia"*** on all people everywhere. The result is misery everywhere – anxiety, a sense of moral drift, purposelessness and the craving for false pleasures.

So the crisis of the West is being forced on the Muslim World. It is producing Muslim "moderates" who have accepted the same ***"hideous schizophrenia"***. Qutb sees this as a great 'shame' (humiliation) and disastrous for Islam. Qutb's agony was to live in a Muslim World increasingly being dominated by liberal, secular ideas. It was a Muslim World being split by pragmatic dualism, just as happened to Christianity in the 3rd century.

So Qutb's analysis **is s**oulful and heartfelt. It is a theological analysis of western culture over the centuries. It has its parallels in Francis Schaeffer's analysis of the same history from an evangelical point of view at about the same time.

[*See* **Escape from Reason; The God who is There; He is There and He is not Silent** *and* **How Should We Then Live**.[4]]

There are many points of agreement in Qutb's analysis and Schaeffer's analysis as well as some major differences! Essentially Qutb sees the fault of the West as its acceptance of a plurality of sources of authority. To him this is paganism – an immense backward step into a life without reference to the one Creator-God. Such a life, according to Qutb, can never be satisfactory or fulfilling.

Qutb writes bitterly about the West (European imperialism and sometimes America) not because it was hypocritical in having double standards in its liberal policies, but <u>because of</u> these liberal policies. Liberal policies are ***"the hideous schizophrenia"*** of the separation of the church from the state – the secular from the sacred. So the great problem with the West is not its political agenda, its individualism, its Hollywood morality, its exploitation of the world's resources etc. **What is wrong with the West is its theology!** Qutb says the conflict between western liberalism and the World of Islam, ***"Remains one of ideology*** (this is the word in the English translation – in Arabic the word used is 'theology'), ***although over the years it has appeared in various guises and grown more sophisticated and, at times, more insidious"***.

Because the liberal West doesn't understand theology, it continues to use pejorative words like "fundamentalism", "fanatics", "backward people" etc. But Qutb says, ***"The confrontation isn't over control of territory or economic resources. It isn't for military domination. If we believed that, we would play into our enemies' hands and would have no-one but ourselves to blame for the consequences."***

So the real issue is theology. Qutb is absolutely clear. The West, consciously or unconsciously, is mounting a huge campaign to weaken Islam by forcing on it ***"the hideous schizophrenia"***. He was furious that the West was succeeding. He used Turkey as an example. In 1924 the remnants of the Caliphate in Turkey were finally removed and Ataturk introduced a secular state with a complete separation of religion from the state. Ataturk spoke strongly against the concept of an Islamic state. To Qutb this was an attempt by a Muslim (!) to destroy the very heart and soul of Islam. He spoke of secular Muslim rulers launching a great offensive all over the Muslim World. He said, ***"It is an attempt to exterminate this religion even as a basic creed and to replace it with secular concepts that have their own implications, values, institutions and organisations"***. Ataturk wasn't the only one. There was Jinnah in Pakistan, Nasser in Egypt, the Shah in Iran etc.

Qutb's Solution

Step One was to open the eyes of Muslims to see what is going on. They need to recognise the danger and understand that the major assault is coming from inside the World of Islam by people who call themselves Muslims! These poor Muslims have had their ideas polluted by "***the hideous schizophrenia"***. They are "false" Muslims who have aided and abetted the West.

Step Two is the creation of a vanguard (a term he borrowed from Lenin). This is a group of people whose eyes have been opened and who are fired with the spirit of true Islam. The goal of the vanguard is to bring revival to Islam. It is to attack "false" Muslims and "hypocrites". It is to found a new state based on the Quran and Sharia. It is to resurrect the Caliphate and unite the Muslim World into one state.

Step Three is to take Islam from this renewed Muslim World to the rest of the world – just as Muhammad and the early Caliphs did. Qutb wrote, "***We are certain that this religion of Islam is so intrinsically genuine, so colossal and so deeply rooted that all such efforts will succeed"***. This vanguard must take responsibility for Jihad – the struggle for Islam.

To Qutb, the imposition of Sharia is the true liberation – liberation from man-made (and therefore arbitrary) laws. He said, ***"The resurrection of the Caliphate will enable every person to be free of the servitude of others and to live in the service of God"***. For Qutb, Sharia was utopia – perfection – the natural order of a world created by God. It was freedom, justice and dignity. It was a vision greater than communism – the ***"total liberation of man from enslavement by others"***.

It is a sad fact that Sharia requires a total dictatorship in order to enforce the vision. Since Sharia is very intricate and complicated, it really needs a dictatorship **of theocrats** who can seek to interpret Sharia to the ordinary masses. *[There are four "schools" of interpretation of the Sharia and within these there is diversity of interpretation.]* The twentieth century generated a number of despotic, totalitarian, revolutionary projects – the Nazis, the Fascists, the Communists and to these should be added Sayyid Qutb and his followers.

Islamists are often well educated and wealthy in spite of attempts by the western press to make them look weird. They are possessed of a powerful philosophy that explains their unhappiness, that gives them an explanation of thousands of years of theological error and corruption and that also gives them a blueprint for the principles of a perfect God-given society. They believe they are saving Islam from extinction. They believe they are doing the world immense good as well as doing the will of God.

Our Response

We must ask ourselves, 'Are we speaking to the deep philosophical / ideological / theological ideas that are presented by Sayyid Qutb?' As the West, we have nothing to say! Much of Qutb's criticism is justified and we would agree with him. As Biblical, evangelical believers it is clear that we need to be much more holistic in our thinking, in our actions and in our interaction with Muslims. We need to focus on understanding our own Biblical worldview and working out a way of explaining it to Muslims. We need to help Muslims understand the Fall, the function of the Mosaic Code, the purpose of the Mosaic sacrifices and the job description of the Messiah. Sayyid Qutb's misinterpretation of the Old Testament is profound and this is the root of all his analysis.

The sort of apologetics of "anti-Deedat", picking over the minutiae of differences, won't be sufficient. We need an apologetic of broad, deep, theological counter ideas. We need to re-read Francis Schaeffer and re-interpret his philosophical framework into the Islamic terminology of Sayyid Qutb – in other words 'contextualise Schaeffer'!!

The advocacy of post-modern liberalism isn't going to stem the tide! The West misunderstands an "ideological" war and relegates this thinking to the 16th century. For this reason alone it will never win the "War on Terror".

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[1] **In the Shadow of the Quran** – Islamic Foundation ISBN 0 86037 303 7

[2] **Escape from Reason**, Francis Schaeffer – Intervarsity Press ISBN 0 85110 340 5

[3] **Rebuilding the Matrix**, Denis Alexander – Lion Publishing ISBN 0 7459 1244 3

[4] Schaeffer books: **Escape from Reason** (as above); **He is There and He is not Silent** ISBN 0 340 19358 1; **The God Who is There** ISBN 340 04466 7; **How Should we then Live?** ISBN 0 8007 0819 9