

Fi Zilal al-Qur'an: Sayyid Qutb's Contemporary Commentary on the Qur'an

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Abstract

*This paper deals with the background of Sayyid Qutb's famous work *Fi Zilal al Quran*. It includes discussion on how *Zilal* came to be written, Qutb's approaches which are in some ways differ from other *Mufasssirun*'s way of the Quranic interpretation, thus making his *Zilal* so relevant to the modern and contemporary society as it attempts to give consistent answers to the social and political problems facing Muslims. In Qutb's view, the establishment of a society in which Islamic teachings could be properly applied, was inevitable. Some distinctive characteristics that made *Zilal* so special and attracted the attention of Muslim and some non-Muslim scholars from all over the world are also discussed.*

Key Words: Muslim society, Quran, Modern Tafsir

Introduction

This paper deals with the historical background to *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*,¹ including how it came to be written and its objectives. It will also examine Sayyid Qutb's approaches in *Zilal* and how they resulted in conflicting opinions between the author and other *Mufasssirun* on certain issues mentioned in the Qur'an. Qutb's interpretation of the Qur'an began with the conviction that the Qur'an was the true guidance for all human beings and thus the only valid source to direct their affairs. This belief emerged only after his progress through several stages of his career coupled with the strong influence of the current environment surrounding the Egyptian society of his time. For this reason, his *Zilal* is very relevant to the modern world for it attempts to give consistent answers to the social and political problems facing Muslims today. In Qutb's view, the establishment of a society in which Islamic teachings could be properly applied, was inevitable.²

Qutb's understanding of and his approach to the Qur'an as manifested in *Zilal* discussions provoked criticism from Muslim and non-Muslim writers. Some even argued about the originality of Qutb's ideas: did they develop as a result of Qutb's long study of the Qur'an and his deep understanding of Islam? Were these ideas shaped by Qutb's prison experiences? It is also, therefore, the purpose of this study to examine the judgement of some Muslim and non-Muslim writers concerning *Zilal*.

Background to the writing of *Zilal*

The twentieth century saw the emergence of various books of *tafsir* written by Islamic scholars in their attempt to revive Muslim society to be in line with the Islamic teachings. They believed that the Qur'an was the only solution to their current social dilemma. Their Qur'anic exegesis was thus aimed at elaborating the Qur'anic principles of law and urging the Muslim *ummaH* to apply them to daily life (Khalidi, 1986: 59-60). Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (d.1897), Muhammad °Abduh (d.1905) and Rashid Rida (d.1935) are well known for their concern about the situation of the Muslim world and their efforts to solve its problems from the Qur'an's point of view.³

¹ Referred to as *Zilal* throughout this paper.

² See, for instance, Qutb, *Zilal*, 1:209, 304, 328, 597; 2:657, 673, 767, 795, 874; 3:1388, 1735; 4:207; and 6:3334, 3342, 3344, 3345.

³ Al-Afghani and °Abduh, for instance, realizing the decline of the Muslim world, had called for an Islamic convention during the pilgrimage to Mecca in order to delineate the causes of the decline and initiate a design for revival (Haddad, 1982: 13-14).

In Egypt itself various books of *tafsir* appeared in addition to ʿAbduh and Rashid Rida’s works. They include *al-Tafsir al-Maraghi* by Mustafa al-Maraghi (d. 1945), *al-Jawahir fi Tafsir al-Qur’an* by Shaykh Jawhari (d. 1940) and *al-Safwat al-ʿIrfan fi Tafsir al-Qur’an* by Muhammad Farid al-Wijdani. These scholars, like ʿAbduh and Rashid Rida, emphasized the need for Qur’anic reform of Muslim society to protect it against Western influences (Khalidi, 1986: 60-70). Although the “return to the Qur’anic teachings” was their common priority, modern scholars of *tafsir* employed various approaches to realize their objectives. According to Khalidi differences in perception of the form of changes needed, coupled with the scholars’ various educational backgrounds, produced a range of methodologies, including *al-Ittihad al-Salafi* (the Salafi Orientation), *al-Ittihad al-ʿIlmi* (the Scientific Orientation), *al-Ittihad al-ʿAqli* (the Rational Orientation), *al-Ittihad al-Ijtimaʿi* (the Sociological Orientation) and *al-Ittihad al-Haraki* (the Movement Orientation).⁴

In his *tafsir*, ʿAbduh, for example, used *al-Ittihad al-ʿAqli*, *al-Ittihad al-Ijtimaʿi* and *al-Ittihad al-Dini*. According to modern researchers in *tafsir*, he used *al-Ittihad al-ʿAqli* quite often to interpret Qur’anic message (Khalidi, 1986: 62). Rashid Rida, on the other hand, employed *al-Ittihad al-Salafi* in his *tafsir*. His *tafsir* began by exposing the social and economics disparity of the modern period as a result of Western influence and how Islam might tackle the problems by emphasizing the role of Qur’an as a guide for all humankind (Khalidi, 1986: 65). The *tafsir* of Tantawi, however, has been regarded as the first ever produced which treated Qur’anic verses in the light of modern science. He discussed various aspects of science, including the universe, medicine, agriculture and industry, and the scientific truth. According to Tantawi, this approach to the Qur’an was in line with the contents of the Qur’an itself: the verses on science (*ʿulum*) constituted 750 compared with those on jurisprudence (*fiqh*) which comprised only 150 (Khalidi, 1986: 67).

The methodology and interpretation used by modern *mufassirun* seem to have been greatly influenced by their environment, coupled with the search for solutions to the problems facing the Muslim *Ummah*. As a result, the Qur’anic text was interpreted in a wider context as the *mufassirun* tried to detect a universal message and show its relevance to the modern world. They also showed that the Qur’an was not a dead text comprehensible only to the learned, but a dynamic, living text compatible with modern life. In this regard the conclusion reached by Galford (1988: 43) seems to have some merit in describing the nature of modern *tafsir*: A number of traits mark modern (i.e., twentieth-century) *tafsir*. One is a move away from the specific linguistic and philological study of individual words to a larger view of the *Sura* (or parts thereof) as a whole...A second trait is the great emphasis placed on *tafsir al-Qur’an bi’l-Qur’an* (interpreting the Qur’an using the Qur’an). Commentators this century are on the whole, if not unanimously, against the use of extra-Qur’anic materials – at least explicitly – to elucidate the Qur’an’s meaning. Two further traits, related to one another, mark twentieth-century *tafsir*. The first is that these commentaries make explicit ideas found in earlier works of commentary. Modern commentaries make binding what was never interpreted to be legal, compulsory, or even definite. There is one and only one correct reading of the Qur’an for modern interpreters. This is due partially to the second trait, the new emphasis that modern commentators place on the Qur’an. The Qur’an is to serve as the source of positive law, and as a weapon against Western encroachment.

At this point, it seems that approaches employed by modern *mufassirun* differ from the traditional *tafsir* written by the early Qur’anic scholars. A traditional *tafsir* usually contained an explanation of the meanings and words of the Qur’an together with a discussions on philology and jurisprudence. Also, to some extent, the Prophet’s traditions (*ahadith*) were mentioned in clarifying the Qur’anic meanings. This method of interpretation sometimes misled readers in understanding the text itself, since many discussions were included with the clarification of the text itself. As a result the discussions became “erudite, scholastic, and beyond the understanding of most Muslims.” (Galford, 1988: 42) ʿAbduh, for instance, realizing this trend of the traditional *tafsir*, called it something “unfortunate” for Muslims when “most of what has been written on *tafsir*, leads the reader away from the guidance of the Qur’an.” (Fayyad, 1977: 85) Therefore, it became the concern of modern *mufassirun*, in particular, ʿAbduh and his contemporaries, to interpret the Qur’an in a wider context and show its compatibility with the lives of modern Muslims. Their *tafsir* attempted to attract Muslims’ attention to look to the Qur’an as the source of religious and spiritual guidance.

⁴ Contemporary researchers in the field of *tafsir* here refer to scholars like Dr Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabi (*al-Tafsir wa’l-Mufassirun*), Dr ʿAbd al-Majid al-Muhtasib (*Ittihad al-Tafsir fi’l-ʿAsr al-Hadith*) and Dr Fadhl ʿAbbas (*Tiyarat al-Tafsir fi Mi-r wa’l-Sha’f’l-ʿAsr al-ʿAdath*). See Khalidi, *Madkhal*, 61.

Abduh viewed the Qur'an itself not primarily as the source of Islamic law or dogma, or an occasion for philologists to display their ingenuity, but as the book from which Muslims ought to derive their ideas about this world and the hereafter (Jansen, 1974: 24).

Qutb represented the new generation of modern *mufasssirin* of the middle of the twentieth century. His *Zilal* discussions in many ways exhibited the modern tendencies described above, especially that the Qur'an was to be treated in a manner that suited its universal message. More importantly, he related his interpretation of the Qur'an to modern human society, believing that the Qur'an's wording, if properly analysed, had the ability to awaken human consciousness. Thus philological studies and jurisprudential arguments did not attract his interest. In his commentary on verse 3 of *Sura 5 (al-Ma'idah)* for instance, Qutb made it clear that jurisprudential argument did not form part of his style in the *Zilal*. Rather, he counselled that whoever wanted that should find it in the appropriate sections of the *fiqh* Book (Qutb, 1995: 971).

Qutb's writing of *Zilal* began in the middle of the twentieth century. Earlier, in 1951, Qutb had written some articles on Qur'anic commentary in the monthly magazine, *al-Muslimun*, under the heading "*Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*" (In the Shade of the Qur'an). The first of his articles appeared with his commentary on "*Sura al-Fatihah*" (The Opening) and "*Sura al-Baqara*" (The Cow), which was in seven instalments. His commentary on these two *Sura* of the Qur'an was received with great acclaim by his readers. They praised the wisdom and versatility of the writer in his presentation, choice of words and style. (Yusuf, 1997:86)

Qutb's contributions to *al-Muslimun* lasted for just under two years, for he made it clear that he wanted to concentrate on producing independently a complete Qur'anic commentary in the form of a book. Thus his articles in the journal ended with his commentary on chapter 2 "*al-Baqara*", verse 103 in early 1952. The first volume of *Zilal* was published in October 1952, to be followed by other volumes. By the beginning of 1954 Qutb had produced 16 volumes. When he was gaoled for three months, from January to March 1954, Qutb produced from prison another two volumes, thus bringing *Zilal* the total to 18. After he was freed he did not produce any more further, because he was appointed chief editor of *al-Muslimun*. However, he did not stay out of prison long, for, a few month later, he and several other members of the Ikhwan were again imprisoned on the allegation of being part of a plot to assassinate President Jamal 'Abd al-Nasir. This time he was sentenced to 15 years. Then he started writing the remaining volumes of *Zilal* while his stay in the prison (Khalidi, 1986: 42-44)

It is important to note that the first 16 volumes of *Zilal*, produced before Qutb's imprisonment in 1954, discussed the beauty of the Qur'anic imagery. There is not much emphasis on *shari'a* law and doctrine. This, however, changed gradually after his imprisonment, when the Qur'an was studied as a dynamic text, capable of changing the whole structure of current society and offering solutions to the problems of the Muslim *ummah* and its world, which was no longer Islamic. He based the last three volumes of the first edition of *Zilal* on this new approach (Khalidi, 1986: 48) Qutb's revised edition of *Zilal*, in which he used his new approach, appeared in 1953. He was able to revise only the first ten volumes of *Zilal*, covering contemporary issues of society: belief, legislation, politics and economy. The remaining volumes, 11 to 27, could not be revised because of his illness and involvement with another trial, and then his execution in 1966 (Khalidi, 1986: 49).

The Objectives of *Zilal*

Qutb's main objective in writing the *Zilal* was to bring people back to the Qur'an by establishing their interest in the text. He therefore encouraged people to read the Qur'an not only to gain God's blessing but also to use its message as the source of guidance in facing the challenges of the modern age. From his observation, losing sight of the spirit of the Qur'an was the major factor that had led to a wide gap between the Muslims of his time and the Qur'an itself. Thus the *Zilal* was Qutb's attempt to show his readers how the Qur'an was the true guide for all human beings and the only system suitable for their lives in both mundane and religious matters. Such guidance would make sense only when the Qur'anic message was properly studied and followed in the same way as in the early days of Islam. Qutb's own experience in studying the Qur'an led him to feel favoured (*ni'mah*) by living in its shade, as he states in the introduction of *Zilal*:

Life in the shade of the Quran is a favour, only those who have tasted it will appreciate it. It is a favour that uplifts the life force, blesses and purifies it. Praise be to Allah; He has indeed granted me life in the shade of the Qur'an for a time. I have felt a taste of the favour which I never had before in my life. I have had a taste of this favour which uplifts, blesses and purifies the life force. (Qutb, 1995: 11)

Qutb had several other objectives in mind when writing the *Zilal*:

1. Emphasizing the role of the human being as the vicegerent of God.
2. Teaching Muslims the Qur'anic principles.
3. Establishing a just and ethical society based on the Qur'an.
4. *Shari'ah* and *'aqidah* as the basis of an Islamic system.
5. Exposing the fallacy of materialistic thought.

1. The role of the human being as the vicegerent of Allah

Like Qutb's earlier writings, his concern on questions of the universe, life and humankind were again stressed in *Zilal*. The role of the human being as the vicegerent of Allah in this world was to worship Allah in the true sense, and organize his or her life according to the way of Allah (*manhaj Allah*). Humankind's relationship with the universe and all Allah's creatures in it was to be a co-operative one, based on a strong *'aqidah* and belief in Allah and the imposition of Allah's order on this world. Qutb writes, for instance, in the introduction of *Zilal*:

I lived in the shade of the Qur'an, feeling the beautiful harmony between human actions as Allah wished them to be and the movement of this universe which Allah created...the human being is Allah's vicegerent on earth, and is human by virtue of having received Allah's breath from His spirit.(Qutb, 1995: 11-12)

2. Teaching Muslims the Qur'anic principles

This included educating Muslims on how to acquire a good Muslim personality, knowing their role as Muslims and managing their lives in accordance with the teachings of the Qur'an. More importantly, they would soon begin to realize that following Qur'anic teachings enabled them to observe and measure their faith, so that it was in accordance with Allah's command and His *manhaj* of life (Khalidi, 1986: 103). That is why in *Zilal* one finds that the author's emphasis on the significance of faith (*iman*) and its nature is paramount, owing to its strong influence on an individual's personal and social life.

3. Establishing a just and ethical society based on the Qur'an

As noted earlier, Qutb's interpretation of the Qur'an as the only true guide for human society was based on his own experiences and Qur'anic studies (Qutb, 1995: 14-15). In his view, to translate the Qur'anic teachings into the reality of human society, politics and economics required the establishment of a just and ethical society governed by the Qur'an. Qutb discussed at length the first such Islamic society, established in Medina. He asserted that this was the society to be adopted as a model for Muslims of the modern age. Furthermore, his understanding of the revelation of the Qur'an itself was to establish such a society:

This Qur'an was revealed to the heart of the Prophet of Allah – Peace Be Upon Him – so that he would thereby establish a community, found a state, organize a society.(Qutb, 1995:875)

4. *Shari'ah* and *'aqidah* as a basis of an Islamic system

It was also the objective of *Zilal* to clarify to Muslims the relationship between the *shari'ah* and *'aqidah* in Islam and the influence of *'aqidah* upon the implementation of law and all other human practices. Qutb stressed that a strong faith within a God-fearing soul constituted an important element in observing Islamic principles (Qutb, 1995: 1384) Furthermore, the *shari'ah* of Allah would cease to function in human society unless there were Allah-fearing individuals who constantly remembered Allah and applied His laws to social, political and other aspect of human life.

5. Exposing the fallacy of Materialistic thought

Zilal also attempted to shed some light on the fallacy of materialistic thought in this modern age. From his experience of a society where materialistic values governed the human mind and conduct, Qutb concluded that such a philosophy was empty and against human nature. In his view, *'aqidah* in Allah as the Lord of the whole universe and the absolute authority was a strong vanguard for Muslims to protect themselves from a materialistic temptation.

Qutb's approach in *Zilal*

Before considering Qutb's approaches in *Zilal*, it is important to look back to Qutb's development of thought that go through three important stages. The first stage began with his literary work, in which he became a well-known literary critic between 1926 and 1948. Later on, from 1948 to the early 1950s, he moved from literature to social criticism of the basic contradictions in Egyptian society, which he aspired to resolve.

He found that Islam was the only solution to his country's socio-political problems and struggled, together with the Ikhwan, against the existing order until his imprisonment in 1954. The third stage began in prison and ended with his execution in 1966. He finally emerged as an Islamic ideologue whose main concern was to see human society under an Islamic government. To this end he produced a more radical and open criticism of those in authority. In his view, the lives of Muslims were no longer Islamic. Terms like *jahiliyyah*, *jihad* and the establishment of the Islamic society (*al-mujtama' al-Islami*) and state (*dawlah*) occupied most of his discussions. Qutb's emphasis on those ideas perhaps reflects his personal ordeal of imprisonment and death sentence.

As noted earlier, Qutb's interest in the Qur'an began only in 1939, when he started writing some articles on the artistic beauty of the Qur'an. This interest was followed by the publication of *Taswir* in 1945 and *Mashahid al-Qiyamah* in 1947. While writing these two books, whose main theme was Qur'anic imagery, Qutb hoped that one day he could produce a complete Qur'anic exegesis on the artistic beauty of the Qur'an by following the direction of the theory that he had formed in *Taswir*, and *Mashahid al-Qiyamah* (Khalidi, 1986: 15) Qutb wrote in *Taswir* for instance, on the important principle of Qur'anic commentary:

Taswir is a pre-eminent tool in the Qur'anic method. It designates with sensual dramatization the image of intellectual meaning (*al-ma'na al-dhihni*), psychological condition, perceptible events, visible scene, human exemplar (*al-namudhaj al-insani*) and human character. These transform into an image similar to individual life, a renewed action (*al-haraka al-mutajaddidah*). Therefore the intellectual meaning transforms into an action or movement, the psychological condition becomes visible or perceptible, the human exemplar becomes a lively person and human nature becomes embodied or visible (Qutb, 1994: 36).

The above extract clearly indicates the method that Qutb intended to use for Qur'anic commentary. He believed that such an experience could deeply affect the human heart, as he himself has been affected while interpreting certain verses of the Qur'an. The literary beauty of the Qur'an, he argued, had decidedly persuaded Arab leaders to convert to Islam (Qutb, 1994: 22). *Taswir* had, therefore, added a new dimension to Qutb's study of the Qur'an, and its method was then employed in his coming thesis on Qur'anic studies. Qutb's plan was fulfilled when the first edition of *Zilal* appeared in 1952. Here the author clearly stated that the purpose of his work was to express his appreciation of the artistic beauty of the Qur'an, similar to the method used in *Taswir*.

Since it was in 1951 when Qutb's articles on Qur'anic commentary began to appear in *al-Muslimun*, it seems that *Zilal* was begun during his reorientation from literary critic to radical social activist representing the impoverished Egyptians. It was also during this year that Qutb joined the Ikhwan. Thus one question arises here: did the appearance of the *Zilal* itself represent Qutb's new orientation, to justice and equal rights or his new discovery when studying the Qur'an from the artistic aspect? This question has created a difference of opinion among some scholars. Some consider that Qutb no longer studied the Qur'an from the artistic viewpoint. Rather, Qutb's commentary saw Islam as the solution to Egypt's problems. However others considered that the focus on the artistic beauty of the Qur'an was Qutb's main purpose in writing the *Zilal*, independent of his ideological method (*al-manhaj al-fikri*) in interpreting its meanings.

In describing the historical background to the writing of *Zilal*, Khalidi notes that the first edition of *Zilal* published in 1952 initially represented Qutb's ideas and his experiences at that time. In other words *Zilal* was based on Qutb's personal appreciation of the literary beauty of the Qur'an, following a direction similar to that of *Taswir* and *Mashahid al-Qiyamah*. Khalidi further argues that Qutb did not ignore the ideological approach (*al-manhaj al-fikri*) in writing the first edition since such an approach had already occupied his mind following the publication of *al-Adalah* in 1949. It was only in the revised edition of *Zilal* completed between 1953 and 1954 that Qutb added a dynamic approach (Khalidi, 1986:18). Therefore it could be said that both artistic and ideological approaches (*al-manhaj al-jamali wa'l-fikri*) were important to Qutb in the first edition of *Zilal*. This was apparently due to the socio-political conditions in the country at that time, according to Qutb's statement in the introduction:

Some people may regard it [the *Zilal*] as a kind of interpretation or a survey of the general Islamic principles as put forward by the Qur'an, or perhaps even as a study of the divine code of life and society shown in the Qur'an. But, none of these considerations has been my intended purpose. All I have tried to do is to write down the notions that occurred to me (*khawatiri*) while living in such shades [i.e. *Zilal al-Qur'an*]. (Qutb, 1995: 2)

Qutb's approach in his *Zilal* differs from other *tafsir* in that, while interpreting the meaning of the Qur'an, he transported himself and his readers into an imaginary world similar to that of the early Muslims, who strove to follow the Revelation and apply its principles to their daily lives. In his view, only by living in such an environment could people truly understand the Qur'an and its message and be motivated to follow its guidance. Qutb said:

There is only one model and method of returning to God, which is to replace one's entire lifestyle with that system as is found in the Qur'an....and it was the Qur'an that established a new concept of existence, life, values and institutions. (Qutb, 1995: 15-16)

In his book, *Khasa'is al-Tasawwur al-Islami wa Muqawwamatuh*, published in 1962, Qutb also stressed an effective means to understand and apply the message of the Qur'an:

To understand the implications of the Qur'an and the feelings inspired by it is not a question of knowing the words and phrases, what we usually call *tafsir*. It is to provide the self with an asset of the feelings, the realizations and the experiences which accompanied its revelation and accompanied the Muslim community as it received it in the heat of action. (Qutb, 1982: 7)

Thus *Zilal*, influenced by this viewpoint, can be described as a dynamic (*Haraki*) *tafsir*. One often finds words like *iha'at* (inspiration) and *zilal* (shade), which indicate the author's attempt to go beyond addressing the literal and general meaning and convey to his readers the reality of the occasion with all its excitement and appeal. Perhaps this is the significance of Qutb's choice of title, *Fi Zilal al-Qur'an*: that is, to convey feeling as well as meaning. These characteristics made Qutb's commentary thoroughly modern in its approach, in the sense that he attempted to show the Qur'an's relevance for all times and circumstances of human life. This differed from the traditional *tafsir*, which, incorporated *ahadith* and philological studies where necessary to clarify interpretations of Qur'anic verses. In describing his method of Qur'anic commentary, Qutb said:

The Qur'anic approach (*al-manhaj al-Qur'ani*) never presents the ideology in the form of a theory to be studied, for this is the knowledge that establishes nothing in the conscience or in life. It is "cold" knowledge that neither controls caprices (*ahwa'*) nor frees one from the yoke of desires...Also it does not present studies in jurisprudence, the political and economic system, the natural and social sciences, or in any other form of knowledge. Rather it presents this religion as an ideology...moving (its believers) towards the realization of its practical contents from the moment it settles in the hearts and minds. (Qutb, 1995: 1399)

The above was in agreement with 'Abduh's view that the Qur'an was not primarily the source of Islamic law or dogmatics, nor an occasion for philologists to display their ingenuity, but the book from which Muslims ought to derive their ideas about this world and the world to come. (Jansen, 1974: 24) We have therefore found that the modern *tafsir*, as exemplified by Qutb and 'Abduh, attempts to demonstrate that the Qur'an is not a dead text comprehensible only to the learned, but a dynamic, living text, compatible with modernity and offering a lifestyle for Muslims to follow today while remaining true to their religious roots. In so doing, Qutb sometimes went beyond the approach of other modern *mufassirun* and invited his readers into a kind of virtual reality similar to the environment in which the Qur'an was revealed. An example is his commentary on "*Sura al-Fath*" (48). Qutb states in the introduction to the *Sura*:

Before we begin explaining the contents of the *Sura* and its significance, it would be better to look [first] into the nature of the event in which the *Sura* was revealed so that we can feel [ourselves] living in the environment in which all [the early generation of] Muslims lived and learnt lessons from this revelation of the Qur'an. (Qutb, 1995: 3306)

Another important aspect of Qutb's approach in *Zilal* was his great emphasis on interpreting the Qur'an using the Qur'an (*tafsir al-Qur'an bi'l-Qur'an*). This means that the Qur'an is sufficient to guide humankind and can be correctly understood solely through its own expression. Qutb reiterated his stand as follows:

The practice in this *Zilal* is based on the principle that we shall not add anything to the issues concerning hidden things about which Allah is giving us just a speck [of information]. We shall therefore stop at [the information supplied] by the Qur'anic text and not go beyond that. It [the information so supplied] is, in itself, sufficient to establish the basics which Allah decided to reveal (Qutb, 1995: 3634).

The above statement does not mean that Qutb rejected the role of the Prophet's *ahadith* (traditions). Indeed, he often referred to the *hadith* not just to clarify the meaning of the Qur'an, but also because the *hadith* itself is one of the sources best fitted to an interpretation of the Qur'an. (Kafrawi, 1998: 9) The only source that Qutb excluded in the *Zilal* was biblical materials (*Isra'iliyyat*) for his Qur'anic commentary. He explained:

I personally do not see any immediate necessity, in dealing with these fundamental subjects, to refer to any source other than the Qur'an, except the sayings of the Prophet since they constitute reports about the Qur'an. Any other opinion is insufficient, even if it is true, until the researcher (*al-bahith*) can convince [us] that he found it in this extraordinary book (Qur'an). (Qutb, 1995: 1423)

As mentioned before, Qutb's approach to *Zilal* shifted from artistic and ideological approaches (*al-manhaj al-jamali wa'l-fikri*) to a dynamic approach (*al-manhaj al-haraki*) during late 1953 and 1954. These periods, as we noted earlier, witnessed Qutb's active participation in the Ikhwan against the unjust government, resulting in his 15-year prison sentence beginning in 1954. The prison experience, in which he was tortured and isolated from the outside world, gave Qutb a new opportunity to study the Qur'an more closely and discover the pure source of Islam from its contents. In addition, this new life enabled him to find in the Qur'an and draw from it new guidelines for the modern world and the struggle to establish a just Muslim society. As Sivan (1985: 25-30) writes:

Qutb's [Qur'anic] ideas matured during his nine years in prison. The prison experience was to be, in effect, crucial in the making of most of the other New Radicals as well.

According to Khalidi, Qutb's prison's experience enabled him to see the real condition of the Muslims around him. Besides the corrupt government ruling the Egyptians at the time, there were other factors contributing to his fate and that of the Ikhwan. These included the weakness in the faith of the Muslims and the loss of the spirit of the Qur'an in their hearts. This was apparent from their unfounded support of the unjust government, despite knowing about its oppression of Islamic groups and their fellow Muslims in particular (Khalidi, 1986: 28-29). They did not truly understand the declaration of faith, "*La ilaha illa Allah*" which asked them to act in accordance with the requirements of the faith. In other words, they had moved far away from the Islamic principles stipulated in the Qur'an, because they no longer lived in the spiritual atmosphere similar to that of the early generations of Muslim generation, in which the Qur'an was revealed (Khalidi, 1986: 29)

All these were, perhaps, the issues occupying Qutb's mind at that critical time which led him to concentrate on the role of the Qur'anic movement (*al-Qur'an al-Haraki*) in solving the problems facing the Muslim *Ummah* and the Egyptians in particular. In Qutb's view, the study of the Qur'an as a dynamic text had been successful, especially during the early years of Islam. At that time, the Qur'an had produced a generation of Muslims that not only studied the Qur'an as the source of religious guidance but also practised its teachings in their daily lives.

As described earlier, Qutb managed to apply his new approach only in the last three volumes of the first edition of *Zilal*. However, in his revised edition of the full *Zilal*, it included all these approaches: artistic, ideological and dynamic. Nevertheless, the artistic and ideological approaches became much less important, for he believed that emphasis on the aspects of Qur'anic movement was more successful in attracting his readers so that they would feel the Qur'an was really addressing them. As Tripp writes, Qutb's new dimension of thought led him believe that "the Qur'an had given mankind the means whereby it could re-invent itself in the mould intended by the Prophet and, through him, by God." (Tripp, 1994: 161).

Convinced by this new approach in Qur'anic commentary, Qutb also called on his readers and scholars in *tafsir* to follow in the same direction so that they could understand the true meaning of the Qur'an. As he said:

This Qur'an will be appreciated only by those who are ready to enter into this war [against *jahiliyyah*], and to struggle together in a situation similar to that in which it was revealed...and those who try to apply the Qur'anic meanings and its message while they are just sitting down, studying [its message] from the rhetorical and artistic points of view, will find themselves removed from its nature because they are in a frozen state, from taking part in the real battle and movement. (Qutb, 1995: 1866)

Furthermore, Qutb expressed in the introduction of the revised edition his happiness and satisfaction at having reached an absolute and final certainty:

I emerged from this period of life – in the shade of the Qur’an – having arrived at an absolute and final certainty (*yaqin jazim*): that there can be no good for this earth, no repose nor satisfaction for humanity, no edification, no blessing, no purity, and no harmony with the laws of the cosmos and the quintessence of life, except through a return to God. (Qutb, 1995: 15)

For Qutb “a return to God” had only one form and one way, that is, a return in every aspect of life to the way of Allah (*manhaj Allah*), which He had prescribed for humanity in the Qur’an: “This way is the sovereign power of this Book in all of human life and the only source of appeal in the arbitration of the affairs of humanity.” (Qutb, 1995: 15). This new dimension to Qutb’s thought brought him to the conclusion that the real struggle in his society was that between Islam on the one side and *jahiliyyah* on the other side. This struggle was between those who wanted Islam to govern human life and those who rejected the *shari‘ah* of Allah, irrespective of their being Muslim or non-Muslim. Prison life also caused him clearly and painfully to see the Nasserite regime as *jahili* and the Muslims who supported the regime as living in *jahiliyyah*, since the laws, morals and behaviour of society were based on *jahili* concepts propounded by the regime. The concept of *jahiliyyah* became the main point of divergence between the thought of Qutb and that of al-Mawdudi. Al-Mawdudi considered only the political community – the ruling elite – is *jahili*. (Mousalli, 1992: 20)

Conclusion

As a whole, *Zilal* has attracted the attention of Muslim and some non-Muslim scholars from all over the world. Although it lacks discussions of jurisprudence, compared with other traditional *tafsir*, *Zilal*, with its author’s distinctive approach to Qur’anic commentary, has the ability to awaken human consciousness and thus enjoys wide acceptance among various intellectual groups. That is why one will find that the book remains a ready reference for teachers, preachers, writers and sincere seekers of the truth all over the Muslim world. The content of *Zilal* that revolve around Qutb’s treatment of the social and political problems facing Egyptian society and the Muslim *ummah* on the basis of the Quran attracted both Muslim and Western scholars’s attentions to consider his view and his influence upon the new Muslim generation in particular on the socio religious concern and commitment towards their religion and nation (*ummah*) as a whole.

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