



May 2003

Dear **MARS HILL AUDIO** Listener,

Back in March, the *New York Times Magazine* published an excerpt from a book by Paul Berman. I haven't yet seen the book (called *Terror and Liberalism*, published by Norton), but the excerpt, called "The Philosopher of Islamic Terror," perceptively summarized the writings of an Egyptian Muslim philosopher named Sayyid Qutb (pronounced KUH-tahb). Born in 1906, Qutb studied literature in Egypt and the U.S., and early in his intellectual life he embraced socialism. By the 1940s, having written novels, poetry, and literary criticism, Qutb was increasingly interested in the intersection between religious belief and social life; his book *Social Justice in Islam* (first published in 1949 and still in print) gives hints of some radical "Islamist" tendencies.

As Paul Berman writes, Qutb "wanted to turn Islam into a political movement to create a new society, to be based on ancient Koranic principles." Soon Qutb joined the Muslim Brotherhood, began work as the editor of the movement's journal, and "established himself right away as Islamism's principle theoretician in the Arab world."

One might quibble that Islam *always was* a political movement, and *always had* a vision for social life rooted in the Koran. But admittedly that vision had become, in Qutb's time, darkened and blurred, especially for intellectuals who had a lot of contact with the West and whose categories of thought owed more to Descartes than to Muhammad.

During the 1950s and 60s, Qutb worked on his *magnum opus*, a 15-volume work called *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, a rich consideration of the dilemmas of modernity in the light of an Islamic worldview. The book's title suggests that modern life apart from revealed truth is arid and suffocating; the Koran provides a refreshing oasis from the intolerable condition of human life in our time. As Paul Berman writes,

Qutb wrote that, all over the world, humans had reached a moment of unbearable crisis. The human race had lost touch with human nature. Man's inspiration, intelligence and morality were degenerating. Sexual relations were deteriorating "to a level lower than the beasts." Man was miserable, anxious and skeptical, sinking into idiocy, insanity and crime. People were turning, in their unhappiness, to drugs, alcohol and existentialism. Qutb admired economic productivity and scientific knowledge. But he did not think that wealth and science were rescuing the human race. He figured that, on the contrary, the richest countries were the unhappiest of all. And what was the cause of this unhappiness—this wretched split between man's truest nature and modern life?

Qutb's analysis of the cause of modern disorientation sounds very much like that of Solzhenitsyn: "Men have forgotten God." But the historical specifics of how we got here are a bit different. Qutb observed that in the unique revelation given to ancient Israel through Moses and other prophets, the one true God called for faithfulness in every sphere of life. By obeying a system of divinely mandated laws, earthly existence could be linked with the divine, with the transcendent. But in Qutb's view, Judaism deteriorated into "a system of rigid and lifeless ritual."

So God sent another prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, who reformed some of the law but left most of it intact while offering a vision of spiritual life that was to complement, not displace, obedience to God's laws. But, in Qutb's views, Jesus' followers were soon derailed from the prophetic message, diminish-

ing the emphasis on obedience while stressing Jesus' message of spirituality and love, and accepting the influence of Greek ideas of the ideal of a spiritual existence completely apart from bodily existence. Christianity became a religion of pure spirit, with little to say about how society should be organized, what laws should govern human behavior, and how the temporal aspects of everyday life could be regulated so as to please God.

This is why the coming of the prophet Muhammad was required. Christians had mistakenly separated the Church and the State, the religious from the temporal, and the spiritual from the physical. So the prophet Muhammad was raised up by God to deliver a reunifying message, to deliver it at the point of a sword if necessary. Christians meekly insisted that the only weapons the people of God had were spiritual, and then behaved as if only the spiritual really mattered. But Man was body and soul, and God was interested in Man's obedience in flesh and in spirit. Hence Muhammad brought revelation of a comprehensive way of life, not simply a "religion" capable of being confined in the heart of believers.

But Greco-Christian dualism won out in Europe, and Europeans became comfortable with God and religion in one corner of life, while science, commerce, and politics assumed autonomy (and growing power) in a separate corner. Qutb laments the fact that in time an increasingly powerful and imperialistic Europe was inflicting its "hideous schizophrenia" on peoples throughout the world. "That" summarizes Berman "was the origin of modern misery—the anxiety in contemporary society, the sense of drift, the purposelessness, the craving for false pleasures." Berman continues:

That was Qutb's analysis. In writing about modern life, he put his finger on something that every thinking person can recognize, if only vaguely—the feeling that human nature and modern life are somehow at odds. But Qutb evoked this feeling in a specifically Muslim fashion. It is easy to imagine that, in expounding on these themes back in the 1950s and 60s, Qutb had already identified the kind of personal agony that Mohamed Atta and the suicide warriors of Sept. 11 must have experienced in our own time. It was the agony of inhabiting a modern world of liberal ideas and achievements while feeling that true life exists somewhere else. It was the agony of walking down a modern sidewalk while dreaming of a different universe altogether, located in the Koranic past—the agony of being pulled this way and that. The present, the past. The secular, the sacred. The freely chosen, the religiously mandated—a life of confusion unto madness brought on, Qutb ventured, by Christian error.

Ever since September 11, 2001, I have been frustrated by the number of commentators, on the Left and the Right, who have ignored or denied the religious motivation of al Qaeda and like-minded terrorists. Paul Berman is to be congratulated for refusing to secularize this conflict. Surely there are spiritual dimensions to this conflict, and yet the prominent voices on the Left and the Right do not seem to be able to recognize this. On the Right, there seems to be an eagerness to defend the West not just against armed attack but against all substantive criticism; many Christians on the Right seem to assume that the West is simply another term for the Judeo-Christian tradition, when in fact it is the much messier Judeo-Greco-Roman-Christian-rationalist-pragmatic tradition. On the Left, despite lip-service to multiculturalism, one is not allowed to have any sympathies with religious traditions that make exclusive truth claims and that insist on having an authoritative role for religion in public life.

So the present conflict is seen either as a threat from another form of totalitarianism, another empire defined as evil because it rejects and threatens Western wisdom, or as the desperate convulsions of the powerless, agonizing under Western (i.e., American) arrogance and tyranny. Neither of these explanations takes seriously the possibility that deep (if faulty) religious and spiritual concerns are at stake.

Paul Berman, by contrast, has the imagination to recognize that there is something deeper going on here, although I'm not at all sure that he gets it right. Nevertheless, he has done a great service in

explaining what Qutb believed and how his work influenced generations of Muslims, including Ayman al-Zawahiri, a student of Qutb and the man often identified as the brains of al Qaeda (see Lawrence Wright's "The Man behind bin Laden," *The New Yorker*, September 16, 2002). And Berman chastens those who look for a purely political explanation to the conflict, lamenting the fact that the deeper concerns of those who hate the West remain unaddressed by political leaders and popular pundits.

It would be nice to think that, in the war against terror, our side, too, speaks of deep philosophical ideas—it would be nice to think that someone is arguing with the terrorists and with the readers of Sayyid Qutb. But here I have my worries. The followers of Qutb speak, in their wild fashion, of enormous human problems, and they urge one another to death and to murder. But the enemies of these people speak of what? The political leaders speak of United Nations resolutions, of unilateralism, of multilateralism, of weapons inspectors, of coercion and noncoercion. This is no answer to the terrorists. The terrorists speak insanely of deep things. The antiterrorists had better speak sanely of equally deep things. Presidents will not do this. Presidents will dispatch armies, or decline to dispatch armies, for better and for worse.

Of course, if "speaking sanely of deep things" requires specific and potentially controverted religious affirmations, our Presidents are not allowed so to speak. The trajectory of First Amendment interpretation holds that it is not within their jurisdiction to do so. Berman doesn't explicitly acknowledge this, moving on to ask: "But who will speak of the sacred and the secular, of the physical world and the spiritual world?" This is exactly the right question. But Berman's next two questions suggest that he still does not understand what is at stake. "Who will defend liberal ideas against the enemies of liberal ideas? Who will defend liberal principles in spite of liberal society's every failure?"

Given the form that liberalism has taken over the past century (or more), the defense of liberal ideas now requires the rejection of substantive public speech about the relationship between the sacred and the secular. Liberalism in its present form maintains that the goal of individual liberty prevents us from making any social or legal commitments based on any specific notions of God's will or God's law. Paul Berman is right to recognize that the West has been ignoring the question of the relationship between the physical world (the domain of positivist science, pragmatic economics, and secular politics) and the spiritual world (which the West has increasingly assumed to be purely subjective, personal, and individualistic). In fact "liberalism" is the name we have given to the assumption that we must not have any public position about the spiritual. How can liberal ideas be defended while we call for deep speech, if liberalism in practice means that we remain mute in public about deep things?

The Canadian philosopher George Parkin Grant, in his 1974 book *English Speaking Justice* described the trajectory of liberal political thought as having led to "the liberalism of autonomous will." Liberal polity has come to mean that the will of each individual must be recognized as possessing an ever-expanding sovereignty; "justice" is advanced as the state moves everything out of the way of the expansion of personal choice.

In 1939, just before England entered World War II, T. S. Eliot gave a series of three lectures at Cambridge University which have been preserved as the essay entitled "The Idea of a Christian Society." Early in his first lecture, Eliot distinguished between cultures that are negative and those that are positive, that is between cultures that define themselves in terms of what they are not, and cultures that define themselves in terms of what they are. From the vantage point of 1939, he regarded Britain's as largely a negative culture, since liberalism's view of human freedom had a hollow core.

That Liberalism may be a tendency towards something very different from itself, is a possibility in its nature. For it is something which tends to release energy rather than to accumulate it, to relax, rather

than to fortify. It is a movement not so much defined by its end, as by its starting point; away from, rather than towards, something definite. Our point of departure is more real to us than our destination; and the destination is likely to present a very different picture when arrived at, from the vaguer image formed in imagination. By destroying traditional social habits of the people, by dissolving their natural collective consciousness into individual constituents, by licensing the opinions of the most foolish, by substituting instruction for education, by encouraging cleverness rather than wisdom, the upstart rather than the qualified, by fostering a notion of getting on to which the alternative is a hopeless apathy, Liberalism can prepare the way for that which is its own negation: the artificial, mechanised or brutalised control which is a desperate remedy for chaos.

Eliot was fearful that the moral hollowness of a negative culture might invite totalitarian tyranny, something like *1984*. As it has turned out, the result is more like *Brave New World*, but that should be no more pleasing to serious Christians than it is to Muslims like Sayyid Qutb. While his followers and countless cobelligerents speak insanely of deep things, the loudest public voices in the West speak inanely of shallow things.

I started the MARS HILL AUDIO *Journal* in 1993 in large measure because I believed that many of the underlying assumptions shaping contemporary cultural institutions were deeply at odds with Christian convictions. I believed that the Church was increasingly weakened and distracted because its leaders failed to recognize those assumptions and their logic. Furthermore, I came to recognize how much of the suffering and confusion in the lives of believers and unbelievers alike was due to the disorders of modernity (and postmodernity). Problems experienced and treated as personal were actually systemic, and in many cases, the Church was naively advancing the systemic disorder in the name of trying to meet personal needs.

In trying to understand these cultural patterns, we have sought the help of hundreds of writers who can speak sanely about deep things. We have also relied on the help of many listeners, whose generous gifts have made possible our modest but important work. If Eliot, Solzhenitsyn, George Parkin Grant, Paul Berman, and countless others (even Sayyid Qutb) are right, the West has for some time been decaying from within, even as it has been materially prospering. Now, after the honeymoon of the post-Cold War period, we realize that we also face a significant challenge from enemies outside, enemies at least in part because we have failed to respond to that inner decay.

In such a time, the Church's obligation to love neighbors makes it imperative that we recover a rich understanding of the cosmic consequences of Christianity rightly understood. Christianity, the faith made possible by an incarnate Savior, has a much more adequate and complete account of how the physical and the spiritual interact than either Islam or modern liberalism can manage. Christianity not only presents a cosmology and a coherent set of ethical principles; it explains that truly righteous living can only be effected as a consequence of a new birth, by grace through faith.

The mandate of MARS HILL AUDIO is to share with our listeners in the task of coming to a better understanding of a full and ramified Christian belief. Please join with us in that task by praying for our work, by telling friends about what we do, and (lest spiritual and physical be sundered) by giving generously to enable us to continue. Thank you!

Sincerely,



Ken Myers