The Role of Humans in Islam

by Brooke Myers

Religions are inherently pluralistic. Scriptures are written within specific temporal contexts and then are interpreted outside the context in which they were written. The very nature of religion provokes important questions: To what extent is scripture relevant to present day society? And to what extent do changing contexts influence the interpretation and understanding of religious texts? These are questions with which each generation and era has dealt – whether consciously or not. Theologians such as al-Ghazali, Sayyid Qutb and Farid Esack demonstrate in their writings how political, personal and social circumstances affect the way in which humans have interpreted the various roles of religious actors: God, creation and Islam. These men have all written about the participatory relationship between God and creation and have shaped Islam accordingly. In my analysis of the Qur’an, I discovered two key themes: God is not completely knowable because of his utter supremacy and that the Qur’an is primarily meant to warn humanity of the coming Judgment. But the authors mentioned above have each devised their own means of participating in Islam. For al-Ghazali, the role of the human is to embark on a journey in the quest for Truth. It must be a dialogue, and a man must transcend his earthly bounds into the mystical world to know the God that cannot be comprehended through earthly definitions. For Sayyid Qutb, the role of the human is to abolish any rule but God’s from the earth to create an environment in which God is the true supreme ruler. For Farid Esack, the role of the human is to uphold the justice defined in the Qur’an. For him, this means that the marginalized must be defended from oppression and inequality. That each of these figures uses the same Qur’an to justify his interpretation of the roles of religious actors shows that they interpreted the Qur’an within varying contexts, which shaped its meaning for them. While many theologians – especially orthodox – have argued that God is something wholly separate and distinct from the human world, what these theologians have in common is their understanding that God is somehow truly involved in their world and that humans must act in order to fulfill the will of God.

*Al-Ghazali: God & the Individual*

Born in the eleventh century in the Middle East, al-Ghazali quickly ascended to the ranks of a top scholar in the Muslim world. His Sufi father died when al-Ghazali was young, and after completing his education in his hometown, he went to Nizamiyya Madrasa in Nishapur where he studied under the Ash’arite theologian al-Juwayni.[[1]](#footnote-1) In 1091, al-Ghazali was appointed to Nizamiyya Madrasa in Baghdad.[[2]](#footnote-2) This recognition put him into contact with some of the most influential men of the time, such as the Grand-Seljuq Sultan Malikshah, his grand-vizier Nizam al-Mulk and the caliphal court in Baghdad.[[3]](#footnote-3) Griffel states that al-Ghazali was “undoubtedly the most influential intellectual of his time.” Likely under the influence of Sufi literature, in 1095 he suddenly gave everything up to live an aesthetic life. Griffel writes, “He realized that the high ethical standards of a virtuous religious life are not compatible with being in the service of sultans, viziers and caliphs.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

His experience as a man among the great theologians of his time is discussed in *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazali*. He writes of the various groups who seek Truth: theologians, the *batiniyah* (authoritative instruction derived from the infallible imam), philosophers, and Sufis, or mystics. And, having been deeply involved in each group at some point in his career, he refutes their usefulness as a means to get to God. He says that for theologians, “their efforts were devoted to making explicit the contradictions of their opponents and criticizing them in respect of the logical consequences of what they admitted.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Philosophy, he writes, is plagued with “infidels and irreligious men.”[[6]](#footnote-6) As for the authoritative instruction, men simply cannot agree – “the Batiniyah have nothing to cure them or save them from the darkness of mere opinions.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Lastly, he turns to mysticism (or Sufism). He describes the mystic way as a process that evolves over time. First, there is adoration in prayer and the sinking of the heart completely in the recollection of God. In the next stage, there are revelations and visions. In later stages, there occurs and experience that he says cannot be explained in words. Lastly, the mystic achieves nearness to God. It is an immediate experience of participation with Him.[[8]](#footnote-8) It is participating in the religion as creation and as a relational being with likeness to a most transcendent God.

The way al-Ghazali writes about his experience as a mystic is critical to understanding how he interprets his role in Islam. *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazali* reads like a narrative. It is an account of his journey – of his search for truth. He explains how he has always had a kind of hunger for truth – and this is exemplified in the way he, at a young age, jumps into the theological debate and becomes a prestigious member within it. But after all the scholarship and all the reasoning, he realizes abruptly that he lacks some vital key to practicing his faith: and that key is the practicing itself. He endured various stages of religious practice. In the first, he accepted what he was taught about Islam (*taqlid*). In the second, he doubted authority and used rationality and sensory perception to come to truth. Third, he realizes that rationality and sensory perception limit God to what a human can understand. It is not until he turns to mysticism that he learns how estranged from God he has been. Other theologians write from a point of distance, using the faculties of logic and reasoning and the authority of others. But al-Ghazali insists that this at best provides a detached understanding of what God is and what humans must do to know him. It fails to bridge the gap between humans and God. Al-Ghazali’s narration is reflective of his belief that knowing God is a journey that requires complete openness and *action.* It is to jump and know that God will catch, rather than to meticulously fashion planks of wood for the bridge that can never cross eternity. It really is to give up the materials of this world and embark on a mystical, ethereal and esoteric relationship with God. He uses an excellent analogy when he says “What a difference there is between knowing the definition of health and satiety, together with their causes and presuppositions, and *being* healthy and satisfied!”[[9]](#footnote-9)

In a sense, al-Ghazali completely denies the validity of reason. Reason leads to unwarranted truth claims that do not bring a person to God. And, in a later stage, reason helps humans to acknowledge that their truth claims are unwarranted. So while reason, or earthly knowledge, plays a crucial role in coming to the truth about God, something else must finish up the equation – a transcendent experience of some sort. And, it is important to note, this is an individual experience. There can be guidance, like that which al-Ghazali offers in the last half of his book, but the participation must be a one-on-one basis – with God and the believer alone. Al-Ghazali does not write about the implications mysticism will have on society. It provides, merely, the transformation of an individual. Thus, for al-Ghazali, the human’s role in Islam is self-centered. By focusing internally and shutting out the world around, a person can create a connection with God. Social obligations and rituals are merely preparation for the internal awakening. They are useful only in that they enable an individual to engage in practices that prepare the heart for submission to, humility toward and trust in God.

*Sayyid Qutb: God & Society*

Sayyid Qutb lived during a tumultuous time in the Middle East, and especially in his native country. His historic context is Egypt in the 1950s, with Nasserism and Pan-Arabism as the political culture of the era. His theologies arose out of a strict social-cultural, political and economic rejection of Western dominance within the region. Though the sentiment of the time was secular – upholding Western principles while ridding the West from the Middle East – Qutb’s theological writings were doubtless a product of the time. He rejected Nasserism because of its secular essence while still retaining the idea of Western rejection – a critical concept in his ideas

The contrast between Qutb’s world and al-Ghazali’s is stark. The latter lived during the Islamic Golden Age, while the former live during a time when the Middle East was coping with the struggles of decolonization and imperialism in the form of the creation of Israel next door. The Arab states were weak, and disunited. The Muslim world desperately needed solidarity to ward off the world powers from waging proxy wars on their territory. Al-Ghazali’s theology of the individual experience with God is telling of the time in which he lived. There was such strength in the whole that al-Ghazali clearly had faith that individual Muslims could turn inwardly to go on their own spiritual journey of enlightenment. For Qutb, the Muslim world was a much different place. There was a need for the strength that numbers could provide. And this is perhaps a key reason for the development of his theology regarding the renunciation of *Jahiliyyah*. The focus of Sayyid Qutb’s writings is *not* on the creation of individual relationships, as it is in al-Ghazali’s. Rather, the focus is on the creation of a community whereby the world slowly comes under the sovereignty of God alone. The role of the individual is to be accountable to the community, and this in turn becomes accountability to God.

For Qutb, Islam is *meant* to spread to every corner of the earth and into every facet of life. It was not an imposition – or inquisition – against the rights of people. It is doing what Islam clearly states is the best thing for all people. The Qur’an is meant to serve as The Law of the land because it can create the perfect society God desires. Indeed, he writes that the “aim is to change the Jahili system at its very roots – this system which is fundamentally at variance with Islam and which, with the help of force and oppression, is keeping us from living the sort of life which is demanded by our Creator.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

The creator, explains Qutb, demands that believers acknowledge His unicity. By declaring that *“La ilaha illa Allah,”* man gives up his own authority over himself or others and recognizes the complete sovereignty of God. For if man is servant to anyone else in the world, he cannot serve God alone. The language, says Qutb, in which the Qur’an is written reveals that the phrase *“La ilaha illa Allah”* means that there is “no sovereignty except God’s, no law except from God, and no authority of one man over another, as the authority in all respects belongs to God.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Qutb refutes al-Ghazali’s individualism by clearly contending that truth comes not from the individual spiritual experience, but through practical application of the law in society. While al-Ghazali denounces the *batiniyah*, Qutb places the utmost respect in it. Tradition is the authority because the best community in history was Muhammad’s after the revelation of Islam. The Qur’an and the traditional texts, such as the *hadith* and *Shari’ah*, hold absolute, irrefutable authority. In fact, Qutb has a rather slanted perception of the Qur’an, which is revealed in the way he denies the ambiguity within it. He writes that the Qur’an is a practical means of constructing Islam; it does “not present this in the form of a theory or a theology, nor did it present it in the style which is common to our scholastic writings on the subject of the Oneness of God.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Both Qutb and al-Ghazali turn to experience and the way the message of the Qur’an is *lived.* But while al-Ghazali lives it through spirituality in the extra-rational, Qutb lives it through its practical application in society. The Qur’an, he writes, “always appeals to human nature …”.[[13]](#footnote-13) For both of these men, it is not enough to be scholastically involved with the Qur’an. A believer lives it, practices it in some way that brings about holy change. Qutb warns that it is an error “to think that Islam can evolve in the form of an abstract theory limited to intellectual learning and cultural knowledge.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Islam cannot remain in the abstract, it must be a practiced faith or it is obsolete. It must be the bricks that build the community and the movement. It must live and breathe. It must “take shape in living souls, in an active organization, and in a viable community. … Islamic belief has a much wider range of action than simply academic discussions, as it not only addresses itself to hearts and minds but also includes practices and morals.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Sayyid Qutb is often demonized as the founder of violent Islamism. This is a mistake. He does not pit Islam against the world in a quest to eradicate other religions and races. To the contrary, Qutb is on a mission of unification. He refutes the nationalistic sentiments of the time as being too exclusive. Islam is not meant to be a nationality, “but always a ‘community of belief.’” Furthermore, it is not meant to be solely an individual experience but a communal one. By abiding by the laws of the Creator, creation is able to fulfill its potential. *Jahiliyyah* is the force that prevents this fulfillment. The relationship between Islam, God and mankind is summed up best at the end of Chapter 3 when he writes:

“Thus they all came together on an equal footing in the relationship of love, with their minds set upon a single goal; thus they used their best abilities, developed the qualities of their race to the fullest, and brought the essence of their personal, national, and historical experiences for the development of this one community, to which they all belonged on an equal footing and in which their common bond was through their relationship with the Sustainer. … Islam, then, is the only Divine way of life which brings out the noblest human characteristics, developing and using them for the construction of human society.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

God gives the law, the believers abide by it, and the society created out of this obedience is the fulfillment of God’s will. Humans therefore, have a large stake in the success or failure to have a relationship with God. Contrary to the God often portrayed by militant Islamists, Qutb’s God is practical, kind and committed to having a relationship with creation. He has, indeed, provided humans with the very means of establishing this relationship. This means that mankind has a significant role in Islam: he has the ability to fulfill the will of God *or* deny it.

*Farid Esack: God & Justice*

While Sayyid Qutb certainly addresses his context, especially in his paragraph about societies in the modern world,[[17]](#footnote-17) he does not believe that his context warrants a different kind of society from the one Muhammad led. Qutb’s and Muhammad’s societies faced the same obstacles – *jahiliyyah*. Farid Esack, however, acknowledges that he is from a whole other world. Indeed, he is in a whole other region, home to a whole other culture and ethnicity. And he consciously allows this to color his interpretation of Islam and the roles of God and the people within it. In fact, he is so adamant to allow his experience in apartheid South Africa to color his interpretation of the Qur’an to suit his needs that he argues absolutist claims are dangerous in Islam. Pro- and anti-apartheid clerics used the same book to justify the same “moral-social objective.” Esack writes that the “struggle for justice in South Africa that resulted in this hermeneutical crisis came about because its people were suffering under rulers with absolutist claims to ‘know’. The oppression of the people was based on this ‘knowing.’”[[18]](#footnote-18) Thus the quest for pluralism is necessary to Esack.

In the second chapter of his book, *Qur’an, Liberation & Pluralism,* Esack establishes his motive as an activist seeking to “rethink the meanings and use of scripture in a racially divided, economically exploitative and patriarchal society and to forge hermeneutical keys that will enable us to read the text in such a way as to advance the liberation of all people.”[[19]](#footnote-19) Qutb and Esack both use the Qur’an to justify their means of establishing a society according to what they believe God wills. However, they start from different premises. Qutb begins from the premise that possible interpretations of the Qur’an are the same if understood correctly. Esack, contrarily, claims that the Qur’an’s meaning changes according to who is reading it.

For al-Ghazali, Qutb and Esack, Islam is based off a working relationship between God and the believers. There is a kind of covenant between them, in which God provides the message and means to get to him, and the people embark upon the journey. Esack’s book is to South African men and women who have established themselves as Muslims. His message is that they have a duty as declared Muslims to uphold the Qur’anic message in the face of their personal and specific struggles. He offers five hermeneutical keys that “have emerged from the South Africa engagement with the struggle for liberation,” and, in explaining them, he consciously shifts between “text and context and the ongoing reflections on their implications for each other.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The first of his keys is *taqwa*, or recognizing one’s commitment to God. In liberation theology, this requires a Muslim to balance his or her spiritual life with his or her engagement in the movement. *Taqwa* is meant to shield one “against revolutionary deception and activist arrogance.”[[21]](#footnote-21) The second key is *tawhid,* which means unity of God. In the Qur’an, this is the belief that there is only one God. In liberation theology, this translates into the notion that society must reflect the oneness of God. Muslims must reject a society that is divided along racial and ethnic lines, which is the antithesis of *tawhid.[[22]](#footnote-22)* The third key is *al-nas*, the people. In the Qur’an, the people are sanctified as the chosen species for God’s vice regency on earth.[[23]](#footnote-23) Humans, thus, are central and must govern their own affairs. In a sense, this is Esack’s justification for democracy as a social-political response to apartheid. This is meant to keep the marginalized from being exploited, which is a key tenant in Islam, according to Esack. The fourth key is *mustad’af*, which refers to “someone who is oppressed or deemed weak and of no consequence and is treated in an arrogant fashion.”[[24]](#footnote-24) It is the duty of the Muslim to reject this oppression and to form solidarity with the *mustad’afun*. The important implication in this is that the mustad’afun are not composed simply of Muslims but of the “religious Other.”[[25]](#footnote-25) In his interpretation of the Qur’anic verses that address the term *mustad’af*, Esack places priority on the oppressed *person* rather than on his religion. Esack clearly accepts pluralism within society and is willing to fight for it by fighting for the liberation of *all* oppressed peoples. The fifth key is *qist* and *‘adl,* or justice and to act justly. The Muslim’s quest for justice is fulfilled when he fights on behalf of the *mustad’afun*. He has a socio-political duty to uphold justice in the community. Justice as it is defined in the text should be applied specifically to the context: “The Qur’an offers itself as an *inspiration* and *guide* for comprehensive insurrection against an unjust status quo.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Lastly is *jihad*, or struggle; it is the praxis – the act itself of combating injustice and oppression for a specific cause. For Muslims, the cause must be their faith in the message of the Qur’an.

There is a fascinating comparison between Esack and Qutb because they seem to be on opposite sides of the spectrum, where Esack is extremely liberal and Qutb is extremely conservative. However, they are both working with a theology of liberation, which Esack defines as

“one that works towards freeing religion from social, political and religious structures and ideas based on uncritical obedience and the freedom of all people from all forms of injustice and exploitation including those of race, gender, class and religion.”

Qutb’s mission was to free Islam from social, political and religious oppressors. Their immediate concerns are different. While Qutb is concerned with producing a society that will allow the sovereignty of God to flourish, Esack is concerned with producing a society in which the sovereignty of the people can flourish. Each of these men rejects the foreign, oppressive influence in their countries, but the details in their personal circumstances are different. Certainly, Qutb aims to break down the national and ethnic barriers that divide the people, but he replaces pan-Arabism with pan-Islamism. Islam must be the thing that unifies the world. In a sense, Qutb’s mission is to use the Qur’an to eradicate nationality and ethnicity as obsolete to Islam. Esack, however, celebrates racial and ethnic differences by using the Qur’an to justify every person’s equal worth despite these differences. The difference between Qutb and Esack is that Esack’s response to apartheid is not *the* response of South Africans; rather, it is the *Muslim South Africans’* response.

This distinction between Qutb and Esack is critical to understanding the different role the Muslim community plays according to both. A brief look into the backgrounds of each of these men can help understand how their liberation theology produces two different results. Qutb lived during a time of Arab pride because of the very influential Egyptian president Abd al-Nasser. Though far more secular than Qutb would have liked, Arab culture was – and is – still heavily influenced by Islam. Despite ethnic and sectarian division within the Middle East, that region is still far less culturally and ethnically diverse than South Africa. That Qutb’s prescription to the world was Islam reveals the influence of pan-Arabism on his thinking. There is a pattern throughout history whereby primarily homogenous nations with a cultural sense of superiority tend to believe that their religions are the panacea to the world’s problems. This is especially exemplified by the West. In South Africa, however, Esack experienced extreme diversity, which was brought to the fore of attention through apartheid practices. Apartheid created a status quo in which colored skin was inferior to white skin. Ethnicity and religion did not matter; and the injustice unified those people who were made inferior. This perhaps offers insight into why Esack’s response was not that Islam was the panacea, therefore making Muslims right and the rest wrong. He had experienced this polarity through apartheid and saw the injustice of it. Instead, he recognized that each group within the “colored” category was fighting for the same end: the justice of equality. He thus set about to unify *Muslims*, to strengthen their impetus in the fight for justice.

*An Active Relationship*

Esack’s hermeneutical keys clearly exhibit the role Muslims must play in their relationship with God. It begins with the recognition that one must be accountable to God and to do what it is necessary to fulfill the will of God. Like al-Ghazali’s and Qutb’s, Esack’s writings render humans as extremely powerful players within Islam. They are not simple creatures who live by the dictates of the Creator. They have the choice to accept the commands, and they have the responsibility and power to carry them out. God is all powerful in the sense that he knows everything, created everything, sees everything, and knows what is best for everything. But, according to each of these theologians, God is a relational entity who acknowledges the power of his creation. God has a will, but he provides humans with the means of fulfilling it. To al-Ghazali, God desires an intimate relationship with his creation. This means humans must carry out the rituals and practices that prepare the mind for a transcendent experience. The journey is for the individual to take. For Qutb, the will of God is that he is sovereign over the world. The Muslim community is the responsible for strengthening itself by coming together and spreading the panacea of Islam to the world. For Esack, the will of God is justice within each society. Muslims must fight as Muslims for this cause, alongside “religious Others” with the same goal. It is simple to see how each of these men has used the Qur’an to justify his individual desire. And furthermore, it is simple to see how pluralism is so inherent within all religions. Using scripture to justify a desired end is something all adherents do. It does not render the religion obsolete. Indeed, such plurality shows how absolutely necessary it is to people to keep religion alive and functioning. Since humanity entered the history of the earth, it has established and maintained religions and traditions. For thousands of years, they have been striving to keep the meaning of their religions alive, but they have done this in the context of an ever-evolving world. Discovering the role of religion, creation and creator is, undoubtedly, one of the most universal themes with the most varied interpretations.

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1. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/al-ghazali/#Lif> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. al-Ghazali, p. 28 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 30 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 52 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., p. 61 - 62 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., p. 55 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Qutb, p. 21 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., p. 26 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., p. 36 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Qutb, p. 36 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., p. 38 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., p. 39 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., p. 50 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Esack, p. 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., p. 78 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., p. 86 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., p. 90 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Iibd., p. 92 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., p. 96 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., p. 98 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., p. 103 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., p. 106, emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)