Through both his writings and his example as a martyr, the Egyptian activist and author Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) has become one of the better known representatives of the more radical tendencies in the contemporary "resurgence" of Islam. His later writings have been described as a charter for Islamic revolution and a major inspiration for extremist groups such as one responsible for the assassination of Anwar al-Sādāt in Egypt. Qutb came to his radical views relatively late in life, however, after having espoused more secularist views at an earlier stage. While considerable scholarly attention has been given to his later writings, relatively little attention has been given to his earlier writings and activities or to the transition from...
his earlier to his later views. I believe that an effort to understand how and why he moved from one position to another, and precisely what changes in his thinking were involved, would be very worth while. While the whole of such an effort is beyond the scope of this article, it does seek to make a small contribution in this direction.

Sayyid Qutb was born about 1906 in a village in Asyut Province, Upper Egypt, into a landowning family which was both pious and touched by modern ways, and he appears to have been quite pious as a child. His formal education was in the state-run schools, first in his village and then in Cairo, and eventually he attended Dār al-ʿUlūm (1929–1933), a school preparing Arabic language instructors that might be said to mediate between the world of the traditional Islamic sciences and that of modern secular learning. He then worked with the Ministry of Education for a number of years. During the 1930’s he came under the influence of the liberal intellectuals of the time particularly ʿAbbās Māhmūd al-ʿAqqād, and wrote a number of articles in the area of literary criticism as well as three novels, one of which was based on his village childhood experiences and another of which is generally thought to refer to an unhappy love affair of his. During this period his ideological position might be described as nationalist and secularist; while not rejecting Islam as a religion he was not interested in applying it to all areas of life.

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2 My main secondary sources for Qutb’s earlier views have been: Muhammad Awwal Abubakar, Sayyid Kutb: A Study of His Critical Ideas. Master of Letters Thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1978, which deals with him as a literary critic; and Adnan Ayyub Musallam, The Formative Stages of Sayyid Qutb’s Intellectual Career and His Emergence as an Islamic Da’īyah. Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1983, which covers the period up to about 1954, but not the later development, which is the primary concern of this paper.


4 Tīfīl min al-Qarya (Child from the Village) and Ashwāk (Thorns), respectively. Carré dates the first to 1946 and the second to 1947 (Mystique et Politique, Paris: Cerf, 1984, p. 227; cf. Haim, op. cit., p. 149, for the first).

5 According to Musallam he wanted to separate art from religion, though not from ethics (op. cit., p. 155 passim). His political views may be seen in his response to Taha Husayn’s Mastaqbal al-Thuqāfah fi Miṣr (Future of Culture in Egypt) (Qutb’s response was originally a series of articles in Sabīḥat Dār al-ʿUlūm published shortly