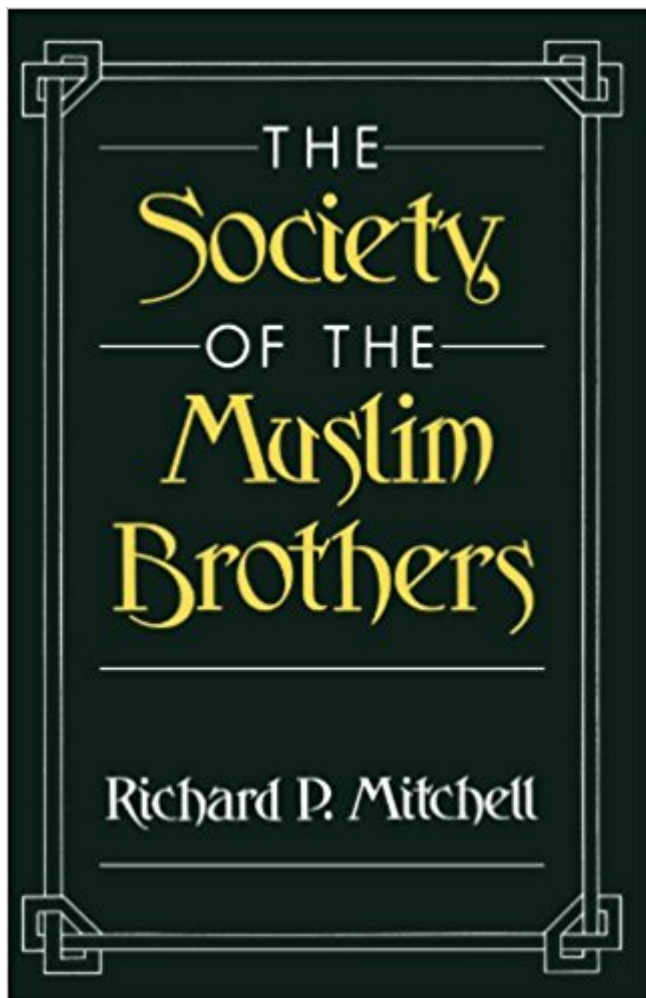


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# The Society Of The Muslim Brothers



## Synopsis

First published in 1969 as part of a series edited by renowned Islamic scholar Albert Hourani, this book has been the standard source for the history of the revivalist Egyptian movement--the Muslim Brethren up to the time of Nasser. The Muslim Brethren are now well-recognized for their foundational role in the Islamic revival which has now taken on new, and perhaps dangerous, life in recent times. After having been out of print for over a decade, this reissue of the classic work makes it accessible to a new generation of scholars and students interested in the Muslim revival--a group whose numbers have increased dramatically in the past decade. The new paperback edition has a foreword by John Voll, a leading American Islamic scholar, discussing the subsequent history and continued significance of the Muslim Brethren.

## Book Information

Paperback: 392 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press (July 29, 1993)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0195084373

ISBN-13: 978-0195084375

Product Dimensions: 8.1 x 0.8 x 5.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.3 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #257,512 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #128 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Religious Studies > Islam](#) #196 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Islam > History](#) #205 in [Books > History > World > Religious > Islam](#)

## Customer Reviews

"Very much enjoyed this book. It should do my students quite well."--John P. Dunn, Florida State University  
"This is an excellent study of Islamic revivalism. It is timeless, and will benefit both students and scholars. Many young scholars and libraries have not had access to this book, and this reprinting will allow Mitchell to be of even more direct influence on Egyptian studies and the study of Islamic revivalism."--Vali Nasr, University of San Diego  
"Richard Mitchell's book was one of the first serious studies of what it is now customary to call the 'resurgence of Islam' and it still remains one of the best....It helps us to understand why they have survived so many changes of fortune and are still a powerful force in Egypt and other Muslim countries."--Albert Hourani  
"The Society of the Muslim Brothers is a major seminal work that remains the standard history of the

early Muslim Brotherhood. Essential reading for understanding the growth of contemporary Islamic movements across the Muslim world."--John Esposito, Georgetown University

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A stellar history of the beginnings and development of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Society of the Muslim Brothers, traces the evolution of the modern world's largest and most influential Islamic society founded in 1928 by Hasan al-Banna. The author, Richard O. Mitchell, chronicles three phases of the Brotherhood from its roots in the small town of Ismailiyya, Egypt, through its burgeoning popularity to the execution of prominent leaders after an assassination attempt on Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasser in 1954. Al-Banna established the group based on a strong belief in Islamic ideals including firm democratic principals, but his mastery over his followers was complete and inclusive, almost approaching sorcery and he led the Brothers in kind of cult of personality. The change in leadership after the death of al-Banna, brought a leader less charismatic but also less amenable to violence and here the internal struggles of the Brotherhood became manifest. Providing not only a chronological account of the evolution of the Brotherhood, Mitchell also meticulously dissects its inner workings and structure, including the driving ideological principals. The Brotherhood revolted against imperialism (slow annihilation and profound and complete corruption of Egypt) and valued education for women as not only desirable but necessary and in the same measure as for men. Mitchell meticulously explains the elaborate structure of the group, it grew with three stages of loyalty and various levels of individual commitment through a vast network of overt, legal and public operations as well as the clandestine secret apparatus blamed for much of the violence eventually perpetrated by Brotherhood members. Providing superb scholarship on the Muslim Brothers, who remain a preeminent powerful nationalist Islamic movement in the Middle East, Mitchell presents key historical issues around the Brotherhood and its evolution. Of special interest to the student of the Arab World, the author elucidates the close relationship between Gamal Abd al-Nasser's Free Officers and the Brotherhood in

arming the secret apparatus and in the coup against the palace in 1952. After al-Banna's assassination, the success of the movement perpetuated from sheer momentum and by those still bound to him, by the residual glow after the flames had died down. Mitchell's work proves insightful for anyone interested in the dynamics between Islamic movements and state governments today. The nationalist fervor, which characterized much of the principal goals of the Brotherhood, proved both the lifeblood and the Achilles heel of the group. Nationalism in combination with unquestioning religious conviction governments of all shades have been unable to tolerate.

Mitchell's book is obviously dated by now, published in 1969 and has been republished in 1993. At first, I wonder whether it is still worth a reading given that there are a lot more recent works in the field as a result of the proliferation of literature on the Islamist movements in recent decades. Having read this book, I must admit that Mitchell's book continues to be a significant contribution in our understanding of Islamism. The book covers periods of Ikhwan foundation in 1928 till its second suppression in 1954. The focus is on Egypt without dealing with various manifestations of the movement outside of the country. The book can be divided into three parts. The first and largest is history of the movement. It sheds interesting light on al-Banna, the founder of the movement, and the roles the movement played in political events including its attitude toward the 1952 revolution. The second part deals with the details of the organizational aspect of the movement while the third part concentrates on its ideology with special reference to its world-view as regards the West, Egypt, capitalism, communism, and Zionism. The final chapter assesses the place of the movement in Egyptian social and political life. The most impressive aspect of this study is Mitchell's utilization of the sources. Through his field work in Egypt in 1953-5 Mitchell was able to witness the development first hand and to conduct interviews with many of the Ikhwan members and other Egyptians. Furthermore, Mitchell uses Arabic language sources, including the writings of the prominent figures of the movement such as al-Banna and Muhammad al-Ghazali, and Qutb along with the writings of other Egyptian unconnected with the society as well as Ikhwan's own publications and documents. In addition, the author also utilizes Egyptian newspapers and numerous Western studies on various aspects of the subject. One common (distorted) image of the movement according to the author is associating Ikhwan with violence. Mitchell dismisses the common view attributing the movement as revolutionary, and terrorist. Mitchell argues that the revolutionary image of the movement is misleading because whatever the (revolutionary) view of

certain groups or members, the leadership had no wish to seize power either in 1948 or 1954. As a matter of fact, Mitchell adds that Al-Banna always emphasized that the movement primary roles were educational and to influence the policies of those in power in establishing the Islamic pattern of behavior in the society rather than to achieve power for themselves. The revolutionary image of the society apparently derived from its semiautonomous "secret apparatus" which advocated violence, but this attitude was confined to this group and not the organization as a whole. In addition, Mitchell argues that tendency toward violence was not confined to some segments of the Brothers, but it was almost a universal tendency in the national politics as a result of disillusionment with parliamentary government which characterized Egyptian politics between 1942-1952. Mitchell also debunks the common view that the society was dogmatic, static and reactionary organization dedicated to restore the seventh century concept of the Muslim state. He states that despite its aspiration for the implementation of Islamic principles in the society, Ikhwan demonstrated its open-minded attitude toward the interpretation of Shariah as reflected in their readiness to open the door of Ijtihad. Although there is a tendency toward Hanbali strict uncompromising attitude in the movement, the author argues that there was also a strong consciousness among the brothers that they were part of Islamic reformist tradition of Abduh, Afghani, and Ridha and shared the same intent of adaptation of Islam to meet modern challenges. As a matter of fact Banna and Hudaybi are depicted as promoting a reformist role for the society. The society's dynamic commercial and welfare activities and to a lesser degree its effort to form an auxiliary Muslim sister "wing" demonstrate the "modernized" and pragmatic aspect of the society. The success of the society can be attributed to al-Banna himself, whom Mitchell repeatedly refers to as a charismatic leader. In chapter one, Mitchell provides a brief account of al-Banna's early years regarding his gifted ability to communicate, to inspire and to influence. Furthermore, Mitchell presents considerable amount of evidence throughout the book demonstrating the charisma in Banna and his "brothers" relationship. However, the death of al-Banna and ascendancy of Hudaybi as the General Guide of the movement posed a serious challenge for the movement. Without a charismatic leader and effective leadership, the society failed in dealing with problems associated with leadership- succession, discipline, consensus and even the loss of control over secret apparatus. My impression from Mitchell's account is that the relative success of the movement under Banna can be attributed to the leadership quality. However, the author's treatment of leadership is inadequate; primarily emphasizing the personality of Banna and leaving out the roles of elite members of the movement such as the Guidance Council and the Secretariat. In light of my own understanding that a good number of Ikhwan prominent figures are not (strictly speaking) the graduates of Islamic studies, It

would also be desirable to learn something about the society's elite such as their educational training and class background. In this regard Mitchell's book is less helpful. Despite the proliferation of literature on the Islamist movement in recent decades, Mitchell's book continues to have a class of its own, especially for those aspiring to learn about the development of the movement in Egypt from its foundation to 1954. One wish that the author could have also covered the influence of the movement outside Egypt, most notably in Palestine, Jordan and Syria.

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