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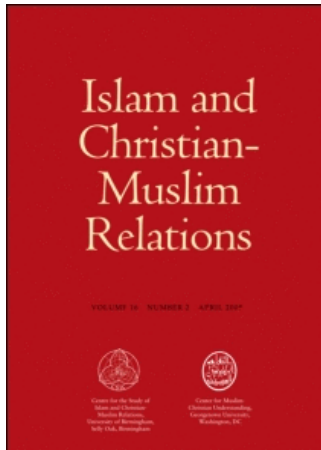
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Islamic scholar and religious leader: A portrait of Shaykh Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Būti

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Islamic Scholar and Religious Leader: a portrait of Shaykh Muḥammad Saʿīd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī

ANDREAS CHRISTMANN

ABSTRACT *In the light of his outstanding reputation and great influence on life in modern Syria, it is amazing that Shaykh Muḥammad Saʿīd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī's work and thought are under-represented to the extent of being almost unknown in European academic literature. This article is a first attempt at a broader European appraisal of al-Būṭī's life and work. It paints a portrait of a thinker who represents the majority of Sunnī Islam or the 'middle path Islam' in Syria, finding its place between the current realities of a secular state and an ideal Islamic society. The article first introduces the biographical details of al-Būṭī's life and the main intellectual influences of people and events around him, then his oeuvre, style and personality. Secondly, it explores his main ideas and views, taking into account the fact that he writes and speaks in two different roles: as an Islamic scholar and as a religious leader, which is perhaps a unique position in modern Syria.*

I ask myself; what is it that keeps me writing and writing? As for my fame I got more of it than I had hoped and expected. As for my property and wealth Allah blessed me with more than I need. And as for the respect of people I got more than I deserve. In the end I found out that all this is fruitless and tasteless unless it is an individual prayer for me by an unknown brother in Islam. (Muḥammad Saʿīd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī)

Introduction

Shaykh al-Būṭī appears in all the media—as the weekly Qurʾān and Ḥadīth exegete on television, frequently as preacher on the radio and as the author of several dozen books and polemical publications in book shops. In his Friday sermons in the Jāmiʿ Mawlānā al-Rifāʿī Mosque and his lectures held twice a week at the Jāmiʿ Tinjiz Mosque, al-Būṭī addresses hundreds of people each time, many of them standing in the mosque courtyard following his speech over the loudspeakers. Professor at the University of Damascus, al-Būṭī has a considerable formative influence on future generations of teachers who will teach religion and Sharīʿa in state primary and secondary schools. Even people who do not practise religion actively, have come across al-Būṭī's name and know where and when he can be heard. Also non-Muslims admit to having attended one or another al-Būṭī session to find out what distinguishes this scholar from the others. Indeed, Shaykh al-Būṭī synthesizes spiritual leadership and Islamic scholarship in a unique way. Just consider his function as *the* Muslim television preacher, who popularizes Islamic knowledge and ideals, in the political context of Syria, where any public statement which is different from the official Baʿth party line may lead to imprisonment or even torture. Of course, there are other *ʿulamāʾ*, too, who appear on

Syrian television as religious authorities, for example Shaykh Marwān Shaykhu, a senior officer in the Ministry of Endowment, who gives sermons every Friday on the radio and weekly *fatāwā* and Qurʾān programmes on television, as well as daily *iftār* speeches during Ramaḍān. But al-Būṭī's fixed broadcasting time (Wednesday 7 p.m.) and the thematic series of lectures, in which he walks the tightrope to verify Sharīʿa rules in the light of secular law and society, have turned al-Būṭī into a widely accepted—sometimes fiercely questioned—public institution advising Syrian Muslims, even in the country's remotest parts, on current issues of mainstream orthodox Islam.¹

Life

Muḥammad Saʿīd Ibn Ramaḍān ʿUmar al-Būṭī was born in 1929 in the small Turkish village of Jilika on the Island of Butan (Jazīrat Ibn ʿUmar) in Western Anatolia, which 'suffered from the spread of ignorance and the need for culture (*thaqāfa*) and knowledge (*maʿrifā*)'.² He was the second child and only son of the Kurdish scholar Mullah Ramaḍān al-Būṭī. His ancestors had all been farmers and so it was al-Būṭī's father, who, supported by his mother, a woman 'full of piety (*ṣalāḥ*) and devotion (*taqwā*)',³ had studied Islamic sciences (*al-ʿulūm al-islāmiyya*) against his father's will and established the family's scholarly traditions continued by Shaykh al-Būṭī and his son Muḥammad Taufīq Ramaḍān al-Būṭī. All we know about al-Būṭī's mother is that she gave birth to three girls who all died very young, whereupon she fell ill herself and died when al-Būṭī was thirteen years old. By that time al-Būṭī's family had been in Damascus for several years. In 1934 they fled from the secularization measures of Kemal Atatürk, who, as al-Būṭī put it, 'insulted Islam',⁴ through Halwat, al-Hasaka, Deir al-Zor, al-Raqqa, al-Hama and Homs to Damascus, where they settled down in the Kurdish quarter of Rukn ad-Din. Al-Būṭī began to study religion, Arabic and mathematics in a private school in Sūq al-Sarūja, an old city neighbourhood, then, at the very early age of eleven, the Qurʾān and the Prophet's biography with Shaykh Ḥasan Habannakah and Shaykh al-Maradīnī in the Jāmiʿ Manjak Mosque in al-Midān, and eventually, when the mosque was transformed into the Institute of Islamic Orientation (*maʿhad al-tawjīh al-islāmī*), he studied Qurʾān exegesis, logic, rhetoric and the fundamental principles of Islamic law (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) until 1953. And yet his main and most influential teacher was until that time his father.

According to al-Būṭī's memories, his father was a most pious man, who unlike most of his contemporaries, already as an undergraduate did not see Islam as a source of emotionless casuistry⁵ but as a way to inner perfection—through unremitting Qurʾān recitation (*tilāwa*), night prayers (*tahajjud*), hundredfold repetitions of *dhikr* and *wird* formulas (invocations of Allāh), through unremitting communion with Allāh (*munājāh*), discipline (*waraʿ*) and asceticism (*zuhd*). His father's custom of performing these extensive religious rituals in spite of his lifelong proneness to a mysterious illness which caused temporary paralysis, was an important part of al-Būṭī's family life. The *Yā-sīn sūra* was read every morning and evening, and at meal times the children were expected to behave as if 'they were eating together with Allāh'. Every Monday and Thursday morning, after morning prayer, the father called the family together for *dhikr* to chant the *tahlīl* formula '*Lā illāha illā Allāh*' and the word 'Allāh' a hundred times each, as well as other intercessions, hymns of praise and beseechings of refuge, all of which al-Būṭī continues to perform to the present day.

The overwhelming influence of al-Būṭī's father, who was born in 1888 and died in 1990 at the age of 102, was by no means restricted to his religious education. The

father decided almost all biographically relevant events in the life of his only son. When al-Būṭī turned eighteen, his father married him to the sister of his second wife, who, though considerably older than al-Būṭī, was still ‘a good catch’ as the family was very poor at the time.⁶ Al-Būṭī’s reluctance to marry so young was met by the father with references to the necessity of marriage as described in al-Ghazālī’s *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, so that al-Būṭī soon recognized his rejection as ‘disobedience and reluctance’ towards his father and ‘contentedly’ agreed to the engagement. The father also decided al-Būṭī’s professional career. When, in 1956 on the completion of his three-year degree course at al-Azhar,⁷ al-Būṭī returned to Damascus with a Sharī’a teaching qualification (*ijāza*) and an education diploma, he refused to take part in an aptitude qualifying contest (*musābaqa*)⁸ for future Sharī’a teachers decreed by the Ministry of Education, because he knew his father considered a career in the civil service for religious affairs, i.e. ‘any pursuit of religion for the sake of money’, a great sin. Yet for ‘inexplicable’ reasons and to al-Būṭī’s ‘great astonishment’ his father consented to and even ordered his participation in the competition, in which he did very well. So he became a Sharī’a teacher at a secondary school and later at the Dār al-Mu‘allimīn al-Ibtidā’iyya in Ḥoms. His academic career began in 1961, when he became an assistant at the newly founded Sharī’a Faculty of Damascus University. After completing his doctorate at al-Azhar in 1965, he became a lecturer in comparative law (*al-fiqh al-islāmī al-muqārīn*) and religious studies (*al-‘aqā’id wa l-adyān*) at Damascus University; for some time he was also the Dean of the Sharī’a faculty. Al-Būṭī was professor of comparative law at the Department of Islamic Law and its Schools (*al-fiqh al-islāmī wa madhāhibihi*) and works today as lecturer the Sources of Islamic Law and the Methodology for its Development (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), Islamic Dogma (*al-‘aqīda al-islāmiyya*) and the Prophet’s Biography (*al-sīra al-nabawiyya*).

Influences

When al-Būṭī’s intellectual development began, his family had already undergone a process of ‘Syrianization’, whereas at the early stage of his life their Kurdish ethnicity had dominated their social and cultural background.⁹ Yet he never denied his Kurdish origins and maintained his interest in the Kurdish language and its literature. At that time, when he was in his twenties, he translated, for example, the very tragic story by the Kurdish poet Aḥmad al-Khasānīa of the love between the Mamu and Zayn, a love ‘which was sown on earth and ripened in heaven’¹⁰ and transformed the story written in verse into narrative form.¹¹ Also, the deprived rural milieu of Anatolia and the poverty of his parents’ house developed in al-Būṭī a strong sense of social justice, which repeatedly induced him to denounce the social, economic and financial defects of Syrian society. This and his father’s lifelong resistance to secularization tendencies—first in Turkey and then in Syria—could have led al-Būṭī into contact with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which was politically very strong during al-Būṭī’s formative years,¹² and its leader Muṣṭafā al-Sibā’ī. The latter had been appointed Dean of the Faculty of Law and Professor of Islamic Law at the University of Damascus in 1956, when al-Būṭī began to work as an assistant there in 1960. We learn from the biographical sources that both families exchanged frequent visits and that the father showed great sympathy with the severely physically handicapped Muslim leader. During the early fifties, al-Būṭī was seen as an enthusiastic listener¹³ at weekly rhetoric performances held by the *Rābiṭa al-‘Ulamā’ al-Dīmiyya* (League of ‘Ulama’), which at that time had close links with the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. However, more influential on al-Būṭī’s

intellectual and personal life was his teacher, Ḥasan Habannakah at the *Ma'had al-Tawjīh al-Islāmī* in al-Midān, at that time headquarters of *al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn* (Muslim Brothers) in Damascus. During the protests of 1964, 1967 and 1973 Shaykh Habannakah was one of the leading clerics who manifested their resistance to the secular government of the Ba'ṯh party which came to power in 1963.¹⁴ For example, in 1967, as the president of the League of 'Ulamā', he organized demonstrations in protest against a nationalistic, anti-religious article in an army magazine,¹⁵ and in 1973 he led protests in Damascus against the first draft of a new constitution that made no mention of Islam except as a main source of legislation.¹⁶ Al-Būṯī, full of admiration for the Shaykh, gives a full report of how his father suddenly dropped his lifelong seclusion from public affairs in order to support Ḥasan al-Habannakah, who was a *shāfi'ī*, in his election to be Grand Mufti of Syria. The father's endeavour was to convince other 'ulamā' that because of Habannakah's 'juridical brilliance' the rule, which demanded succession of a *ḥanafī* scholar, should be abrogated. Moreover, al-Būṯī's father not only joined study circles in Ḥasan al-Habannakah's house,¹⁷ he was also the only one of the 'ulamā' who 'prayed publicly for Habannakah's health and stayed with him the whole night, when the shaykh fell terribly ill'.¹⁸

During that time another intellectual and spiritual guiding figure emerged in Ramaḍān al-Būṯī's life: Badī' al-Zamān Sa'īd Nursī. As one of the most influential religious and political propagandists in late Ottoman and Republican Turkey, and as the founder of the intellectual-religious movement Nurculuk, Sa'īd Nursī was arrested and banned several times, both by the Ottoman and later by the Republican governments.¹⁹ After translating Sa'īd Nursī's autobiography, published in 1958, from Kurdish into Arabic, al-Būṯī published the article: 'Sa'īd Nursī: the miracle of the Islamic revolution in Turkey'. The following paragraph not only reveals al-Būṯī's admiration for Sa'īd Nursī's *da'wā* (Islamic missionary call), but also reflects Shaykh al-Būṯī's own aspirations at that time:

When I hold this pen to write down his life on these few pages, I feel an immense emotion moving within the depth of my being! When I write these words I feel that I am illustrating how the life of a Muslim who is faithful to his Islamic belief, and of a preacher who is honest in his mission, and of a scholar who is dedicated in his work ought to be—whether that be from the social, the political, the ethical or other aspects ... However, this is not the only reason why I am engulfed with this immense sense of emotion and happiness as I narrate the life of this great missionary. It could be that I find in his great life, which is characterized by dedication, pious efforts and selflessness, that which we no longer find in the lives of most other Islamic 'ulamā' and preachers today. It is not an exaggeration that my happiness when writing about the life of Badī' al-Zamān exceeds that of a man dying of dehydration whose liver has dried up from thirst in a remote desert, when he sees the glimmer of the Euphrates' water.²⁰

It seems that Shaykh al-Būṯī's sympathy for the cause of a viable and politically conscious Islamic movement was considerable. Yet sympathy with some ideals of the Muslim Brotherhood is not the same as collaboration or complicity when it comes to militant actions. He witnessed with growing opposition the assassinations of prominent 'Alawīs and the attacks on government and Ba'ṯh party offices, police stations, and army units by Muslim Brothers and members of smaller Islamic groups. After the gunning-down of 83 'Alawī cadets at the Artillery Academy at Aleppo in June 1979,

Shaykh al-Būṭī condemned the killing on television as juridically illegitimate—at the request of the Ministry of Information.²¹

This event could be regarded as al-Būṭī's breakthrough as a public figure and high ranking *ʿālim*. Only a few years later—at the climax of violent upheavals all over Syria in 1982—he was asked to give a speech on the occasion of welcoming the next century (the 15th of the *hijra*), in which he was obediently to address the President of Syria Ḥafīz al-Asad—at that time the official target of the Islamists' fight. The shaykh assented.²² Some years later, when the government removed strict censorship on Islamic publications, the total ban on religious broadcasting and the prohibition against wearing the *ḥijāb* and *niqāb* (types of womens' coverings) in state institutions, al-Būṭī accepted an invitation to thank the 'hidden hand of these achievements', President Asad, on television.²³

The more al-Būṭī became a public figure the less he could retain his revolutionary impetus. Before that, Shaykh al-Būṭī was shown great respect because of his long dissociation from the state's rigid reaction against the Islamic opposition. Consequently he lost much of his credibility by becoming more and more the recipient of President Asad's benevolence, in particular after accepting the latter's offer to become a regular lecturer on Syrian television. Many Sunnī Muslims expected him to be a mouthpiece of Islamic criticism in broadcasting, but were extremely disappointed when they found him very cautious and diplomatic; yet he seems to have been not insensitive to the critical voices around him. The reader of his biography, *This is my Father*, is constantly given the impression that al-Būṭī himself was always reluctant and even unwilling to fulfil the official tasks of the state authorities. He tries to show that it was always his father who advised him, or rather obliged or even demanded of him to do everything. 'In fact, everything that I said at that time was led and ordered by my father, may the mercy of God be with him.'²⁴

Works

Al-Būṭī's works are numerous and varied. First of all, more than twenty voluminous treatises have appeared since al-Būṭī's first publication some thirty years ago. Then there is his series of (so far ten) pamphlets on crises in the Islamic world over the past twenty years, which appears under the somewhat odd title 'Summit Analyses' (*Abḥāth fī l-qimma*)²⁵ and is very popular amongst Muslims. With these A6 booklets, al-Būṭī means to 'administer the most effective medicine for the treatment of the problems of the Muslims', and if some people do not perceive their world as problematic, he continues, he is going to show them 'that they do require this medicine'.²⁶ Furthermore, there are hundreds of religious instructions, lectures and sermons given by him in mosques, which are regularly taped by a team of young Muslims who sell them in their thousands at mosque entrances.²⁷ In the study rooms of Sharī'a students I saw, for example, the twenty-seven piece lecture series about Islamic doctrine, (*al-ʿaqīda al-islāmīyya*), on which the students had spent a fortune (£1080)²⁸ as well as the several-part Commentary on an-Nawawī's book, 'The Gardens of the Virtuous' (*Riyāḍ al-sāliḥīn*). Since January 1990, the medical and scientific journal *Ṭabībak* has published occasional *fatwās* from Shaykh al-Būṭī, in particular on *ibādāt* and *muʿamalāt* issues (e.g. rules for the *arkān* rituals, problems of circumcision, perforation of the hymen, homosexuality, masturbation, AIDS etc.).²⁹ Finally, there are his lectures on comparative Islamic law, which are now available as books³⁰ and video cassettes, his television

religious instructions and his numerous articles in periodicals like *Al-Ijtihād* and *Aital-Nahj al-Islāmī*.³¹

It is almost impossible to see in al-Būṭī's work any limitation of topics. As an Islamic scholar who has climbed the ladder to more and more highly ranked positions in his academic and public life, and who is for many Syrian Muslims the leading religious authority in the intellectual dispute in Islam about modern life, he has made statements on all the most relevant and explosive topics among Muslims today. These appear in the form, 'What does Islam say about ...', e.g. slavery, the veiling of women, female labour, education, Islamic *da'wā*, revivalism, radicalism and reformism, *jihād*, secularization, Marxism, nationalism, etc.³² His work even includes comments on topics such as abortion, the mass media, macro and micro economics and Arabic literature.³³ His choice of subjects does not follow a consistent pattern and nowhere is there the same definitive answer to the same question. Many of his publications are *ad hoc* statements about topics widely discussed at a certain time or disputes with his opponents published as books,³⁴ for example, the very controversial interview by Nabil Fayyād, who wrote *When the Camel is Kneeling from a Blanket*.³⁵ which was banned in Syria, according to the author, after a visit to President Asad from al-Būṭī himself.

Style and Personality

The remarkable thing about al-Būṭī's academic style is his personal tone. He does not correspond at all to Michael Gilson's 'ideal type' of an *'ālim* who defines his authority purely through the knowledge (*'ilm*) he has acquired and not through his individual character, as he has usually gone through a depersonalized and objectified educational process.³⁶ Al-Būṭī, on the contrary, presents his Islamic erudition with a strikingly individual tone—not least through the revelation of very private spheres of his life, as can best be seen in his father's biography. The introductions to his books are also very personal. His emotional outbursts, not to say eruptions, in the middle of a sermon or a prayer of supplication (*du'ā'*), which often end in sobs or even bursts of crying are well known.³⁷ Al-Būṭī is admired for his speaking openly, his extemporizations, his rasping voice, his vivid facial expressions and gestures. His Arabic is certainly pure *fuṣḥā* [standard Arabic], yet his usage of the Levantine dialect is remarkable, for example, when he almost systematically replaces the more formal interrogatives '*mādhā*', '*hal*', '*man huwa*' with '*shū*', '*mā*' and '*mīn*', or particles like '*faqad*' and '*idhan*' with '*bas*' and '*ṭīb*'. What is unique about al-Būṭī, in comparison with other Damascus-based scholars I interviewed, is his ability of self-reflection. Al-Būṭī is fully aware of his position and his influence as a public figure on his environment. He is capable of differentiating between the various currents, groups and followers within Islam, and argues with them in a provocative and polemical way. His books, speeches and sermons read like a never-ending disputation in which al-Būṭī tackles a 'just published treatise', a 'book written by certain scribblers', an 'odd question received yesterday over the phone' or a 'peculiar response to my last book'. He tackles divergent opinions, often proves the others 'definitely wrong' or 'completely unscholarly'. Now and then he calls them liars or fools, or he even discriminates against other authors an account of their 'Western' or 'Jewish' background. In summary, one can say that al-Būṭī's rhetorical style, which is marked by his endeavours to be at all costs superior to his spiritual opponents, could be called 'competitive academicism'. Furthermore, Shaykh al-Būṭī propagates his Islamic visions in the light of Western values and they therefore suffer from the pitfalls and flaws of apologetic sermonizing, for example when he cites statistics with an ideally

high rate of divorce, single families and violence within European families, and then concludes: 'The family in the West has lost any historical or social function!'³⁸ Or when he attacks attempts by UNESCO to simplify the Arabic language as 'dangerous colonialistic conspiracies' against a thorough study and deep understanding of Qur'ān.³⁹

Unlike many modern Muslim thinkers, al-Būṭī has specialized in the Sharī'a sciences and in particular in their main discipline, *uṣūl al-fiqh*. He is outstanding in his knowledge of all relevant sources of Islamic jurisprudence, which gives him an enormous advantage over his rival in debate. Most of his arguments and ideas are put forward within the framework of traditional legal scholarship, frequently referring to Qur'ānic verses, Ḥadīth and the opinions of the leading classical authorities, in particular Imām al-Nawawī, Ibn al-'Arabī, al-Ghazālī, and al-Shāfi'ī. Due to his profession, al-Būṭī regards Islamic law as the core of the Islamic religion; whenever he speaks of Islam he means the principles, injunctions and practical implications of the Sharī'a. When talking about juridical matters, he never overemphasizes the originality of his conclusions, but tells people that he does not want to change what has already been carefully established. 'Rearrangements of the law of Allāh mean only the abuse of it, do they not?'⁴⁰ However, at the same time, al-Būṭī shows an interest in overriding the boundaries of classical legal casuistry, treating Islamic law from different perspectives. He writes on philosophical, cosmological and historical underpinnings of Islamic jurisprudence,⁴¹ and also deals with specific areas of secular positive law for a detailed comparison.⁴² Like many modern scholars, he takes a particular interest in differences of juristic opinions (*ikhtilāf*) and defends them in his books and lectures about comparative jurisprudence (*al-fiqh al-muqārīn*).⁴³ In this regard, al-Būṭī does not stick to his *shāfi'ī* background, but offers a balanced treatment of the views and contributions of all the prominent schools of law without the sectarian bias that can be found in pre-modern *uṣūl al-fiqh* works.⁴⁴ His teaching style is appealing, logical and didactic, and the contents of his books are clearly written. The reader of his works or the listener to his lectures is always asked to follow the logic of his arguments, the way he uses the legal sources, and therefore to catch the stages through which a particular ruling is reached. This reveals the paramount aim of his writings and lecturings about Islamic law, which is to educate Muslim laymen in the general principles of the Sharī'a. For al-Būṭī, it makes no sense to turn to the Islamic religion without knowing the rules and requirements of Islamic law. His endeavour is to give people the chance to understand the underlying principles of an *ijtihād* process (reasoning to derive laws from the legitimate sources), but he always demands that followers know the specialized technical terminology of Islamic jurisprudence, thus avoiding the impression that anyone not sufficiently qualified can reason juridically for himself. 'It is absolute nonsense to claim that Islam and Islamic law are nothing more than a couple of uncomplicated rules!'⁴⁵

Shaykh al-Būṭī as Islamic Scholar

In his defence of the traditional-scholarly way of Islamic jurisprudence against overly liberal or relativist positions, we find his main concern as an Islamic scholar. His major and most sophisticated works are dedicated to attacking radical *salafiyya* positions of the reform movement, which tries to simplify the complicated demands of Islamic reasoning. In his book, *Non-madhabism: the greatest bid'a threatening the Islamic Sharī'a*, he responds to the anti-school of law trend, which promotes a more flexible and less constrained *ijtihād* system, rejects the hair-splitting by the *fuqahā'* (experts in Islamic

jurisprudence), encourages every individual not to rely on the judgments of religious experts, seeks to merge the different schools of law into one single school, and finally emphasizes the Qur'ān and Sunna over the consensuses of the four schools of law as authoritative sources for beliefs, ritual practices, ethics and law. Al-Būṭī does not deny that modern conditions demand a flexible *ijtihād* system and that the gate of *ijtihād* should be kept open. He says: 'It is absolutely necessary to study conditions and problems that are new in our time. We have seriously and honestly to study values and customs which are different from what they used to be. No doubt this is one of the central duties Allāh has imposed on us.'⁴⁶ Elsewhere, he previously states that he would always promote *ijtihād* rather than *taqlīd* (imitation of the rulings of *mujtahids*) if Muslims are faced with issues that could not have been dealt with by previous generations of the Muslim community.⁴⁷ In fact, Shaykh al-Būṭī encourages people to use their individual opinion (*ra'y*) so they may study the authoritative sources extensively. 'If a person finds a different understanding of a particular issue, conflicting textual proofs or a divergent Ḥadīth to that of his school, then he is bound by the results of his own *ijtihāds* and should not follow his Imām.'⁴⁸ The Shaykh also strongly supports the famous idea of the 1984 Conference of Islamic Thought in Constantine to establish an independent board of the most prominent '*ulamā*' of the Islamic world to give institutionally collective *ijtihāds* about newly emerging issues.⁴⁹ Metaphorically, he compares this system with two boats, one containing Islam and its law, the other all signs of modern civilization, which are driven parallel through the constant work of *mujtahidūn* (persons who make juridical decisions, *ijtihāds*).⁵⁰

However, in spite of his enthusiasm for regaining the flexibility of the pre-classical *ijtihād* system, he rejects what he calls 'selfish arbitrariness' in looking at *ijtihād*. 'Some of them (modernists) believe that *ijtihād* is a kind of secret recipe to fulfill all their dreams, to open all gates and to pull down all barriers, a kind of permission to do forbidden things.'⁵¹ For him, it is unacceptable that every individual should have the right to exercise his or her own *ijtihād*. On the contrary, the process of *ijtihād* demands deep knowledge of all the relevant sources and the capability to apply rules from authoritative texts to modern circumstances. As long as the *muqallid* (imitator) does not reach the level of knowledge of the *mujtahid*, the former has to follow the latter. Supporting his strong hierarchical view on religious knowledge with a saying of al-Shāṭibī, al-Būṭī claims that in the case of intellectual inferiority the ruling of the *mujtahid* is binding for the *muqallid*—as binding as the Qur'ān and Sunna are for the *mujtahid*.⁵²

Al-Būṭī feels the threat of modernists challenging established authority. 'How is it possible for the *muqallid* to replace his Imām every day, who will be then followed by another Imām? Or should that happen every month or every year? If the *muqallid* is obliged to do that, where is the legal proof to back this necessity?'⁵³ What happens, asks al-Būṭī next, when people stop following their Imāms? And he gives the answer: It is as if people were to ignore the knowledge of engineers in building their houses, or that of physicians in healing their illnesses or that of specialists in running factories. There is no doubt what will ensue: a dangerous chaos. People will destroy their houses, suppress their souls and produce poverty. 'And all that, because people displaced *ijtihād* from its rightful place and applied it without any condition, and because people ignored the normative practice of Allāh which consists of mutual co-operation, help, instruction and counseling among different groups of people.'⁵⁴ When he compares the science of deriving rulings with that of proper medical diagnosis, he is informing the reader that he lives today in an age in which specialization has become essential: 'Is it not a sin

when the father of a seriously ill child gives him the wrong medicine only because he looked in medical textbooks for himself instead of consulting a trained medical practitioner?⁵⁵ And thus it is, he concludes, in matters of religion: it will be foolish and hazardous for everyone to study the sources in order to become his own *muftī* (authority who makes general juridical decisions).

Furthermore, al-Būṭī warns his readers against exercising eclectic *ijtihād*, which he observes among Islamists who are ‘not well versed in Islamic law, the principles of jurisprudence or early Islamic history’. They become convinced of the islamicity of the issue and then attempt to justify their position by selecting texts which support their preconceived position. But traditionally each new problem should be seen in isolation and not considered as a means to fulfilling a purpose. Shaykh al-Būṭī defends the traditional method of linking new problems to authoritative scripture or a text of the Imāms in order to make a decision as to the permissibility and non-permissibility (or *bidʿa*: condemned innovation) of an action. In this respect, he strongly argues against the ‘trend to revitalize al-Ṭūfī’s concept which authorizes *maṣlaḥa mursala* (considerations of public interest) to take precedence over all other considerations; that is to say: if the Qurʾān and Sunna and other proofs of the Sharīʿa happen to conform to the *maṣlaḥa* of the people in a particular case they should be applied forthwith, but if they oppose it *maṣlaḥa* should take precedence over them. Those ‘fantasies’, polemicalizes al-Būṭī, give free rein to all sorts of abuse. For him, a concept that authorizes recourse to *maṣlaḥa* without the existence of a *naṣṣ* (explicit text) is unthinkable.⁵⁶

Against the background of Muslim modernists’ attempts to ‘disqualify a whole corpus of ritual actions and religious institutions as un-Islamic’, he develops in his book, *The Salafiyya: a blessed, historically limited period, not an Islamic school*, an ‘academic method towards knowledge of and commentary on, texts’ (*manhaj ʿilmī fī l-maʿrifa wa tafsīr al-nuṣūṣ*),⁵⁷ or, as he calls it later on, ‘a universal method’ (*al-manhaj al-jāmi*).⁵⁸ Here, al-Būṭī revitalizes the classical apparatus of textual analysis and criticism in order to correct the *salafiyya* movement in its ‘hasty eliminating of all that had slipped into the Islamic Tradition’. He emphasizes the fact that not all the *aḥkām* (injunctions) of the Sharīʿa are equally important or permanent, and therefore that different interpretations can be permitted. There are hypothetical judgments which mainly deal with transactions, customs, and manners. These are open to *ijtihād*. Disagreement based on authentic *ijtihād* on these issues represents no harm or threat. On the other hand, there are *aḥkām* dealing with matters of faith, belief and *ʿibādāt* which are firmly established in the Qurʾān, Sunna and *ijmāʿ* (consensus), which are definitive, categorical and not open to *ijtihād*. Overly ambitious Muslims should be fully aware of which issues are open to disagreement and which are not. More importantly, they should know the standard norms of behaviour practised in settling differences and disagreements. They must learn the ethics of disagreement (*adab al-khilāf*) in Islamic jurisprudence. ‘The “essence” of Islamic law is not to prescribe absolute certainty’.⁵⁹

Again, the Shaykh is harsh in his criticism of the classical *salafiyya* and young modernists today who have ‘no deep understanding of classical Islam, the methodology of *uṣūl al-fiqh* and other such skills in Islamic scholarship’, but tend to classify other *mujtahids* as *kāfirs* (unbelievers). In his view, the lack of understanding of the ‘true meaning of Islam’ among Muslims has also led them to condemn what are intrinsic parts of Islam, such as Ṣūfism or specific types of Islamic worship. Through applying traditional terminology, al-Būṭī reaches a much less radical view and a more differentiated picture of valid Islamic practices. He teaches his reader to apply the old reliable differentiation between what is just divergent opinion (*khilāf*), deviation (*shudhūdh*),

departure from, or distortion of the truth (*inhirāf*), and what is in fact godlessness (*kufī*).⁶⁰ Furthermore, he argues against modernists that finding out the intention of someone who is performing a certain ritual ‘only by watching his outward ritual behaviour’, is misleading. Some rituals mean true worship of Allāh, even if they were not explicitly ordered or performed by the Prophet Muhammad. As for Şūfism, Sa‘īd al-Būṭī shares the modernist criticism that the establishment of Şūfī orders, the sacralization and blind obedience of Şūfī shaykhs by their followers, worship at tombs, and the exclusive and emotionalized way of reciting *dhikr* and *tasbīh* have led to ‘a distortion of true Islam’.⁶¹ This is what he calls ‘sentimental Şūfism’ (*al-ṭaṣawwuf al-wijḍānī*),⁶² which he rejects. According to al-Būṭī, it is true that many Şūfis do not follow the aims of the Islamic *da‘wā*, but only selfish interests. ‘I know a lot of Şūfī shaykhs who do not preach honestly, but do it professionally. They want to earn money, political influence and power as spiritual leaders. They do it just so that others may say: Look at how many students and *murīdūn* (followers) he has!’⁶³ At the same time, al-Būṭī points out that he does not accept the zealous demand that Şūfism should be condemned and expelled from Islam. ‘I am so puzzled by a Muslim who joins his brothers in the *rukū‘* and *sujūd* of their prayers, who feels their turn to Allāh in God’s places of prayer, but runs away from *dhikr* meetings. Is it not astonishing that he flees if he spots Muslims who stretch out their arms towards Allāh as if he has seen a revolt against God?!’⁶⁴ Al-Būṭī warns against mixing sentimental Şūfism up with ethically oriented Şūfism (*al-ṭaṣawwuf al-akhlāqī*), which consists of activities based on the Qur’ān, Sunna and Islamic law.⁶⁵

Al-Būṭī’s main books and thoughts aim at condemning ‘those people who not only assume that they know the whole truth, but who also try to coerce other people to follow them, believing that they can eradicate all *madhhabs* and disagreements and unite all people in one single stroke.’⁶⁶ They tend to forget that their own understanding and interpretation of the texts are no more than hypotheses which may be right or wrong. However, in spite of his harsh criticism of ‘overambitious’ *salafiyya* adherents, he is very cautious not to condemn them all. While, for example, he shows his disapproval at the *salafiyya* attempt to establish their own school ‘creating adherents of a new *madhhab* (school) as a result of partisanship and sectarian egoism, thus splitting up the Islamic community’,⁶⁷ he cannot on the other hand deny their contribution in having introduced a new, fresh and radical impulse towards a rejuvenated Islamic society.⁶⁸ Shaykh al-Būṭī supports their call for adherence to the texts and their new interpretations and understandings of the Islamic past. His final statement is, therefore, rather vague: ‘We do not want them to give up their opinions about *ijtihād*. We only want to remind them that they should not consider themselves the only true representatives of Islam ..., but we do not exclude theirs and others’ opinions from our programme of *ijtihād* outlined here.’⁶⁹

Shaykh al-Būṭī as Religious Leader

The higher al-Būṭī climbed up the academic ladder of Islamic scholarship the more his thoughts turned towards concerns of the whole Muslim community (*umma*) or to the theoretical premises of a modern Islamic civilization (*al-ḥaḍāra al-islāmiyya al-mu‘āṣira*). Unlike many other modern Muslim thinkers, he extends the modernist debate about Western progress (*taqaddum*) and Islamic backwardness (*takhalluf*). When the Shaykh talks about the reasons for the crisis of Islam in our century, he does not blame Islamic religion as the main cause. We read that ‘almost all of the social, cultural,

and other problems which the Islamic community (*umma*) has been suffering from, arise from one single source: that Muslims felt attracted to Western civilization'.⁷⁰ Their turn away from Islam during the first decades of our century was due to the fact that they interpreted European progress and superiority as a result of secularization, that is the success in restraining the influence and power of the Christian Church. The angry outburst of Westerners against the Church, their turning away from all religious activities and their focus on a purely materialistic way of life had a tremendous effect on Muslims, who then thought that progress was only possible without religion. Totally ignoring the importance of religion, al-Būṭī continues, they rejected all Islamic prescriptions and rules of conduct; they were convinced that Islam was insufficient for all the areas of social life and was unable to solve the question of power. Today, however, one can clearly recognize the 'end of blindness and a de-mystification of European progress'. Every Westerner now feels in his soul and his mind the results of the total absence of religion, which again has had an immense influence on Muslims and their attitude towards religion.⁷¹ Unlike previous generations of reform-minded Muslim scholars, Shaykh al-Būṭī rejects the feeling of inferiority to the West. In his preaching and writing is an implicit optimism and a feeling of the superiority of Islam. He writes repeatedly that Islam has now returned to the Islamic world, and that there is no Muslim who would doubt whether Islam had political and social sufficiency, whether Islam was compatible with the sciences or not, because Muslims have put a stop to some of the traditional scholars' retrogressive perception of modern intellect and knowledge. Muslims are now ready to accept Islam as a comprehensive system of worship (*'ibādāt*) and authoritative legislation (*Sharī'a*).⁷² At the back of the West's own deep social, moral and spiritual crisis—or moral inferiority—Shaykh al-Būṭī discerns a new attractiveness of Islam.

Young Muslims react to recent developments in the Western world, the collapse of the family, the destruction of culture, morality and health, through drugs, venereal diseases and neuroses. Muslims who thought that the Western way of life was the best way to live, are now disappointed and return to Islam.⁷³

The Shaykh even thinks of a post-modern mutual dependence between Islam and the West: 'In the name of Islam and its Law Muslims have the right to adopt that of Western civilization which has proved to be good and useful'.⁷⁴ Westerners for their part could adopt from Islam what they need to escape spiritual devastation and attain salvation. This mutual exchange follows the new insight into the global character of the destruction caused by civilization and the perception that this sickness can only be healed by religion.⁷⁵

However, despite this appealing analysis of recent developments related to the Muslim mentality, he is a less clear and straightforward about how to achieve an Islamic society based on Islamic worship (*'ibādāt*) and *Sharī'a*. In his most controversial book, *Jihād in Islam: how we understand it and how we apply it*, the shaykh basically rejects *jihād* (self-exertion in the cause of Allāh) as a violent means of changing the balance of power and society. Against today's mainstream Islamism he declares the ultimate reason (*'illa*) for *jihād* to be the prevention of robbery or brigandage (*dar' al-ḥirāba*) and the defence of existing things, and not as a means of fighting against unbelief (*qaḍā' al-kufr*). Furthermore, he differentiates between those *mujāhids* who have committed *baghy* (false or evil endeavour) and those who have committed *ḥirāba* (highway robbery). Whereas the former (*al-bughāt*) do not obey an Imām's or a *khalīfa*'s *ijtihād* but have

their own valid and accepted *ijtihād*, the latter (*al-muḥāribūn*) attack the ruler without any juridical legitimization. Looking around the Islamic world, he complains:

If we could only apply the conditions of *al-baghy* to those who proclaim their attacks on their rulers, who are dedicated to kill, to assassinate treacherously (*fatk*) and to steal (*khatf*). If only they could differentiate between those who called the Prophet the obedient (*al-ṭā'ī'*) and the sinful (*al-fājir*)!⁷⁶

However, al-Būṭī's differentiation has harsh consequences: if *mujāhids* are accused of being *muḥāribūn*, then the ruler is allowed by Islamic law to treat them as such, as *murtaddūn* or *kuffār* (people actively against Islam), which could lead to their execution.⁷⁷ Because of this judgment, al-Būṭī was criticized for being in the same camp as the currently ruling despots. One of his critics said:

The reader of his book gets the feeling that the author was not successful in dealing with some of the problems of our contemporary world, as he flatters the rulers who call themselves 'Imāms of the Muslims' but do not apply the Sharī'a of Allāh. For him [al-Būṭī], they are not unbelievers and attacks on them are forbidden.⁷⁸

In fact, the Shaykh is very reluctant to condemn rulers as *kuffār*. Even if they have ordered the closure of mosques, Sharī'a schools and institutes in order to prevent Islamic mission (*da'wā*), attacks on them are not allowed. *Da'wā* can take place somewhere else: in squares, courtyards or gardens!⁷⁹ However, at the same time Shaykh al-Būṭī is aware of the fact that he could easily be accused of being corrupted and patronized by the authorities. He himself has always blamed other '*ulamā'*' for having lost the courage to disagree with rulers, of being silent about the rulers' atrocities and their negligence of Sharī'a, and of glorifying and commending them for such deplorable actions. That is why he emphatically adds:

'Obviously it is necessary to repeat and stress that an attack on the ruler, that is a revolution against him, is one thing, and a rebellious disobedience against him ('*adam ṭā'atīhi fi l-ma'ṣiyya*) is another thing. How often people obliterate the distinction!⁸⁰

He regards patience in the face of the injustice of the ruler or in the face of suffering, and perseverance in the face of deviance or provocation as the highest values of an honest and sound *da'wā*, which is free of violence (*qahr*) and force (*ilzām*).⁸¹ Al-Būṭī makes clear that a forceful *da'wā* doesn't mean fanatic, violent actions, and although he repeatedly indicates that he feels some sympathy with those who are suffering from oppression and exploitation, he can never accept violence. Inspired by Gandhi's concept of non-violent resistance, his thoughts are preoccupied with the Islamic mission as an educational and non-violent means.⁸² We can infer from his writings that he considers the complete return to the Islamic way of life and the establishment of the Islamic state as a gradual process, taking into account that right belief (*īmān*) is a precondition for an Islamic way of life. 'Only when all individuals in a society, or most of them, have chosen Islam and declared their obedience to its rules and principles, can an Islamic society based on the contract of obedience to Allāh ('*ubūdiyya Allāh*) emerge.'⁸³

According to al-Būṭī, Islam needs to be rooted in every Muslim mind and heart, otherwise the fetters of disbelief, superstition and ignorance will remain. A Muslim *dā'ī* (missionary) should concentrate his effort on teaching monotheism (*tawḥīd*) and the Sharī'a injunctions, purifying the heart from doubts, sins and distractions, so that the

heart which embraces the right faith constitutes a nucleus of the correct Islamic way of life. We read elsewhere:

If a person commits himself to worship and applies all its rules and *adābs*, this will urge him to complete obedience to Allāh. He will automatically be turned into a bed of different virtues where the seeds of righteous politics, social cooperation and justice will grow. All good things will grow there reaching a perfect state.⁸⁴

At the same time, the Shaykh continues, this will enable the individual to turn against all symptoms of tyranny (*ẓulm*), abuse of power, acquisitive greed and oppression of the weak.⁸⁵ It will prevent people from self-idolization (*taʿalluh*) and from considering themselves superior to others (*takabbur*), moreover the weak and deprived will overcome humiliation and inferiority, thus regaining freedom, dignity, power and pride.⁸⁶ The *ḥikma* (underlying purpose of a rule) of worship is that the emotions are being constantly purified as human life is being constantly observed by Allāh. It is evident that for Shaykh al-Būṭī ritual acts have extra-religious values, that is that worship means a personal awareness of the social well-being of society, since it is prescribed as social events: the five daily prayers as a meeting of the neighbourhood, the Friday prayer as a weekly meeting of the whole city or village, and the pilgrimage as an annual gathering of the whole Islamic community. Hence, al-Būṭī concludes, the mosque, as the place of worship, is the foundation of the Islamic state (*al-ḥajar al-asāsī al-awwal fī bināʾ al-dawla al-islāmiyya*), a symbol of unity, equality and harmony between the individual and the *umma*, and between the *umma* and the ruler of the country. 'There is a natural growing up of our souls, but only provided that these souls are moulded together within the melting pot (*būdaqa*) of the mosque.'⁸⁷

However, what makes al-Būṭī different from an orthodox preacher who stresses the importance of individual piety and public religiosity for the well-being of society, is that he attaches great importance to the power of the nation state. His main interest is to convince his readers and listeners that a strong nation state guarantees the best way of establishing a true Islamic civilization. At the same time, an Islamic *daʿwā* that promotes 'a purified soul' and 'an enlightened, conscious and educated heart'⁸⁸ would strengthen the nation state against neo-colonialist attempts to regain control over the country. In the light of this post-colonialist setting we have to understand the Shaykh's sermonizing stand: his crusade against superstition, ignorance, materialism and sectarianism. He carries out an energetic polemic against some of the phenomena of popular religion, e.g. *tashāʾum* (taking things as evil omens), certain fertility rites and talisman cults 'under the guise of true religion'.⁸⁹ 'In fact, superstition not only damages religion but all pillars of society: religion (*dīn*), culture (*thaqāfa*), patriotism (*waṭaniyya*) and nationalism (*qawmiyya*). That is why foreign enemies often sow superstition.'⁹⁰ If one stops propagating and teaching clearly and comprehensively 'an undistorted, true picture of Islam'⁹¹ then, so we are assured, the enemies of Islam immediately come and brainwash Muslims with something different. This causes the latter to have doubts about the competence of Islam to adopt reason and science and fight the evils within Islamic civilization. When Muslims are constantly presented with an irrational, superstitious and sentimental Islam, they will be tempted to give up Islam again. Good examples of his endeavour to fight ignorance are the sermons in which he accuses his fellow Muslims of 'regressive attitudes', e.g. when they extort the *mahr* (bridal gift) from their daughters, when they deny their wives the right to attend prayers and Islamic instruction in mosques, when they keep them in public places half a metre behind

themselves or when they are ashamed of hearing their wives' names spoken. 'All of these are acts of ignorance (*jāhiliyya*), not of Islam!'⁹² As for materialism and moral decadence, he states that the modern world is full of materialistic desires, passion and seduction ('the modern weapons of the ideological war'⁹³), which are mobilized by neo-colonialist forces to keep people from getting closer to God, as has already happened in the West. Finally, even the fragmentation of the national community is, according to al-Būṭī, clearly a colonialist phenomenon. A distorted picture of Islam is spread among the population causing total ignorance of people towards Islamic ideals such as magnanimity, unity and co-operation, thus creating sectarianism and unrest within the nation.⁹⁴

Since he perceives superstition, ignorance, materialism and sectarianism as the main obstacles to creating national unity (*al-waḥda al-waṭaniyya*) and an Islamic civilization (*al-ḥaḍāra al-islāmiyya*), it has become Shaykh al-Būṭī's preoccupation to denounce all phenomena and practices which he regards as their preconditions or results. In positive terms, he believes that 'knowledge' creates in the hearts and minds of Muslims a kind of a shield against 'all signs of these evils'. 'We need literature that does not distort Islamic truth, but spreads an honest morality. We need spiritual and emotional food to satisfy thirst, to keep them [the Muslims] from being attracted to the slippery ground of meanness and the precipice of their ruin.'⁹⁵ He announces himself as a spiritual guide who leads his followers to the truth and to full harmony with Allāh's creation (*fiṭra*). 'The aim of my work is to provide a key for the locks of Islam, a simple path to correct knowledge about the truths of our majestic religion, to right belief, judgement, society and morality.'⁹⁶

Conclusion

As for the debate about his role as an influential Islamic figure in Syria, many Syrians see in al-Būṭī *the* representative of a modern and self-conscious Islam, whose religious and social affairs are rationally determined, of a moderate and non-violent Islam in the post-revivalist era, of a problem-oriented, socially pragmatic and denominationally ecumenical Islam in the instability of Syria's political and economic opening up. Others, however, think that al-Būṭī represents those thinkers whose attempt at comprehensive Islamic reform has failed, being stuck halfway between the traditional, socially conservative legacy and a modern, socially and politically progressive Islam. Yet, in his role as a Muslim leader, al-Būṭī seems always to have tried to present Islam as a modern, rational, enlightened and self-aware religion. He has adopted the Muslim Brotherhood's appeal to the Syrian nation to devote themselves to reading and studying Islamic knowledge for the development of a self-confident and self-sufficient Islamic civilization. Like them he emphasizes principles like social justice, social solidarity, mutual social responsibility, strengthening the national economy and increasing national prosperity. But unlike them, he attempts to prove that real progress can only be achieved through a synthesis of Islamic faith, ethics, academic research and support by the (existing) state, adopting the idea that absolute faith (*īmān*) in God is the basis of a moral society.

As a Muslim *ʿālim* and *faqīh* he is challenged by the modernist view on traditional scholarship and the literalistic understanding of authoritative scriptures. Not that he feels threatened in his position and status as a religious expert (like many traditionalists before him); rather he regards the decline of the *ʿulamāʾ* as the loss of an important

part of the Islamic tradition. He believes that Muslims will lack a proper methodology for comprehending and developing ‘the essence of Islam’, which is much more than merely a literal understanding of the scriptures. This can only be achieved when there is a deep and wide knowledge of the texts, especially the Qurʾān and the traditions of the Prophet, in addition to an insight into the reasons, the events, the circumstances, and the purposes underlying each text, as well as an ability to distinguish between the eternal and unalterable and those formulated to meet a temporary need, an existing custom or tradition, or certain circumstances, which can be changed when the latter change. Fulfilling the legacy of Mullah Ramaḍān al-Būṭī as well as that of his teachers Ḥasan Habannakah, Muṣṭafā as-Sibāʿī and Saʿīd Nursī, Shaykh al-Būṭī’s paramount project was therefore to build sound and independent institutions of Islamic learning capable of producing excellent scholars steeped in the Islamic tradition and keeping abreast of the demands and dilemmas of the modern age.

Concerning his place as a ‘culture broker’ of Islamic tradition, his statements on the *salafiyya* movement illustrate the potentially conflicting tendency between his role as an Islamic scholar, who must watch over proper and sound juridical reasoning, and his role as religious leader, who regards religious fervour and conscious interest in Islam as more important than an overcorrect observance of all rules. It is this ambiguity and his role as a buffer between the Syrian secular authorities and the Muslim community that have made him one of the most controversial figures in the contemporary Middle East. Certainly, it is too early to make a final statement about Shaykh al-Būṭī’s place, as his independence and intellectual integrity are today much more at stake than when he was a middle ranked *ʿālim*. However, he still enjoys great respect for his charismatic teaching and an enormous popular legitimacy envied by others. In his various roles as preacher, *muftī*, teacher, and spiritual mentor he continues to attract millions of young Muslims all over the Islamic world. Considering the fact that Kurdish scholars have always benefitted from President Asad’s special patronage in achieving high positions within the religious establishment, Shaykh al-Būṭī could become an even more public figure. Al-Būṭī is of the right age, and has the proper Islamic Sharīʿa background and a very close relationship to President Asad, which could enable him one day to become the successor of the current Grand Mufti of Syria, Aḥmad Kaftaro.

NOTES

1. It was during my field studies in Damascus in the months of Ramaḍān 1995 and 1996 that I learned about al-Būṭī’s great significance and reputation. To my question which of the *ʿulamāʾ* in Damascus gives the best Ramaḍān sermons everybody answered in unison: Shaykh al-Būṭī. Seeking advice about which of the scholars in Damascus I should primarily consult about the relationship between Islam and social change in Syria, I was again referred to al-Būṭī: ‘Talk to him first’, I was told. ‘You will then realize that you need not see anybody else!’ Having thus become aware of al-Būṭī’s leading position in Syria’s spiritual life I was anxious to meet him personally. Last year I encountered al-Būṭī only briefly after one of his sermons whereas this year I succeeded in conducting an interview with him in his university office.
2. Al-Būṭī, *Hādihā wālīdī: al-qīṣṣa al-kāmīla li ḥayāt al-shaykh mullah ramaḍān al-būṭī min wilādatihi ilā wafātihi* (Damascus, 1995), 14.
3. *Ibid.*, 4.
4. The father is described as furious about such measures as the abolition of the call to prayer in Arabic, the replacement of the Arabic by the Latin alphabet, the prohibition of reciting the Qurʾān publicly, the translation of the Qurʾān into Turkish, the prescription to wear European clothes and the prohibition of women to wear the *ḥijāb* and *niqāb*—all of those ‘acts of dangerous sabotage undertaken under pressure from British hegemony’ (*ibid.*, 29–32).

5. *Ibid.*, 17.
6. Because of the family's poverty (the father had to work as a trader in Islamic books, which he delivered mainly to the Kurdish Jezira region, beside his profession as Imām and *khaṭīb* of the al-Rifā'ī Mosque in the al-Hārat al-Jadīda neighbourhood), the father had to sell quite a large number of his own books, otherwise he would not have been able to hold the wedding celebration (*ibid.*, 62).
7. Al-Būṭī could escape from being called up to the Syrian military service only by becoming a student at a high school, since in the fifties the law that the only son of a family is exempt from conscription had not yet come into force (*ibid.*, 63).
8. The Ministry of Education has been trying to establish a system whereby teaching jobs are given to graduates with the highest marks in a qualifying test. Candidates on the lower end of the list have no chance of a job and have to repeat the test the following year.
9. Among the religious scholars al-Būṭī first encountered were exclusively Kurdish 'ulamā', such as Mulla 'Abd Al-Majīd, Mulla 'Alī, Muḥammad Jāzu, Mulla Sa'īd, Mulla 'Abd al-Jalīl, Mulla Khālid.
10. This is the subtitle of the book *Mamu Zayn* (Damascus, 1958).
11. Other activities included the editing of *Nahj al-Anam* (a manual of decent religious and ethical behaviour) and *Nu Bahr* (a dictionary of juridical terminology). I am very grateful to Sandra Houot for these details.
12. In 1949, the Brotherhood in Damascus won 23% of the parliamentary seats, 19% in 1954, and still 18% in 1961, see: Hanna Batatu, Syria's Muslim Brethren, *MERIP Reports*, 12/9 (1982), 17; also Umar F. Abd Allah. *The Islamic Struggle in Syria* (Berkeley, 1983), 88–95; A. R. Kelidar, Religion and State in Syria, *Asian Affairs* 61/1 (1974), 16–22.
13. *Hādhā wālidī*, 127.
14. Cf. Henry Munson Jr., *Islam and Revolution in the Middle East* (New Haven, 1988), 89; Ibrahim Hassan, La Syrie de la guerre civile, *Peuples Méditerranéens* 12 (1980), 91–108; Ramond A. Hinnebusch, The Islamic movement in Syria, in Ali E. Dessouki (Ed.), *Islamic Resurgence in the Arab World* (New York, 1982), 138–169.
15. Farzana Schaikh (Ed.), *Islam and Islamic Groups* (London, 1992), 233; also Thomas Mayer, The Islamic opposition in Syria, 1961–1982, *Orient*, 24/4 (1983), 589–609; Johannes Reissner, *Ideologie und Politik der Muslimbrüder Syriens* (Freiburg, 1980).
16. Cf. Henry Munson Jr., *Islam and Revolution in the Middle East*, 88–89; Michael C. Hudson, The Islamic factor in Syrian and Iraqi politics, in James Piscatori (Ed.), *Islam in the Political Process* (Cambridge, 1983), 82–86.
17. Al-Būṭī could not himself take part in the gathering, but remembers the participants: his father, Ḥasan Habannakah, Aḥmad al-Dakar, 'Abd al-Karīm al-Rifā'ī, Amin al-Miṣrī, and the study subjects: *Al-risāla* by Imām al-Shāfi'ī and *Al-majmū'* by Imām al-Nawawī (*Hādhā wālidī*, 130).
18. *Ibid.*, 130–132. During my talk with al-Būṭī he did not seem reluctant to praise him as a warm-hearted and pious teacher with an enormous influence on him and other students. Looking back to his own life al-Būṭī reports that he learnt Islamic knowledge mainly from 'two mentors and spiritual leaders' (*ustādḥayn wa murshidayn*), his father and Ḥasan Habannakah al-Midānī (*ibid.*, 62).
19. Cf. Serif Mardin, Bediüzzaman Said Nursi (1873–1960): the shaping of a vocation, in John Davis (Ed.), *Religious Organization and Religious Experience* (London, 1982), 65–79; also EI1, Vol. VII, 143.
20. Al-Būṭī, *Min al-fikr wa l-qalb, fuṣ'ul an-naqd fi l-'utum wa l-ijtimā' wa l-adab* (2nd ed., Damascus, 1972), 240.
21. He argued that assassination did not belong either to 'killing because of apostacy' (*qatl al-murtadd*), 'killing because of retaliation' (*al-qatl qaṣāṣan*) or 'killing because of unjust war or robbery/brigandage' (*al-qatl bi-sabab al-ṣiyāl aw al-ḥirāba*) (*Hādhā wālidī*, 140); cf. also Karl Binswanger, Politischer 'Islamischer Fundamentalismus': das Beispiel der Syrischen Muslimbrüderschaft, *Orient*, 22/4 (1981), 644–653.
22. *Hādhā wālidī*, 140–141.
23. *Ibid.*, 141.
24. *Ibid.*, 140.
25. 1: *Bāṭn al-iḥm: al-khaṭar al-akbar fi ḥayāt al-muslimīn* (n.d.); 2: *Al-insān wa 'adālat allāh fi l-arq* (n.d.); 3: *Manhaj tarbawī jarīd fi l-qur'ān* (n.d.); 4: *Ilā kull fatāt tu' min bi l-lāh* (n.d.); 5: *Al-islām wa mushkilāt al-shabāb* (1393 h); 6: *Min asrār al-manhaj al-rabbānī* (n.d.); 7: *Man huwa sayyid*

- al-qadr fī ḥayāt al-insān?* (2nd 1976); 8: *Man al-mas'ūl 'an takhalluf al-muslimīn* (n.d.); 9: *Hākadhā fal-nadā'u ilā l-islām* (n.d.); 10: *Al-dīn wa l-falsafa* (2nd 1994).
26. Al-Būṭī, *Bāṭin al-ithm*, 2.
 27. They are sold under the trademark: 'Hafith Records: Production and Distribution of Qur'ān Recitations and Hymns of Praise on the Prophet' (*tasjīlāt al-ḥafīz: intāj wa tawzī' khitām al-qur'ān wa l-madā'ih al-nabawīyya*).
 28. In 1996 a cassette costed 40 Syrian pounds (50 pence), which is about a quarter of the price of a book with religious content.
 29. Cf. Sandra Houot, *Le rôle de la fatwā chez le Sayh syrien Sa'īd Ramadan al-Buti, ou le glissement de la dimension légale à la dimension éthique, au détour du corps*, unpublished paper at the EURAMES conference 1996.
 30. Al-Būṭī, *Muḥāḍarāt fī l-ḥiq al-muqāran*, 1970; *Ḥiq as-sīra al-nabawīyya ma' mījaz li ta'rīkh al-khulafā' al-rashīda*, 1968; *Ḍawābiṭ al-maṣlaḥa fī l-sharī'a al-islāmīyya*, 1965; *Min rawā'ī' al-qur'ān: ta'ammulāt 'ilmiyya wa adabīyya fī kitāb allāh 'azza wa jalla*, 1975; *Qaḍāyā fiḥīyya mu'āshira*, 1994.
 31. Most of al-Būṭī's books are now reprinted in their fourth, fifth or in two cases even eighth and tenth edition. Hundreds of thousands copies must have been sold by now even taking into consideration that in the Arab world only small editions are printed. Al-Būṭī's enormous output occasionally still seems to astonish Arabic booksellers. When I asked one of them which works by al-Būṭī he had and he discovered the huge stock on his shelves, he exclaimed: '*Huwa majnūn*'— 'This man is just mad!'
 32. Al-Būṭī, *Naqd awḥām al-maddīyya al-jadaliyya al-diyālaktikiyya* (Damascus, 1978); *Al-jihād fī l-islām kayf naḥmuhu wa kayf numārisuhu?* (Damascus, 1993); *Tajriba al-tarbīyya al-islāmīyya fī mīzān al-baḥṭh* (Damascus, 1990); *Al-Lāmadhhabīyya: akhtār bid'a tuḥaddīd al-sharī'a al-islāmīyya* (Damascus, 1969); *As-Salafīyya: marḥala zamanīyya mubāraka lā madhhab islāmī* (Damascus, 1988).
 33. Al-Būṭī, *Mas'alat taḥdīd an-nasl wiqāyatan wa 'ilājan* (Damascus, 1976); *Min al-fikr wa l-qalb* (Damascus, 1972); *Ḥiwār ḥawl mushkilāt ḥaḍariyya* (Damascus, 1993); *Manu zayn: qiṣṣat ḥubb fī l-arḍ wa 'ainha fī l-samā'* (Damascus, 1958).
 34. Al-Būṭī, *Hādhihi mushkilatuhum* (Damascus, 1990); ... *Wa hādhihi mushkilatunā* (Damascus, 1994); *Zawābi' wa aṣḍā' warā'* kitāb al-jihād fī l-islām (Damascus, 1994).
 35. Nabil Fayyād, *Yawm inḥadara al-jamal min al-saqīfa*, 1995; see also for further details Eckart Wörtz, *Traditionelles islamisches Selbstbild und Moderne: Grundzüge einer aktuellen Diskussion in Syrien*, unpublished MA thesis, Friedrich Alexander Universität, Erlangen.
 36. Michael Gilsenan, *Recognizing Islam: religion and society in the modern Middle East* (London, 1982), 31–32.
 37. However, weeping during religious speeches is historically a wide spread phenomenon, which can be seen as a rhetorical device to emotionalize the audience, as William A. Christian Jr. has shown in relation to Christianity (Provoked religious weeping in early modern Spain, in J. Davis, *Religious Organization and Religious Experience*, 97–114).
 38. Al-Būṭī, television sermon, 24 January 1996, Channel 1 (recorded by the author). See also *Al-mar'a bain tughyān an-nizām al-gharbī wa laṭā' if al-tashrī' al-rabbānī* (Damascus, 1996).
 39. The reason for this polemicism is that al-Būṭī sees a link between a high command of the Arabic language and the right understanding of qur'ānic verses. If Muslims neglect their cultural heritage and above all their literary language, they will not be able to read classical and modern Arabic literature, and then they will not grasp the real meaning of words and phrases in their basic religious texts. The more the Arabic language, with its rich and polysemantic vocabulary, is simplified and interspersed with new non-Arabic words the less is the command of qur'ānic words and their ideas (*Tajriba al-tarbīyya al-islāmīyya*, 91–108).
 40. *Zawābi' wa aṣḍā'*, 63.
 41. *Kubrā al-yaqīniyyāt al-kawniyya: wujūd al-khālīq wa waḥīfat al-makhlūq* (Damascus, 1968); *Manhaj al-ḥaḍara al-insāniyya fī l-qur'ān* (Damascus, 1992); *Al-dīn wa l-falsafa* (Damascus, 1994).
 42. *Mas'alat taḥdīd al-nasl*.
 43. See note 30.
 44. Cf. M. Hashem Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society, 1991), XIV.
 45. *Al-lāmadhhabīyya*, 42.
 46. *Ḥiwār ḥawl mushkilāt ḥaḍariyya*, 177.

47. *Muḥāḍarāt fī l-fiqh al-muqāran*, 10–16.
48. *Al-lāmadhhabīyya*, 85.
49. *Ḥiwār ḥawl mushkilāt ḥaḍariyya*, 178.
50. *Ibid.*, 143.
51. *Ibid.*, 143.
52. *Al-lāmadhhabīyya*, 73.
53. *Ibid.*, 76.
54. *Ibid.*, 88.
55. *Ibid.*, 104.
56. *Dawābiṭ al-maṣlaḥa*, 178–189.
57. *Al-salafīyya*, 55.
58. *Ibid.*, 60.
59. *Muḥāḍarāt fī l-fiqh*, 6.
60. *Al-salafīyya*, 109–130.
61. *Ibid.*, 117–130; *Bāṭin al-ithm*, 17–45.
62. *Ibid.*, 79. Al-Būṭī follows here the distinction made by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, who classifies Sūfism as either rational and intellectual or ecstatic and bound in mystical brotherhoods; see: David D. Commins, *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria* (New York, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990).
63. Interview with the author, 2 February 1996.
64. Lecture, given on 22 February 1996 in the Rukn al-Dīn Mosque (recorded by the author).
65. He advocates a new interpretation of *dhikr* performances: ‘*Dhikr* means spiritual mobility of the heart towards Allāh. In its outer appearance it could be *tasbīḥ*, *tahwīd*, *taḥlīl* and *tawḥīd* (invocations) of Allāh or recitations of Allāh’s book, it could be an individual prayer to Allāh to protect him from what he fears, a meditation on Allāh’s attributes, individual or collective devotions, and it could be a mutual reminder not to forget the remembrance of Allāh. Each of these activities can be called *dhikr* and was the habit and tradition of the Prophet’, Lecture 22 January 1996.
66. *Muḥāḍarāt fī l-fiqh*, 15.
67. *Al-Salafīyya*, 244–246.
68. *Ibid.*, 5.
69. *Ibid.*, 258.
70. *Ḥiwār ḥawl mushkilāt*, 33.
71. *Manhaj al-‘awda ilā l-islām: rasm li-minhaj wa ḥall li-mushkilāt* (Damascus, 1980), 9.
72. Al-Būṭī deliberately refuses to speak of ‘*dīn wa dawla*’ (religion and state).
73. Interview by the author, 2 February 1996.
74. *Ḥiwār ḥawl mushkilāt*, 47.
75. *Manhaj al-awda*, 12–13.
76. *Zawābi’ wa aṣdā’ warā’ kitāb*, 35.
77. Cf. ‘Abdur Rahman I. Doi, *Sharī‘ah: The Islamic Law* (London, Ta Ha, 1984), 252.
78. *Zawābi’ wa aṣdā’ warā’ kitāb*, 48.
79. *Ibid.*, 36–37.
80. *Ibid.*, 54.
81. *Ibid.*, 37.
82. *Tajriba al-tarbiyya al-islāmīyya*, 135.
83. *Zawābi’ wa aṣdā’ warā’ kitāb*, 68.
84. *Manhaj al-awda*, 78.
85. *Ibid.*, 78.
86. *Ibid.*, 81.
87. *Ibid.*, 83–84.
88. Interview by the author, 2 February 1996.
89. *Tajriba al-tarbiyya*, 109.
90. *Ibid.*, 110.
91. *Manhaj al-awda*, 11.
92. Lecture on television, 24 January 1996 (recorded by the author).
93. *Ibid.*
94. *Tajriba al-tarbiyya*, 123–132.
95. *Mamu zayn*, 9.
96. *Min al-fikr wa l-qalb*, 6.

APPENDIX

A talk between al-Būṭī (B) and ‘a young man of the *Salafiyya* movement’ (S), in: Muḥammad Saʿīd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī: *Al-lāmadhhabīyya: akḥṭar bidʿa tuḥaddid al-sharīʿa al-islāmīyya ...*, 96–106

He came to my house together with some other thinking young men, who were very eager to study the truth and to clear away doubts. I began our talk by asking him:

B: What is your way (*ṭarīqatak*) to understand the prescriptions of Allāh? Do you take them from the Qurʾān, the Sunna or from the *mujtahid* Imāms?

S: I examine the sayings of the Imāms and the evidence (*adilla*) for them. Then I take what is closest to the evidence of the Qurʾān and the Sunna.

B: You have got 5000 Syrian pounds. Six months are passing, while you are keeping the money. Then you buy goods and trade them. When will you pay *zakāt*—6 months or a whole year after you started trading in the goods?

S: My brother, your question is not a simple one. It is not possible to answer it without the thorough study of the Scriptures. It takes time. But we have come to discuss another matter.

B: (Although I disliked it I asked him): Should every Muslim examine the sayings of the Imāms and then have them confirmed by the Qurʾān and the Sunna?

S: Yes.

B: That means that everybody is as able to perform *ijtihād* as the Imāms of the schools. Even much better than the Imāms, for they will judge the opinions of the Imāms with the standards of the Qurʾān and the Sunna in mind. So they are much more knowledgeable than all of them are together!

S: In fact, you can divide people into three categories: *muqallid*, *mutṭabiʿ* and *mujtahid*. A *mutṭabiʿ* is someone who is able to differentiate between the different schools and can choose what is closest to the Qurʾān and Sunna. He is between the levels of *mujtahids* and *muqallids*.

B: What are the duties of a *muqallid*?

S: He follows the *mujtahidūn* without any reasoning.

B: Is he forbidden to follow one of them, and then to leave him and turn to another one?

S: Yes, he is not allowed to do that.

B: What is the evidence (*dalīl*) for this prohibition?

S: The evidence is that he clings to something which Allāh did not tell him to do.

B: Which of the seven ways did you choose to read the Qurʾān?

S: The *hafṣ*-way.

B: Do you keep to that or do you change your way of reading every day?

S: No, I keep to that.

B: Why do you do this, although Allāh did not tell you to do this?

S: Because I have not studied all the other ways sufficiently so it would be difficult for me to practise them.

B: Someone who studied *fiqh* following al-Shāfiʿī will have not studied sufficiently all the other schools. It will be difficult for him to follow schools other than his own. If you oblige him to study all other schools as well, then you must also oblige yourself to study all other ways of reading the Qurʾān. If you excuse yourself from doing this, then this *muqallid* can do it on his own behalf. Anyway, we say that a *muqallid* is obliged to change his school, and he is not obliged to stick to it.

S: But what forbids him to do this is the fact that he keeps hold of the school because he believes that Allāh has told him to do so.

B: This is a different matter, and indeed there are some doubts about it. But is he also not allowed to keep hold of one *mujtahid*, if he knows that Allāh told him to do so?

S: It is not forbidden.

B: But those around Shaykh Nāzīr informed us that it is disbelief (*kufr*) to keep hold of one Imām and not to leave him.

S: Where can I look it up? (He took the book and read: He who sticks to one of them in all affairs is a mistaken fanatic, who imitates blindly—*mutaʿṣib mukḥṭiʿ* *muqallid taqlīdan ʿaʿmā*). It means that with *kufr* he believes that Allāh has told him to do so, although I must admit that these words are insufficient/misleading.

B: How do you know that this is meant by this word. Why don't you say that the author was wrong?

S: (He insisted that the meaning of the word was so, saying that it was taken out of its context and that the author was beyond errors.)

[...]

B: You see, nobody will forbid someone to change his school. It may be that this used to be so at the time of Ottoman rule, when they disregarded the change of a Ḥanafī to another school. No doubt that this was—provided this is a correct picture of that time—blind fanaticism.

[...]

B: What exactly is the difference between a *muqallid* and a *muṭṭabi*?

S: The *muṭṭabi* is able to evaluate (*yumāyiz*) the sayings and evidence given by the Imāms and then prefer one to the other. This is a different level than pure imitation.

B: If you mean by evaluation that he can assess the quality of a piece of evidence, as well as its insufficiency, then he is on the highest level of *ijtihād*. Are you yourself able to reach that level?

S: I perform it in accordance to what I know.

B: I know that you gave a *fatwā* about divorce in which you ruled that instead of three pronouncements of divorce in one session there need only be one pronouncement. Did you evaluate the sayings of the Imāms, compare them and then base your *fatwā* on them? Did you know the Ḥadīth saying that ‘Ūyamar al-‘Ajlānī pronounced the divorce three times in a session which he held together with the Messenger of God? He said: ‘I have lied to her, o Messenger of God, I have expelled her three times!’ Did you know that as well as the influence of this evidence on the school of Ibn Taymiyya?

S: I didn’t know this Ḥadīth.

B: But how could you give a *fatwā* on this affair, which is different to that of the Imāms, without having consulted their evidence, their definiteness or insufficiencies?

S: I haven’t got all the books in order to evaluate all the evidence given by the Imāms.

B: Why did you not hesitate and wait before deviating from the standpoints of the Imāms? Did you examine their evidence afterwards?

S: No, I have only got a limited amount of sources in my library.

B: You did not know the evidence of the Imāms—as you have admitted—but gave a *fatwā* different from that of the Imāms, being content simply to give a deviant *fatwā*: that is an extreme expression of fanaticism, which you have actually accused us of!

S: But I have consulted the opinions of the Imāms in the books of al-Shawkānī and in *Fiqh al-sunna* by Sayyid Sābiq.

B: Good Lord, all of these books are hostile to the four Imāms in this affair. All of them are written from a certain perspective, and only those arguments are delivered which support that perspective. Don’t you see that you judged your opponents only on the basis of what others heard and said.

S: I don’t see anything in my action which deserves reproach. I had to give an answer to the question, and this was the level I could reach with my knowledge and understanding.

B: You said that a *muṭṭabi* should first evaluate the evidence of the schools, secondly choose one of them, and thirdly apply the one which is closest to the Qur’ān and the Sunna. But you didn’t give a damn about your principle!

S: I couldn’t do it because I hadn’t enough sources about it.

B: Why didn’t you wait? Why did you do something which Allāh didn’t instruct you to do (*lam yukallifuk allāh biḥālik abadan*). Didn’t you only want to support the opinion of Ibn Taymiyya on that affair?

S: But I found in the books which I had in my library one piece of evidence that convinced me. Allāh did instruct me to do exactly that.

B: Is this knowledge which you take as evidence from books compelling enough (*mūjab*) to leave the school which has a different opinion, even if these books do not refer to the evidence of the schools?

S: This is enough!

B: If a young man who knows nothing about Islam reads the Qur’ān (2:115): ‘Allāh is the East and the West, wherever you turn, there is the face of God.’ and got the impression that he can turn in his prayer wherever he wants, although he has heard about the Imāms who fixed the *qibla* facing the Ka’ba, should he stick to his assessment or follow the consensus of the Imāms?

S: He should stick to his assessment/conviction (*qanā’atahu al-dhātīyya*)!

B: Is his prayer valid, even if he prays towards the East?

S: Yes, as he is instructed to keep hold of his convictions.

B: If someone is convinced that it is not forbidden to commit adultery with his neighbour’s spouse, to drink wine or to rob people of their money, would Allāh allow this in the name of conviction?

S: These are unreal things. But he has to study. Didn’t he read a Ḥadīth or a *sūra*?

B: No, not a single word. Are you still convinced of your principle of self-assessment and are you still against the consensus of the Imāms?

S: If he couldn’t study and consult the scriptures, then he is excused. He could only do what his study told him to do.

B: These are strange and dangerous words. I will go and have the words from your mouth published!

S: Do and publish what you want, I have no fear.

B: How can you fear me, if you don't fear Allāh? You show with your words that you don't give a damn about Allāh's words: 'Ask the *ahl al-dhikr*, if you don't know.'

S: My brother, these Imāms are not infallible. Only these verses are infallible. How can you leave the infallible and cling to the fallible?

B: But, we have here the difference between an ignorant young man and fallible *mujtahidūn* Imāms, a difference between little, shallow knowledge and deep research, knowledge and precision.

S: Allāh didn't instruct him to do more than what he can do in accordance to his abilities.

B: Answer my question: If physicians tell a father, whose child has got a serious infection, not to give him penicillin, otherwise he will die, and he finds in dictionaries that penicillin is a medicine against infection, then gives him the medicine, but the child dies, should he be put on trial for what he has done?

S: No, not at all! His self-assessment is the basis of all his actions.

B: He applied his self-assessment and caused the death of his child. Shouldn't that have juridical consequences?

S: No consequences or responsibilities at all!

B: So let us finish our discussion here without your last word. There is no chance whatsoever for a mutual agreement between you and me. With your answer you have left the consensus of the whole Islamic community (*ijmā' al-milla al-islāmiya*)!