

dite and highly readable presentation of all this detailed material, in a book of readable length.

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BÖTTCHER, Annabelle — Syrische Religionspolitik unter Asad. (Freiburger Beiträge zu Entwicklung und Politik, 25). Arnold Bergstraesser Institut, Freiburg i. Br., 1998. (21 cm, 258). ISBN 3-928597-24-8; ISSN 0934-9480. DM 30,—.

Dr Böttcher's study — originally published as a dissertation presented in 1997 to the University of Freiburg in Germany — contains a meticulously detailed, occasionally somewhat encyclopaedic, description and analysis of how Syria's official Sunni Islamic institutions were gradually brought under full control of the Ba'th regime which came to power in 1963. She recounts how various of these religious institutions managed to survive and develop by way of a compromising symbiosis with the Alawi dominated secular Ba'th regime.

Böttcher analyses the developments and changes in various Syrian Islamic institutions, describing organisational authority structures, relevant posts in ministries, the administrative apparatus, the higher *Awqaf* Council, the institution of muftis and grand muftis, the position of preachers, imams and mosque teachers, the place of mosques in political life and religious education, the Hafiz al-Asad Qur'an institutes, the Shari'a Faculty of Damascus University, etcetera. She furthermore deals extensively with the position, background and teachings of the Syrian Grand Mufti, Shaykh Ahmad Kaftaru, whose religious centre *Majma' Abi al-Nur* is described by her as "the largest 'Islamic laboratory' which built a Sufi movement with support of the state" (p. 219). Böttcher concludes that Shaykh Kaftaru's *Naqshbandiya-Kaftariya* Sufi order can be considered as the organisational backbone of Syrian "state Islam" (p.149).

In contrast with Syria's Islamic opposition, Shaykh Kaftaru's *Kaftariya* movement has taken an "extremely friendly position towards the Shi'is" (p. 206), trying to build a bridge between Sunnis and Shi'is in a way which could be seen as a conscious effort to put the Alawi dominated Ba'th regime at ease.

Böttcher notes that the strength of Ahmad Kaftaru is at the same time his weakness: his willingness to cooperate and compromise with the Ba'th regime also discredits him in the eyes of the Islamic opposition and many others in Syria: "He has neither support in the Ministry of *Awqaf*, nor among the Syrian Ulama. Similarly, the *Kaftariya* has little support among Syrian society" (p. 220). Böttcher concludes that whatever precautionary measures President Asad has taken, his "avalanche walls" may nevertheless be unable to ultimately prevent "Ba'th Islamists" from forming a (temporary) coalition with other Islamic forces with the aim of seizing power (p. 228).

To some extent the Ba'thist governmental domination of religious institutions is nothing but a continuation of a long tradition, which also existed under Ottoman rule and before. Different from Ottoman times, however, the Ba'th regime preferred to have a Sunni Shaykh as Grand Mufti who lacked

a strong following among the local Sunni establishment and who might therefore be used as a counterweight against, for instance, the traditionally strong Damascene Sunni establishment.

Böttcher observes that the aim of the strategy of the Ba'th regime was not just to control the religious administration, but also to transform it into a powerless instrument. In addition to changing the structure of official Islamic institutions in this sense, the ruling Ba'thists also filled the various key religious functions with personalities who were expected to be cooperative and willing to support their regime (p. 65).

Böttcher discovered from an internal memorandum circulated in 1989 that Ba'thist control over Islamic life in Syria reached such proportions that the Ministry of *Awqaf* did not only prescribe the central themes of the Friday sermons, but for some specific provinces even dictated their full text (pp. 100-101). It is not fully clear why some provinces have been supervised more strictly than others.

Whereas Böttcher has thoroughly studied the official Sunni Islamic structures and establishments, she does by far not deal as extensively with the other Islamic communities in Syria, such as the Alawis, Druzes and Isma'ilis. To this reviewer this was somewhat disappointing, because members of these communities have played — as is fully acknowledged by Böttcher — such an important role during the Syrian Ba'thist era, Alawis in particular. Nevertheless Böttcher provides interesting insights in their respect. She notes for instance that in certain Syrian circles it is customary to speak on purpose of "five" instead of four Islamic law schools: Shafi'i, Hanafi, Maliki, Hanbali and "Shi'i", so as to take account of sensitivities among the predominantly Alawi rulers of the country. Without much further comment, Böttcher follows the official position of today's Alawi religious leaders that Alawis are in fact "Twelver Shi'i" or "Ja'fari" Muslims. In line with this view, the concept of "Alawis", "Twelver Shi'is" and "Ja'faris" are mostly used interchangeably in the book. Böttcher notes that in areas with a "Twelver Shi'i" or Isma'ili population like Lattakia, Salamiya, Haffa, etc., there are apparently Shi'i muftis. These constitute a paradox in the Sunni *Ifta'* system, because such an institution does not exist in Shi'i law. Making any distinction between Sunni and Shi'i *Ifta'* would be contrary to Ba'thist ideology which officially aims at eliminating sectarian differences and discrimination. In this spirit the first Mufti Conference in Damascus in 1980 reportedly even recommended to do away with the "distinctions that colonialism had created between Islamic law schools" (!)(pp. 71-72).

Syrian parlance of "five" Islamic law schools is not reflected in daily practice, however, as Böttcher notes for instance that the Shafi'i Mufti of Aleppo used to issue fatwas according to "all four law schools" (p. 75), thus being "open minded" towards the three other Sunni schools, while ignoring the fifth "Shi'i" school. The fact that the Grand Mufti of Syria continues to be officially considered as the representative of "all Muslims" in the country, including the Sunnis, Alawis, Isma'ilis and Druzes (p. 145), does not take into account that many, if not most Syrian Sunnis, do not even consider the members of these other Islamic communities as real Muslims.

This is the first time that an academic work with such depth has been published by a western scholar on the earlier mentioned subjects. The reader is repeatedly confronted with a lengthy mass of data, including for instance the detailed

compositions and competencies of Islamic institutions, biographies of religious officials, summaries of educational curricula of classes of Islamic institutions, or even a description of the different floors of the building which houses Shaykh Kaftaru's *Majma' Abi al-Nur*. One will now and then have to plough one's way through sometimes dull, but not irrelevant details, in order to be ultimately rewarded by the interesting analysis and occasionally fascinating insights provided by the author. The work has clearly the character of a thorough dissertation, in which Böttcher apparently wanted to preserve as much as possible of her precious material, which obviously could only be obtained after long and painstaking research. Her study is based on a wide range of secondary and primary written sources (some of them unpublished), as well as on personal interviews conducted in Syria over the period from 1990 till 1996. The book positively reflects the fact that — in spite of several obstacles — she managed to immerse deeply in Syrian religious society by personally attending Islamic ceremonies, festivities, meetings, lectures, school classes, *Dhikr*-sessions, or by observing events in the *Awqaf* Ministry, in mufti offices, Islamic cemeteries, etc.

Although Dr Böttcher's study may at first glance be seen as a book that is particularly attractive for specialised Syria watchers, it should also be considered as a welcome addition to the libraries of those interested in wider themes, such as modern Islamic history, politics of religion ("Religionspolitik"), or the functioning of Islamic institutions under totalitarian rule.

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