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Maḥmūd Shaltūt (1893–1963)

Rainer Brunner

1. Introduction

Of all rectors of the Cairene al-Azhar University in the 20th century, Maḥmūd Shaltūt counts among the most important ones, his relatively short tenure of five years notwithstanding. This is first and foremost due to the fact that it was under his aegis that the far-reaching reform of al-Azhar was carried out in 1961, which not only transformed the (semi-)autonomous university that had been the object of intense reform debates for nearly a century into a state-run institution, but also modernized the curricula and introduced new faculties. As the figurehead of this development, Shaltūt thus also came to embody the dilemma of many Muslim scholars to divide between their traditional role as religious authorities and their newly acquired position as civil servants. It is not least against this political backdrop that Shaltūt's involvement in another central issue of Muslim thought in the 20th century must be considered, namely the efforts to overcome the strife between Sunnis and Shiites. Besides these activities as a religious functionary, however, he also left a scholarly legacy that is worthy of consideration, both in the fields of legal studies and Qur'ānic exegesis. In all this, his career resembled very much that of one of his predecessors as *Shaykh al-Azhar*, Muḥammad Muṣṭafā I-Marāghī, both with regard to reformist activities and the general approach to the Qur'ān.¹

2. Shaltūt, al-Azhar Reform, and the Muslim Ecumene

Maḥmūd Shaltūt's biography is well-researched.² Hailing from humble backgrounds,

¹ On earlier debates about the reform of al-Azhar in general and al-Marāghī (1881–1945) in particular, see in detail the chapter on him in the present volume and the literature given there.

² Apart from the *EP*² article by Werner Ende ("Shaltūt, Maḥmūd," in *EP*² [Leiden: Brill, 1997], 9: 260f.), there are three monographs on Shaltūt in Western languages which bear Shaltūt's name in their title: Wolf-Dieter Lemke, *Maḥmūd Šaltūt (1893-1963) und die Reform der Azhar. Untersuchungen zu Erneuerungsbestrebungen im ägyptisch-islamischen Erziehungssystem* (Frankfurt/Main etc.: Peter Lang, 1980); Kate Zebiri, *Maḥmūd Shaltūt and Islamic Modernism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993);

he was born in 1893 in the Lower Egyptian village Minyat Banī Maṣṣūr, where he also received his primary education. From 1906 on, he attended the religious institute (*al-maʿhad ad-dīnī*) in Alexandria, which had only shortly before (in 1903) been founded at the instigation of Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905), and which was affiliated to al-Azhar.³ After graduating in 1918, he stayed at the institute as a teacher, before being appointed as a lecturer at the Higher Division (*al-qism al-ʿālī*) at al-Azhar in 1927. Interrupted by a four-year period when he worked as a lawyer at the sharia courts, Shaltūt returned to al-Azhar in 1935 and made a steady career within the university which led him from the office of vice-dean of the law faculty (1937) via the membership in the Council of Senior Religious Scholars (*Jamāʿat Kibār al-ʿUlamāʿ*, 1941) and the office of General Inspector of Research and Islamic Culture at al-Azhar (1950) to the ranks of Vice rector (1957) and finally rector (*Shaykh al-Azhar*, 1958). He died in office in December 1963.⁴

Starting from his education at the institute in Alexandria, Shaltūt was strongly influenced by the reformist currents of thought that demanded, from the late nineteenth century onward, the introduction of new subjects and teaching methods at al-Azhar. It comes as no surprise therefore that he was a determined supporter of Muḥammad Muṣṭafā I-Marāghī who became *Shaykh al-Azhar* in 1928 and shortly afterwards presented a memorandum in which he outlined his ideas of a far-reaching continuation of earlier reform laws (1872 and 1911) which more often than not had been thwarted by

Midhat David Abraham, “Maḥmūd Shaltūt (1893-1963), a Muslim Reformist. His Life, Works and Religious Thought” (PhD diss. Hartford, Conn. 1976). Also in Arabic, there are several (even if at times somewhat uncritical) accounts, e.g. ʿAlī Aḥmadī, *ash-Shaykh Maḥmūd Shaltūt* (Tehran: al-Majmaʿ al-ʿĀlamī li-t-Taqrīb bayn al-Madhāhib al-Islāmiyya, 2007); Muḥammad ʿImāra, *ash-Shaykh Shaltūt. Imām fī l-ijtihād wa-t-tajdīd* (Cairo: Dār as-Salām, n.d.); idem, *al-Imām al-akbar ash-Shaykh Maḥmūd Shaltūt. Tajdīd al-dunyā bi-d-dīn* (Cairo: Majallat al-Azhar, 2008); Ḥasan Salhab, *ash-Shaykh Maḥmūd Shaltūt. Qirāʿa fī tajribat al-iṣlāḥ wa-l-waḥda al-islāmiyya* (Beirut: Markaz al-Ḥaḍāra li-Tanmiyat al-Fikr al-Islāmī, 2008). Moreover, in all chronicles of al-Azhar in the 20th century, Shaltūt takes a prominent place; cf. ʿAlī ʿAbd al-ʿAzīm, *Mashyakh al-Azhar mundhu inshāʾ ihā ḥattā l-ān* (Cairo: al-Hayʿa al-ʿĀmma li-Shuʿn al-Maṭābiʿ al-Amīriyya, 1979), 2: 179–243; Muḥammad Rajab al-Bayyūmī, *an-Naḥḍa al-islāmiyya fī siyar aʿlāmihā l-muʿāṣirīn* (Beirut: ad-Dār ash-Shāmiyya, 1995), 1: 447–67; Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Munʿim al-Khafājī, *al-Azhar fī alf ʿām* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya li-t-Turāth, 2011³), 2: 272–303.

³ On Shaltūt’s early education and the background of the Alexandria institute see Lemke, *Maḥmūd Shaltūt*, 34–46.

⁴ Zebiri, *Maḥmūd Shaltūt*, 12–15; on the way, Shaltūt was also one of al-Azhar representatives at an international conference on comparative law in The Hague (1937), and he was admitted to the Arabic Language Academy (*Majmaʿ al-Luḡa al-ʿArabiyya*) in 1946; a complete CV in note form is given by Salhab, *ash-Shaykh Maḥmūd Shaltūt*, 21–23.

traditionalist scholars.⁵ As a consequence, however, he was also involved in the power struggle between Muḥammad Muṣṭafā l-Marāghī (d. 1945) and his conservative counterpart, Muḥammad al-Aḥmadī z-Ẓawāhirī (d. 1944). When the latter was appointed as rector after al-Marāghī's resignation in 1929, the ensuing conflict led to the aforementioned involuntary interruption of Shaltūt's career, as he was among the seventy critical scholars who were dismissed shortly after az-Ẓawāhirī took office.⁶ Both al-Marāghī and Shaltūt were reinstated only in 1935, when az-Ẓawāhirī was forced to step down in the wake of continuous protests. While al-Marāghī's reforming zeal, much to the dismay of his adherents, slackened in the following years, Shaltūt continued to be an active proponent of institutional and educational reform, without, however, managing to overcome internal conservative resistance. Like several of his colleagues, especially from the younger generation, he was not able to voice his disillusionment in the official journal of the university, *Majallat al-Azhar*, but resorted to the weekly paper *ar-Risāla* whose editor, Aḥmad Ḥasan az-Zayyāt (d. 1964), strongly supported the calls for reform.⁷ Shaltūt's own ideas were not revolutionary per se, but the very fact that he demanded that modern problems should be treated with modern methods, that textbooks should be critically scrutinized and, whenever necessary, replaced by new "scientific" ones, or that everything having to do with preaching and religious guidance (*al-wa'z wa-l-irshād*) should be reorganized so as to deepen relations with Muslim societies abroad – all this proved that he considered al-Azhar to fall short of meeting these contemporary requirements.⁸ Yet his criticism never grew to the degree of risking an open conflict or even a rupture with al-Azhar leadership, especially after he became himself a member of the senior scholars council in 1941.⁹

This difficult situation persisted after al-Marāghī's death and during the post-World War II tribulations that finally led to the revolution of the "Free Officers" and Jamāl

⁵ Lemke, *Mahmūd Ṣaltūt*, 58–65; on Marāghī's memorandum, 65–75.

⁶ Ibid., 89–95; for more references, also on az-Ẓawāhirī (1878–1944), see the chapter on al-Marāghī.

⁷ Lemke, *Mahmūd Ṣaltūt*, 125; az-Zayyāt (1904–1964) also collaborated with Shaltūt after the latter had assumed the rectorship in 1958; see Rainer Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism in the Twentieth Century. The Azhar and Shiism between Rapprochement and Restraint* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 286.

⁸ Lemke, *Mahmūd Ṣaltūt*, 135–41.

⁹ Like in the case of al-Marāghī, Shaltūt did not publish his thesis (*risāla*) "al-Mas'ūliyya al-madaniyya wa-l-jinā'iyya fī sh-sharī'a al-islāmiyya" as a separate monograph; instead it was incorporated as a chapter in his book *al-Islam 'aqīda wa-sharī'a* (Cairo: Dār ash-Shurūq, 2001¹⁸): 392–429; cf. Lemke, *Mahmūd Ṣaltūt*, 135–41; for a more detailed discussion of it, see Salhab, *ash-Shaykh Mahmūd Shaltūt*, 65–70.

‘Abd an-Nāṣir’s takeover in 1952. For al-Azhar, it meant frequent changes in its rectorship, with no less than six different *shuyūkh al-Azhar* holding office between 1945 and 1958. It was only from the mid-1950s onward that the new regime felt strong enough to tackle protracted institutional problems. After the abolition of the independent sharia courts (which were incorporated into the national legal system) in 1956 and the nationalization of the pious endowments (*awqāf khayriyya*) in 1957, the way was paved for the comprehensive re-organization of al-Azhar that was enacted in 1961. New faculties (for economics, engineering, agriculture and medicine) were added to the now restructured existing ones (theology, law, Arabic language), a separate faculty for women was founded, a new academic body (the “Academy of Islamic Research,” *Majma‘ al-Buḥūth al-Islāmiyya*) concerned with international relations was established, and al-Azhar as a whole was placed under the authority of the *Awqāf* Ministry.¹⁰

Shaltūt was promoted to the highest Azhar echelons because of his long-standing commitment to reform, his stature as a legal scholar, and his renown in the Muslim world beyond Egypt proper. Particularly this last point is noteworthy, since it involved a reconsideration of contacts with Shiite dignitaries. He was not the first Azhar scholar to seek better sectarian relations in modern Islam, as he was preceded in this regard as well by al-Marāghī who in 1936 had entered into a brief discussion with the Iraqi Shiite scholar ‘Abd al-Karīm az-Zanjānī (d. 1968) over matters of belief and a possible legal cooperation resulting thereof. In the end, the undertaking came to nothing, mainly for political reasons, but it did open the horizon for a broader involvement of al-Azhar.¹¹ Another Shiite who forged contacts with al-Marāghī in the late 1930s was the young Iranian Muḥammad Taqī Qummī (d. 1990). Shortly after the war, he returned to Cairo and founded an association which already by its name indicates what the single purpose of its existence was: the Society for the Rapprochement among the Islamic Legal Schools (*Jamā‘at al-Taqrīb bayn al-Madhāhib al-Islāmiyya*). In view of Qummī’s own minor status as a scholar, it is very likely that he could do so only on the initiative of the Qom-based Ayatollah Ḥusayn Burūjirdī, who was then acknowl-

¹⁰ The details of this reform (and its partial rescission in 1965) are discussed in great depth by Lemke, *Maḥmūd Ṣaltūt*, 166–232; see also Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, “al-Azhar, modern period,” in *EF*³, ed. Kate Fleet et al., accessed May 29, 2023, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_0110; Salhab, *ash-Shaykh Maḥmūd Shaltūt*, 73–88.

¹¹ On az-Zanjānī (1887–1968) and his talks with al-Marāghī, see the chapter on al-Marāghī.

edged by the majority of Shiites worldwide as their supreme religious authority (*marja' at-taqlīd*); Burūjirdī himself stayed in the background throughout the society's activities until his death in 1961. While al-Azhar did not officially partake as an institution,¹² several of its high-ranking scholars were apparently instrumental to getting the project off the ground, among them the rectors Muṣṭafā 'Abd ar-Rāziq (d. 1947) and 'Abd al-Majīd Salīm (d. 1954).¹³

As for Shaltūt, his contribution was more or less limited to the running commentary of the Qur'ān which was published regularly in the *Jamā'a's* journal, *Risālat al-Islām*, from 1949 onward, to which we will turn below.¹⁴ That his name is nevertheless most prominently linked to ecumenical endeavors in the 20th century is due to the famous *fatwā* which was published in his name in 1959, in which he acknowledged Shiite Islam as a legitimate school alongside the Sunni *madhāhib*, and opened, without explicitly saying so, the possibility of mutual conversion. Irrespective of the rather curious genesis of this *fatwā* and the fact that Shaltūt did not include it in his collection of legal opinions, this was the first unequivocal statement of a high-ranking Sunni scholar in favor of a settlement of this sectarian strife.¹⁵ What al-Marāghī and az-Zanjānī had started to consider twenty years earlier, namely the establishment of a legal body of comparative law, seemingly came to fruition in Shaltūt's matter-of-course declaration. Yet the further course of events was quickly to prove that the commonalities of both initiatives also extended to their ultimate failure, as al-Marāghī and Shaltūt were politically loyal servants who were ready to put their scholarship at the service of the government's interests. While in al-Marāghī's case, it had soon become clear that he intended to use the rapprochement with Shiism as a lever to win the vacant caliphate

¹² After the revolution in 1952, the official mouthpiece of al-Azhar was even turned into a vehemently anti-Shiite bastion, when the Salafiyya scholar Muḥibb ad-Dīn al-Khaṭīb (d. 1969) took over as editor-in-chief of the *Majallat al-Azhar* and used the journal for publishing a number of polemics. He was dismissed shortly after Shaltūt assumed the rectorship; see Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism*, 255–75, 286.

¹³ On the foundation (1947) and the early history of the *Jamā'at at-Taqrīb*, see *ibid.*, 129–43 and the references given there; on Burūjirdī see *ibid.*, 189–93. Other Azharīs who were responsible for the publishing activities were Muḥammad al-Madanī and 'Abd al-'Azīz Muḥammad 'Īsā.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 165–67. Apart from the *tafsīr*, there was only one regular article penned by Shaltūt for the journal: "Ḥukm ash-sharī'a fī istibdāl an-naqd bi-l-hudā," *Risālat al-Islām* 1, no. 4 (1949): 365–68.

¹⁵ For the background of the *fatwā* and its historical and political consequences, see in detail Werner Ende, "Die Azhar, Šaiḥ Šaltūt und die Schia," in *XXIV. Deutscher Orientalistentag vom 26. bis 30. September 1988 in Köln. Ausgewählte Vorträge*, ed. Werner Diem and Abdoldjavad Falaturi (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1990): *passim*, and Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism*, 284–320. It was in fact only about relations between Sunnites and Twelver Shiites; Zaydites hardly figured in this society, Ismā'īlīs, Ibāḍites and others did not play any role at all.

for King Fārūq, Shaltūt supported ‘Abd an-Nāṣir’s political rapprochement to Shiite Iran for cementing Egyptian regional hegemony against the alleged communist tendencies in Iraq. It was only consistent therefore that he did not energetically resist the breakdown of the *Jamā‘at at-Taqrīb* in the wake of a diplomatic crisis between Egypt and Iran in 1960, only one year after his spectacular *fatwā*. His contacts with Shiite scholars over the years were polite, but few and indirect; Shaltūt was apparently directly in touch only with Qummī, but he never travelled to a Shiite country.¹⁶ What is more, there were no tangible results even in his own main field of scholarship, i.e. jurisprudence: although Shaltūt strongly promoted the jurist’s individual *ijtihād* and rejected the idea of strictly adhering to a specific *madhhab*, this amounted only to transcending the boundaries of the four Sunni schools of law. The textbook on comparative law which he had produced with his colleague Muḥammad ‘Alī s-Sāyis was thus clearly confined to Sunni law,¹⁷ and the hopes that were briefly cherished in the wake of the *fatwā* in 1959 to establish a chair for Shiite law at al-Azhar died down quickly.¹⁸

3. Maḥmūd Shaltūt and the Qur’ān

Again, in comparison to Muḥammad Muṣṭafā l-Marāghī, several characteristics of Shaltūt’s approach to the Qur’ān become evident. The proximity of the reasoning of the two scholars was visible from the very beginning, namely in their respective articles which they published in 1936 in the course of the intense debate of the question whether it was licit to translate the Qur’ān into foreign languages in general, and for the purpose of reciting it in prayer in particular. As the background and the course of this discussion have already been described in the chapter on al-Marāghī, there is no need to go into further details here.¹⁹ Suffice it to state that Shaltūt’s essay which ap-

¹⁶ The only Shiite scholar who visited him in Cairo seems to have been the Lebanese Muḥammad Jawād Mughniyya (d. 1979), a very committed protagonist of the Sunni-Shiite movement. But even he came to Egypt only once, as late as 1963, and met Shaltūt shortly before the latter’s death; cf. ‘Abd al-Ḥusayn Mughniyya’s memoirs, *Tajārib Muḥammad Jawād Mughniyya bi-qalamihī wa-aqlām al-ākhirīn* (Beirut: Dār al-Jawād, 1980), 300f., 357–64.

¹⁷ Maḥmūd Shaltūt and Muḥammad ‘Alī Sāyis, *Muqāranat al-madhāhib fī l-fiqh* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1986), 2–6; the phrasing that the result of a comparison of the *madhāhib* might be the necessity “to follow someone else than the four imams” (p. 2) could only be a very unstable bridge leading to Shiite law which, however, was not discussed in the book; on Shaltūt’s jurisprudence, see Zebiri, *Maḥmūd Shaltūt*, 82–106.

¹⁸ Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism*, 295–300.

¹⁹ See the chapter on al-Marāghī.

peared in the very same issue of the *Majallat al-Azhar* as al-Marāghī's to a large degree reads like an abridged reduplication of the latter's central lines of argumentation. Shaltūt also stresses the nature of a translation as an "absolute interpretation" (*at-tafsīr muṭlaqan*) and the role of a translator as an interpreter of the text (*al-mufasssīr li-l-kalām*). He distinguishes between various forms of translations: while emulating the *i'jāz* character of the Qur'ān is impossible, the two other forms – rendering each word as literally as possible, or carefully understanding the meaning (*ma'nā*) of each verse and retelling it in a foreign language – are possible and recommendable. Finally, Shaltūt quotes the same classical authorities in favor of translating God's word (Abū l-Qāsim az-Zamakhsharī [d. 538/1144], Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī [d. 505/ 1111] and, above all, Abū Ishāq ash-Shāṭibī [d. 790/1388]), and discusses and refutes at great length possible counterarguments of opponents of a translation.²⁰ Quoting Q 16:44 and seeing a translation as a means to spread the Qur'ānic commands and to guide mankind towards the right way, he did „not hesitate for one moment“ to conclude that it was not only permitted, but obligatory.²¹ It is clear that Shaltūt's article was meant to support his senior colleague in this controversial debate, the more so, as al-Marāghī was deliberating for a while – albeit without tangible results – to arrange for an official Azhar translation.

Neither al-Marāghī nor Shaltūt were systematic exegetes of the scripture who composed a traditional commentary in which they followed the sequence of the verses. Both were trained jurists who came to *tafsīr* in their capacity as Azhar scholars trying to reach out to a larger public. While for al-Marāghī, the occasion to do so was provided by his annual Ramadan lectures between 1937 and 1944 that were subsequently published as "Religious Lessons" (*ad-Durūs ad-dīniyya*), Shaltūt was one of the first scholars to make use of the modern media. He suggested regular morning broadcasts on religious topics, and since his voice was apparently well-suited – none other than the famous singer Umm Kulthūm allegedly remembered Shaltūt's voice as the one she

²⁰ Maḥmūd Shaltūt, "Tarjamat al-Qur'ān wa-nuṣūṣ al-'ulamā' fīhi," *Majallat al-Azhar* 7 (1936): 124, 126–27, 131–34; cf. Abraham, "Maḥmūd Shaltūt," 128–30; J.J.G. Jansen, *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 11; Lemke, *Maḥmūd Šaltūt*, 111–15.

²¹ Shaltūt, "Tarjamat al-Qur'ān," 127. Q 16:44 runs: "We have sent down to thee the Remembrance that thou mayest make clear to mankind what was sent down to them; and so haply they will reflect" (Arberry's translation).

loved most to listen to – the *tafsīr* part on Radio Cairo was his for many years.²² These lectures formed the basis of his actual Qur’ānic commentary that appeared, as mentioned above, in the journal *Risālat al-Islām*. Starting from its very first issue in 1949, all in all fifty instalments were published over the following fourteen years until Shaltūt’s death.²³ Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī, who studied and worked with Shaltūt in the 1950s, claims that he and his colleague Aḥmad al-‘Assāl were commissioned by Shaltūt to edit these articles for publication as a separate book, and that they were also licensed by him “to fill the gaps” as they deemed fitted.²⁴ The commentary finally appeared in 1959 and quickly established itself as a popular exemplar of this genre; at least a dozen reprints have come out since. It is certainly in remembrance of Shaltūt’s role in the ecumenical movement (and the non-sectarian character of his *tafsīr*) that a Persian translation was published in 2003.²⁵ In addition to this *tafsīr*, Shaltūt composed another book devoted to the Qur’ān, entitled *Towards the Qur’ān*, which, however, cannot be called a Qur’ānic commentary proper, as it consists mainly of short passages of sometimes only a few lines in which groups of verses are summarily presented according to their general features.²⁶

From a formal point of view, Shaltūt’s *tafsīr* is arranged according to suras and covers the first nine chapters of the Qur’ān.²⁷ In the introduction, the author warns of two ways of reading the scripture which he found harmful: the first one is the widespread sectarian interpretation (*ta’wīl al-Qur’ān wifqa l-madhāhib*) in which the supporters of various religious groups in Islam (Shaltūt called it *bid‘at al-firaq*) had indulged from the beginning. Some even claimed that the revelation had been sent down upon their specific school of thought or creed, and jurists, theologians and Sufī exaggerators –

²² Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī, *Fī wadā’ al-a’lām* (Turkey: ad-Dār ash-Shāmiyya, 2016), 58; see also ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd, *Manāhij al-mufasssīrīn* (Cairo/Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-Miṣrī/al-Lubnānī, 2000): 347.

²³ Besides his regular commentary, Shaltūt, being a member of the Arabic Language Academy, was also involved in the preparation of the “Dictionary of Qur’ānic Words” (*Mu‘jam alfāz al-Qur’ān al-karīm*), of which 34 instalments appeared irregularly in *Risālat al-Islām*; cf. Jansen, *Interpretation*, 61; Brunner, *Islamic Ecumenism*, 146.

²⁴ Al-Qaraḏāwī, *Fī wadā’ al-a’lām*, 61f.

²⁵ Maḥmūd Shaltūt, *Tafsīr-i Qur’ān-i karīm. Tafsīr-i dah juz’-i awal-i Qur’ān*, trans. Muḥammad Riḏā ‘Atāyī; the publisher is the charitable trust *Āstān-i Quds-i Rażawī* (2003) which is in charge of the shrine of the eighth Imam ‘Alī r-Riḏā in Mashhad.

²⁶ Maḥmūd Shaltūt, *Ilā l-Qur’ān al-karīm* (Cairo, n.d. [ca. 1950]); reprinted in *Min hudā l-Qur’ān* (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī li-ṭ-Ṭibā‘a wa-n-Nashr, n.d. [ca. 1969]), 6–168.

²⁷ In the journal of the *Jamā‘at at-Taqrīb*, two more exegetical chapters were published after Shaltūt’s death: “Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-karīm,” *Risālat al-Islām* 14 (1964): 179–86 and 15 (1964): 5–10; both referred to sura 11 (Hūd) and were not included in the printed *tafsīr*; for a detailed discussion of Shal-

ghulāt al-mutaṣawwifa; interestingly enough, he omits the Shiites and their distinctive tradition of relating the Qurʾān to the Imams – thus seized the Qurʾān for their own purposes, shackling reason and spreading blind imitation (*taqlīd*). In particular, this applies to the reliance on traditions adopted from the *ahl al-kitāb*, the so-called *Isrāʾīliyyāt* that Shaltūt flatly rejects as spurious.²⁸ This point seems to have been of special importance for Shaltūt, for he time and again turned his attention to it: one of the items on his reformist agenda which he submitted to the *Jamāʿat Kibār al-ʿUlamāʾ* as early as 1941 was the suggestion to prepare a compilation of all *Isrāʾīliyyāt* in the customary Qurʾānic commentaries so as to purge modern Qurʾān interpretation of them. Also in his *fatwās*, he criticized the exegetes for not having preserved the *tafsīr* from this “odor of poison wafting through the books of exegesis” (*rīḥ as-sumūm habbat ʿalā kutub at-tafsīr*). Especially with regard to the hidden things (*al-ghayb*) he reproached them for referring to them without taking into account that God had reserved knowledge of these things for Himself, as He saw no use in disclosing knowledge about them to mankind.²⁹ For Shaltūt, there is no question that the Qurʾān contains information that is not accessible to human understanding, such as, for example, the mysterious letters at the beginning of some suras. In these instances, one has to accept God’s monopoly (*istiʿthār*) of knowing the secrets, without claiming that their hidden meaning (*bāṭin*) is penetrable to the initiated few, as this only deepens the split among the Muslims.³⁰ The necessity to accept less fathomable things at face value also extends to the Qurʾānic stories about pre-Islamic prophets and communities, the so-called *qiṣaṣ*. Shaltūt strictly refuses all attempts to either interpret them metaphorically, or to declare them fictitious, and in the famous controversy about Muḥammad Khalafallāh’s dissertation on “The Art of Storytelling in the Qurʾān” (*al-Fann al-*

tūt’s exegetical principles and methods, see Zebiri, *Maḥmūd Shaltūt*, 150–80.

²⁸ Maḥmūd Shaltūt, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-karīm. Al-Ajzāʾ al-ʿashara al-ūlā*. Cairo: Dār ash-Shurūq, 2004¹², 10f.; see also Abraham, “Maḥmūd Shaltūt,” 140f.; on Shiite exegesis see Farhad Daftary and Gurdofarid Miskinzoda, eds., *The Study of Shiʿi Islam: History, Theology and Law* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 79–162.

²⁹ Maḥmūd Shaltūt, *Fatāwā l-Imām al-akbar Maḥmūd Shaltūt* (Cairo: Dār ash-Shurūq, 2001¹⁸), 55f. (quotation on 56), see also 426; Maḥmūd Shaltūt, *al-Qurʾān wa-l-qitāl* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1951), 5; Lemke, *Maḥmūd Šaltūt*, 137; Zebiri, *Maḥmūd Shaltūt*, 113, 150f. On the conceptual history of the *Isrāʾīliyyāt* see in detail Roberto Tottoli, “Origin and Use of the Term *isrāʾīliyyāt* in Muslim Literature,” *AR* 46 (1999): 193–210; the debates about them in the 20th century is described by G.H.A. Juynboll, *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature: Discussions in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), 121–38. Al-Qaraḏāwī praises the clearance of Shaltūt’s *tafsīr* of the *Isrāʾīliyyāt* and other fables (*asāṭīr*) as one of its main merits: *Fī wadāʾ al-aʿlām*, 66.

qaṣaṣī fī l-Qurʾān al-karīm), he is said to have written a negative report.³¹

The second snare Qurʾānic exegesis should be wary of in Shaltūt's view is the so-called *tafsīr ʿilmī*, i.e. the endeavor to interpret the scripture in the light of modern (natural) sciences and to try to find subsequent discoveries already announced by the Qurʾān. Especially since the late 19th century, this approach had managed to gain some popularity, and between 1923 and 1935, the Egyptian scholar Ṭanṭāwī Jawharī (d. 1940) published his famous *al-Jawāhir fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-karīm* in 26 volumes which was entirely based on this principle and aroused many a controversy.³² For Shaltūt, this approach was totally unacceptable, as it would lead to wrong ideas about the scripture. It struck him as rather bizarre that one should make a connection between the modern aerial recording of voices and the frequent self-description of the Qurʾān as *al-kitāb al-mubīn* in which all good and bad deeds are registered and presented to the humans on the day of reckoning, or why Q 44:10–11 should be read as a divine announcement of the human invention of poison gas.³³ The main fault of the scientific exegesis, Shaltūt explains, is that it leads to arbitrary or esoteric interpretation (*taʿwīl*) which not only contrasts to the Qurʾānic *iʿjāz*, but gives the impression that the Qurʾān is in competition with the latest scientific theories. The latter, however, can by necessity only be preliminary and without fixed certainties – what today counts as true, may tomorrow be regarded as superstitious.³⁴

The fact that his commentary formally treated the first nine suras was the only concession to familiar exegesis that Shaltūt was willing to make. In practical terms, he did not stick to the convention of proceeding from one verse or group of verses to the next. Rather, he developed a comprehensive view on each sura which he regarded as a unit, and inserted frequent subheadings on the topics which he then discussed summarily. By doing so, he became one of the forerunners – and probably the most important one

³⁰ Shaltūt, *Tafsīr*, 46–50; see also Zebiri, *Maḥmūd Shaltūt*, 167.

³¹ Shaltūt, *Tafsīr*, 37–44, 215–16; on the Khalafallāh affair, see Lemke, *Maḥmūd Šaltūt*, 152f. and the literature quoted there.

³² Marwa Elshakry, “The Exegesis of Science in Twentieth-Century Arabic Interpretations of the Qurʾān,” in *Nature and Scripture in the Abrahamic Religions*, ed. J.M. van der Meer and S. Mandelbrote, vol. 2, *1700–Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2008): 494, 504–9.

³³ The verses run (again in Arberry's translation): “So be on the watch for a day when heaven shall bring a manifest smoke, covering the people; this is a painful chastisement.” This was a direct critique of Jawharī (who goes unnamed here) who had interpreted this verse precisely in this vein.

³⁴ Shaltūt, *Tafsīr*, 12–14; cf. also Maḥmūd, *Manāḥij*, 351f. On the difference between *tafsīr* and *taʿwīl*, see also the article of Ismail Poonawala, “Taʿwīl,” in *EF²* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 10: 390–92.

– of an exegetical method that later on became known as “thematic interpretation” (*tafsīr mawḍūʿī*).³⁵ While he did not dwell on the details of his method in his *tafsīr*, he did write a short programmatic text elsewhere, namely in the introduction to a small booklet on *Islam and Fighting* which he published in 1951, where he laid out “the ideal method” (*at-ṭarīqa al-muthlā*) of Qurʾānic interpretation.³⁶ In his view, there are two possible ways of exegesis: the first consists in going through the text verse by verse in the familiar order of the text, and explaining the words, the connection between the verses, and the meanings (*al-maʿānī*) they convey. This, he declares, is the kind of interpretation people got used to since the beginning of *tafsīr* in general, and it has as many manifestations as there are exegetes, for every *mufasssīr* would tackle the text according to his own spirit, from the point of view of rhetoric, history, philosophy, jurisprudence, et cetera. But this, in Shaltūt’s view, leads to distortions, to claims that verses had been abrogated, and to arbitrary interpretations according to *madhhab* affiliation – in brief, to intellectual chaos (*fawḍā fikriyya*) that not only dwarfs the importance of the Qurʾān, but makes people turn away from it and from paying attention to the exegete. In contrast, the second method of approaching the scripture is to gather all verses about a given subject, regardless of their actual placement in the book, to analyze them and their interrelation, and thus gain a comprehensive judgment. This method can be applied to any specific topic, be it legislation, science, the family, society, tourism, economy, sacrifice, piety, or in fact all themes that are rightly considered to be “pillars in the building and growth of the community” (*ʿumud qawiyya fī bināʾ al-umma wa-nahḍatihā*).³⁷ The Qurʾān is thus no longer merely regarded as a spiritual book that explains how to reach greater proximity to God, but as relevant for the life and the problems of the people today.

This emphasis on structural and thematic circumstances allows Shaltūt to insert observations that go far beyond a given verse. For instance, in the midst of his exegesis of sura 6, *al-Anʿām* (The Cattle), he briefly discusses the question why the order of the suras in the book (*at-tartīb al-muṣḥafī*) is different from the sequence of their revelation (*tartīb an-nuzūl*). The reason, Shaltūt explains, is that the arrangement

³⁵ Johanna Pink, *Muslim Qurʾānic Interpretation Today: Media, Genealogies and Interpretive Communities* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2019), 153f.; Zebiri, *Maḥmūd Shaltūt*, 139, describes al-Azhar scholar Amīn al-Khūlī (d. 1967) as the first notable representative of this current.

³⁶ For the following, see Shaltūt, *al-Qurʾān wa-l-qitāl*, 5–11 (reprinted in idem, *Min hudā l-Qurʾān*, 322–26).

³⁷ Shaltūt, *al-Qurʾān wa-l-qitāl*, 8.

tion (*tartīb an-nuzūl*). The reason, Shaltūt explains, is that the arrangement happened after the termination of the phase of the *da'wa* when the community was established and the Qur'ān had become the principle of individual and social life. This new phase required an order that was different from the previous one, and therefore the Qur'ān starts with the long Medinan suras that contain the prescriptions for the Muslim society.³⁸ It is thus not astonishing that the traditions about the “occasions of the revelation” (*asbāb an-nuzūl*) are of no importance to Shaltūt and that he has in general no recourse to hadiths.³⁹ In general, his aim is to explain the Qur'ān by itself (*tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi-l-Qur'ān*), instead of consulting external methods of authentication and explication.⁴⁰

Apart from the recognition that the chronological order of the revelation was given up in favor of a changed overall structure and purpose, Shaltūt focuses on the construction of the individual parts, both regarding the inner composition of a sura (such as the binary division of sura 2, *al-Baqara* [The Cow] as an exhortation directed at the Jews and the foundation of the legislation of the new Muslim community⁴¹), or in view of their relatedness with each other.⁴² Above all, this structural procedure is the necessary prerequisite for his thematic exegesis proper, for it allows Shaltūt to single out, in each sura, those aspects that he considers to be of particular importance, without having to distribute his exegetical attention evenly. It is unavoidable that this results in a rather selective approach. While he often adduces verses from other suras in order to make a specific point, large passages of each sura are left out or are addressed only cursorily. On the one hand, his interest is of an ethical nature: He shows a particular awareness of the calls (*nidā'āt*) that God directly directs at the humans, addressing them alternately “*yā ayyuhā l-ladhīna...*, *yā ayyuhā n-nās*, *yā banī Ādam*, *yā ahl al-kitāb*,” and which form a central element in several suras,⁴³ he includes a contemplation on the term *birr* (“piety,” following Q 2:189, the so-called *āyat al-birr*)⁴⁴, or he goes into

³⁸ Shaltūt, *Tafsīr*, 292f.

³⁹ Zebiri, *Maḥmūd Shaltūt*, 159; on the diminishing role of *asbāb an-nuzūl* in modern exegesis, see also Pink, *Muslim Qur'ānic Interpretation Today*, 131f.

⁴⁰ Zebiri, *Maḥmūd Shaltūt*, 154f.

⁴¹ Shaltūt, *Tafsīr*, 44–46.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 132–37, 275–93, 398–400, 450; see also Zebiri, *Maḥmūd Shaltūt*, 154f.

⁴³ Shaltūt, *Tafsīr*, 92–128 (sura 3, *Āl 'Imrān* [The House of 'Imrān]), 187–91 (sura 4, *an-Nisā'* [Women]), 219–72 (sura 5, *al-Mā'ida* [The Table Spread]), 363f. (sura 7, *al-A'rāf* [The Heights]), 443–48 (sura 8, *al-Anfāl* [The Spoils]).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 64–73.

some details about the ten commandments (*waṣāyā*) as enumerated in Q 6:151–52.⁴⁵ On the other hand, he puts an emphasis on those topics that he regards as relevant for Muslim society in the 20th century: the role of women (as traced out in sura 4, *an-Nisā* [Women]), the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims (mainly according to sura 5, *al-Mā`ida* [The Table Spread]), and the principles of warfare and conflict regulation (as detailed in sura 8, *al-Anfāl* [The Spoils] and sura 9, *at-Tawba* [Repentance]).⁴⁶ It is here that his main profession as a jurist becomes most obvious. In line with his aforementioned efforts to overcome *madhhab* boundaries and his strong promotion of *ijtihād*, Shaltūt rejected the consensus of the jurists (*ijmā`*) as a valid legal source and replaced it with the jurist’s opinion (*ra`y*).⁴⁷ In his *tafsīr*, he proceeded accordingly and frequently chose the heading “our opinion” (*ra`yunā*) when discussing legal material,⁴⁸ with the result that some of his exegetical statements are barely distinguishable from his legal *fatwās*. For instance, in his discussion of the permission for Muslim men to marry Jewish and Christian women (Q 5:5), he came to the conclusion that this was not an “absolute” authorization. For if in such mixed marriages, the Muslim man deviates from being “the natural centre” of the family and allows his children to be Europeanised by his wife, the government is not only allowed, but even obliged to prohibit these relations. The relevant passage in his Qur’ānic commentary is to a large degree identical with a *fatwā* that he issued on this question.⁴⁹ Exegesis and jurisprudence thus went hand in hand for Shaltūt, and in consequence, his collection of legal rulings contains also a separate section on Qur’ānic verses.⁵⁰

Shaltūt’s thematic approach, though not totally undisputed, has proved influential in modern Muslim reasoning on the Qur’ān.⁵¹ By directing the principal attention away from the original environment of the revelation (although he does discuss the events

⁴⁵ Ibid., 303–46.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 132–50 (women), 208–33 (non-Muslims), 398–412, 450–500 (warfare); see also Zebiri, *Mahmūd Shaltūt*, 62–72, 162–66.

⁴⁷ Zebiri, *Mahmūd Shaltūt*, 117–20; see also Shaltūt, *al-Islām ‘aqīda wa-sharī‘a*, 543–50. On classical deliberations of this concept, see the article of Jeanette Wakin and A. Zysow, “Ra`y,” in *EI²* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 12: 687–90.

⁴⁸ Shaltūt, *Tafsīr*, 40, 52, 210, 231f., 241, 244, 319, 381, 392.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 232f.; Shaltūt, *Fatāwā*, 279–81.

⁵⁰ Shaltūt, *Fatāwā*, 423–50; also Shaltūt, *al-Islām ‘aqīda wa-sharī‘a*, 470–89.

⁵¹ Jansen (*Interpretation*, 14) calls it “not a representative example of Modern Koran interpretation.” By contrast, Salhab (*ash-Shaykh Mahmūd Shaltūt*, 63) remarks “a high capacity for renewal and creativity”; see in general Zebiri, *Mahmūd Shaltūt*, 169–76; Pink, *Muslim Qur’ānic Interpretation Today*, 153f.

and clashes between the Prophet's *hijra* and the conquest of Mecca⁵²) and moving it to contemporary social and legal problems, he managed to make it meaningful for his readers in an innovative way. Yet at the same time, by completely forsaking the familiar ways of exegesis, above all what he called the “intellectual chaos” of classical and post-classical authorities, and by using his jurisprudential tools of normative deductions, he also contributed to a growing tendency of a disambiguation of the Qur'ān that leaves hardly room for uncertainty and ambivalence. One looks in vain for the classical loophole *wa-llāhu a'lam* in Shaltūt's commentary of the Qur'ān.

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⁵² Mostly in his interpretation of sura 9, *at-Tawba* (Repentance): Shaltūt, *Tafsīr*, 451–506.

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