Preaching and the epistemological enforcement of *'ulamā'* authority: The sermons of Muhammad Mitwallī Sha'rāwī

Jacquelene Brinton*

Abstract: The changes that have taken place during the modern era have threatened the overall authority of the *'ulamā'* as transmitters of knowledge. The *'ulamā'* nevertheless retained their status by adapting their past discursive forms. Based upon interviews and content analysis, this study found that the *'ulamā'* in Egypt continue to use the medium of preaching as a means of instructing the public. They still interpret the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* to bring forth new responses, ones attuned to their particular environment. Additionally, *'ulamā'* communications to the believing public have become the texts of suitability, which represent continuation and adaptation, or textual traditions melded with the present concerns of adherents. One Egyptian *'ālim* preacher, Muhammad Mitwallī Sha'rāwī, relied on his authority as a man of knowledge engaged with the past Islamic interpretive understanding to demonstrate the necessity of the religious specialist in his sermons to the people. He needed to reiterate the necessity of his expertise because many social and political forces were threatening his authority during his lifetime.

Keywords: preaching, Egypt, *'ulamā'*, religious authority, modernity, epistemology

Abstrak: Perubahan yang berlaku semasa era moden telah mengancam kuasa keseluruhan 'ulamā' sebagai penyampai ilmu. 'Ulamā', walau bagaimanapun tetap mempertahankan status mereka dengan menyesuaikan bentuk diskursif

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*Jacquelene Brinton is Assistant Professor, Department of Religious Studies, University of Kansas, Smith Hall, 1300 Oread Ave, Lawrence, Kansas 66044, 785-864-7255. Email: jbrinton@ku.edu

mereka yang lalu. Berdasarkan wawancara dan analisa kandungan, kajian ini mendapati bahawa 'ulamā' di Mesir terus menggunakan media khutbah sebagai cara mengajar orang awam. Mereka masih menafsirkan Qur'ān dan hadis dalam mengemukakan pendapat-pendapat baru, yang bersesuaian dengan keadaan persekitaraan mereka. Selain itu, komunikasi 'ulamā' kepada masyarakat yang beragama telah menjadikan teks-teks yang bersesuaian, yang memaparkan kesinambungan dan adaptasi, atau tradisi tekstual yang sehaluan dengan keprihatinan penganut sekarang. Seorang penceramah alim Mesir, Muhammad Mitwalli Sha'rāwī, bergantung kepada kuasanya sebagai seorang yang berilmu yang masih berpegang kepada pemahaman interpretif Islam masa silam untuk menunjukkan perlunya pakar keagamaan dalam khutbah kepada orang ramai. Beliau harus mengulangi perlunya kepakaran ini kerana terdapat banyak kuasa sosial dan politik yang mengancam otoritinya semasa hayatnya.

Kata kunci*: khutbah, Mesir, 'ulamā', kuasa agama, pemodenan, epistimologi*

The changes that took place during the modern era were unprecedented in Islamic history; especially in the way that they opened the field of religious authority beyond previously recognized boundaries, which limited the overall authority of the *'ulamā'* (religious teachers) by threatening their status as transmitters of knowledge. As a result, many studies of modern Islam assume that the *'ulamā'* have completely lost their authority among the people (Zaman, 2003). Yet even though their role as intermediaries has been curtailed in recent times, the *'ulamā'* have remained influential guides. In Egypt, they have adapted by using their discourses to defend against instability and to reaffirm their status as transmitters of knowledge. They have also been able to invent new ways to ensure their unremitting relevance, even though, sometimes, to do so, they have had to go beyond past methods of adjustment.

Although presently the *'ulamā'* do not utilize all of their past discursive forms, the *'ulamā'* in Egypt continue to use the medium of preaching as a means of instructing the public. Egyptian *'ulamā'* preachers still interpret the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* to bring forth new responses, ones attuned to their particular environment. They still function as intermediaries in order to present a full or accurate picture of contemporary religion. The *'ulamā'* in Egypt still lead the populace

partially because they have been able to reaffirm their status, thus protecting their vocation into the future.

Furthermore, the survival of tradition can actually be detected in how believers continuously utilize religion in their lives. Hence, to fully understand Islamic religious history in the 20th century, we must examine the ways in which average people engaged, and were engaged by, religion throughout this trying period, and how the 'ulamā' helped to direct this engagement. While it is not necessary to discount the importance of Egyptian intellectuals and Islamists, many average folks have looked to the 'ulamā' for instruction on how to integrate correct religious practice into daily activities. There has been a lot written about the importance of understanding Islam from below, defining religion not through the study of texts alone but by how religion is animated in the lives of practitioners (Berkey, 1992, 2001; Gellner, 1983; Shoshan, 1993). However, studying the religion of the people and understanding how they embody their faith also entails understanding how texts enable belief to be absorbed and then substantiated in the practicable. Those who aid the assimilation of revelatory knowledge often articulate how textual understandings can be blended with practice. The 'ulamā', especially in their role as preachers in Egypt, aid assimilation because they reconstruct the textual tradition as it comes to them, tailoring it to fit the particulars of their context. 'Ulamā' communications to the believing public, then, become the texts of suitability, which represent continuation and adaptation, or textual traditions melded with the present concerns of adherents.

Authority among the Sunnī 'ulamā'

The 'ulamā' in Sunnī Islam also have a claim to religious authority, which has enabled their communications to be continually efficacious.[1] Many academics have divided authority in the Sunnī community after Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) death according to different spheres of influence, including the political, the religious and the spiritual (Abou El Fadl 2001; Dabashi, 1989; Takim, 2006). Within the religious sphere itself there are also different areas of expertise, all of them harkening back to the example of Muhammad (SAW) and some of them being associated with specific types of actors. They include, but are not limited to, access to the spiritual

realms, legal knowledge, piety, exemplary behaviour, and the claim to lineage (Beuhler, 1998; Cornell, 1998; Renard, 2008; Schimmel, 1985). For our purpose, what is important about these distinctive areas is how they complement one another more than how they differ. All of them, or any combination of them, can appear in one religious figure by being melded to fit the primary function and goals of that particular individual. It is often those who successfully merge their capabilities who have the greatest appeal with the public. How *'ulamā'* preachers blend their capacities can depend upon the depths of their connection to religious learning or esoteric insight, their rapport with the people, their objectives, and even the time periods or regions in which they live and how they adapt, accordingly.

'Ulamā' preachers have had both the freedom to formulate novel authority, even beyond the recognized typology of characteristics associated with Muhammad (SAW), and the greatest access to the people. In their exhortations *'ulamā'* preachers integrate their religious knowledge with the actualities of life, which can include popular manifestations of religion as well as elements of daily existence. They often formulate original programmes based on these dual purposes: summoning the people to correct worship and belief, and delivering messages that include currently familiar, if unconventional, reality. Often times the transmissions of *'ulamā'* preachers reach beyond well-established boundaries of acceptable content. They have also been known to employ unique methods in an attempt to ensure that their messages successfully reach the people.

In the modern era in Egypt, preaching has been crucial to the continuance of *'ulamā'* relevance, beyond being associated with the responsibility of bringing correct religion to the people. Since the advent of modernity in Egypt, *'ulamā'* functions have been increasingly curtailed, their responsibilities as guardians of the law, and the divine texts, were taken over by the Egyptian state (Abou El Fadl, 2002; Zaman, 2003). Secularization and the rise of the nation state also enabled those utilizing extra-religious types of authority to gain prominence within the realm of religious expertise. Preaching, however, remains one of the roles in which the *'ulamā'* continue to assert their dominance amongst this competition, as the correct purveyors of revelatory knowledge. Nevertheless, the *'ulamā'* have

had to expand the role of preaching, to both hold on to one of the few vocations left open to them, and to counter threats to their status as the exclusive transmitters of religious knowledge. So, while the expansion of authority beyond the legal/textual was always possible for the *'ālim*-preacher, in the modern era it became a necessity for many. In order to maintain a voice amongst the people, some Egyptian preachers—because of the changed atmosphere—even supplemented their traditional expertise, often successfully delivering religious messages as part of social or political movements. This expansion has helped them to both compete in the marketplace of religious ideas, and to speak to a secularly educated, politically-aware public. Others rely on the categories of authority within the traditional typology but supplement it with modern technologies and sensibilities, which also help them reach larger audiences with their religious messages. Both examples illustrate the interdependence of various forms of authority in terms of the function of the *'ālim*-preacher.

Although *'ulamā'* influence is often assumed to be merely connected to their legal occupations as jurists and judges, this overlooks the *'ulamā'* preachers' other areas of dominance. As those who directly transmit religious knowledge to the general population, they must rely on categories of authority that appeal to their public (Abou El Fadl, 2002). Many Egyptian *'ulamā'* preachers, such as Muhammad al-Ghazālī (d.1989) and Yusuf Qardāwī, exercised religious authority by supplementing traditional types of authority with ones that were novel for *'ulamā'* preachers.

When amalgamations of exceptional characteristics, religious or secular, are recognized in any individual *'ālim*, they provide the basis for various types of effective authority. Well-respected *'ulamā'*, while imparting knowledge about proper behaviour and worship, may also be heeded because they are associated with piety. When the knowledge they impart is visible in their lives, it is a mark of the sincerity of their admonitions. Some trusted *'ulamā'* preachers are also followed because they are known to receive special gifts from God (*karāmāt*), which signals an affirmation of their reliability, in addition to the veracity of their knowledge. *Karāmāt* is understood as that which is received as a result of one's faithfulness and dedication to God, harkening back to pious behaviour. In the modern

era, any and all of these can be supplemented by an *'ālim's* familiarity with the commonalities of his context, whether they be technological, scientific, or political.

Concepts of knowledge (*'ilm*) before the modern period

Institutions of learning in medieval Islam were divided into three categories of knowledge: the Islamic sciences, philosophy and natural science, and the literary arts. Within this tripartite division, the Islamic sciences were preeminent by the 11th century, as they had total "control and ascendancy" over the other disciplines (Makdisi, 1981, p.76). Moreover, the religious sciences were comprised of different fields of expertise. According to the famous *Sunnī* jurist and theologian al-Ghazālī (d. 1111/AH 505), the religious sciences had two parts. First, there was the science of fundamental principles: *tawḥīd* (monotheism or divine unity), prophethood, eschatology and the sources of knowledge (Qur'ān, Sunnah, and consensus of the scholars).

Second, there was the science of the "derived principles" including: obligations to God, obligations to society and obligations to oneself. All of these were separate from the non-religious sciences, which included mathematics, logic, the natural sciences and metaphysics (Saeed, 2006, pp.10-11). In the religious sciences, al-Ghazālī separated knowledge of foundational beliefs based on the revelatory texts, from knowledge of how beliefs should be applied to fulfill one's obligations to God and society. The *'ulamā'* were responsible for knowing and disseminating both the essential subject material and its application, even though they represented different realms of *'ulamā'* knowledge. However, the science of "derived principles" contained knowledge that the *'ulamā'* were responsible for correctly transmitting to all believers because every Muslim needed to be taught the proper way to fulfill their religious obligations (Berkey, 1992, pp.201-215).

The responsibility for instructing the common people about their religious obligations usually fell to the preachers and admonishers among the *'ulamā'* (Peterson, 1948, pp.217-225; Schwartz, 1971, pp.99-107). Though preachers sometimes lacked sufficient training, within the realm of religious sciences the religious experts had a distinctive authority, one they controlled, or attempted to control

based on their expertise in these sciences (Peterson, 1948, p.217; Schwartz, 1971; Shoshan, 1993).

It was the established *'ulamā'* who oversaw the system of education, made the decisions about what knowledge should be transmitted, and who conveyed certain aspects of religious knowledge to the public at large (Makdisi, 1981, pp.70-90). Additionally, throughout much of Islamic history, education was focused on the primacy of religious knowledge and of those who had expertise in the religious sciences, the *'ulamā'*. In 20th century Egypt, however, as secular learning expanded and became the focus of education, the primacy of religious knowledge and its experts was handed over to those trained in the secular sciences—people who began to claim authority as religious experts as well.

As a consequence of this usurpation, Egyptian *'ulamā'* lost control over the public discourse concerning religion, which made it necessary for them to defend and revitalize their vocation as the directors of religious thought. The *'ulamā'* affirmed their relevance, and unique status as transmitters of religious knowledge, both by partaking novel conventions, such as joining social movements and utilizing television and other technologies, and by strengthening the means of discourse that have been part of their repertoire throughout Islamic history, such as preaching. In examining the content of the sermons of Shaykh Sha'rāwī, an extremely popular modern Egyptian preacher, this study attempts to decipher how he dealt with the undermining of his vocation as the guardian and transmitter of religious knowledge. The study is based upon informal discussions with the people, interviews conducted in Cairo in 2006, 2007, 2009 and especially in 2008, and finally the content analysis of Sha'rāwī's sermons. The sermons of this contemporary preacher, seen in the context of historical contingencies, also offer us a glimpse into how the everyday concerns of believers have been involved in the polemics of this defence, and thus how changing realities have affected the role of the *'ulamā'*, as well as the content of their responses.

Muhammad Mitwallī Sha'rāwī: *'Ālim* preacher of Egypt

Muhammad Mitwallī Sha'rāwī (1911-1998) was, an al-Azhar trained *'ālim* who became arguably, the most popular preacher and religious

guide in late 20th century Egypt. Hence, he represents someone who remained steeped in the Islamic hermeneutical tradition while exercising effective religious authority in a contemporary context. Sha'rāwī (his nickname was al-Shaykh al-Amīn al- Sha'rāwī) was born on April 16, 1911 in Egypt in the village of Daqadous. His early talents in Qur'ān memorization and his aptitude for religious learning meant that he was singled out as a candidate to go on to higher learning at al-Azhar University in Cairo. At al-Azhar, Sha'rāwī enrolled in the college of Arabic Language where he earned his degree *(ijāzah al-'ālamiyyah*) in 1941. Two years later, he went on to obtain a degree in teaching from al-Azhar. He taught for a time in Egypt and then in Saudi Arabia as a professor of *Sharī'ah* and Theology at King 'Abdul 'Azīz College in Mecca. Upon his return to Cairo, he served as the director of the office of the Shaykh al-Azhar who was, at the time, Ḥasan Ma'mūn and eventually, in 1976, he was selected to become the Egyptian Minister of Religious Endowments (Al-Sha'rāwī 1992a).

In 1980, at the age of 59, Shaykh Sha'rāwī appeared for the first time on the television show *Nūr 'alā Nūr*, Light upon Light, with Maḥmūd Farag. He was invited back many times and his appearances became so popular that eventually the show became his. He changed the format from a question-and-answer show to a show containing his "thoughts" (*khawāṭir*) about various topics in light of his Qur'ānic interpretations (Al-Sha'rāwī, 1992b). During his programme, Sha'rāwī would deliver his sermon from a mosque somewhere in Cairo or Alexandria, sitting in front of his audience and interpreting the Qur'ān for the Egyptian viewing public. His show aired every Friday afternoon after congregational prayer time when, as I was often told, people would rush home to watch Sha'rāwī's show with their families. He was one of the first successful preachers on Egyptian television; hence, he is often called the father of Islamic television preaching. His television show reached millions of Egyptians every week with his message of renewal, affirming the role of the *'ulamā'* as guides of the people. By instructing his viewers on how to merge their particular circumstances with Islamic belief and practice, Sha'rāwī also attempted to subdue the threatening effects of modernity by including contemporary issues and language into his articulations in order to increase religious adherence.

For Shaʿrāwī, religious truth always took precedence, which meant that contingencies were always modified and weighed against his understanding of the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth* before they were accepted. Shaʿrāwī believed that the Qur'ān contained responses to every situation, and every knowledge claim that manifests in history. For Shaʿrāwī, information was hidden in the Qur'ān to be brought forth at the appropriate time when the conditions of life necessitated it. He taught that only revelation could be trusted for certain knowledge about any subject, exoteric or esoteric, hence all other information must be weighed in the scales of revelation. Furthermore, Shaʿrāwī insisted that only the religious expert could interpret revelation in order to derive knowledge, therefore the religious expert was perpetually needed to decipher God's constant disclosures for the people. Sometimes, as a result of his theory of renewal, Shaʿrāwī accepted new conditions, and sometimes he modified, or even rejected, them. Yet, a majority of his responses were attempts to syncretize religious knowledge and modern life: Shaʿrāwī either adapted new information to revelatory truth, or he adjusted religious institutions and understandings according to novel circumstances as was necessitated for the survival of the tradition he represented.

Shaykh Shaʿrāwī's theory of knowledge: Displaying modern *'ulamā'* authority

In looking at one aspect of Shaʿrāwī's preaching, his theory of knowledge, we will try to find evidence of how, for him, understanding God as the source of all knowledge was paramount. This led him to posit a hierarchy associated with different ways of knowing and with those who claim expertise in any area of knowledge. In Shaʿrāwī's hierarchy, God's knowledge, and by extension those with expertise in interpreting theological intentions through revelation, is placed above all types of human knowledge by encompassing them. By giving precedence to the theological in his epistemology, Shaʿrāwī made all knowledge completely dependent on God's system and subject to God's control. He thereby posited that in order for believers to gain any surety in knowledge they must begin by gaining insight into God's system of knowledge as it has been laid out in revelation. For this purpose, they need the guidance of someone who can interpret and explain the Qur'ān,

and Shaʿrāwī was the living example of such a guide. Moreover, Shaʿrāwī said that anyone who has expertise in any realm associated with the non-theological (what Shaʿrāwī called *basharī,* that associated with the secular aspects of human knowledge) should not disclose information about God's system. Shaʿrāwī refuted the possibility that those trained in secular knowledge could be trusted to explicate the Qurʾān. Instead, he affirmed that only religious experts, those specially trained, could serve as intermediaries between the revelation and the people. He did so through his epistemology and as an example of a representative of his hermeneutic tradition. Shaʿrāwī displayed the absolute necessity of the religious expert to extract knowledge applicable to the modern context from God's disclosure, as it was deposited in the revelation to be brought forth for his time. This is exactly how, in his epistemology, he reinforced the necessity of the hermeneutics of those specially trained in the religious sciences; by answering the question of why the *ʿulamāʾ*, and no one else, were appropriate guides for believers in the modern era.

Shaʿrāwī's epistemological enforcement of *ʿulamāʾ* superiority in religious matters was part of his defense of the *ʿulamāʾ*, and in it we can see the way he utilized discourse to attempt to combat challenges to *ʿulamāʾ* authority. This enforcement can be surmised from four distinctive, yet interconnected, aspects of his teachings. First, he posited that because the Qurʾān is the word of God, only knowledge gained from the Qurʾān is guaranteed in its veracity. Second, he taught that this verified Qurʾānic knowledge is perpetual, expandable, and all-inclusive, and therefore that the Qurʾān is the source of all verifiable knowledge. Third, he postulated that only those with expertise in the Qurʾānic sciences (the *ʿulamāʾ*) could be entrusted with interpreting and communicating this knowledge. And fourth, as a result, that the *ʿulamāʾ*, as the interpreters of Qurʾānic knowledge, are (and have been) continuously necessary in order to determine truth from falsity in every era. The rest of this paper explore the implications of these four propositions and the beliefs that sustain them.

Shaykh Shaʿrāwī's theory of knowledge relied on the proposition that although there is a difference between human and divine knowledge, they are interconnected and, for the purposes of

human acquisition of verifiable knowledge, interdependent. Based on this idea, Sha'rāwī posited an epistemic hierarchy which concerned both a ranking of knowledge and a ranking of those who claim expertise in any field. In Sha'rāwī's hierarchy, God's knowledge, and by extension those with expertise in interpreting theological intentions through revelation, was placed above all types of human knowledge by encompassing them. By relating epistemological concerns to the theological, Sha'rāwī reasserted the primacy of theological knowledge above all types of secular knowledge, such as scientific or political, by presenting them as subject to the control of God's will; making God as the source of all knowledge. Hence, Sha'rāwī's epistemology made all knowledge subject to God's control. Moreover, Sha'rāwī said that anyone with expertise in any realm associated with the non-theological should not disclose information about God's system.

The first step in Sha'rāwī's affirmation of revelatory knowledge was to redirect the discourse on knowledge and again focus on it as a theological concept, not in competition with other ways of knowing but as the basis from which all knowledge springs. Furthermore, Sha'rāwī stressed that God's knowledge has no boundaries, because God is both the master of *al-shahādah* (the exoteric—the dominion of the seen, witnessed, or experienced but I will translate it as "disclosed" to come closest to Sha'rāwī's meaning) and *al-ghayb* (the esoteric—the dominion of the unseen, transcendental, hidden, and concealed).

In contrast, for Sha'rāwi, human beings are limited in their knowledge of both realms, especially in the realm of the unseen. Sha'rāwī taught that the hidden, unseen realm is comprised of the *jinn*, angels, all that comes down unto earth or alights up to heaven, and the *barzakh* (the place between this world and the next), judgment, the last day, heaven and hell, life after death, and all that is veiled from humanity about the past and future and by space. God knows all of the unseen and every disclosed event that has, or will, happen on Earth, from the smallest leaf falling to the larger occurrences (Al-Sha'rāwī, 1990, pp.107-124). In addition, before creating the universe, God had knowledge about all that would happen in it. Sha'rāwī explained this by saying that just as we define the goal before we undertake a task, so God assigned a purpose for

everything. Added to the things outside of time and place that God knows, Sha'rāwī also stated that God knows all things in the universe because He measured everything before He created it. Hence, Sha'rāwī posited that everything existed in God's knowledge as a precise model even before being substantiated in creation. He said:

> In order for God to have created it, its creation must have been a part of His knowledge as God has been the creator prior to the existence of anything He created. Because He engendered (*awjad*) and created by His (divine) quality (*bi-ṣifātih*). As the creator, [God's] attributes have existed eternally (without a beginning) after which the creation was engendered. In the same way all of God's attributes were pre-eternal. God has been compassionate (*Raḥīm*) prior to the existence of one who deserves compassion (*al-raḥmah*). And [God has been] the provider prior to the existence of one who needs provision. This is [the nature] of God's attributes. (Al-Sha'rāwī, 1990, p.114)

For Sha'rāwī, all things in the disclosed world existed first in the invisible world, and therefore when God says "be and it is," it means God says "be" to something that already exists in the esoteric realm. This is precisely how God brings everything hidden into the open to be witnessed. Based on this premise, Sha'rāwī believed that in the Qur'ān God gave every unseen thing a perceptible image in order to elucidate it for the mind (Al-Sha'rāwī ,1990, p.115).

Here, Sha'rāwī was clear about the absolute and complete nature of God's knowledge and how this reinforces notions about the unity of God. Additionally, Sha'rāwī was not just connecting what we witness to God's knowledge and purposes, he was positing that because God is the source of knowledge, every verifiable particular is part of God's dominion and jurisdiction. By confirming that God's dominion includes all that we see and do, Sha'rāwī postulated a hierarchy of knowledge in which knowledge of divine purposes must be primary to all other ways that human beings become cognizant of the universe.

When Sha'rāwī stated that it takes God's command to bring forth knowledge from the hidden to the witnessed world, he included the discoveries we make with our minds because we do not gain new knowledge by our endeavors alone. Sha'rāwī believed that new

scientific discoveries are made because God brings something out of the unseen, thereby making it possible for human beings to witness it. Thus, Sha'rāwī claimed that scientific postulations can be judged according to knowledge contained in the Qur'ān. As knowledge is brought forth (*yabdi'*) from the unseen to the seen, it will also become apparent in the verses of the Qur'ān and is thereby verifiable.[2] According to Sha'rāwī, no secular knowledge can be properly understood (or verified) without first understanding its connection to its divine origins (Al-Sha'rāwī, 1990, pp.45-49).

It is clear that with these ideas Sha'rāwī was informing his audience that while human understanding is vital, it is completely dependent on divine intervention and verification. All knowledge gained must be understood in the light of the revelation, because, for Sha'rāwī, the Qur'ān contained all information. Anything God brings from the esoteric realm to be witnessed will be referred to in the Qur'ān. Sha'rāwī held that the Qur'ān is infinite in its ability to provide guidance, even though humans can only extract from it what is appropriate to their times or what has been clarified in history. Here, we see an extension of this belief in which Sha'rāwī contends that human beings can only utilize what is appropriate to their times because that which people of successive generations will find in the Qur'ān has not been brought forth yet by God and so remains hidden, in actualization, and also in the Qur'ān.

Hence, Sha'rāwī offered a very distinctive and effective critique of secular ways of knowing, through which he reinforced the importance of engagement with theological understanding through the Qur'ān. For Sha'rāwī, human knowledge can never be right if it opposes God's knowledge, or has not been first disclosed by God. Therefore, the truth must be discovered in revelation in order to decipher it in terms of God's disclosures to humanity and in terms of its greater purpose in being revealed. In the same way, he considered human knowledge limited in general, even about non-religious subjects, because there are many things which are kept hidden from human beings and are only known to God, some of which will be disclosed at a future time. Sha'rāwī believed that only knowledge gleaned from the Qur'ān can be trusted as true knowledge that originated with God before it was brought forth from the esoteric to be disclosed.

Thus, Sha'rāwī affirmed the necessity of interpreting the Qur'ān afresh in every generation, and, by extension, for renewers who could be trusted with the task because of their knowledge, and their engagement with the Islamic tradition of exegesis (*tafsīr*). This is exactly what Sha'rāwī did in his preaching; he used his skill to extract the truth from the Qur'ān, interpreting it according to definitive methods, in order to bring forth newly-disclosed knowledge. Additionally, since his renewed exegesis did not reject past attempts to apply revelatory knowledge to the temporal and mundane, Sha'rāwī affirmed the necessity of the hermeneutic tradition of exegesis to continue into the future.

To clarify this, Sha'rāwī used the law as an example. Laws are made with our limited knowledge based on what we as individuals have seen within our own time. However, as time goes on, the laws must be changed according to what God has brought from the hidden realm since that time. Therefore, what is kept hidden from us is always greater than what is revealed. Furthermore, those making decisions are limited by the little they know about what is visible to them and by their complete lack of knowledge about the hidden (Al-Sha'rāwī, 1993, pp.104-107). Ultimately, Sha'rāwī posited that in both realms we are completely dependent on God for disclosing knowledge and on religious experts to explain what has been disclosed in every generation.

In all of the aspects of his theory that we have explored above, God's control, how God brings forth knowledge from the unseen to the seen, how new information is really gained, and especially how the Qur'ān verifies all of this, Sha'rāwī was not only reminding people that God controls the universe but also that in order for knowledge to be gained, an intermediary between God's disclosures and how the people understand those disclosures is needed. Although human knowledge is comprised of the secular and religious sciences, only the religious sciences can serve to bridge the gap between humanity and God's disclosures. Hence, in his expositions about knowledge, Sha'rāwī identified the secular aspects of human knowledge that had taken precedence in his era and he explained how they must be grasped in the context of revelatory truth, thereby placing his specialty above all of the others. What is embedded in this approach is not only an affirmation of the fact that all human knowledge must

be viewed in light of its source in God's knowledge but also the necessity of the *'ulamā'*, because of their training in the religious sciences, to decipher God's knowledge as it was embedded in the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*.

Sha'rāwī's hierarchy of knowledge was also demonstrated in his belief that there was a distinction between how human beings come to know divine truths as opposed to how other types of expertise are gained. Sha'rāwī believed that human knowledge, as religious knowledge, begins with God's book and the sunnah of Muhammad (SAW) and that from these sources God's method can be discerned. He also labeled all other types of human knowledge *basharī*, secular. For example, according to him, there is a great difference between political and religious thought. Each represents different types of knowledge because they are derived from different sources. Politics is comprised of human thought but in religion the words come from God (Al-Sha'rāwī, 1992, p.45). For Sha'rāwī, it was the expert in any area of disclosed knowledge who must be relied on to provide an understanding of that subject because he/she is the only one who has attained valuable and correct information. Hence, the one who provides understanding of religious matters must be an expert in the field of religious knowledge. This reinforces the necessity of the *'ulamā'* in the face of competition from those who have expertise in areas that have already been disclosed but who rely on the secular aspects of human knowledge.

As the final proof of the necessity of the *'ulamā'* in the midst of so many other specialists, Sha'rāwī showed why secularly trained specialists cannot be relied on to provide religious understanding. According to Sha'rāwī, just as those engaged in divine knowledge cannot use their expertise for secular purposes, those who use human thought as their source should not engage in speculation about the divine. In a political context, this means that, for Sha'rāwī, religious groups should not have political goals and political groups should not have religious goals. As he said: "Politics is the struggle of human thought against other human thought. But religion subjects human thought to heavenly thought" (Al-Sha'rāwī, 1992, p.49).

Sha'rāwī disputed scientific thought in the same way. In the course of challenging theories of evolution, Sha'rāwī claimed that God

placed an added restriction on those who look to the material world (scientists) to find proof about how God created humanity:

> Why does God say: 'I do not take those who are led astray (*al-muḍillīn*) as helpers?' (Qur'ān, 18:51). This is a warning to the heedless (*al-mutaghāfilīn*) who use philosophical means to [explain] the particularities (*kayfiyyah*) of creation … God wants to place impediments (*hajrān*) in the mouth of every one of the misguided by setting up proofs [of what they cannot know] in the material universe. He does not silence those materialists. However, they are not able to speak about this (those things which God has hidden from them). To those we say God's creation of man has been concealed (*ghā'iban*) from before we have known ourselves (Al-Sha'rāwī, 1986, pp.7-8).

According to Sha'rāwī, by leaving the answers to material questions (such as the creation of humanity) hidden from material proof and only revealing them in the Qur'ān, God has exposed how the materialists are limited even in the area of their expertise. Ultimately, they are claiming to know what God has kept hidden but scientists and philosophers can never know God's secrets, which are reserved for those who are granted knowledge by God. However, because God does not take them as helpers, materialists have neither the means to approach what has been revealed in the Qur'ān but not in science, nor the esoteric. Here, Sha'rāwī asserts that the Qur'ān contains an argument for disputing 20th century threats to its veracity, since in this sermon he is specifically arguing against theories of evolution in order to reaffirm that God is the creator of the universe (Al-Sha'rāwī, 1986, pp.7-11).[3]

Sha'rāwī demonstrated that when those who are "led astray" are corrected by those who have knowledge of the Qur'ān, they serve to bring believers to the truth by necessitating that Qur'ānic knowledge be brought forth. For Sha'rāwī, those who doubt God are only a threat if they are not properly understood as necessary to lead the believer to inquire about the truth, thereby aiding the affirmation of trust in God and the Qur'ān.

It was of crucial importance to Sha'rāwī that what God has kept hidden serves as impediments to the arguments of the materialists because it shows that they cannot elucidate the matter completely

from a position outside of God's knowledge as revealed in the Qur'ān. Only the Qur'ān, which tells us that the origins of creation are with God, can be trusted. Once a believer accepts the premise that the only certain knowledge is that which comes from the revelation, or is verified by the revelation; then logically it is clear that science has not proven all of the aspects of creation. This confirms Sha'rāwī's point that God has limited the ability of scientists to possess knowledge about the physical world by keeping certain matters hidden until such time when He brings them from the esoteric realm into the realm of the knowable. When God does disclose knowledge, it becomes evident in the Qur'ān, hence only the Qur'ānic expert can dispute scientific theories if they are false, or verify them if they are true.

For those who accept and believe that the test of true knowledge is how that knowledge stands up when seen in the light of the words of revelation, Sha'rāwī leads them to reject real threats to their faith, in this case, threats that are posed by materialist thinking. By putting forth such an argument, Sha'rāwī reinforces the idea that revelation is the only source to be trusted to regulate not only normative behaviours and beliefs but also ideas about every aspect of life. Although this explanation is of course scripturalist, it neither sets up an irreconcilable difference between religion and science, nor does it take an apologetic approach by defending Qur'ānic verses. Instead, Sha'rāwī articulated that science without revelation cannot be implicitly trusted. This is where a modern scientific mind would find fault with Sha'rāwī, perhaps based on Sha'rāwī's own argument. If the expert in religion should be trusted to explicate theological matters, then the scientist should be trusted to explicate scientific matters. However, this view assumes that God only controls certain areas of knowledge but, as we saw, for Sha'rāwī, God controls all knowledge. Therefore, it is the religious specialist whose knowledge takes precedence over all other experts.

Actually, Sha'rāwī stated that there were two possibilities for explaining what happens when the Qur'ān and science conflict. The first is that the Qur'ān is right and science is wrong and the second is that the Qur'ānic verse in question has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. If the former is the case, then it is obvious that divine knowledge always triumphs other types of knowledge, which must

be incorrect. The second reinforces the continued need for *'ulamā'* interpreters, especially as preachers, to teach the people the correct interpretation and to mitigate confusion concerning correct belief.

Sha'rāwi took as an example the Qur'ānic verse: "And the earth, we have laid it out" (15:19). He said that some have misinterpreted this to mean that the Qur'ān asserts that the earth is flat and that because scientists have said that the earth is round, science is a lie. According to Sha'rāwī, those who believe this have misinterpreted the verse. The verse actually means that when human beings walk the earth what they see from any point on the earth is the land laid out in front of them. So when the verse says that the land is stretched out in front of human beings this is according to what they see, and does not mean that the earth itself is stretched out (Al-Sha'rāwī, 1990, Chapter 3).

Thus, Sha'rāwī's argument illustrates a common method of his Qur'ānic interpretation, dependent on his knowledge of the Arabic language, because it is based on his understanding of the word *al-arḍ*, which can mean either earth or land. Since Sha'rāwī interprets it as land, the controversy is easily resolved. Sha'rāwī actually takes it a step further and states that this Qur'ānic verse supports the scientific finding that the earth is spherical:

> In this way when you go to any place on the land you will find it spread out in front of you (*mabsūṭah amāmaka*). This could not happen except if the earth was spherical (*kurawiyyah*). But if it was a hexagon, a square, a triangle or any other shape then you would reach an edge [and in that case] you would not find the land out stretched (*mamdūd*) in front of you (Al-Sha'rāwī, 1990, pp.60-62).

For Sha'rāwī, this is an example of how God discloses knowledge through human discovery, here through scientific discovery and satellite pictures, of something that was previously hidden. Additionally, this disclosure is verified through proper interpretation of the Qur'ān.

There are two other interesting things to note about this example. Firstly, Sha'rāwī's method for incorporating science depended on God bringing forth what was once hidden, which then prompted Sha'rāwī as a specialist to search the Qur'ān and reinterpret it where

mistakes were made. Thus, the Qur'ānic search was prompted by the way the revelation had been interpreted by others and how that interpretation needed correcting, not by a need to prove the correctness or falsity of the scientific theory. If reinterpretation had been impossible, then the scientific proof would have been assumed to be false or inadequate (as in the case of evolutionary theory) because in such a case the Qur'ān always overrides science.[4] Secondly, the interpretive specialist is needed now more than ever for this process since, as we saw, scientists are limited in their knowledge and so may offer humanity faulty information that can weaken faith in God.

For Sha'rāwī, human science, and human thought in general, are correct when used as an instrument of God, emanating originally from God's desire. Human thought leads to mistakes when used in spite of God, or in defiance of God, coming originally from human desire. Sha'rāwī believed that human thought and reason are absolutely necessary for God's plans to become manifest but God's plans must be properly understood first, and for this task only an exegetical expert could be trusted.

Simplifying a complicated message

Even though Sha'rāwī strongly guarded his vocation as a transmitter of religious knowledge, he had to procure his authority as a Qur'ānic exegete from more than his expertise in knowledge. Sha'rāwī also had to be understandable and relevant to the people. Yet the exposition of knowledge above does not seem like the words of a preacher known primarily for his rapport with the common people of Egypt. Although I was told by some of Sha'rāwī's disciples that his messages spoke to people of all different levels of knowledge, one of the most common phrases repeated about Sha'rāwī was that he was able to take complicated ideas and make them understandable to the people (Al-Sha'rāwī, 2008; Al-Ḥanafī, 2008; Engineer 'Abd al-Raḥmān, 2008). One way in which he accomplished this was by introducing complicated theological renderings and then repeating them through metaphors.

For example, in explaining his epistemology, Sha'rāwī posed the question: how does humanity know how to operate existence? In explaining God's instructions to humanity concerning existence,

Sha'rāwī used the metaphor of a washing machine. The creator of a washing machine gives the owner an instruction booklet or a catalogue, which explains how to operate the machine so that it will work properly.

Just like a washing machine, creation has a purpose and a goal. In order to know how to function within existence human beings must discover these goals and purposes through the catalogue, the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, which God, as the creator, has given to humanity. However, since the properties of life are fixed, this discovery is to be accomplished with the mind. Humanity reads the catalogue for instructions but they must use their minds to understand those instructions (Al-Sha'rāwī, 1992, p.48). In this metaphor, Sha'rāwī limited the source of knowledge, while reinforcing the role of the *'ulamā'* as interpreters of revelation by virtue of the fact that the human mind, when it devises its own plans, can just as easily lead one away from following God's orders. Moreover, because of his belief that only religious specialists should be involved with religious thought, he delegated the interpretation of revelation to be the exclusive function of the *'ulamā'*.

Sha'rāwī saw his own role as one of helping his community understand God's catalogue for humanity; giving his audience the specifics of how to train themselves so that they could use their independent volition to obey God. However, he firmly rejected the notion that any of his thoughts originated anywhere except in the words of God.

By emphasizing that God's words are the only source of guidance for a believer, Shaykh Sha'rāwī categorized the source of all other thoughts as *basharī*, human or secular, and therefore as potentially offering mistaken religious guidance. In setting forth his method for distinguishing truth from falsehood, this way he dismissed all of the alternative discourses concerning religious knowledge, whether they be secular thought, governmental thought or Islamist thought, as belonging to the same mistaken ideology— that of originating in human thought instead of with God. Sha'rāwī categorized such ideological groups as "ruling with Islam" instead of being "ruled by Islam," actively enforcing their own will instead of passively following the primary: God's will.

Conclusion

Using metaphor to explain theological truth in a way that was relevant to the daily lives of the people of Egypt was a common method for Sha'rāwī and it was effective. It meant he combined his knowledge with his charisma and his ability to make theological knowledge relevant to people's lives. By offering his epistemology to the people, he added to his demonstration of *'ulamā'* necessity because he was also able to decipher the everyday in terms of theological ideas. Sha'rāwī chose this complicated subject because of the necessity to reassert the importance of theological knowledge in competition with secularly-based sciences.

Additionally, because this competition was manifested in the lives of his audience, it threatened their acceptance of theological claims. In formulating a response to threats in the modern period, which for Sha'rāwī largely stemmed from the way theological truths had been abandoned for scientific truths, he showed that only someone with his level of understanding could offer the correct formula for thinking about these matters. Thus, in establishing the primacy of knowledge gleaned from the divine revelation he substantiated *'ulamā'* necessity while displaying modern *'ulamā'* authority.

Because Sha'rāwī expressed some of his most complicated ideas in his Friday sermons to the people, he does not seem to fit the classification of someone who merely used simple speech to reach the common people (see for example Lazarus, 1983). What the display of Sha'rāwī's epistemology within his sermons demonstrates is that although he was beloved by the common people he taught, that fact did not preclude him from including necessary theological and intellectual content in his messages. The full implication of the realization that there is not a contradiction between common understanding and sermons addressing Qur'ānic epistemology cannot be explored here (further study, for example, could be done on the fallacy of assuming that the uneducated cannot understand theological complexities). One explanation as to why Sha'rāwī introduced these complicated subjects to his television audience is that it was necessary to reinforce the importance of correctly-trained hermeneutic experts in the modern scientific and technological world.

Sha'rāwī told his audience that the texts and signs of God are open to potential misunderstanding through faulty logic and the inappropriate use of the human mind ('*aql*); then, by offering the correct knowledge, he exemplified his own indispensability. By questioning human realms of thought and positing that all knowledge is theological, dependent on and originating from God, Sha'rāwī linked epistemological understandings to theological understandings. By then grounding those understandings in how all knowledge is deposited in the Qur'ān, he was essentially claiming that humanity is in constant need of intermediaries to decipher God's disclosures as history unfolds. Sha'rāwī claimed that although the Qur'ān is eternally true, interpretations are not, therefore, the Qur'ān needs to be constantly searched for new understandings.

However, Sha'rāwī also relied on his authority as a man of knowledge engaged with the past Islamic interpretive understanding, thus he was able to demonstrate the necessity of the religious specialist in his sermons to the people. He needed to reiterate the necessity of his expertise because many social and political forces were threatening his authority during his lifetime. For Sha'rāwī, Qur'ānic interpreters had to be trained in the sciences of the Qur'ān so that they could recognize the unfolding of God's will in history, according to God's words in revelation. The '*ālim*-preacher was necessary to serve as an intermediary, delivering this disclosure to the people.

Endnotes

1. In relation to the '*ālim*-preacher, I consider religious authority in the following manner: "In contrast to military and political authority, which is vested in powers to secure obedience...religious authority is a spiritually compelling person, book or tradition that so fundamentally affects or influences us that we recognise in him or her or it a spriitual power which...'speaks to our condition' and to which therefore we look for guidance" (MacGregor, 1991, p.48).

2. Even though all knowledge is verifiable by the Qur'ān, Sha'rāwī also cautioned that the Qur'ān should not be used as a textbook to prove scientific facts as this is not the Qur'ān's purpose because it is a book of guidance. For him, using the Qur'ān this way could also be damaging because scientific theories are always changing. However, he also said that if science is teaching something that is against the Qur'ān, then it must be challenged and shown to

be false because it is relying on human knowledge, and God's knowledge as revealed in the Qur'ān, can never be wrong. This difference seems slight but it places maintaining the veracity of the Qur'ān above the need to prove (or disprove) scientific theories.

3. Sha'rāwī specifically says that those who believe in evolution serve the purpose of proving the veracity of the verse, since the Qur'ān predicted that they would come along. Thus, the superiority of Qur'ānic knowledge is demonstrable because the Qur'ān predicted the rise of science and its false assumptions about God. Hence, scientific knowledge when it contradicts the Qur'ān is necessary because it proves the veracity of the Qur'ān. All knowledge, true and false, serves God's purposes.

4. Here we will note that when the Qur'ān proves science wrong new interpretations of the Qur'ān are used because past interpretations did not respond to scientific assumptions. Again, this demonstrates the necessity of understanding the greater purposes of disclosed knowledge, or even of false assumptions, in order to elucidate God's message in the revelation.

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