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“Utilizing the Sermon to Incorporate Change: Shaykh Sharawi’s
Epistemological Enforcement of Ulama authority”

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ABSTRACT

Muhammad Mitwalli Sha’rawi (d. 1998) emphasized the unique capacity of the *ulama* to direct religious discourse amidst threats to their exclusive status as the interpreters of revelatory knowledge. Additionally, by insisting that access to irrefutable knowledge can only be gained through proper revelatory interpretation, he also affirmed the necessity of the *ulama* as intermediaries between divine disclosures and human understanding for all times. Basic Islamic epistemology explains knowledge according to a bipartite division between human knowledge (both secular and religious) and God’s knowledge. Religious knowledge is distinguished from secular knowledge because it is directly linked to God; it entails deciphering God’s will and intentions as they are disclosed in the revelatory sources. Based on this idea, Sha’rawi posited a hierarchy of knowledge and of those who claim expertise in any area of knowledge. In Sha’rawi’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 giving precedence to the theological in his epistemology, Sha’rawi made all knowledge completely dependent on God’s system and subject to God’s control. He thereby propounded that in order for believers to gain any surety in knowledge they need the guidance of one who is an expert in the religious sciences and can interpret and explain the Qur’an. Sha’rawi, as an *‘alim*, was the living example of such a guide. Moreover, Sha’rawi said that anyone who has expertise in any realm associated with the non-theological should not disclose information about God’s system. Sha’rawi 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.

In 20th century Egypt, because the secular sciences expanded and became the focus of education, trumping the primacy of religious knowledge, secularly trained specialists began to claim authority as religious experts. As a consequence of this

dissipation and usurpation, Egyptian 'ulama' lost control over the public discourse concerning religion. This made it necessary for them to defend and revitalize their vocation as the directors of religious thought in a changed atmosphere, one in which it was no longer assumed that they were only ones capable of directing religious discourse. The 'ulama' affirmed their relevance, and unique status, both by partaking novel conventions, such as joining social movements, and utilizing television and other technologies, and by strengthening institutions that have been part of their repertoire throughout Islamic history, such as preaching. In examining the content of the sermons of modern preachers we can decipher how they have dealt with the undermining of religious institutions including threats to the 'ulama' as the guardians of the religious sciences. But the lessons of contemporary preachers, seen in the context of historical contingencies, also offer us a glimpse into how the every day concerns of believers are involved in the polemics of this defense, and thus how changing realities have affected the role of the 'ulama', as well as the content of their messages.

Muhammad Mitwalli Sha'rawi's (d. 1998) was Egypt's most popular television preacher in the late twentieth century. His epistemological enforcement of 'ulama' authority was part of this defense, and in it we can see the way he utilized discourse to attempt to combat challenges to ulama authority, by incorporating and rejecting various elements of twentieth century Egypt reality. This enforcement can be surmised from four distinctive, yet interconnected, aspects of his teachings. First, he posited that because the Qur'an is the word of God, only knowledge gained from the Qur'an is guaranteed in its veracity. Second, he taught that this verified Quranic knowledge is perpetual, expandable, and all-inclusive, and therefore the Qur'an is the source of all verifiable knowledge. Third, he postulated that only those with expertise in the Quranic sciences (the ulama) could be entrusted with interpreting and communicating this knowledge. And forth, as a result, that the 'ulama, as the interpreters of Quranic knowledge, are (and have been) continuously necessary in order to determine truth from falsity in every era. In the rest of this paper I will explore the implications of these four propositions and the beliefs that sustain them.

Shaykh Sha'rawi'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. Basic Islamic epistemological understanding explains knowledge according to a bipartite division between human knowledge (both secular and religious) and God's knowledge. Religious knowledge is distinguished from secular knowledge because it is directly linked to God; it entails deciphering God's will and intentions as they are disclosed in the revelatory sources. Based on this idea Sha'rawi posited an epistemic hierarchy, which concerned both a ranking of knowledge as well and of those who claim expertise in any field. In Sha'rawi'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'rawi 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; positing God as the source of all knowledge. Hence, Sha'rawi epistemology made all knowledge subject to God's control. Moreover, Sha'rawi said that anyone who has expertise in any realm associated with the non-theological should not disclose information about God's system.

The first step in Sha'rawi'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'rawi stressed that God's knowledge has no boundaries, because God is both the master of *al-shahada* (the exoteric-the dominion of the seen, witnessed, or experienced, but I will also translate it as disclosed to come closest to Sha'rawi's meaning) and *al-ghayb* (the esoteric- the dominion of the unseen, transcendental, hidden, and concealed). In contrast, for Sha'rawi, human beings are limited in their knowledge of both realms, especially in the realm of the unseen. Sha'rawi taught that the hidden realm is comprised of the jinn, angels, all that comes down unto earth or alights up to heaven, and the *barzakh* (isthmus, 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 in the earth, from the smallest

leaf falling to the larger occurrences.¹ In addition, before creating the universe God had knowledge about all that would happen in it. Sha'rawi 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'rawi also stated that God knows all things in the universe because he measured everything before he created it. Hence, Sha'rawi posited that everything existed in God's knowledge as a precise model even before being substantiated in creation.

“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 sifat*). 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 (*rahim*) prior to the existence of one who deserves compassion (*al-rahma*). And [God has been] the provider prior to the existence of one who needs provision. This is [the nature] of God's attributes.”²

For Sha'rawi 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'rawi believed that in the Qur'an God gave every unseen thing a perceptible image in order to elucidate it for the mind.³

Here Sha'rawi was clear about the absolute and complete nature of God's knowledge and how this reinforces notions about the unity of God. Additionally, Sha'rawi 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

¹ Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha'rawi, *Al-Ghayb*, pp. 107-124.

² Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha'rawi, *Al-Ghayb*, p 114.

³ Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha'rawi, *Al-Ghayb*, p 115.

God's dominion includes all that we see and do, Sha'rawi 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'rawi 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'rawi 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. This is why Sha'rawi claimed that scientific postulations can be judged according to knowledge contained in the Qur'an. As knowledge is brought forth (*yabdi*) from the unseen to the seen it will also become apparent in the verses of the Qur'an and is thereby verifiable.⁴ According to Sha'rawi no secular knowledge can be properly understood (or verified) without first understanding its connection to its divine origins.⁵

It is clear that with these ideas Sha'rawi 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'rawi, the Qur'an contains all information. Anything God brings from the esoteric realm to be witnessed will be referred to in the Qur'an. Sha'rawi held that the Qur'an 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'rawi 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'an has not been brought forth yet by God and so remains hidden, in actualization, and also in the Qur'an.

Hence, Sha'rawi offered a very distinctive and effective critique of secular ways of knowing, through which he reinforced the importance of engagement

⁴ Even though all knowledge is verifiable by the Qur'an Sha'rawi also cautioned that the Qur'an should not be used as a textbook to prove scientific facts as this is not the Qur'an's purpose because it is a book of guidance. For him using the Qur'an this way could also be damaging because scientific theories are always changing. But he also said that if science is teaching something against the Qur'an 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'an can never be wrong. This difference seems slight, but it places maintaining the veracity of the Qur'an above the need to prove (or disprove) scientific theories.

⁵ Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha'rawi, *Al-Ghayb*, pp. 45-59.

with theological understanding through the Qur'an. For Sha'rawi 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'rawi believed that only knowledge gleaned from the Qur'an can be trusted as true knowledge that originated with God before it was brought forth from the esoteric to be disclosed.

Thus, Sha'rawi affirmed the necessity of interpreting the Qur'an 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 (*tafsir*). This is exactly what Sha'rawi did in his preaching, he used his skill to extract the truth from the Qur'an, 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'raawi affirmed the necessity of the hermeneutic tradition of exegesis to continue into the future.

To clarify this Sha'rawi 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. But 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.⁶ Ultimately Sha'rawi 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

⁶ Muh}ammad Mitwalli> Sha'ra>>wi>, *Al-Qad}a' wal Qadr (Al-Qa>hira: Akhra>r al-Yom, 1993)*, pp. 104-107.

information is really gained, and especially how the Qur'an verifies all of this, Sha'rawi was not only reminding the 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'rawi 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 'ulama', because of their training in the religious sciences, to decipher God's knowledge as it was embedded in the Qur'an and hadith.

Sha'rawi'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. As we saw Sha'rawi believed that human knowledge, as religious knowledge, begins with God's book and the Sunna of Muhammad and that from these sources God's method can be discerned. But he also labeled all other types of human knowledge *bashari*, secular. So, 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.⁷ For Sha'rawi 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 'ulama' 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.

⁷Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha'rawi in interviews given to Mahmud Fawzi. *Al-Shaykh al-Sha'rawi: Min al-Qaryah ila al-Qimah*, p. 45.

As the final proof of the necessity of the ‘ulama’ in the midst of so many other specialists Sha‘rawi showed why secularly trained specialists can not be relied on to provide religious understanding. According to Sha‘rawi just as those engaged in divine knowledge cannot use their expertise for secular purposes, those who use human thoughts as their source should not engage in speculation about the divine. In a political context this means that for Sha‘rawi 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.”⁸ Sha‘rawi disputed scientific thought the same way. In the course of challenging theories of evolution Sha‘rawi claimed that God placed an added restriction on those who look to the material world (scientists) to find proofs about how God created humanity:

“Why does God say: ‘I do not take those who are led astray (*al-mudahn*) as helpers?’ (Qur’an: Kahf, 18:51) This is a warning to the heedless (*al-mutaghafilin*) who use philosophical means to [explain] the particularities (*kayfiyya*) of creation. ... God wants to place impediments (*hajran*) in the mouth of every one of the misguided by setting up proofs [of what they can not 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 (*ghaiban*) from before we have known ourselves.”⁹

According to Sha‘rawi by leaving the answers to material questions (such as the creation of humanity) hidden from material proof and only revealing them in the Qur’an, 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 scientist and philosophers can never know God’s secrets, this, as we will see in the next chapter, is reserved for those who are granted knowledge by God. But because God does not take them as helpers, materialists have no means to

⁸ Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha‘rawi in interviews given to Mahmud Fawzi. *Al-Shaykh al- Sha‘rawi: Min al-Qaryah ila al-Qimah*, p. 49.

⁹ Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha‘rawi, *Min Fa'id al-Rahman fi Tarbiat al-Insan*, pp. 7-8.

approach either what has been revealed in the Qur'an but not in science, or the esoteric. In contrast what Sha'rawi did was to offer a new interpretation of this verse, based on his access to God's disclosure through the Qur'an about a twentieth century reality. He asserted that the Qur'an contains an argument for disputing twentieth 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.¹⁰

Sha'rawi demonstrated that when those who are "led astray" are corrected by those who have knowledge of the Qur'an, they serve to bring believers to the truth by necessitating that Quranic knowledge be brought forth. For Sha'rawi 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'an. It was of crucial importance to Sha'rawi that what God has kept hidden serves as impediments to the arguments of the materialists because it shows that they cannot elucidate completely on the matter from a position outside of God's knowledge as revealed in the Qur'an. Only the Qur'an, 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'rawi'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 as he brings them from the esoteric realm into the realm of the knowable. When God does disclose knowledge it becomes evident in the Qur'an, hence only the Quranic expert is the one who can dispute scientific theories if they are false.

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'rawi 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'rawi

¹⁰ Sha'rawi specifically says that those who believe in evolution serve the purpose of proving the veracity of the verse, since the Qur'an predicted that they would come along. Thus the superiority of Quranic knowledge is demonstrable because the Qur'an predicted the rise of science and its false assumptions about God. Hence, scientific knowledge when it contradicts the Qur'an is necessary because it proves the veracity of the Qur'an. All knowledge, true and false, serves God's purposes. Muhammad Mitwalli Sha'rawi, *Min Fa'id al-Rahman*, p. 7-11.

reinforces the idea that revelation is the only source to be trusted to regulate not only normative behaviors 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 takes an apologetic approach by defending Quranic verses. Instead Sha'rawi articulated that science without revelation can not be implicitly trusted. This is where a modern scientific mind would find fault with Sha'rawi, perhaps based on Sha'rawi'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. But this view assumes that God only controls certain areas of knowledge, and as we saw, for Sha'rawi God controls all knowledge. Therefore it is the religious specialist whose knowledge takes precedence over all other experts.

Actually Sha'rawi stated there were two possibilities for explaining what happens when the Qur'an and science conflict. The first is that the Qur'an is right and science wrong and the second is that the Quranic verse in question has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. If the first example is the case then it is obvious that divine knowledge always trumps other types knowledge, which in this case must be incorrect. The second reinforces the continued need for 'ulama' interpreters, especially as preachers, to teach the people the correct interpretation and to mitigate confusion concerning correct belief.

Sha'rawi took as an example the Quranic verse: "And the earth, we have laid it out." (Al-Hijr 15:19) He said that some have misinterpreted this to mean that the Qur'an asserts that the earth is flat and that because scientists have said that the earth is round, science is a lie. According to Sha'rawi 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.¹¹ Thus Sha'rawi's argument illustrates a common method of his Quranic interpretation, dependent on his knowledge of the Arabic language, because it is based on his understanding of the word *al-'ard*, which can mean either earth or land. Since Sha'rawi interprets it as land then the controversy

¹¹ Muhammad Mitwalli Sha'rawi, *Al-Ghayb*, chapter 3.

is easily resolved. But Sha'rawi actually takes it a step further and states that this Quranic 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 (*mabsuta amamaka*). This could not happen except if the earth was spherical (*kurawiyya*). 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 (*mamdud*) in front of you.”¹²

For Sha'rawi 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'an.

There are two other interesting things to note about this example. First Sha'rawi's method for incorporating science depended on God bringing forth what was once hidden, which then prompted Sha'rawi as a specialist to search the Qur'an and reinterpret it where mistakes were made. Thus the Quranic 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 of 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'an always overrides science.¹³ Second, 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'rawi 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'rawi believed that human thought and reason are absolutely necessary

¹² Muhammad Mitwalli Sha'rawi, *Al-Ghayb*, pp. 60-61.

¹³ Here we will note that when the Qur'an proves science wrong new interpretations of the Qur'an 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.

for God's plans to become manifest, but God's plans must be properly understood first.

CONCLUSION

By constantly relying on his authority as a man of knowledge engaged with the Islamic hermeneutical tradition, Sha'rawi was able to demonstrate the necessity of the religious specialist in his interpretations and understandings. For Sha'rawi Quranic interpreters had to be trained in the sciences of the Qur'an so that they could recognize the unfolding of God's will in history according to God's words in revelation. The 'alim preacher was necessary to serve as an intermediary, delivering this disclosure to people.

Sha'rawi 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. He needed to reiterate the necessity of his expertise because many social and political forces were threatening his authority during his lifetime. By questioning human realms of thought and positing that all knowledge is theological, dependent on and originating from God, Sha'rawi linked epistemological understandings to theological understandings. By then grounding those understandings in how all knowledge is deposited in the Qur'an, he was essentially claiming that humanity is in constant need of intermediaries to decipher God's disclosures as history unfolds. Sha'rawi claimed that although the Qur'an is eternally true interpretations are not, therefore the Qur'an needs to be constantly searched for new understandings.

Nevertheless, because he claimed that even the best interpreters have limited ability, Sha'rawi's had to procure his authority as a Quranic exegete from more than his expertise in knowledge. As we have explored in this chapter Sha'rawi believed that any knowledge that comes from the human being is by its very nature incomplete. Therefore Sha'rawi's mastery of exoteric knowledge was combined with his pious life and, as we will explore in the next chapter, his insight into the esoteric realms of knowledge, to produce his special status among the people of Egypt.