

Shaikh Sha'arawi: the Preacher as a Superstar

IN 1982 an Israeli woman, Professor Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, wrote about the well known *alim* and preacher, Shaikh Muhammad Mutwalli al-Sha'arawi of Egypt, saying that the Shaikh is one of those fundamentalist *alims* "who are nevertheless considered moderate in their political approach and therefore encouraged by the authorities. Yet it may well be that through their religious fundamentalist approach, these shaikhs pave - perhaps unconsciously - the way for the radical violent groups... who transfer this approach to the political sphere as well... Thus, although they may be truly loyal to the regime and opposed to any violent measures - their basic fundamentalist approach to religious problems makes them very dangerous." The Professor goes on to add that politicians and scholars are wrong to classify Islamic thinkers according to their politics, branding as fundamentalists only those who ask for full and immediate implementation of *shari'a* while classifying as moderate all others. "Unfortunately the Egyptian government has also accepted this classification, and has therefore encouraged people like Shaikh Sha'arawi to expound their doctrine throughout the mass media and in printed publications. But even in this respect Sha'arawi is only partially moderate, namely with regard to the means to be used in order to establish an Islamic state. But, with regard to the ideal itself, he wholeheartedly supports the common goal of an Islamic state."

This must be the ultimate vindication for an *alim* who has been so much maligned by radical Islamists and leftists alike for alleged "moderate" views. This thinly-veiled call for the silencing of Sha'arawi by a supposedly "impartial" scholar is testimony to the influence Shaikh Sha'arawi wields and the threats he poses to the enemies of Islam. This view is also held by Abdalla Schleifer,

It is rare for a Muslim preacher to reach audiences of several millions, yet this is exactly what Sheikh Sha'arawi has achieved, **Abdul Wahab Effendi** discusses the ideas of one of the most influential of media personalities.

former NBC correspondent in Cairo. Schleifer protested to me once that the Islamic media seems to neglect people like Sha'arawi just because their influence is imperceptible and follow the sensation-prone western media in focusing on radicals like Shaikh Abdel-Hamid Kishk or Shaikh Omar Abdel-Rahman. Schleifer estimates that about twenty million people listen to Sha'arawi's Friday noon programme on TV. That is not an exaggeration. The programme has been listened to by millions all over the Arab world. In Saudi Arabia, I was told that many leading personalities refuse to take telephone calls when Shaikh Sha'arawi is on TV. And the surprising thing is that his audience is not made up only of the traditionally religious. In fact the bulk of his audience is constituted from the urban educated masses who did not previously tolerate, let alone enjoy, listening to preachers. His influence on this sector was incalculable, as a whole generation started the trek back to religion to the tune of Sha'arawi's mesmerising and unobtrusive "chat show."

Shaikh Sha'arawi who shot to fame in 1973 when he first appeared on Ahmad Farraj's religious programme *Nur ala Nur* (Light upon Light), was born in 1911 in the village of Daqadus in Daqhaliyya province. The village, like most other Egyptian villages, was profoundly religious and fanatically Wafdist. Sha'arawi says that he never

remembers a time when he was not fasting in the month of Ramadan. From a very tender age the youngsters, whose main playground was the mosque courtyard, used to boast among themselves and brag about who had the driest lips (from thirst). It was thus natural for the young Sha'arawi to enroll in the village *kuttab* (Quranic school). From there he went to the Zaqaziq religious college where he had his primary and secondary education.

But Sha'arawi experienced modern influences early in life as well. Part of the village culture was to celebrate the Eid festival marking the end of Ramadan by distributing *Ka'ak*, the traditional cakes, at the mosque. The occasion was a place for competition and show off, where every family tries to outdo the other in the quality of the *Ka'ak* on offer. On the eve of the Eid every family would bring along a sample of what it has made for the communal breaking of the fast at the mosque. On one such occasion the young Sha'arawi was intrigued to see one of his mates bring over a variety of *Ka'ak* so colourful and delicious that it was unlike anything the village had seen before. He went back to his mother and told her the story, and was saddened to know that his family could not afford such sumptuous concoctions, because "the father of your colleague is a government employee and we are just people of modest means." He then asked:

"What is a government employee?" And was duly informed that civil servant is someone who works for the government for a fixed monthly salary, like the teachers at his school. So he then asked: "And what makes these people teachers?" He was told that they carry a certificate called *al-Kafa'ah* (equivalent of secondary school certificate). So from then on the youngster was determined to get this certificate and become an "employee." He chose the three-year course in the secondary school which lead to the *Kafa'ah* certificate. When he got it he could not believe his luck and was going to take a government job as soon as he could. But his father had other plans for him. He wanted his son to go the Azhar university and become an *alim*. Sha'arawi, however, had no such ambitions, and implored his father to let him take a government job. His father resisted strongly. When the young Sha'arawi persisted, his father asked him: "How much would you get for the job?" Sha'arawi told him that his colleagues who got government jobs now got three pounds a month. So his father replied: "You are now my employee for three pounds a month provided you continue your studies at al-Azhar." A friend of his father's who was also present at the conversation retorted to the father: "And you will have to give him a raise every time his colleagues get one!" It was then decided that Sha'arawi should continue his Azhar studies in the pay of his father.

The mere fact of his entry into al-Azhar made Sha'arawi a celebrity in his village. He was asked to give religious lessons in the village mosque when he went home on vacation, mainly in Ramadan. This, his first taste of public speaking gave him a lesson or two to heed in his later career. In one of his earliest appearances as a preacher in the village mosque he prepared his lecture and went on calmly to deliver it. However, after a few minutes, he discovered that he had recited all the material he had learned from his teachers in al-Azhar and had no more to say. But the bulk of time allocated to the hour-long lecture was still there to be filled. So he started stuttering and repeating himself, until he was saved by the *imam* of the mosque who realized his predicament and intervened to fill the rest of the time. After the lecture he asked the *imam* (after thanking him for his help) why the same lecture used to take his teacher at al-Azhar a full hour while it seemed so short when he recited it? The *imam* ex-

plained to him that the teacher does not just recite what he has written for them, but goes on to explain and elaborate on it, drawing on his extensive knowledge. That was lesson one for the aspiring Shaikh. It made him keen to read extensively and influenced his style, which tends to be dotted with anecdotes and bits of information he has gathered from all over the place.

Sha'arawi went to another school to sharpen his oratorical abilities: the school of political activism. It is interesting to know that Shaikh Sha'arawi, paraded by many of his critics as the collaborationist *alim* par excellence, actually grew up as a fierce political activist. His village in Daqadus was a Wafdist stronghold, and it rose in 1930 in revolt against the anti-Wafdist, pro-British government of Sidqi Pasha. The village decided to boycott the elections ordered by the government in that year. A clash resulted when troops came to drag villagers to the polling station and killed a villager who resisted. The villagers then chased the force and killed its commander. As a result the village was occupied by troops which imposed a dusk to dawn curfew on the whole village, prohibiting all public gatherings except for funerals, for which permission had to be obtained in adv-

diers surrounding the place by pretending that he was reciting verses from the Quran. For sometime after that Sha'arawi became a regular speaker at local Wafdist functions, known as a fiery orator and poet.

Sha'arawi's attitude to poetry and politics is perhaps best explained by an incident when he was distressed to read a poem by his favourite poet Ahmad Shawqi, in which he welcomes the return to wine drinking after the end of the month of fasting. He had to be consoled by elders and teachers so as not to lose faith in his hero. However, the poem was full of other stuff which does not seem to have perturbed Sha'arawi in the least. In essence it was a bitter complaint of the decline and decadence of Egypt coupled (paradoxically) with praise for the King, whose claim to descent from the Prophet (very controversial in ulama circles) Shawqi recognises and dwells upon. "My Lord," Shawqi goes on addressing his royal patron. "The wish of Egypt is that you remain for her, for if you remain all the good will remain." All this did not cause the least concern for the revolutionary Wafdist, but the mention of wine did. But then this was consistent with Sha'arawi's status as a traditional *alim* (or one in the making, as he was then). Traditional ulema have been



Over 20 million people listen to the weekly lesson

ance. One day some Wafdists decided to celebrate the anniversary of the death of Sa'ad Zaghloul, the party founder. This coincided with a funeral that was scheduled to take place the same evening. Sha'arawi, (who is an accomplished poet on his own right) prepared a poem which he recited at the funeral, while he tricked the sol-

conditioned not to be very sensitive to the aberrations of rulers who paid lip service to Islam and kept appearances as far as Islamic obligations were concerned. The traditional ulema establishment (especially in the Sunni Muslim world) has been very flexible, and even quasi-secularist when it comes to questions of power. In his

attitude Sha'arawi, therefore is essentially a traditionalist.

But had he been just another traditionalist then he would not have been that interesting. His emergence was due to his ability to talk to people who did not listen to Islamic speakers before, whether traditional or not. When he emerged as a television personality in the early seventies Sha'arawi had by then amassed extensive experience in talking to people. He graduated from al-Azhar in 1941



and became an approved teacher two years later, at the age of 32. He taught at various religious colleges in Zaqaq (where he himself had earlier studied), and at Tanta and Alexandria, before he went to Saudi Arabia in 1950 to teach at King Abdul-Aziz University in Jeddah. After that he became dean of Tanta College (1960) and the Director of Islamic Missionary Department in the Ministry of Awqaf (1961), and an Inspector of Arabic language at al-Azhar (1962) and later director to the office of Shaikh al-Azhar (the President of al-Azhar) in 1964. Then he went to Algeria in 1966 as head of the Azhar mission. In 1970 he was back again at King Abdul-Aziz University where he became head of the Graduate Studies department in 1972. In 1976 he returned to Egypt, this time as Minister of Awqaf under Sadat. He did not last long there. Since then he has not held any official title or position except his membership of the Islamic Research Academy at al-Azhar, to which he was appointed in 1980.

His style has thus taken long to mature. He was over 60 when he first became famous, and had travelled extensively all over the world, spending

long years abroad. Sha'arawi is more of a speaker than a writer, although many of his speeches and talks have been transcribed and published in book form. Also he publishes numerous articles in all the printed media, but most of these are also taken from

ert him from the path of obedience to God.

In a typical digression Sha'arawi then discusses the episode when Adam and Eve eat from the forbidden tree and are shocked to see their private parts revealed as a consequ-

"Sha'arawi's success is his ability to talk to people who did not listen to Islamic preachers before"

his talks. He speaks in a relaxed confident manner, which is a major element of his charm. He eases the listener in, and then holds his attention with great skill. As one of his supporters put it once, Sha'arawi never ceases to surprise his listeners, always producing novel ideas, logical arguments and new proofs. His arguments are not directed only at the committed believer. In fact a great deal of his charm stems from the fact that he directs his arguments mainly at the sceptics and the confused, that ever expanding constituency which does not know enough about either Islam or western thought, but for which what little it knows about Islam has been challenged its brush with modern life.

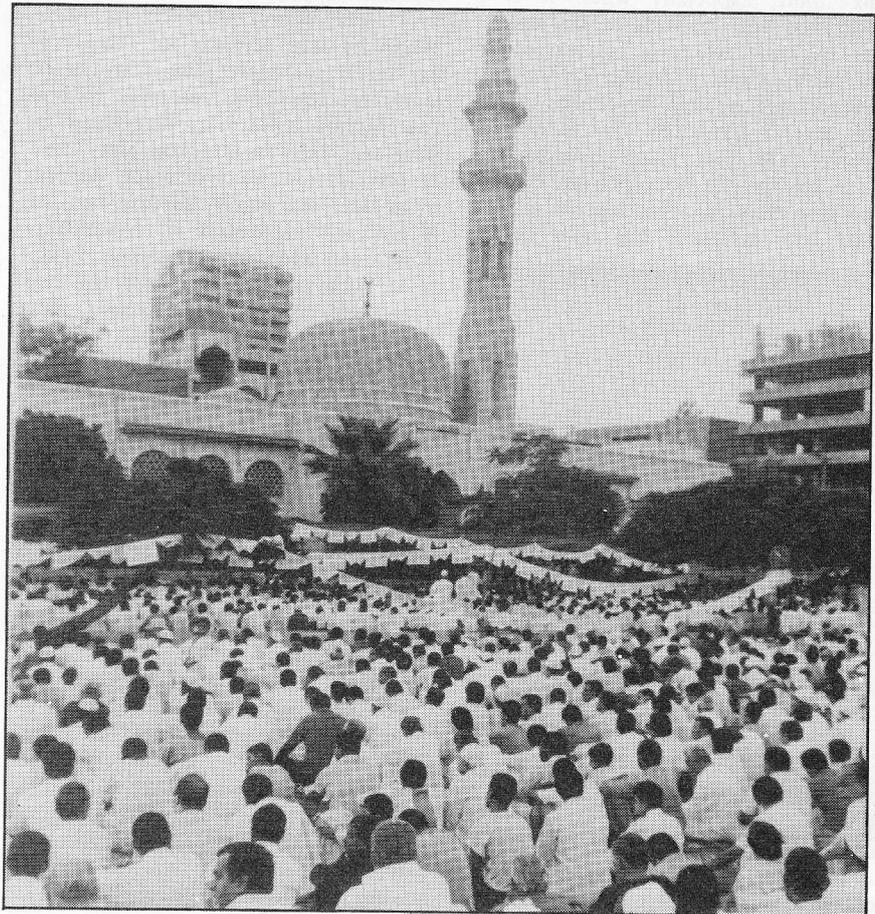
One interesting example of Sha'arawi's style is his discussion of the story of Adam. He refutes the idea that Adam's "sin" was actually the cause of his fall. He quotes the Qur'an to show that Adam was created by God originally so as to inhabit the earth, and that his sojourn in paradise was in fact an aside to his mission, a period of "training", so to speak, for the original mission. Thus what he committed there was not actually sin. Compare he says, the pupil who studies at school. At first you teach him, and if he makes a mistake you correct it. You do not punish him for it or hold him to account. But later, when the teaching is over, you examine him. Then you do not correct his mistakes, but hold him to account for them, and give him his marks accordingly. Thus Adam was not yet being examined in paradise, he was just being trained, so he could not have sinned, since sin is by definition failing the test, which had not yet started then. Adam was just being introduced to the problems he was going to face on earth, as exemplified by the temptations of his own desires and the whisperings of Satan, his enemy who is keen to div-

ence. This shock, he says, represents the positive contribution of ugliness to the universe. Real beauty is not the mere perception of beautiful things, but it is the agreement of premises with conclusions. If something is wrong with the universe while the universe still looked wonderful, this is not beauty. One might hear that all the students of a certain school have passed their exams. He says: "Oh, this is wonderful news!" But it is so only if these students have passed after hard and successful exertion. But if the students passed without doing any work, then this is not good, it is bad and ugly. Similarly, it is not strange to find swarms of flies in a dirty house. This is only logical. What is ugly, illogical and unacceptable is when dirty and clean homes become on the same footing.

Sha'arawi's main discussions concentrate on the exposition of the Qur'an, where he employs his philosophical style to comment on the intricacies of Qur'anic discourse. In one such comment he discusses two apparently identical verses, one telling people not to murder their children (as was the practice in pre-Islamic Arabia) "because of poverty, for We provide for you as well as for them." The other also says "Do not kill your children for fear of poverty, for We provide for them as well as for you." The Shaikh then tells his listeners that the two verses actually discuss two different things. The first deals with actual poverty, and thus emphasises provision for the parents, the other speaks of fear of poverty to be caused by the birth of children, and thus emphasises the promise to provide for children. As appears here some of his comments are very perceptive, although it is not clear to what extent they are original. But he has got some apparently original and perceptive comments of his own, like when he refutes in one sentence Ibn Khaldoun's celebrated theory of

'*asabiya* (kinship solidarity) which the latter claims is necessary even for the success of prophetic missions. Without reference to Ibn Khaldoun, Sha'arawi says: "God did not will that Islam should triumph in [Makkah] the seat of power and influence, but made it victorious in Madina... so that all people would know, and the whole world would repeat, that '*asabiya* for Muhammad did not create belief, but that belief in Muhammad had created solidarity with him."

But all these comments appear to be on an exalted and safe level of abstraction. This is typical of most of Sha'arawi's comments. He is very careful to shun controversy and politics, and this is part of the universality of his appeal. But he does not completely shun controversy. In fact as he grew more popular he became bolder and bolder in airing his views. Some of his most controversial remarks centre on the role of women in Muslim society. He holds a very traditionalist, not to say reactionary, view about women, that has infuriated even women Muslim activists. Once he replied to a question about the rules of girls mixing with boys by retorting angrily: "Why are girls so keen to mix with boys? This is neither logical nor natural." His view is that a woman's going out to work is only permissible in cases of extreme necessity, and that such necessity should not exist in an ideal Muslim society, which must be under obligation to resolve it as soon as it arises, and enable the woman to go back to her 'natural' vocation of caring for her husband and children at home. Those who clamour for equality between men and women are in fact enemies of the woman, because they want her to perform outside jobs in addition to her natural task of bearing and rearing children, which they cannot do instead of her. They are also insincere, for they do not allow her to perform all the tasks performed by men. Sha'arawi's views here have been attacked by both sec-



Sha'arawi calls the people back to the mosque (above) while the critics accuse him of ill-informed piety (left)

ideas of the ages of Muslim decadence. However, his ideas remain very popular in Egypt and the Gulf.

Sha'arawi has been seen as a moderate mainly because of his pro-regime political views. He did not criticise the Camp David accords with Israel, and once replied to a question on the subject by maintaining that he does not discuss politics. However, Israel protested strongly against his televised exposition of surat II (al-Baqara), which discusses the Israelites and their history at length. They said that his views were too anti-Jewish,

However the Shaikh unequivocally supports the idea of an Islamic state. Only, he claims that the way to achieve it is for each Muslim to do his own duty. Once all Muslims adhere to Islam in their personal affairs, rulers will find themselves obliged to implement Islamic law, if only to win popularity. He criticises the "immature and individualist" approach of radical Islamists because the members were not steeped enough in Islamic belief, with the result that we find that whenever oppression descends on these movements, its following evaporates. If they were truly Islamic they would have stuck by each other under repression. Therefore we should leave rulers alone at first, and concentrate on educating ourselves. If rulers take some small steps towards Islam we should thank them for it and say to them may God guide you to fulfill the rest of your obligations. In this way we avoid instability, error and will be safe from the delusions that have gripped many groups. If we all become truly Islamic the un-Islamic regime will fall by itself.

However, Sha'arawi is not always

" His critics brand him as shallow What disturbs them is his popularity "

ularists who claim that they stand as proof that Islam oppresses women, and Islamists who say that these views do not reflect the ideals of Islam as exemplified in the Madinese society, but rather the reactionary and rigid

and Sha'arawi was apparently silenced, because Lazarus-Yafeh expresses satisfaction that the Shaikh stopped expressing his sharp views against the Jews, Judaism and the state of Israel following the Camp David accords.

this timid, especially when it is a matter of pure theoretical discussion. For example when he discusses the apologetic view of Muslims trying to defend Islam against the charge that it has spread by force, he holds the strong view that Islam had to use force to liberate people from tyrants and give them the freedom to choose their own religion. He only barely

" He is a strong proponent of an Islamic State, but is not on good terms with Muslim political activists "

stops short of recommending the use of active force to bring down barriers in the path of Islam today. Speaking of the October 1973 war with Israel, he says that victory was not achieved in that war because we were not truly soldiers of God, because God states categorically that the soldiers of God will always be victorious. But the little that was achieved was because minor moves were made towards God, like using the Islamic war cry "God is great!" God has given us the equivalent of our empty slogans. Had we transformed these slogans to reality by following the path of God in our actual life, God's generosity would have been proportionate to the distance we move in that direction. Anyway the existence of an army to defend us is meaningless if the values we are supposed to defend were not respected in our lives. We do not just defend a patch of desert land, but the people who live on it and the values they live by. Why do we fear an external enemy if we do not fear for our way of life?

It is this equivocal stance of Sha'arawi's that makes the attitude of Islamists towards him similarly ambiguous. He earned the enmity of the Muslim Brotherhood, and is reported to have once said that he prefers dealing with the Communists. Part of

the clash appears to be due to clashes over his liberal political attitude. When he was Minister of Awqaf he expressed the view that it would be legitimate for the government to borrow money with interest because of necessity. Ikhwan attacked him bitterly on this and said that the government does not qualify for this because it has not exhausted all Islamically-sanctioned avenues of revenue collection. Such debates alienated the two sides and embittered relations. But Ikhwan, on the other hand, respect and appreciate the role Sha'arawi is playing in strengthening popular Islam.

Ikhwan's appreciation of Sha'arawi is accentuated by the bitter attacks of secularists and leftists against him, attacks which were motivated mainly by his popularity. Lazarus-Yafeh reiterates a major criticism of Sha'arawi's opponents, that he is shallow and a reactionary who did not try to reform popular Islamic beliefs and purify them as men like Syed Qutb tried to do. He rather chose to swim with the current, and gain popularity by expressing popular religious beliefs. There is some truth in this charge. Sha'arawi's arguments are not that sophisticated. His knowledge outside the traditional field of Islamic studies is rudimentary, if his works are any indication. In fact most of his arguments will collapse immediately if subjected to critical appraisal. For example what he calls the "linguistic proof" of God's existence is refuted within his very argument, when says that if God does not exist where did the word for "God" enter our language? However he mentions words which are in the language but denote non-existents, like *ghoul* (monster). The actual argument is admittedly a little bit more sophisticated than presented here. For he says that "ghoul" is different from "God" in that it is defined in terms of denoting a non-existent entity, while the latter is not. But that does not make it into a serious proof. However, this alleged shallowness is the very essence of Sha'arawi's appeal. He is not dealing with philosophers or philosophical arguments. He is dealing with actual doubts of ordinary people, who may have attained some level of education but have not arrived at their scepticism about Islamic doctrine through sophisticated philosophical instruction either.

The leftists, and even the liberals, who attacked Sha'arawi lived to regret it. A columnist who made a timid suggestion in 1980 that perhaps the

Shaikh should make less use of his hands as he spoke was forced to apologise publicly, withdraw his suggestion and emphasise the fact that he was an ardent fan of the Shaikh himself. In 1983, more substantive criticism from two pillars of the intellectual establishment, the respected philosopher Zaki Najib Mahmoud and the leftist novelist Yousuf Idris, drew an unprecedented popular response that made the two regret their comments. Lazarus-Yafeh, who reported the incident at its start expressed the faint hope of Sha'arawi's critics when she said: "It is of course too early to determine whether this discussion has weakened al-Sha'arawi or strengthened him even further." We feel we must put her mind at peace on this vital point. Last year, Yousuf Idris, who has embarked on a fresh criticism of Sha'arawi pleaded a typographical error to distance himself from the storm evoked by these criticisms. No one of course could believe that one machine (or even the typesetter) has been invented that could add several pages to a book, but the excuse may tell the lady something!

This said, however, the Sha'arawi phenomenon must be viewed in perspective. He can be only considered as just one step in the right direction. Once he has achieved his bit of winning the masses back to Islam, it is

" Sha'arawi has some original arguments, like his one sentence refutation of Ibn Khaldun's theory of *asabiya* "

clear that his approach is far from adequate for what is to follow. That can also be said of many leaders of the modern Islamic revival since Afghani. But it must be said more emphatically of Sha'arawi, who is still with us, and who is less well-equipped than many to lead Muslims intellectually through the complexities of the modern world.