In 2006, while walking the streets of Cairo, I repeatedly saw the image of one religious scholar (sing. 'alim, pl. 'ulama’), Shaykh Muhammad Mitwalli Sha’rawi (1911–1998). During his lifetime Sha’rawi was primarily known as a preacher who interpreted the Qur’an and hadith on his popular weekly show, which aired on state run television every Friday afternoon from 1980 until shortly before he died. But his presence in Cairo nearly a decade after his death was still ubiquitous; in addition to the reruns of his sermons that played on Egyptian television many times during the week, his books were for sale on street corners and in bookshops, and his picture was hung outside shops and in kiosks throughout the city. Although Sha’rawi remains one of the most popular Egyptian preachers, he is not the only ‘alim one finds when looking at religious material available in Egyptian bookshops or when watching television. The continued success of the television shows of religious scholars trained at al-Azhar, the oldest and most prestigious Sunni university in Egypt, and the profusion of different media versions of their lessons (durūs) and sermons is evidence of their extensive celebrity and marketability among the people.

Despite being called the father of Arab television preaching and despite his immense popularity in Egypt and throughout the world, little serious academic work on the importance and legacy of Sha’rawi has previously been published. Although there is no shortage of studies on Islam in the modern world or even specifically on modern Egypt, most of them ignore or at best briefly mention Sha’rawi. He is often dismissed as someone who merely
enjoyed widespread support among the Egyptian public who tuned into his show each week. He is also overlooked because he does not fit neatly into the categories frequently used to analyze contemporary Muslim religious figures. Whether these figures actively engage in antigovernment activities or can be labeled fundamentalists, Wahhabis, modernists, or Islamists, for example, often determines if they are deemed worthy of study. Yet these criteria are so broadly defined that they link disparate agents with different agendas, hiding the nuances that help differentiate them from one another.

Categories that seem to be descriptive are often limited in their usefulness because they are presented as binaries, a favorite being the modernist–fundamentalist binary. The term modernist is associated with liberalism, but it also implies “‘modern’ values . . . explicitly associated with the modern world, especially rationality, science, constitutionalism, and certain forms of human equality . . . not simply modern (a feature of modernity) but modernist (a proponent of modernity).” Fundamentalism is a term long recognized as controversial when used to refer to Muslims seeking religious authority. Roxanne Euben uses the term in a minimally problematic way to connect various religious movements synchronically. She defines fundamentalism as:

contemporary religio-political movements that attempt to return to the scriptural foundations of the community, excavating and reinterpreting these foundations for application to the contemporary social and political world.

Therefore, according to Euben, fundamentalism is political, not otherworldly or mystical. It is limited to scriptural traditions, and it rejects commentary in favor of the original texts themselves, which for Muslims are the Qur’an and sunna.

A study of Sha’rawi’s thought quickly problematizes the use of terms like fundamentalist and modernist by exposing their limits. Sha’rawi could easily be considered a modernist who followed in the path of Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905), an al-Azhar-trained ‘alim who is considered the father of Muslim modernism. Both used new media to disseminate their messages of reform, and both were proponents of treating every human being with dignity, regardless of religious affiliation. However, Sha’rawi vetted all knowledge through his exegesis, a method ‘Abduh would not have condoned. ‘Abduh instead believed that responding to modern problems by searching the Qur’an would not yield solutions unless human reason was used to supplement the knowledge gained from scripture.
Because Sha’rawi insisted that all aspects of life—past, present, and future—should be understood by reading the Qur’an, he could easily be dismissed as a fundamentalist. According to Euben’s definition, however, Sha’rawi does not fit the description of a fundamentalist for two reasons. First, he insisted on the importance of the past interpretative methods and expertise of the Sunni ‘ulama’. In fact these claims are foundational to his entire program. Second, Sha’rawi’s scriptural interpretations were often premised on his mystical orientation. His esoteric orientation also means that, even though he spent many years teaching in Saudi Arabia, he cannot be considered a Wahhabi.

Sha’rawi is also overlooked for the very reason I will argue that he is essential to understanding Muslim authority in modern Egypt: Not only was he grounded in a traditional Sunni worldview—one he learned at al-Azhar—but he was also admired by millions of ordinary people. The one full chapter previously written on Sha’rawi in English is entitled “Muhammad Mutawalli Al-Sha’rawi: A Portrait of a Contemporary ‘Alim in Egypt.” In it the author claims that Sha’rawi was indicative of the decline of the religious scholars of al-Azhar in general because of both his beliefs and his audiences: “[T]his decline is illustrated by the rise of men like Muhammad Mitwalli al-Sha’rawi who do not have the thorough grounding in Islamic scholarship . . . [and so] pander to popular feelings and superstitions with literalist interpretations of things such as jinn and miracles appealing to a very low religious common denominator.”

In this statement Sha’rawi is characterized as gaining popularity by distracting people with what they desire: literalist interpretations of the Qur’an. It not only demeans Sha’rawi, but also his audiences and the central importance of the Qur’an to many Muslims. The author of this quote equated the problem of “literalist interpretations” with the unseen (ghayb) elements of the Qur’an, such as miracles and jinn, to demonstrate that belief in such things is false, a result of feelings and superstitions. By impugning belief in the Qur’anic exposition of the unseen as low, however, the author dismisses an essential tenet of Muslim belief under the pretext of dismissing Sha’rawi. When Sha’rawi spoke about the existence of jinn and miracles, he did so through his exegesis. The unseen is an essential element of the Qur’an and is a subject that even the most highly trained religious scholars accept and write about. Sha’rawi was therefore representing conventional beliefs, which were grounded in his Qur’anic worldview.
The quote in the previous paragraph is also troubling because the author assumes that being grounded in scholarship—something she expresses as belonging to the past—is distinct from having influence among the people in the present. Except among his harshest critics, Sha’rawi was recognized as a specialist in Qur’anic Arabic, but he also spoke in Egyptian dialect (especially early in his career as a television personality), told stories from his village, and reaffirmed local beliefs and customs. Linguistic exegesis was his scholarly enterprise, an enterprise with a long history among the ‘ulama’ that entails particular rules for dissecting Qur’anic language. Sha’rawi’s scholarly limitations were not caused by a lack of “thorough grounding in Islamic scholarship” nor by his appeal among the people; they were instead related to the breakdown of the legal functions of the ‘ulama’ in Egypt, which makes the issue of Sha’rawi’s influence a much more complicated matter. For the type of authority he had as an ‘alim-preacher, he relied on a different sort of expertise than what would have been required in the past.

The ‘ulama’ in Sunni Islam have a long and varied past. Marshall Hodgson connected the rise of an ‘ulama’ class in Sunni Islam to the beginnings of the four legal schools, but he claimed that the precursors of the ‘ulama’ were the “piety-minded.” Hodgson used the term *piety-minded* generally to refer to those in late Umayyad times (692–750 C.E.) who “expected Islam to carry with its own law, its own learning, its own etiquette, its own principles of private life and public order . . .” According to Hodgson these piety-minded would later be called ‘ulama’ when they began to systematize these ideals and focus on shari’a through jurisprudence (*fiqh*) in order to answer legal questions. This common way of viewing the rise of the Sunni ‘ulama’ connects them specifically to *’ilm* (exoteric knowledge), but it also acknowledges that the meaning of the word, along with the vocations and responsibilities of the ‘ulama’, developed over time. In terms of their overall authority, it wasn’t until later, and after much contestation, that the ‘ulama’ in Sunni Islam came to be defined according to a well-known hadith, as the “heirs to the Prophet.” Understanding how ‘ulama’ authority arose as part of the general competition for religious authority in early Islam is useful. It demonstrates both precedence for contestation and that authority was partially determined by the concerns of a particular time period and situation. But ‘ulama’ authority was not limited to the realm of legal expertise.

A common typology used to explain Muslim religious authority more generally divides realms of authority according to knowledge (exoteric); access to the
spiritual realms (esoteric); pious, exemplary behavior (piety); and the claim to lineage (traditional). While Muhammad was understood to have possessed all of these qualities, religious agents do not need to have all of them to exert their authority; in fact, academics treat these areas as distinctive. For example, the Sufis are often said to rely on lineage and access to the esoteric realms, and the 'ulama' on exoteric—specifically legal—knowledge. Yet confining 'ulama' authority to 'ilm and separating authority according to vocation and religious commitments is problematic. Defining 'ulama’ authority as that which relies on exoteric knowledge has led to the idea that there was constant conflict between most 'ulama', as the exoteric and normative representatives, and the Sufis, as the esoteric and antinomian. In actuality many ‘ulama’ have claimed to possess both exoteric and esoteric prowess, and many Sufis are also experts in law. Al-Azhar provides intellectual lineage for its graduates, but it is also known to have had ‘ulama’ who are affiliated with different Sufi orders among its highest ranks. Sha’rawi was someone who grounded his discourse in his ‘ulama’ training, but his sermons are replete with references to esoteric knowledge. In his attempt to renew religion, the brand of Islam he presented to the people was representative of the Azhari tradition of blending Sunni theological and legal concepts with a mystical orientation, or the “Sunni-Shar’ia-Sufi synthesis.”

Religious authority depends not just on how agents express that authority. In general, and chiefly through the influence of the theories of Max Weber, it has been recognized that religious authority is noncoercive. Once the Sunni ‘ulama’ established themselves as the heirs of the Prophet, being “in authority” meant that they had to “obtain compliance with their commands by displaying the marks or insignia of authority that communicate to others that they are entitled to issue such a directive or command.” Once recognized through the display of such marks, their authority rendered personal judgment secondary to their decisions. When compliance was obtained, their authority became effective. The fact that the ‘ulama’ had to display marks of authority indicates that exhibiting particular characteristics and obtaining the acceptance of the people have both been central to ‘ulama’ authority for a very long time. Evaluations of authority are not always based solely on the abilities of the one seeking authority; they also rely on the perception of those who formulate those assessments. Or, to understand it slightly differently, those seeking authority rely on and display symbols in order to receive compliance. Through interaction, authority is at once effective, interdependent, and intangible; it is generating and generated.
For the ‘ulama’, receiving compliance could mean either being accepted by other religious scholars or being accepted by the public. Although a single scholar could receive the respect of both, the approval of peers and the adulation of the public were often associated with different functions. In the first case, and on a practical level, some ‘ulama’ had the responsibility of regulating others, meaning that there were different classes of ‘ulama’ with different types of responsibilities. For example, the ‘ulama’ preachers and their sermons have been critiqued and regulated by more highly ranked ‘ulama’ since early in Islamic history. Many preachers did not belong to the most educated of the ‘ulama’ classes; often the content of their sermons did not come from acceptable texts and at times were even antithetical to doctrinal foundations. As a result, a literature of internal critique began as soon as preaching became an institutional responsibility of the ‘ulama’. The most highly trained ‘ulama’ also worked out disagreements in law and theology through a vast and complex literary tradition in which they spoke mostly to one another. In the second case, local imams issued legal opinions (fatāwā), taught school, took care of mosques, and performed many other community functions. Preachers transmitted knowledge to adherents through admonitions or warnings (wa’ẓ or tadhkira), stories (qiṣaṣ), or by delivering sermons (khaṭāba) from mosque pulpits after communal prayers on Friday.

Depending on their exhibition of valued attributes, and on the compliance they attained as a result, those seeking authority could achieve ascendancy among the competition by displaying the qualities that the public or other ‘ulama’ accepted as being preeminent in the religious realm. While this characterization of religious authority is in many ways correct, it ignores the fact that, at times, the elements even of noncoercive authority are coupled with institutions and historical contingencies that have an impact on how claimants convince people of their authority. Those influences work not just on those seeking authoritative guides but also on the guides themselves — on the way they compel and attain compliance. When traditional authority is connected to institutions of power, those institutions can both constrain and aid discourse, but they often go unrecognized by those who view religious authority as noncoercive.

In contemporary Egypt, beginning in the nineteenth century, changes were set in motion to reform religious institutions for the sake of modernizing the country. These changes led to a reshaping of the ‘ulama’ in both direct and
indirect ways—they lessened ‘ulama’ influence in society by removing knowledge transmission and religiously based social regulation from their control. Also in the nineteenth century, many intellectuals began to call for the removal of interpretive, revelatory authority from the specialized realm of the ‘ulama’. They wanted people to interpret the Qur’an and hadith for themselves as a way of combating Muslim intellectual stagnation. Stagnation was posited as the answer to the question of why Europeans were able to succeed in subduing regions of the world that had only recently been ruled by Muslims. Thus, the shift in authority began as an attempt to combat European ascendency through modernization, that is, as an imitation of European models of government and of knowledge production and distribution. Concerning knowledge, it was posited that the stagnation of Muslim societies could be rectified by giving those who were not religious scholars the opportunity to partake in activities seen to exemplify Muslim intellectual production. As a result, rational capacity—and not specialized learning in centuries-old interpretive techniques—became the criteria for interpretive rights. Although the call for individuals to interpret the revelation for themselves came under attack by Muslim legal scholars, the scholars’ attempts to maintain control over the transmission of religious knowledge became more difficult—in fact, almost impossible—as time went on.¹⁹

The notion that rational capability, exemplified by any type of education, was all that was needed for one to be able to extract correct rulings from the Qur’an and hadith in order to introduce change into society led to the idea that training in the methods and rules used by any authorized legal scholar (mufti) for this task was unnecessary. In Egypt and in many other places, these ideas were coupled with the notion that such procedures had been a hindrance to true understanding and that they needed to be changed precisely because they were limited to those who had the specialized knowledge to regulate them and restrain their use. The regulating ‘ulama’, especially the legal scholars, were therefore read as having succumbed to stagnation by restricting the possibilities for change. Stripping the ‘ulama’ of their regulating rights over the production and distribution of religious knowledge resulted in the despecialization of knowledge; this change, paired with the “invented tradition of stagnation,” gave rise to the widespread acceptance of interpretations made by those who were primarily motivated by political contingencies.²⁰ Many who came to be accepted as religious authorities did so by finding relevant
knowledge in the Qur’an and hadith, which helped make their interpretations applicable. The ability to make the text relevant—something that was once an outcome—became the object and description of learnedness.

Sha’rawi positioned himself somewhere between necessary acceptance of already embedded shifts and attempts to prevent further slippage. His role as renewer was best illustrated by his attempt to reinforce the primacy of the “Sunni-Shari’a-Sufi synthesis,” which was associated with the mainstream Sunni tajdid (renewal) movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These movements represented the schools of law and “conservative” Sufi orders. At the same time he did not renew through the specialized techniques used in the past. Therefore, I refer to him throughout this book as an ‘alim preacher, a term meant to signify his attachment to al-Azhar and the tasks he felt his training made him, and others like him, uniquely qualified to undertake. But, the term ‘alim preacher is also meant to refer to the reorganization of ‘ulama’ functions. Sha’rawi found himself in the midst of the transformation of the ‘ulama’, yet this overhaul had mixed repercussions for him. Although the ‘ulama’ lost their regulating functions, and therefore control, over the transmission of knowledge, Sha’rawi benefitted from and even originated some of those changes. Through the use of new technologies, he tried to reestablish the Sunni Azhari position as the dominant religious position in a time when it was increasingly threatened. In his broadcasts, he challenged threats by using language to direct societal conversation about religion. His rise as an authoritative ‘alim, as an ‘alim-preacher, and as a preacher of the people (‘alim al-sha’b) therefore signifies disruption and the opportunity it offered to non-legal scholars trained at al-Azhar as they attempted to keep the boundaries of learnedness from being generalized further than their own claims. Thus, in the Egyptian context, men like Sha’rawi centered their claims to societal interpretive authority in the institution of al-Azhar, adjusting to its gains and losses. Sha’rawi used the language derived from his interpretive strategies and his access to the people to try to ensure that those losses did not become permanent.

It is precisely in times of disruption that “discursive coherence” can be deployed to establish discursive dominance. Discursive coherence refers to the attempt to “represent the present” within a particular, cogent perspective that is based on tradition. But achieving dominance through coherence can also result in subtle changes to tradition. Sha’rawi sought discursive coherence by responding to events and discussions taking place in his society. In an attempt
to control the import of those conversations, he tried to subordinate them to his Qur’anic readings in order to preserve the underpinnings of the system that helped perpetuate Azhari religious authority. To maintain the viability of the ‘ulama’ claim to be the true representatives of Qur’anic understanding, however, Sha’rawi employed tactics, such as embracing language fluctuations and television, that subtly altered what he sought to preserve. His television shows were the texts of suitability; they influenced and were influenced by a combination of religious elements as they were transmitted and received. His preaching represented, and still represents, an expression of tradition in its time primarily because of how people engaged both Sha’rawi and his orations.

Preacher texts serve as a paradigmatic example of why hermeneutics, or an emphasis on interpretation, needs to be combined with a focus on the everyday to provide a more complete picture of how religion actually functions. To depict the state of religious engagement in modern Egypt, I assume the interdependency of textualized meaning and immediate presence, presentations focused on God and television watching, the persuasive quality of authority and how adherents substantiate that authority, constraints of history and how people navigate within those constraints, and even esotericism and tools of communication such as language use and media. A lot has been written about the importance of understanding Islam from below, not defining religion through the study of texts alone, but also by how religion is animated in the lives of practitioners. Scripture is part of the everyday lives of devout Egyptian Muslims, who recite verses from the Qur’an in prayer multiple times each day. But the Qur’an and hadith are also seamlessly woven into the quotidian. Anyone who rides the metro in Cairo will see people reading and quietly reciting verses from pocket editions of these texts. This example is interesting because it demonstrates how scripture has been incorporated into daily activities, taking its place in communal mundane space. But the insertion of religious texts into the everyday is also made possible by the material form of those words as print media. The actual content of the books as well as how people’s senses are engaged when reading in this environment, influence the understanding they derive from God’s words or the Prophet’s example. This derived, and potentially adjustable understanding is as important to the entire scene as the circumstances themselves. The fact that passages of revelatory texts are integrated into ordinary practice with the help of modern technologies illustrates that societal, personal, and even political contexts help animate words.
In examining how religious language is integrated into the lives of adherents, its significance becomes apparent. The increased popularization of religious talk, or the increased ability of adherents to pick texts, passages, and preachers according to their liking, is an important aspect of contemporary religion. It means that the ‘ulama’, or anyone who wants his or her discourse to reach people, needs to conform to public expectations. Popularization is partially the result of an increasingly literate public, who have access to a proliferation of religious perspectives and voices and who are thus better situated to distinguish between competing claimants. For someone like Sha’rawi, competition increased the need for confirmation among the public and decreased the importance of getting approval from other ‘ulama’. He did not introduce innovation to the scholarly debates that the ‘ulama’ have among themselves. As a preacher, he focused on influencing discussions taking place outside al-Azhar by affirming standard Azhari views. As an element that helped to establish his authority, popular support enabled Sha’rawi—and therefore his commentary—to thrive and assured him influence and longevity. Throughout this book, I will explore how Sha’rawi was unique and was also a paradigm of ‘ulama’ resiliency. His precedent serves as a means of exploring different manifestations of religious authority in modern Egypt more broadly and among the ‘ulama’ particularly.

Popularization of religious authority also allowed the public to use different types of criteria to decide who was and who was not an appropriate religious guide, and their opinions were often based on personal inclination. The presence of diversity is reflected in the popularization of claims made through language, mass media, and other modes, but it means that those who wanted to speak about religion authoritatively, and those who wanted to understand that language in terms that related to their own lives helped redirect the very notions of authority. This opening is often referred to as a fragmentation of religious authority. The notion of fragmented authority, or even of a marketplace of religious ideas, posits authority as measurable and limits consideration of the components of religious authority that make it fluid and flexible by nature. Those who use such terms often do so to point out how new religious movements or actors have benefitted in the contemporary Muslim majority world, and how the ‘ulama’, because of their previous definitive claim to religious authority, have suffered loss. Yet the reconfiguration of religious authority was not merely a consequence of its fragmentation; instead, authoritative claims were now developed through displays of multiple elements
combined in different ways, elements that have come to determine whether claims will be recognized or rejected. Many have gained authority by combining factors such as affiliations with popular organizations, particular styles of writing, language cues, interpretive strategies, and modes of transmission and reception with their abilities to quote scripture, reference the past, and react to government policy or societal forces. It is how those seeking authority become recognizable, how they appeal to certain publics, and how they distinguish themselves from others that determine their influence.

Religious authority is not a measurable entity, neither is it always an either-or proposition that is limited to a singular choice. It is instead accepted as an amalgam of characteristics that consists of stable and shifting markers, or formative and re-formed habits. It is interactive and blended. Because it exists in the agreement between those who live it—both those displaying characteristics and those who legitimate particular qualities through their choices and proclivities—it can be said to exist when the two are effectively combined. Those seeking authority may rely on certain elements to assert their claims, but because of the increasing diversity of adherent interests, they have no guarantee of success.

Authority, according to this view, is not finitely distributed but differently applied by individuals and groups within populations. It is the proliferation of defining factors that leads to increased struggle, but also to multiple forms of acceptance. Distinct claimants, for example, often complement one another even while they seek dominance, and sometimes they do so inadvertently. In Egypt, this complementarity is also accompanied by distinction. Sha’rawi was admired by many for his expertise in Arabic, his simple and understandable exegesis, his humility and gentle manner, his pious behavior, and receiving special gifts from God (karāmāt). But he rarely offered readings that countered the Egyptian government, he was not associated with any new religious movement, he had close ties with the leaders of Saudi Arabia, and he rarely engaged European and American ideas concerning governance and society. The prominent Islamist Sayyid Qutb, who was executed by the Egyptian government in 1966, had neither exoteric training in nor esoteric connections to religious knowledge; in fact, he had disdain for both. But he was known for defending his beliefs no matter what the consequences, becoming a martyr as a result, his anti-Western polemics, and the solutions he posed for the ills of his society. Yusuf Qaradawi, a global satellite personality, is known for his al-Azhar training, his expert legal opinions, being exiled from Egypt for his beliefs, and his association with the Muslim Brotherhood.
Why, or how, might some people decide to take advice from one or a mixture of these figures? People often choose guides who fit their expectations, and their choice is aided by the rapid increase of messages available through television, print media, and the Internet. However, this increase also means that adherents can combine guidance culled from different sources, even those that represent incompatible views. For example, although Sha’rawi and Qaradawi may have disagreed on the relationship between religion and politics, people might listen to Sha’rawi for his Qur’anic interpretations and tune into Qaradawi’s program for juridical advice. They might also admire both out of a sense of national pride, simply for the fact that they both are Egyptian. Access to an ever-increasing pool of competitors allows for numerous factors, including social pressures and institutional influence, to influence how people engage those making authoritative claims.

Sha’rawi was directly connected to two powerful Egyptian institutions: al-Azhar and the government. His discourse was therefore circumscribed by his centrist perspective and by governmental and societal forces. He was restrained and enabled by the construction of his vocation and its discursive history, by societal expectations of the ‘ulama’, and by the government that employed him. Yet these elements were coupled with the noncoercive aspects of his authority, which included reliance on his expertise and training in Arabic, his public displays of piety, his visible charisma, and his connection to karāmāt. He navigated between the authoritative claims he made, especially those that resonated with the people, and the constraints of his time and place until he was even able to affect the functioning of both.

Although I argue that Sha’rawi used the fact that the ‘ulama’ continue to be associated with knowledge, piety, and charisma to claim his authority, I am not arguing that he reinstated that typology as a singular indication of authority throughout society. Nor am I arguing that his example can be used to make general assertions about the current state of ‘ulama’ effectiveness in Egyptian society. Both competition for authority outside the ‘ulama’ ranks and diversity within those ranks make it hard to point to specific characteristics as being the deciding factors in the formulation of religious authority in Egypt today. In this environment it is more accurate to examine how authority becomes effective in particular instances and what it signifies in those cases in relation to broader trends in society. The fact that Sha’rawi’s connection to ‘ulama’ claims evoked recognition of him as authoritative among the people demonstrates that the traditional typology of religious authority re-
mains an important part of the larger picture of religious authority in Egypt. But the fact that Sha’rawi also had to blend those significations with other, more recently embedded changes to the working of authority in Egypt is also telling.

Therefore, Sha’rawi did not become an authority merely by being connected to the Sunni typology. He also struck the right balance between not being overtly political and having the necessary qualities to gain the respect of the people. Adaptation was the key. During his lifetime, Sha’rawi used his discourse to counter what he thought were the greatest risks to the stability of his society. While he rarely responded directly to political and social controversies—especially not in his sermons—he did embed his opinions about them in his articulations. Among the threats he sought to controvert were Islamism, rationalism, and communism, and throughout this book are numerous references to why he thought these positions were dangerous and how he attempted to counter them. Ultimately, in all three cases, he believed that ideas that originated in the human mind and contradicted God’s words posed an imminent threat to belief in the primacy of those words. He wanted to reassert that truth could be found in the Qur’an and that the interpretations of trained experts were needed to demonstrate Qur’anic primacy if and when it was undermined by rationally generated ideas.

But Sha’rawi was not without his critics, and he remains a controversial figure among certain segments of the Egyptian population until today. Some saw him as too closely tied to the Egyptian government, others thought his use of the Qur’an as the premier source for deciding the veracity of all information was simplistic. His defense against what he saw as major political and societal threats, which correlated with his role as a government appointed spokesperson, together with his innovations in language and use of technology were more successful than his attempts to fold scientific knowledge into his theological renderings. To demonstrate Sha’rawi’s knowledge of science, his son, ‘Abd-al Rahim al-Sha’rawi, told me that Sha’rawi would often go to doctors not because he had medical problems but to learn about biology and genetics. Rather than demonstrating that Sha’rawi gained knowledge of medicine through this method, the story instead demonstrates that Sha’rawi’s scientific information was gathered haphazardly, which is evidenced by the fact that his attempts to defend the Qur’an from scientific claims did not engage those claims in any sustained way. Sha’rawi struggled to make a convincing case for the view that science could be judged in light of the Qur’an.
The two modes of inquiry have very different groundings, and he never endeavored to explain the difference between them, which even constrained his Qur’anic perspective. It is necessary to examine what he said about these issues in order to ascertain the content of his program of renewal, which helped define the tradition of relying on revelatory knowledge as a primary source of truth in the contemporary era.

The fact that Sha’rawi and his orations were presented on television ultimately determined his reach throughout society and thus determined his impact. In his television appearances, Sha’rawi molded and transmitted fragments of diverse approaches, Ash’arite theology, Qur’anic exegesis, mystical renderings, common stories and folktales, and reactions to contemporary problems. He was the first to deliver in-depth theological postulations and esoteric interpretations amid nationalist messages and advertisements, an innovation that should not be overlooked. Media, specifically television, influenced his discourse in production and reception, but, just as important, it influenced how he, as a man of authority, entered the lives of his viewers. Television transmission, with all of its political, societal, and material aspects, created the phenomenon of Sha’rawi.

Sha’rawi’s disciples referred to his innovations in language and mass media techniques when they told me that he was “the renewer of the scientific and technological age.” However, his technological innovations had mixed repercussions when considered in light of his goals. When he stated that he became a media preacher to spread his message to as many people as possible, it does seem like he succeeded in achieving what he set out to do. Yet his media success also came at a cost to that message. In many ways, Sha’rawi’s use of television justifies the idea that the medium dominates the message.28 Religious broadcasting changed the way people experienced speech about the Qur’an: from the way people interacted with one another while listening to sermons to how television recordings enabled Sha’rawi’s words to live on, to how government intentions helped defined Sha’rawi’s sermons. Sha’rawi’s books also helped in this regard, but almost all of the writings attributed to him were taken from his televised sermons and interviews, many of which are now posted on YouTube. In addition, video is a neutral transmitter: It does not favor presenters based on what they say as much as on how they say it. Sha’rawi’s religious broadcasting basically sanctified visual media as an appropriate place to talk about God. But by doing so, he introduced an opportunity for an increase in competition with his point of view: other...
television content and other presenters of religion. While television worked well for him because of his charisma, charisma is not limited to people who are connected to al-Azhar. And while having charisma is not a new necessity for a preacher, it is a deciding factor in television success.

The time when national television broadcasts dominated the airwaves passed at almost exactly the same time as Sha'rawi’s death, in the late 1990s. The site of media competition among religious authorities has shifted twice since then, first to satellite programming and then to the Internet. Because of his appeal, Sha’rawi has been successfully repurposed through both. Satellite now dominates the realm of television, and the diversity of presenters and content on satellite television is even greater than on state-run media. The celebrity status that television afforded Sha’rawi, and the influence it gave him throughout society, is now shared by many, both on satellite television and on the Internet, whose opinions he would have seen as dangerous. An argument can be made, however, that the integration of technology and theology ensured that Sha’rawi, his sermons, and his perspective would endure after his death. For Sha’rawi’s legacy, and certainly in terms of the long-term implications for the ‘ulama’ generally, media continues to be a dominating factor in the determination of authority among claimants.

My book is structured to highlight the different elements of Sha’rawi’s adaptation, the environment in which he worked, and the repercussions of his innovations. Each chapter analyzes a theme but also explains how Sha’rawi can and should be distinguished from other religious authorities, past and present. In chapter 1, I begin with Sha’rawi’s historical and biographical context. I examine how that context shaped his life, his public persona, his message, and his legacy. Chapter 2 discusses his reactions to some of the social and political issues of his day and how he influenced public opinion about them, often to the displeasure of the government. Chapters 3 and 4 cover how Sha’rawi, through his vocation, remained grounded in past ‘ulama’ concepts and methods, yet his association with them marked a distinctive change in how they were understood and in how they functioned. Chapter 3 deals with preaching—both its history among the ‘ulama’, and Sha’rawi as a preacher in his time in relation to his government and media connections. In this chapter I also compare Sha’rawi’s and Yusuf Qaradawi’s use of media to explain how their different messages fit the type of broadcasting each chose. Chapter 4 covers the issue of renewal—this concept was associated with the ‘ulama’ in the past, but its association with Sha’rawi helps expose its transformed
meaning. Many Egyptians told me that Sha’rawi was the renewer of Islam in the twentieth century, which means they associated that task with a popular preacher instead of with a trained jurist. Sha’rawi renewed by repeating past Ash’arite theological understandings and making them accessible to the people; he did not innovate by rethinking them. To better understand how the popularization of once specialized terms came about, I begin chapter 4 with an exploration of the thought of Muhammad ‘Abduh, who was the most influential ‘ulama’ reformer of the late nineteenth century. Chapter 5 is centered on understanding shifts in knowledge and how Sha’rawi sought to reclaim esoteric knowledge as primarily Qur’anic in order to make an argument for the indispensability of those trained at al-Azhar. Because his knowledge claims were partially devised to counteract Islamist thought, in this chapter I compare Sha’rawi’s ideas about knowledge to the ideas of different types of Egyptian Islamists. I look at Sha’rawi’s connection to esotericism in chapter 6: his affirmation of certain beliefs about esoteric knowledge, his association with miracles, and how the retelling of his life exemplifies typical Sufi hagiographies. This chapter also puts Sha’rawi’s connection to esotericism in context through a discussion of the rise of Salafism in Egypt, the influence of the movement on al-Azhar, and its vehement anti-Sufi rhetoric. Chapter 7 focuses on the ideological use of language, especially as it pertains to modern Egypt. This chapter takes the elements discussed in earlier chapters related to Sha’rawi’s attempt to exercise discursive dominance and helps explain that attempt by looking at language instead of content or context. A comparison of Sha’rawi’s struggle for discursive dominance is compared to Sayyid Qutb’s similar attempts in this chapter, which helps to distinguish their ideologies. Chapter 8 focuses on the visual aspects of television and how dependence on visual engagement and media rituals both heightened Sha’rawi’s authority as an individual and removed that authority from his ‘ulama’ connections. I use affect theory to explain that seeing, as a bodily act, changes how viewers perceive someone presented on television. Affect and language ideology are related because the form of the message helps determine the message. Each is a site of likely contention when authoritative structures are engaged, and both can result in multiple reactions. But they are also related to one another because there is a back and forth between language and the senses, which means that the senses play a crucial role in how religion and religious authority is experienced. Yet, there are elements that help situate that experience before it takes place. Multiple uses of linguistic expressions, or heteroglossia, in any
given society will help determine the reception of sacred speech. In terms of affect, social conditioning helps determine how one uses visual and auditory stimulus. Both affect and language use offer the opportunity to examine how influences, sensual, linguistic, cultural and historical, work on religious reception. In the Conclusion I briefly discuss where religious media has gone since the time of Sha’rawi’s death.

I lived in Cairo during the summers of 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010, with a follow-up trip in 2013. I was able to gather information about Sha’rawi through the formal interviews I conducted, and the informal conversations I had about him. The advantage of doing research over many years, as opposed to doing it all in one year, is that I was able to see how the reception of Sha’rawi changed as the political and social environment in Egypt changed, an issue I deal with in the conclusion of this book.

The interviews I did and the conversations I had about Sha’rawi help structure the book because they determined the areas of inquiry I pursued. I did extensive interviews during my time in Cairo with Sha’rawi’s followers—those who continue to look to him as a religious guide—and his disciples—those who have tasked themselves with keeping his legacy alive. The disciples I interviewed included Sha’rawi’s son, ‘Abd al-Rahim al-Sha’rawi; one of Sha’rawi’s main disciples, ‘Abd al-Ra’uf Hanafi, and his wife, Mrs. Nour El Din Attia; and the director of the Sha’rawi Center in Daqadous, Engineer ‘Abd al-Rahman. I also attended numerous lectures given by ‘Abd al-Ra’uf and by ‘Abd al-Rahim al-Sha’rawi in different places in Cairo. During my time at these lectures, I met and spoke to many who continue to follow Sha’rawi’s teachings, although these gatherings did not usually have more than thirty or forty people in attendance.

One of the bonuses of doing research on Sha’rawi is that I cannot mention his name to Egyptians without getting some kind of reaction, by which I mean I have rarely met an Egyptian who does not have an opinion about Sha’rawi. I learned early in my research to listen carefully when I tell people, and not only Egyptians, that the object of my research is Shaykh Sha’rawi. People of many nationalities have recounted stories of watching Sha’rawi when they were young or even of watching him today, and opinions are always mixed. I was able eventually to loosely categorize the comments and opinions I heard because many of them were repeated again and again. I did so in the following manner. First were the disciples and followers of Sha’rawi, as I mentioned. His disciples tended to exaggerate his importance, seeing him as more...
central to changing Muslim discourse and more appealing to intellectuals and al-Azhar elites than he was. Something I heard commonly was that Sha‘rawi spoke on many different levels and that people learned from him what they were capable of understanding. Sha‘rawi’s disciples also told me wonderful stories about him, many of which are recounted in this book. Second were his followers, who without fail recounted to me how correct Sha‘rawi was, how kind and gentle his manner was, how he explained complicated Qur‘anic verses in simple language, and how when he died the Muslim world suffered because there was no one to take his place. His disciples and his followers, along with those who respected Sha‘rawi but did not follow his teachings, also recounted stories of Sha‘rawi’s karāmāt, stories that are still well known throughout Egypt. Third, I spoke with a limited number of al-Azhar graduates, one of whom was of Sha‘rawi’s generation. In general they were grateful to Sha‘rawi for teaching people in the manner that he did, but they did not find what he said to be relevant to them because they didn’t consider it very sophisticated. Some even critiqued his time as an official at al-Azhar. Fourth, there were the educated elite in Cairo and other parts of Egypt. The opinions of this group were mixed: Some saw Sha‘rawi as simple and not very interesting; some even regretted his influence among what they called the common people. Others thought of him as anti-intellectual and perhaps even dangerous because he bragged about only reading the Qur’an in the last years of his life. Some people told me that Sha‘rawi should have spoken up against the government; many of them considered him a proxy of the presidents he worked for. One person told me that Sha‘rawi’s sermons helped him return to Islam, but that he had moved on to other teachers once he became more devout. Many people of all classes were impressed with the depth of Sha‘rawi’s knowledge of the Arabic language, which was sometimes the only quality people admired about him.

In general, however, I found no evidence that those who respected and even received religious guidance from Sha‘rawi came only from the lower classes of Cairo, as is usually asserted. Although much of Sha‘rawi’s devoted public did come from the lower and lower middle classes, Sha‘rawi was able to reach across class lines in Egypt because of his Arabic expertise, common sense interpretations, and the perception of him as a person who practiced what he preached. Seeing that Sha‘rawi is so often characterized as a preacher of the common folk, I was surprised to find that many of the people who showed up to hear lectures about him were well off and well educated.
The comments made about Sha’rawi show that, even for those who protest his influence, he was at the very least recognized as one of the prominent Egyptian religious authorities of his era, for better or for worse. Throughout the book, I try to address the wide spectrum of opinions about Sha’rawi by investigating religious authority as fleeting and unstable, relying on vestiges of the past, and referencing contestations and future configurations. In any instance, authority is comprised of interactions and elements of complexity that are embedded in a singular society and the interaction of those elements both create discourse and are created by it.