

Ali Shari‘ati: Islamizing Socialism and Socializing Islam

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The main idea in Ali Shari‘ati’s mind when he was lecturing, writing, and debating in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s in the university of Mashhad and in Husaynieh Ershad, Tehran, was not so different from Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: “the Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it.”¹ Shari‘ati was trying to convince his audience—young revolutionary students, Marxists, and others in Iran and in different countries of the Middle East—that to overcome the condition of backwardness, and to defeat capitalism and imperialism in their societies, one must be an organic intellectual and sway the masses to one’s side. To achieve this goal, one should establish a discourse focused on the deep tradition of Islamic thought in general and Shiite thought in particular. Shari‘ati maintained that the main role of a real revolutionary and organic thinker in Iran was to re-think, re-theorize, and re-construct Islam to return it to the way it was in its early phase. In other words, he wanted those seeking change to establish a revolutionary, socialist ideology that would liberate Muslims along with humankind in general.

Dr. Ali Shari‘ati was born in 1933 in a small village called Kahak, in Khorasan, located in Northeastern Iran.² His father was Muhammad Taghi Shari‘ati, founder of the Center for the Propagation of Islamic Truths which aimed to disseminate Islam through teachings of logic and science. Its goal was to attract intellectual and modernized youth back to faith and Islam, a goal destined to be one of the main objectives in young Shari‘ati’s philosophy and activism.³ Shari‘ati was a sociologist, an activist, and a graduate of the Western Academy. During his studies in Paris, he was exposed to western revolutionary movements, Marxism, socialism, and existentialism, and he could foresee the shift of Iranian and Shiite youth in pursuit of these ideas. Shari‘ati maintained that the Shiite faith should be renewed and transformed into a comprehensive revolutionary faith. He interpreted the Qur‘an and Islam in modern and socialist terms, and depicted prophets as leaders of oppressed populations around the world.⁴ A number of skeptical clerics and supporters of the Shah deemed Shari‘ati a Marxist hiding behind Islamic terminology. By the early 1970s several major Shiite *ulama*, including Abul Qasim Khoei and Muhammad Husayn Tabatabaei, had issued religious rulings (*fatwa*) against Shari‘ati, accusing him of heresy and opposition to Islam.⁵

It is important at this stage to iterate that Shari‘ati was a genuine Islamic thinker who strongly believed in the advantage of the true Islam over any other

western ideology to mobilize the masses and to elevate them in the dialectical process of moving from the mud to God. Shari'ati even insisted that Marxism has borrowed many of its principles from the Islam and not the contrary. For example, he always stressed that the revolutionary asceticism is not something modern Muslims have learned from Marxists, "It is the Marxists who have just learnt it from Islam."⁶

Shari'ati joined the National Front of Iran, which included observant Shi'a Muslims, secular nationalists, and Marxists who worked against the dominance of the Western powers over Iran and its natural resources.⁷ Together with his father and other clerics, Shari'ati joined the Movement of God-Worshipping Socialists, founded by Muhammad Nakhshab; its name was taken from the title given by Shari'ati to a translated biography of one of Prophet Muhammad's companions, Abu Dharr al-Ghafari.⁸ The biography portrays him as a prototype of the socialist hero: a revolutionary who opposed poverty, capitalism, feudalism, racism, and dictatorship, and who was considered to be a source of inspiration for all revolutionaries worldwide, especially in the Middle East.⁹ In his life, Shari'ati admitted that he was a "follower of Abu Dharr and that his Islam, Shiism, ideals, wants and even rage, were those of Abu Dharr. Shari'ati felt so close to Abu Dharr that he felt himself something close to his reincarnation."¹⁰

In 1960, after completing his Master's degree in foreign languages with specializations in Arabic and French, he was granted a state scholarship to the Sorbonne to study for a PhD in sociology. While in Paris, he joined the Iranian Student Confederation, the exiled branch of the National Front of Iran, and organized student demonstrations on behalf of Algerian revolutionaries and nationalists. Shari'ati also edited two journals: *Iran Azad*, the organ of the National Front in Europe, and *Nameh-i Pars*, the monthly journal of the Iranian Student Confederation in France. Shari'ati also translated Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *What Is Poetry?* and began a translation of Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* and *Year Five of the Algerian Revolution* (better known to English readers as *A Dying Colonialism*).¹¹

Shari'ati's sojourn in France had a considerable influence on his work. Throughout his studies he was in contact with the Algerian resistance movement, the National Liberation Front. He was also influenced by the French philosopher and activist Jean-Paul Sartre and by Frantz Fanon, a prominent theoretician of revolutionism in the Third World. In fact, Shari'ati attempted to take the revolutionary ideology he acquired in France through a process of "Islamization" to render it more relevant and clearer to the Iranian masses, who did not necessarily know or comprehend Western worldviews, ideologies, or philosophies, but were strongly attached to Islam and the Islamic tradition as an integral part of their lives.

In fact, this was a point of disagreement between Shari'ati and Fanon during their exchange of ideas over the role of religion in general and of Islam in par-

ticular in the broad anti-colonial war. While Fanon expressed his doubts about the role that religion would play within the international revolutionary front of anti-colonialism, Shari'ati was certain that in the case of Islam, and especially in case of the Alvid Shiite Islam, it had a central role. This genuine form of Islam has a revolutionary ideology that enables the organic intellectual in Iran—and all Islamic countries—to fuse with his own society and not to be alienated from it.¹²

Therefore, Shari'ati not only criticized traditional clerics or others who glorified passivity and *intizār* (awaiting), he also criticized “Westernized” Iranian intellectuals who attempted to eliminate the clerics, Islam, and Islamic traditions, both progressive and reactionary.¹³ These latter intellectuals, he maintained, were ineffective in terms of their struggle against Imperialism.¹⁴ In his lecture “Where Shall We Start” Shari'ati emphasizes this point: “Our own history and experience have demonstrated that whenever an enlightened person turns his back on religion, which is the dominant spirit of the society, the society turns its back on him.”¹⁵ Thus, Shari'ati delineated a path for organic intellectuals in Iranian society, and in Islamic societies in general, whereby their activism should be driven by the predominant national faith of these societies, and not exist separately from it.

In 1964 Shari'ati returned to Iran. Upon his arrival, he was imprisoned for six months. After his release, he taught at a high school and later at Mashhad University. In 1967, he moved to Tehran and started to lecture at Hosseiniyeh Ershad, a religious institute founded and financed by veteran leaders of the Liberation Movement. The next five years were the most productive in his life. He lectured regularly at the Hosseiniyeh, and most of these lectures were transcribed into pamphlets and booklets. Along with the pamphlets and booklets, tapes of his lectures were widely circulated and received instant acclaim, especially among college and high-school students.¹⁶ Soon after the closure of the Hosseiniyeh, Shari'ati was arrested and accused of advocating “Islamic Marxism,” and subsequently imprisoned. He remained in prison until 1975, when a flood of petitions from Paris intellectuals and Algerian government officials secured his release. On May 1977, he left for London, where only one month after his arrival he suddenly died. His death was attributed to the Shah's secret police, SAVAK.¹⁷

Religion against Religion

The dialectical method which Shari'ati adopted from Marx and Hegel is explicit in most of his writings and in the way he dealt with various social and religious phenomena. In his search for the perfect revolutionary tool or party with which the masses in Iran, various Islamic countries, and the third world could reach emancipation, he activated the dialectical method and negated the hegemonic religion, what he called black Islam or the Islam of clergy, with red Islam or the Islam of the *mujahid*.

Shari'ati directed his main criticism towards Muslim clerics who dedicated their energy to unnecessary details while abandoning the core of true Islam, which

he believed to be social justice and resistance to oppressive powers. Shari‘ati differentiated between pure Shi‘a Islam—the revolutionary and authentic Islam of Ali—and the passive and inauthentic Safavid Shi‘a Islam.¹⁸

Islam has two separate Islams. The first can be considered a revolutionary ‘ideology.’ By this I mean beliefs, critical programmes and aspirations whose goal is human development. This is true religion. The second can be considered scholastic ‘knowledge.’ By this I mean philosophy, oratory, legal training and scriptural learning. Islam in the first sense belongs to the Mojaheds, Abu Zarr, and now the intelligentsia. Islam in the second sense belongs to the Mojtaheds, Abu Ali Sina, and the seminaries’ theologians. The second form can be grasped by academic specialists, even by reactionary ones. The first can be grasped by uneducated believers. This is why sometimes true believers can understand Islam better than the *faqih* (religious jurist), the *‘Alim* (scholar) and the philosophers.¹⁹

Shari‘ati maintained that Shi‘a Islam had sided with the oppressed masses for many centuries, and sought to liberate them from various tyrants:

We can see that for over eight centuries (until the Safavid era), Alavid Shi‘ism was more than just a revolutionary movement in history which opposed all the autocratic and class-conscious regimes... Like a revolutionary party, Shi‘ism had a well-organized, informed, deep-rooted and well-defined ideology, with clear-cut and definite slogans and a disciplined and well-groomed organization. It led the deprived and oppressed masses in their movements for freedom and for seeking justice.²⁰

Shari‘ati was less concerned with the confrontation between secularism and Islam. Instead, he preached about the clash between the two Islams: between the red Alavid Islam, as he named it, and the black Safavid Islam.²¹ While red Islam praised martyrdom and revolutionary activism, the Safavids disempowered people, and transformed the idea of heroic activism of Imam Husayn—the third Imam of the Shi‘a—into acts of contrition, constant self-pity, passivity, and infinite waiting, which prevented believers from acting in a way that would change the status quo.²² Shari‘ati aspired to a Shi‘ism without clerics or, at least, without the kind of traditional clerics who were mainly concerned with trivial issues. He sought to turn religion into ideology that mobilized the masses towards revolutionary acts that would establish the empire of justice in the world at the present, instead of waiting until the end of

history in the far-distant future.

By looking at all of Shari'ati's work we can see that the dialectical method with its thesis, anti-thesis, and synthesis could be used to explain the general nature of historical development.²³ We can detect the same method in his efforts to reconstruct revolutionary Islam by advancing red Alavid Shi'ism against the traditional black Shi'ism in order to reestablish and revive the real prophetic Islam of the prophet Muhammad, his companions, and his family.²⁴

Shari'ati's critique of so-called black Islam or black Shi'ism was not just a critique of its spiritual-political message. It also highlighted Shi'ism's economic structure as its main problem:

Do you know what is the source of misery for Islam? It is the formation of, and the dependency of the religion on, [petit-bourgeoisie] class, establishing [as they have,] a connection between the seminary and the bazaar. Should Islam to be able one day to get rid of this dirty connection, it will, forever, assume the leadership of humanity; and should this relation continue, Islam has been lost forever. The Islam which is growing nowadays and which has adherents is the Islam with connection between Hajjis [he means the merchants who have been to Mecca] and the Mollas. And these two have a [cozy set of] reciprocal relationships with each other. This [the Molla] takes care of the other's [the Haji's] religion, and that [the Haji] takes care of the other's [the Molla's] worldliness ... then in [the process of] such a reciprocal relationship they make a religion for people which is of no use to them.²⁵

Shari'ati continues:

We have to save Islam from this connection [between the merchants and the clerics]. In my opinion, this is the objective. Except for this commitment, with whatever we keep busying ourselves—good or evil, true or false—we have abandoned our responsibility and our mission.²⁶

The target of Shari'ati's criticism was not just the super-structure of the Islamic system. He targeted not only the ideology on the surface of the system, but also the root of the economic system of Iran and Islamic countries in general. Shari'ati attacked the charity system that enabled capitalists to accumulate wealth and then give up part of it as an act of charity to the poor. He argued that charity should be replaced by a system of social justice, based on a different economic system, that has its basis in Islam: "The Islamic economic system should be such that he [the

capitalist] is not permitted to accumulate wealth.” He accused the clergy of “admonishing the capitalist on the pulpit, but [issuing] juridical injunctions in his favor.”²⁷ In order to prove the genuine nature of his socialist claim he quoted the Qur’an:

And those who hoard gold and silver and spend it not in the way of Allah—give them tidings of a painful punishment. The Day when it will be heated in the fire of Hell and seared therewith will be their foreheads, their flanks, and their backs, [it will be said], ‘This is what you hoarded for yourselves, so taste what you used to hoard.’²⁸

Thus, Shari‘ati’s Islam was a socialist one. He was certain that under a restructured, socialist Islam, the boundless accumulation of capital would be prevented. In order to do so, Islamic society should firmly adopt progressive programs. Later on, Shari‘ati provided an Islamic metaphysical perspective in support of these socialist and Marxist economic measures:

In our eyes, bourgeoisie is loathsome. It will not just be eliminated. It must be eliminated. This [capitalist system] is to be condemned not just because it is incompatible with the “collective production” in modern industrial systems, but more because it is antihuman. It corrupts the human nature. It transforms all values to interests. It changes the nature to “money,” and man, who is the representative of God on earth ... to a bloody wolf.²⁹

For Shari‘ati there were no doubts that the system that should succeed this corrupted capitalist system was a socialist one, which would emancipate humankind from economic and spiritual chains. This would allow individuals to realize their divine origin and to be closer to God, in the sense that he talked about in his *tawhid* theory, which will be discussed later. And yet, after all these statements, it was nonetheless very important for Shari‘ati to explain in what sense he was a socialist but *not* a Marxist:

It is clear in what sense we are not Marxists, and in what sense we are socialists. As a universal and scientific principal [sic], Marx makes economics the infrastructure of man; but we [hold] precisely the opposite [view]. That is why we are the enemy of capitalism and hate the bourgeoisie. Our greatest hope in socialism is that in it man, his faith, ideas and ethical values are not superstructural, are not the manufactured and produced goods of economic infrastructure. They are their own cause. Modes of production do not produce them. They are made between the

two hands of 'love' and 'consciousness.' Man chooses, creates, and sustains himself.³⁰

In this context, I would agree with Mojtaba Mahdavi that socialism in Shari'ati's view "is not simply a just system of production and distribution, but also a philosophy that guides everyday actions and contains an *ethical* dimension."³¹ In Shari'ati's view, socialism permits man to realize his divine origin and emancipate himself from the economic and spiritual prison of capitalism. Therefore, socialism in Shari'ati's view is not a mere economic value of collective appropriation of the collective surplus-value. Rather, socialism functions as an emancipatory monotheist system which enables the man to be the closest to God.

Shari'ati's Organic Intellectual

Shari'ati designated the main role of disseminating this ethical dimension of equality among the masses to intellectuals. He believed that intellectuals have a very important role in leading the masses to the "light" of true Islam as a combination of social justice, equality, freedom, and socialism.

In dealing with the obstacles that confront intellectuals, Shari'ati sought to merge Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's idea of the organic intellectual and Plato's idea of the pursuit of truth. Gramsci made a significant contribution in moving the focus of Marxist analysis from the economic dimension to the ethical, cultural, and political one. He explains that the group which should formulate the main message of the "general will" is the group of intellectuals who are supposed to consolidate the current "historical bloc" struggling to promote a new hegemonic political project. According to Gramsci, an intellectual and ethical leadership would formulate a more exalted synthesis, which the ideology helps transform into an organizational mortar that consolidates a "historical bloc."³² Gramsci defines the intellectual not as a truth pursuer in the Platonic/Socratic sense but distinguishes between two types of intellectuals: "organic" versus "traditional." He maintains that the organic intellectual is part of the

social group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, [that] creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields...³³

The neo-Gramscians have developed this definition of the organic intellectual to include intellectuals from any social group, and not only the ones who emerged from the world of economic production.³⁴

Just as in Gramsci's theory of hegemony, Shari'ati shifted the question of

oppression in Iran from domination (i.e. coercion) to leading (i.e. coercion and consent). He believed that the formulation of radical Islamic ideology was the first and most important step towards effecting social change. This is the main task of the intellectuals, who should be involved in a long “trench war” to enable them to gain gradual control over all positions in this great battlefield—to instill the alternative hegemony in the society, which in Shari’ati’s case is Alavid (red) Shiite Islam. According to Gwyn Williams, in his classical essay on the Gramscian concept of hegemony, a project becomes hegemonic when its “concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all taste, morality, customs, religious and political principles, and all social relations, particularly in their intellectual and moral connotation.”³⁵ This is exactly what Shari’ati sought to achieve with his Alavid revolutionary Islam.

Shari’ati accentuated the role of the conscious vanguard intellectual in changing the destiny of his own society. He argued that “a conscious and alert individual could grab history by the collar and propel it from feudalism to socialism, thus disrupting the orderly historical stages of development and historical determinism.”³⁶ Indeed, Shari’ati believed that the role the intellectual should play in the countries of the third world is to enlighten the masses. He should fulfill his mission by being part of these masses and by merging with them, using their language and basing his arguments, slogans, and program upon their own understanding:

In a society like Iran, whose foundation is a religious one, we must not turn ourselves into a so-called free-thinker cadre (that gathers in coffee houses, cabarets, and parties to “talk big,” and show off by reciting new personalities), while our average citizens are still living in the Middle Ages, having no access to our talents, religion, ideology, and writing.³⁷

Shari’ati continues:

Any school which is not based upon the cultural foundations of a society looks like a good book in a library which is used only by a small group of students and professors. Even if thousands of such books are printed, they will have no effect upon the masses. The greatest danger, however, is self-separation of the free-thinker from the society’s context.³⁸

It is not enough for intellectuals, from his perspective, to be “right” or to offer a brilliant analysis of reality. Their challenge is to connect with the masses in order to transform their poverty into consciousness that would lead to action. As Shari’ati put it: “contradiction must enter subjectivity in order to cause movement. This is why poverty does not cause movement, it is the feeling of poverty that does ... The poor must develop consciousness of poverty.”³⁹ At the same time, Shari’ati did

not believe that “free-thinkers” should continue to lead the masses after the revolution succeeds, unless they are totally merged in an evolutionary action. Rather, Shari’ati preferred that another type of intellectual, referred to as revolutionaries, would take the lead. He maintained that after the free-thinkers light the spark, it will be time for revolutionaries to step in:

Therefore, the function of free-thinkers is not the political leadership of a society, rather, their sole job is to bestow awareness on the masses, that’s all. If a freethinker yearns to awaken his society, the product of his mission will be heroes who can lead the free-thinkers themselves.⁴⁰

And he continues after this statement:

As long as there are no heroes, the mission of the freethinker is not yet over. Religion, art, how to communicate with people, poetry, and theatre are all important factors with which free-thinkers can work; trying to handle more than these is useless. That is, the mission of a free-thinker is confined to returning the alienated society (by Europeans) to her real self, restoring her character and her “usurped” human sentiment and bestowing class consciousness, faith, and national history upon her.⁴¹

Shari’ati believed that the “true spirit of Iran’s history” is Islam, and in order for the organic intellectual to be truly “organic,” he needed to find the real revolutionary impulse within Islam and not outside it.⁴² That was exactly what Shari’ati did by reviving and reframing Islam as a revolutionary ideology.

Consciousness Revolution: Leaping to the Twentieth Century

Shari’ati maintained that Iran and countries of the Islamic world should undergo a process of self-invention and rediscovery. Through this process of rediscovery, Iran and the Islamic countries would break free from their imperialist and colonial oppressors in the West and enter the twentieth century as productive agents. At the same time, Shari’ati believed that Islam should undergo a reformation like the one that Catholic Christianity went through in the sixteenth century. “He evaluated the Protestant movement through which a new religion was founded as a positive Western experience worthy of emulation.”⁴³ Shari’ati called for the transformation of Islam and its purification from practices and rituals foreign to true Islam.

As part of his understanding of history, Shari’ati believed that to attain the revolutionary phase, and to move towards the fulfillment of the Marxist prediction of a classless and just society, Iran and the Islamic countries should first go

through a revolution of consciousness. As Shari'ati's wife put it: "For Shari'ati, the task of revolutionary intellectuals was to develop a contextually grounded discourse of revolutionary awareness on the basis of the 'extraction,' 'reformation,' and 'refinement' of local and popular cultural resources."⁴⁴ Shari'ati did not maintain that Iran and other colonized and semi-colonized countries—especially in the Islamic world—should wait for the next stage of development. Rather, he believed that with the right investment and the right revolutionary consciousness, Iran could pass in one or two decades through several stages that had taken the west hundreds of years: "If we recognize that we are in the 14th century and subsequently work with our society with 14th century methods, we will reach the 20th century in less than half a century."⁴⁵

Shari'ati did not dismiss the relevance of a Marxist analysis for Islamic countries, yet he was certain that for a Marxist analysis to be relevant, it should come after the conscious revolution or in parallel to it, not instead of it. For Shari'ati, this was the principle error that had been committed by Marxists and socialists in the Islamic countries, and in Iran in particular, for a long time—they imposed an analysis relevant to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on a context of the fourteenth century. For him, these Marxists and socialists were akin to traditional Islamic clerics; specifically, they were fanatical about the literal word of Marxism rather than the dialectical understanding of its spirit.

Shari'ati's Marx

Shari'ati was a Marxist in his own way, even if he did not admit it. As Hamid Dabashi puts it:

A close reading of Shari'ati's writings leaves no doubt that his chief frame of reference, his conceptions of history, society, class, state apparatus, economy, culture, his program of political action, his strategies of revolutionary propaganda are all in the classical Marxist tradition.⁴⁶

For Shari'ati, as he explained in his lectures entitled "Lessons on Islamology," there was not one Marx, but three: the young philosopher Marx, the mature social-scientist Marx, and the old political Marx. Shari'ati rejected the young and the old Marx and adopted only the middle, sociologist Marx.⁴⁷ For Shari'ati, the young Marx was mainly an atheist who did not differentiate between the institute of the church and the essence of true religion. Shari'ati tried to fix the "mistake" of the young Marx through his aforementioned theory of differentiation between the two religions that exist within each religion, especially within Islam: the religion of the oppressors and the religion of the oppressed. Shari'ati approved of Marx's critique of religion as the "opium of the people," and he defended Marx's statement as true insofar as

we examine the past and present of institutionalized religion, rather than the religion of action.⁴⁸ He writes:

As for religion, Marx saw resemblance between the complexion of Jesus and the Pope's; this is where he was mistaken! The Pope's complexion was closer to the Roman Caesar's rather than to Jesus Christ's, the barefoot Palestinian fisherman, crowned with thorns ... One does not refer here, neither to the 19th century's Pope nor to the institution of the Catholic Church, but to the capitalist clerics who used to dominate the people's faiths throughout history and in all societies, taking advantage of this to instill their unjust rule that makes the majority a victim of the "nobility" of the ruling minority. For this reason, Marx adopted materialism as an ideological basis for the socialist system, calling for denying religion that constitutes an ideological basis for the hegemony of the nobles and the tyrant government...⁴⁹

Thus, Shari'ati's critique of Iranian Marxists, and secular intellectuals' way of dealing with religion was based on Marxist thought itself. Shari'ati's critique had two distinct bases. On the one hand, his first critique focused on an analysis of the specific historical context that Marx addressed in his writing and theory; on the other hand, his second critique focused on an application of Marxist ideas in the different context of twentieth century Iran:

The value of Marx's philosophy resides in his pursuit of knowledge regarding the movement he belonged to, and the sacred goal that he believed in and sought to analyze deeply. Marx wrote history in favor of this movement, and enriched it with reason, philosophy, economics, sociology and anthropology, and provided the proletariat, that he was committed to, with class consciousness, and with the ideological weapon that helped it survive. Therefore, scientific and ideological imitation does not mean that we have to repeat Marx's deeds unconsciously and adopt his way of thinking blindfolded.⁵⁰

Furthermore, Shari'ati never used the loaded Islamic term *Kufr* (blasphemy) to describe Marx and Marxism—unlike his contemporary clergies. He argued that, although he is not materialist, many materialists—including Marx—are much closer to God and to the real Islam than the traditional clerics who did not defy the rulers and the oppressors: "examine carefully how the Qur'an uses the term *Kafir*. It uses that term to describe those who refuse to take action for the truth. It never applies that term to those who deny the existence of God and the soul."⁵¹ Shari'ati main-

tained elsewhere that Islam's contradiction with imperialism and capitalism was antagonistic incapable of reconciliation, while Islam's contradiction with Marxism was of non-antagonistic nature. For Shari'ati, Marxists were rivals while the imperialist camp was an enemy.⁵²

As for the old Marx, he was a political figure who made mistakes in his short-term political and economic predictions. For Shari'ati, the most effective Marx, the one that should be adopted and learned from, was the middle-period sociologist who analyzed the history of humankind, theorized the antagonistic class struggle, and posited the determinism that is moving humankind towards social justice. As we shall see later, Shari'ati took this phase of Marx and merged it with his own theory of *tawhid*. He also tried to merge historical determinism with God's will, which he submitted to an existentialist interpretation.

Revolutionizing Islam: *Tawhid* and Revolutionary Action

As previously stated, Shari'ati was deeply influenced by European Marxism and existentialism, and tried to merge Islam and Marxist philosophy in a way that was acceptable to and based on the Islamic tradition and faith in Iran or, as he maintains:

Adherence to real faith and “*Tashayy*” (Shiism) in our society unites us with the masses, and enables us to speak in their language, hence our ability to disseminate consciousness and instill a sense of responsibility (among the masses) ... this is achieved through interpreting and analyzing events and figures in the history of Islam. This adherence rescues us from being alienated from people (*al-nas*), and builds between us, namely the intellectuals and the masses, a stable bridge. Therefore, consciousness regarding the “*Tashayy*” becomes a general conception in the society we live in, since it helps us understand genuine and deep truths in our land.⁵³

Shari'ati had a twofold purpose. In addition to mobilizing the masses towards revolutionary activism, he adhered to his father's original objective voiced years earlier: to attract the westernized Iranian intelligentsia back to Islam. To achieve this, he needed to use one of the central worldviews that prevailed in Europe at that time, in addition to Marxism: Sartrean existentialism, which constituted a common infrastructure and language that was shared amongst the Iranian intellectuals that were influenced by it during those years.⁵⁴

In her 2014 article, researcher Elisheva Machlis emphasizes Shari'ati and *tawhid* theory—the monotheistic principle of unity—writing that he succeeded in formulating an authentic theory that linked Islam to existentialism. He achieved this mainly by transforming *tawhid* from an Islamic theological perception into an ide-

ology and worldview of revolutionary activism that seeks to change reality.⁵⁵ That is to say, he sought to position human beings and their future at the centre of concern, instead of divine essence and nature.

In his unique perception of the *tawhid* concept Shari‘ati merged God, nature, and humankind, rendering them one essence. In his lecture on *tawhid* he writes that “there are many people who believe in *tawhid*, but only as a religious-philosophical theory, meaning nothing but ‘God is one, not more than one’ but I take *tawhid* in the sense of a world-view, and I am convinced that Islam also intends it in this sense.”⁵⁶

A paragraph earlier he writes:

But *tawhid* as a world-view in the sense I intend in my theory means regarding the whole universe as a unity, instead of dividing it into this world and the hereafter, the natural and the supernatural, substance and meaning, spirit and body. It means regarding the whole of existence as a single form, a single living and conscious organism, possessing will, intelligence, feeling and purpose.⁵⁷

Shari‘ati’s *tawhid* theory was meant to bridge divine authority, human activism, and freedom of choice, which ultimately lead to humankind’s freedom of political activity in this world, here and now, as an alternative to the passivity that “black Shi‘ism” promoted. This is made possible by virtue of the inherent unity between God, humankind, and nature, and in light of Shari‘ati’s renewed interpretation of man’s perception as “God’s Caliphate,” or God’s successor on earth. Therefore, Shari‘ati concludes that God and humankind are part of one entity; as a result, humankind constantly progresses in an infinite path—for God is infinite—towards the comprehension of the universe and of God, which will enable one to act freely in this world, and to be responsible for his choices and deeds.⁵⁸

Using the dialectical method, Shari‘ati referred to human beings as a union of two opposites: thesis which is the “spirit of God” and anti-thesis which is the “stinking mud” from which human beings were made. The struggle between these two contradictory elements created the dialectical movement from the “stinking mud” to “God” and this journey was called, in Shari‘ati’s jargon, religion.⁵⁹ In Shari‘ati’s interpretation, *tawhid* is also the rejection of any kind of polytheism in the political, economic, and social spheres. Shari‘ati’s *tawhid* symbolized humankind’s liberation from submission to any social force or power that may be other than God. It meant also the rebellion against all earthly powers which sought submission, wishing to replace the position of God.⁶⁰ In this sense, Shari‘ati’s *tawhid* theory—contrary to that of black Islam or the traditional clergy—had very stark social, po-

litical, economic, and ethical implications similar to those of its pure version in the era of the prophet Muhammad and his companions, especially Ali and Abu Dharr al-Ghafari. The desired result of Shari'ati's *tawhid* philosophy is not an ideological or intellectual exercise for its own sake; instead, Shari'ati's activism was committed to achieving justice through authentic Islamic instruments, even at the expense of Orientalizing western ideologies (which he admitted) and "westernizing" Islam (which he did not admit).

What interested Shari'ati was not merely the afterlife. He was motivated to change the present world that people currently live in and suffer in as human beings:

...this is the *tashayn*' , it is not about praying in a hope of gaining *bur al-'ein* [the heaven's beautiful virgins]. The real *tashayn*' is not about accumulating "requisites" (*thawab*) in preparation for the afterlife; it is about gaining requital and all the good in this world. It seeks to achieve salvation, "divine interceding" and all the goals that exist on earth...it even builds heaven in this world.⁶¹

Shari'ati further emphasized the goal of achieving social justice. In order to do so, he gave a new, revolutionary reading of the Qur'an. He maintained that the Qur'anic references to *Allab* on social issues can in fact be replaced with *al-nas* (the people):

In the affairs of society, therefore, in all that concerns the social system, but not in creedal matters such as the order of the cosmos, the words *al-nas* and *Allab* belong together. Thus when it is said, "Rule belongs to God" the meaning is that rule belongs to the people, not to those who present themselves as the representatives or the sons of God...When it is said, "property belongs to God," the meaning is that capital belongs to the people as whole, not to Croesus. When it is said "religion belongs to God" the meaning is that the entire structure and content of religion belongs to the people; it is not a monopoly held by a certain institution or certain people...⁶²

As these quotes demonstrate, Shari'ati's perception was radical and humanistic. Although he was not an orthodox Marxist, he was deeply influenced by Marx. In addition to the argument voiced by many scholars who maintain that Shari'ati brought Marxism and revolutionary perceptions into a process of "Islamization," I think it is very important to add that Shari'ati also re-constructed Islamic thought and brought it into a process of social revolutionization.⁶³ For example, in his lecture on the dialectics of sociology, Shari'ati reduced social structures and regimes in history to two models: Abel's and Cain's. These are "monotheist" *tawhidi* regimes and

the “polytheist” *shirk* regimes, linking the Marxist analysis of the different socio-economic phases of human history, with the Qur’anic and Islamic (and other Abrahamic religions’) story of the sons of Adam. In Abel’s regimes Shari’ati includes egalitarian social structures, primitive communism in early history, and the future socialist and subsequent communist classless society, whereas in Cain’s regimes, he includes all social structures based on oppression and exploitation such as slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and so forth.⁶⁴

Within these regimes, Shari’ati distinguishes two opposing forces: the exploiters and the exploited. Among the former he includes kings, capitalists, imperialists, aristocrats, and traditional clerics; in the latter he includes the people, or *al-nas*, and God. Shari’ati emphasizes that, in a class-based society, “*Allah* sides with *al-nas* in all the social issues mentioned in the Qur’an. *Allah* and *al-nas* are actually synonyms, and very often they can replace each other without changing the meaning.”⁶⁵ Shari’ati emphasized that “Islam invites the individual who wishes to experience God to annihilate or negate himself in the people or the creatures of God.”⁶⁶ Therefore, Shari’ati replaced the Sufi concept of self-annihilation and subsequent assimilation or living in God with self-annihilation and subsequent assimilation or living in the people.⁶⁷ This was a very revolutionary idea that made Marxist revolutionaries, such as Che Guevara who merged with the masses, closer to God than the clerics who separated themselves from the people and their struggle against imperialism, capitalism, and injustice.

Shari’ati’s interpretation of the story of Cain and Abel in the Qur’an is completely Marxist. He maintained that the only reason for the differences between Cain, the oppressor, and Abel, the oppressed, was economic structure and their different positions in the relations of production. He emphasized that they both came from the same father and the same mother, they both lived in the same “society” and in the same environment, and they both had the same education and cultural background.⁶⁸ The reason for their different reactions to their father’s request, that each of them would marry the other’s twin sister, was a result of their different place in the relations of production “Abel represented the pasture-based economy, of primitive socialism that preceded private ownership, and Cain represents the system of agriculture, and individual or monopoly ownership.”⁶⁹

A few sentences later Shari’ati states:

In my opinion, the murder of Abel at the hands of Cain represents a great development, a sudden swerve in the course of history, the most important event to have occurred in all human life. It interprets and explains that event in a most profound fashion—scientifically, sociologically, and with reference to class. The story concerns the end of primitive communism, the disappear-

ance of man's original system of equality and brotherhood, expressed in the hunting and fishing system of productivity (equated with Abel), and its replacement by agricultural production, the creation of private ownership, the formation of the first class society, the system of discrimination and exploitation, the worship of wealth and lack of true faith, the beginning of enmity, rivalry, greed, plunder, slavery and fratricide (equated with Cain).⁷⁰

At the end of the story, Shari'ati underlined the lesson that we should learn from this symbolic story:

This confirms the scientific fact that life, society and history are based on contradiction and struggle, and that contrary to the belief of the idealists, the fundamental factors in all three are economic and sexuality, which come to predominate over religious faith, brotherly ties, truth and morality.⁷¹

Shari'ati surpassed other contemporary clerics and philosophers. He tried to match Shiite Alavid Islam, as he names it, to revolutionism to transform it into an instrument that can change the world and confront the local capitalists and imperialists, and their allies, the Safavid clerics, without causing alienation of the masses.

Conclusion: Revolutionism between Islam and Socialism

Ali Shari'ati's writings and thoughts represented the atmosphere that prevailed among a gradually growing group within the Shiite community in different countries, mainly among radical youth who sought change. However, these young radicals were uncertain about the best way to create far-reaching social transformation that would improve their condition and that of their families and communities. In the period of widespread agitation from the 1950s to the 1970s, an era of national liberation and decolonization movements in the Third World with an increasing number of young people following radical and socialist ideologies and views, it seemed that religious ones in general, and the Muslim Shi'a in particular, became obsolete institutions that disconnected themselves from young people's lives. At that time, Shiite clerics were a sort of prototype of the traditional intellectuals that Gramsci referred to in his *Prison Notebooks*, in the sense that they were a kind of a remnant, who adhered to the past and to the very limited knowledge that served as sedative for the masses. These clerics continuously supported passivity and *intizār* (awaiting) on the part of believers: abstention from taking any activist initiative in this world to change the reality in which the Shiite believers live, or to confront the injustice they have been subject to for centuries.

Shari'ati emerged during this precarious time, deriving support from the

early history of Shi‘a Islam, which he perceived as much more active, including the early contemplations of the first Imam, Ali, and the third Imam, Husayn. Shari‘ati’s thought could not have originated without this historical development, during which radical, socialist, and patriotic perceptions were deeply instilled in Middle Eastern counties and in Iran in particular. Shari‘ati was an organic intellectual, in Gramsci’s sense, not only because he was the product of a specific socioeconomic class, but also because he established an organic relationship with the populations that supported him and his approach, and because of his responsiveness to the challenges that other radical movements put in his path.

More precisely, Shari‘ati can be characterized as a religious intellectual who evolved organically and was in dialogue with tradition. His traditionalism—in this case not in its Gramscian sense—derives from his refusal to totally detach from the religion. At the same time, he extracted from that tradition the revolutionary-resistant parts that Shi‘ism, especially early Shi‘ism, is saturated with. Shari‘ati reconnected Shiite emblems and tradition to the daily life of believers, transforming them into a powerful political stimulus that enabled the Shiites to draw from both worlds. Passivity and abstention from political activism were not needed anymore in the present condition. On the contrary, believers needed to be active and lead all oppressed people worldwide through means that were both authentic and rebellious.

Shari‘ati’s Islamic-socialism was shaped to give an answer to concrete challenges that confronted revolutionaries and Marxists in an Islamic country, where religion played a very crucial role in the popular tradition of the masses. Instead of throwing the entire tradition away and causing alienation among the masses, he decided to take the progressive part of that tradition and religion, and to criticize its reactionary representatives, especially clerics, in their own field (religion): he strove to re-invent a genuinely progressive Islam. He concurrently fought orthodox Marxists on their own ground (historical-materialist theory), arguing in favour of applying what he saw as the spirit of Marxism as opposed to its orthodox dogma—exactly the same methodological split he saw with respect to religion. By adapting Marxist theory to present conditions, in a way that would not be foreign to the masses or alienated from them, namely by synthesizing it with their lived experience and worldview—predominantly Islam—one can achieve the goal for which this philosophy was invented in the first place: to reach social justice in the here and now.

NOTES

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- ² Pouran Shariat-Razavi cited in Siavash Saffari, *Beyond Shariati: Modernity, Cosmopolitanism, and Islam in Iranian Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017), 6.
- ³ Hamid Algar, Introduction in *On the Sociology of Islam* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979), 16.
- ⁴ Ali Shariati, "Shahadat" in *Jihad and Shabadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam* ed. Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhausen (Houston: The Institute for Research and Islamic Studies, 1986), 155-159.
- ⁵ Abedi and Legenhausen, "Introduction," *Jihad and Shabadat: Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, 35.
- ⁶ Ali Shariati, cited in Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 141.
- ⁷ Abedi and Legenhausen, "Introduction," 31.
- ⁸ Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 209.
- ⁹ Hamid Dabashi, *Shi'ism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 53-54.
- ¹⁰ Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian*, 60.
- ¹¹ Ervand Abrahamian, *Radical Islam: The Iranian Mojahedin* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1989), 107.
- ¹² Rahnema, 126-7.
- ¹³ Full translation of *intizār* is waiting or awaiting
- ¹⁴ Dustin Byrd, *Ayatollah Khomeini and the Anatomy of the Islamic Revolution in Iran: Toward a Theory of Prophetic Charisma* (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 2011), 97.
- ¹⁵ Ali Shari'ati, *Where Shall We Begin?* Iran Chamber Society, accessed June 10, 2021, https://www.iranchamber.com/personalities/ashariati/works/where_shall_we_begin.php.
- ¹⁶ Ervand Abrahamian, "Ali Shari'ati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution," *Middle East Research and Information Project Report* 102 (January 1982), 24-28.
- ¹⁷ Abrahamian, "Ali Shari'ati," 24-28.
- ¹⁸ Abdulaziz Sachedina, "Ali Shariati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution" in *Voices of Resurgent Islam* ed. John. L. Esposito (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 205-211.
- ¹⁹ Ali Shari'ati, cited in Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, 119.

²⁰ Ali Shari'ati, "Red Shi'ism vs. Black Shi'ism" in *That's How Ali Shariati Spoke: His Ideas and his role in the Advancement of the Islamic Movement and a Collection of his Writings* (Beirut: Dar al-Kalima Publishing house, 1987), 185-86.

²¹ Shari'ati, "Red Shi'ism vs. Black Shi'ism," 185-86.

²² Heinz Halm, *Shi'ism* (Baghdad: Dar al-Warraaq, 2011), 140.

²³ Rahnema, "Ali Shariati: Teacher," 230.

²⁴ Dustin J. Byrd, "Ali Shariati and Critical Theory: From Black Affirmation to Red Negation" in *Ali Shariati and the Future of Social Theory: Religion, Revolution, and the Role of the Intellectual*, ed. Dustin J. Byrd and Sayed Javad Miri (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 111.

²⁵ Ali Shari'ati, cited in Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publishers, 2006), 142.

²⁶ Shari'ati, *Theology of Discontent*, 142.

²⁷ Shari'ati, *Theology of Discontent*, 142.

²⁸ Qur'an (9: 34-35).

²⁹ Shari'ati, *Theology of Discontent*, 143.

³⁰ Shari'ati, *Theology of Discontent*, 143.

³¹ Mojtaba Mahdavi, "One Bed and Two Dreams? Contentious Public Religion in the Discourses of Ayatollah Khomeini and Ali Shariati," *Studies in Religion* 43, no.1 (2014), 46.

³² Antonio Gramsci, *On Hegemony: a selection from Prison Notebooks* (Tel-Aviv: Resling, 2004), 104.

³³ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1995), 5.

³⁴ See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

³⁵ Gwyn A. Williams, "The Concept of 'Egemonia' in the Thought of Antonio Gramsci: Some Notes on Interpretation," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 21, no.4 (Oct-Dec 1960): 587.

³⁶ Ali Shari'ati, cited in Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian*, 291.

³⁷ Ali Shariati, *Mission of a Free Thinker Part I*, Dr. Ali Shariati Website, accessed June 10, 2021, <http://www.shariati.com/english/mission/mission1.html>.

³⁸ Shari'ati, *Mission of a Free Thinker I*.

³⁹ Ali Shari'ati, *Mission of a Free Thinker Part II*, Dr. Ali Shariati Website, accessed June 10, 2021, <http://www.shariati.com/english/mission/mission2.html>.

⁴⁰ Shari'ati, *Mission of a Free Thinker II*.

⁴¹ Shari'ati, *Mission of a Free Thinker II*.

⁴² Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian*, 196.

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- ⁴³ Rahnema, 283.
- ⁴⁴ Shariat-Razavi cited in Saffari, *Beyond Shariati: Modernity, Cosmopolitanism, and Islam in Iranian Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 7.
- ⁴⁵ Ali Shari'ati, *Mission of a Free-Thinker II*.
- ⁴⁶ Ali Shari'ati, cited in Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, 137.
- ⁴⁷ Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, 114.
- ⁴⁸ Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, 72.
- ⁴⁹ Shari'ati, *Religion vs. Religion*, (al-Najaf: Dar al-Fikr al-Jadeed, 2007), 149 (in Arabic).
- ⁵⁰ Shariati, *Religion vs. Religion*, 150.
- ⁵¹ Shari'ati, *Islamology*, cited in Abrahamian, *Radical Islam*, 117.
- ⁵² Rahnema, "Ali Shariati: Teacher," 240.
- ⁵³ Shari'ati in *That's How Ali Shariati Spoke*, 205-6.
- ⁵⁴ Elisheva Machlis, "Ali Shari'ati and the Notion of tawhid: Re-exploring the Question of God's Unity," in *Die Welt des Islams*, 54 no. 2 (2014) 183-211.
- ⁵⁵ Machlis, "Ali Shari'ati and the Notion of Tawhid," 192.
- ⁵⁶ Shari'ati, "The World-View of Tawhid," in *On the Sociology of Islam*, 82-87.
- ⁵⁷ Shari'ati, "The World-View of Tawhid," 82-87.
- ⁵⁸ Machlis, Ali Shari'ati and the Notion of tawhid, 202-204.
- ⁵⁹ Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian*, 291-2.
- ⁶⁰ Rahnema, 289.
- ⁶¹ Shari'ati, *That's How Ali Shariati Spoke*, 207.
- ⁶² Shari'ati, "The Dialectic of Sociology," in *On The Sociology of Islam*, 116-117.
- ⁶³ These arguments can be found in many works, for example, Byrd, *Anatomy of the Islamic Revolution*, 98; Machlis, "Ali Shari'ati and the Notion of tawhid:" 183-211.
- ⁶⁴ Shari'ati, "The Dialectic of Sociology," in *On The Sociology of Islam*, 111-112.
- ⁶⁵ Shari'ati, "The Dialectic of Sociology," 116.
- ⁶⁶ Shari'ati, cited in Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian*, 159.
- ⁶⁷ Shari'ati, cited in Rahnema, 159.
- ⁶⁸ Shari'ati, *Al-awdabela al-That*, Trans. Ibrahim D. Shata (Cairo: al-Zahrā' li-E'alam Al-'Arabī, 1986), 347.
- ⁶⁹ Shari'ati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, 98.
- ⁷⁰ Shari'ati, 103-104.
- ⁷¹ Shari'ati, 104.