Radical Thoughts of Ali Shariati

In preparing the intellectual and political atmosphere for the unparalleled surge of Islamic revival that we notice in Iran, many factors have been at work. One of the most important is the legacy of Dr. Ali Shariati's progressive and radical thoughts. A teacher, scholar and writer, Shariati had a dynamic influence on the young people of Iran with his classes, discussion, free lectures and articles during the 1960's and 1970's. Shariati a sociologist, subjected contemporary society to careful examination, using the terms, experiences and concepts found in Islamic philosophy and culture for his analysis. He formulated and presented a coherent Islamic worldview and an ideology of social, political and economic change. His views have contributed much to the Iranian Islamic revolution.

Ali Shariati was, in the fullest sense of the word a committed believer in tauhid (monotheist), an intellectual with an acute sense of social responsibility for a moment. In the age of ignorance he demonstrated, together with a few other self-sacrificing souls, how it is still possible to give one's entire life-study, profession, work and even family to the task of conveying the message. He devoted all of his time to jihad and to struggle to the propagation of religion, in the hope that he might
save his forgotten and unenlightened generation from its confusion and bewilderment.¹

Radical instinct, to the extent of extremism was deep-rooted in his thinking since the very beginning. He waged a constant struggle against the evil temper of the modern age and society, the withered root of which can be watered only by the renunciation of all things, even life itself, by martyrdom!

“I cannot endure remaining silent and being unable to say anything. I shall remain silent, but I feel like a person enduring the pangs of death who knows that peace and salvation await him, who is tired of the troubles of life, for whom there is nothing but a waiting that lasts a whole lifetime...

Do you not see how sweetly and peacefully a martyr dies? For those fully accustomed to their everyday routine, death is an awesome tragedy, a horrendous cessation of all things; it is becoming lost in nothingness. But the one who intends to migrate from himself begins with death. How great are those men who have heeded this wondrous command and acted accordingly – “Die before you die.” Kavir, p. 55.²

Family Attribution

There weighed upon Shariati’s life not only the burden of the trust he had inherited from his own ancestors and forefathers, but also the heavy burden of the search for truth and justice. His strong family background had impact on approaches

towards life. His ancestors had sentimental attachment with their original place. This sense of attachment with the place in trouble had been guiding force in the revolutionary thinking of Ali Shariati forever. In his own words:

"About eighty-five years ago, before the beginning of the Constitutional Revolution, my grandfather studied theology, philosophy and jurisprudence... even though he was living in the remote and obscure village of Bahmanabad, his fame spread to the learned circles of Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan and Najaf... Nasiruddin Shah invited him to the capital. There he taught philosophy at the Sipahsalar madrasa, but the urge for solitude and isolation, strong in his blood, drew him back to his retreat in Bahmanabad."\(^3\)

Shariti derived much benefit from the life of his pure ancestors. He learned in particular "the philosophy of remaining a human being in an age when life is polluted, when remaining a human being is extremely difficult, and when a repeated jihad is needed everyday, and when jihad cannot be waged!"\(^4\)

His life began in the desert and ended with the attainment of a comprehensive historical and social ideology, a message for the intellectual guidance of the young generation, and the search for discovery of that "median path" that was the need of times. Consciously and deliberately, he traversed the destined path of all those who

\(^3\) Ibid.


\(^4\) Ibid.
felt and suffered as he did, the pain of our age, and he became one more among the martyrs and witness of history.\textsuperscript{5}

Shari'ati regarded as his own the whole legacy of humanity and scholarship that his ancestors had left behind. He considered their spirit as living on in him and looked upon it as guiding lamp, lighting his path. He believed that inheritance is a philosophical and credal fundamental of Islam by means of which Islam wishes to establish a purposive continuity running through the different events and occurrences that have happened, are happening, and will happen in different times and places. They are linked together by means of this continuity; they are born and they die as the result of a logical causality and a scientific law; they succeed each other and influence each other; and each of them forms a link in a single continuous chain that extends from the beginning of humanity with Adam down to the end of the system of contradiction and struggle at the end of time.

In truth, life itself was no problem for him, only how to live and for what purpose. For this reason, from the very beginning of his life, he was not only concerned with the shaping of his life and imbuing it with meaning, but he also felt intensely the weight of the burden of the trust that he had inherited from his forefathers and ancestors. He wished to carry that burden to its destination as swiftly as possible, and as he recalled in his last letter; he never wasted a single moment or permitted it to pass without profit and result:

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid

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By the grace of God Almighty, whose miraculous love for me induces shame and pain in my heart and nearly causes my spirit to explode in its agitation, and without in any way being worthy of it, I have entered on such a path that I cannot permit myself to spend single instant of my life on personal happiness... and what pleasure could be greater than this, that my life destined to pass in any event, should pass in this fashion?

(From Shariati's last letter to his father)⁶

This letter shows his priority and deep-rooted commitment for a change through a revolution. It was above all his father who was his spiritual teacher, in such a way that the son became a shining reflection of his father's essence.

My father broke with tradition and did not return to the village after completing his studies. He stayed in the city, and strove mightily to preserve himself with knowledge, love and jihad in the midst of the swamp of urban life... I am the result of his decision to stay... I am the bearer of his cherished trust, laboring beneath it awesome weight...⁷

His father, Aqa Muhammad Taqi Shari'ati, the great teacher and mujahid and the founder of the "Centre for the Propagation of Islamic Truth" in Mashhad, is one

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⁶ Quoted in - On the Sociology of Islam.

⁷ Kavir, page 19 (Ibid)
of the founders of the Islamic intellectual movement in Iran. He has been in the forefront of efforts to bring the modern-educated youth back to faith and Islam, delivering them from materialism, worship of the west, and hostility to religion. Shari’ati gives credit to his father for creating a congenial religio-revolutionary atmosphere in Iran. Shari’ati says “The idea of taking the Quran as the central means of teaching, studying and propagating the teachings of Islam and Shi’ism, and the creation of a special school of Quranic exegesis during the last few years, is largely his work.”

Shariati’s life had scholarly, religious, social, political and human dimensions, playing significant role in changing the methods of approach to Islamic and political questions and in choosing a correct and suitable method for their examination in the convulsed age in which he lived. He was well aware of the restrictions of his environment, and the traditional forms that surrounded him, and he was determined to subject them to his own purposes instead of being subjected by them. In this, Sharia’ti was successful. He taught while still studying, and he developed intellectually in numerous ways so that everyone was aware he had already taken a few steps outside his environment and age.

He started his scholarly and intellectual career through delivering lectures to the students and learned at the Centre for the Propagation of Islamic Truth in Mashed. What fashioned him and determined the direction of his thought was not so much his conventional program of study, nor even the course of higher study that he followed

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abroad, as his love of learning and thought, and the creativity and commitment that he derived from his firm faith in the perspicuous religion of Islam, as well as from his earliest environment, which always remained a source of guidance for him.\(^9\) The Centre for the Propagation of Islamic Truth, which for thirty years was the active and vital centre of committed intellectual Muslims in the city, contributed much to his formation and in return, he played a great role in promoting its activities by delivering lectures, answering questions and presiding over its sessions.\(^{10}\)

In his view, Islam might be regarded as a "median school" among the different schools of philosophy, one intermediate between socialism and capitalism, which adopted the advantages and positive aspects of other schools of thought while avoiding their negative aspects. He was chiefly concerned, with the ideological and anti-imperialist movements that at that time were sweeping across the Islamic world, from North Africa to Indonesia, and held out the promise of broad and comprehensive action. Shariati had to develop a particular interest in the history of religion, the history of Islam and the philosophy of history.

His independence of thought and belief was demonstrated above all by his determined defense of truth and justice and the particular attention he paid to religions, social and political events that affected the destiny of the people.

In the deathly silence that prevailed in the early years after the overthrow of Musaddiq in August 1953, he could never withdraw from the social struggle and

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\(^{10}\) Ibid.
conflicts, and the battle between the truth and falsehood. Shariati was never able to remain silent and to accept the negative equilibrium that had been established in society. He fought on two fronts simultaneously. He opposed the extreme traditionalists who had spun a web around themselves, separated Islam from Society, retreated into a corner of the mosque and the madrasa, and often reacted negatively to any kind of intellectual movement within society; they had covered the brilliant truths of Islam with a dark veil behind which they themselves also hid. Shariati had deep concern for society. He also opposed the rootless and imitative intellectuals who had made the “new scholasticism” their stronghold. In the opinion of Shariati both groups had severed their relations with society and masses of the people, and humbly bowed their heads before the manifestations of corruption and decadence of the modern age.

Radicalism Through Western Influence

Shariati, with his educational stay at the University of Paris came directly in contact and influence of radical writers and intellectuals of Europe, particularly of France. His five years at the University provided him with the opportunity not only to continue his studies, but also to make the acquaintance of books generally unavailable in Iran. He was able to examine and gain direct knowledge of different schools of social and philosophical thought and social behaviours, as well as the works of philosophers, scholars and writers such as Bergson, Albert Camus, Sartre, Schwartz, sociologists such as Gurwitsch and Berque, and Islamologists such as Louis Massignon. He was particularly attracted to Islamic studies and sociology, and he studied these subjects formally. The analytical and critical school of French sociology left a considerable impression on him but despite the attraction exerted on him for
some time by this kind of sociology, his social vision was a compound of idea and action. He found unconvincing both the positivist approach to society, which regarded sociology as an absolute science, and purely Marxist approach. In the opinion of Shariati, neither of these approaches was able to comprehend or analyse the realities of the non-industrialised world, the so-called "Third World". Shariati was constantly engaged in the search for a sociology that, irrespective of the status and development of capitalist society or the communist system, would be able to interpret and analyse the realities of the life of those peoples whose subjection to imperialism had been approved even by the communists of Europe, but who were struggling to gain their dignity and independence.

Shariati was not confined to Iran only. He had concern for the Muslim all over the world. His stay in France coincided with the tumultuous period of the Algerian revolution. Even in Europe, Scholars, intellectuals and sociologist were adopting various positions on the fate of Muslim peoples who had been subjected to imperialism for more than a century and were engaged in a fierce jihad, a life and death struggle. Shariati devoted attention and thought to what was taking place in Algeria, for he never considered himself separate from the anti-imperialist struggles of Muslim peoples and regarded himself a partner in their destinies.\(^{11}\)

The essays and books of Franz Fanon drew particular attention. Originally from Martinique, he had taken Algerian nationality, joined the ranks of the Algerian

\(^{11}\) Ibid.
revolution at its very inception, and produced important works, such as *The Damned of the Earth* and *The Fifth Year of the Algerian Revolution*. Fanon was first truly and adequately discussed by Dr. Ali Shariati, in an article he wrote in 1962 for one of the socio-political journals published by the Iranian students in Europe. He regarded the book *The Damned of the Earth*, with its profound sociological and psychological analyses of the Algerian revolution, as a valuable intellectual gift to be presented to all those engaged in the struggle for change in Iran. By expounding certain theories of Fanon, Shariati enabled the echo of Fanon's thought and outlook to reach the Iranian popular movement of which he was a part. Under the influence of Fanon, phrases such as the following began to appear in his pronouncements:

“Come, friends let us abandon Europe; let us cease this nauseating, apish imitation of Europe. Let us leave behind this Europe that always speaks of humanity, but destroys human beings wherever it finds them.”

Fanon became known and appreciated in Iran, with the result that a number of discerning people devoted themselves to further study of the revolutionary ideas of this radical writer.

Similarly, Shariati played a great role in making known the ideas of other African revolutionary writers, including Umar Uzgan, author of *The Best of All Struggles* (Afīd al-Jihad), as well as a number of non-Muslim writers and poets. Sharia'ti was convinced that ideas taking shape in various popular and Islamic

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12 From the Damned of the Earth, quoted in – the Sociology of Islam.
movements in Africa could inspire a new intellectual dynamism in the social and political struggles of the Iranian Muslims, and indeed, always his pupils and conscious people of Iran to benefit intellectually from anything the genuine movements of Islamic struggle in our age have to offer.

The study of the works and ideas of committed thinkers and writers, as well as his personal encounter with some of them, did not affect him in a passive sense rather, it inspired him to the development of new ideas, to originality and creativity. Shariati based his study and understanding of society not so much on formal and official sociology as one the actual and observable movements of society, and his objective studies and analyses were never devoid of criticism. Throughout the period of his residence and study in Paris – a period which ended in his receiving a doctorate in social sciences, he was engaged not so much in studying, memorising and preparing for examination as in developing himself as a mujahid, self aware and discriminating.

Sharia’ti’s activities were focused on three distinguished aspects: the intellectual struggle, practical struggle, and the struggle for the evolution of a true system of education. These all three forms of struggle were oriented toward the people or, more broadly conceived to the Umma. Instead of being totally absorbed by the tumult of student political activity, he sought to accomplish something for the sake of his people, something lasting and worthwhile. His writings and efforts were for the sake of his people, and he, more than anyone else, viewed the masses as his unique and irreplaceable point of orientation.
Sharia’ti’s residence in Paris coincided with a new and vital phase in the development of the progressive wing of the Iranian religious movement inside Iran. As soon as freedom movement started gaining momentum in Iran, tyranny and repression reasserted their former place in the life of the country.\textsuperscript{13} Arrests and trials began again, long sentences of imprisonment were given, and barbaric torture was practiced. The chief target of the repression consisted of the religiously-oriented nationalists, especially those committed persons who had joined the Freedom Movement (\textit{Nehzat-e Azadi}), the only group to come forward with a clear ideology and policy and a firm programme of action. The glorious uprising of Muharram 12,1383/June 5, 1963 also gave a new aspect to the Islamic movement in Iran, and separated the true mujahidin from the seasonal demonstrators.

Shariati belonged to this movement and considered it his own; hence he never desisted for an instant from writing and proclaiming the truth and analysing the Islamic movement that had been shaped by the powerful leadership of Ayatullah Khomeini.\textsuperscript{14} At the same time, the most conspicuous feature – the majority of Persian – language publications appearing abroad had a non-religious or even anti-religious tone, even thought the movement within Iran was fundamentally an Islamic one, and its whole basis was a progressive religious ideology. Iranian intellectuals abroad were overlooking the social realities of Iran and the true nature of the popular struggle,

\textsuperscript{13} Ali Shariati; \textit{On the Sociology of Islam} (translated) from Introduction by Hamid Algar, New Delhi
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
whether as a matter of evil intention, a conspiracy of silence, or the result of ignorance.  

Sharia'ti together with a number of like minded persons, was able to publish one of the most widely read Persian-language journals in Europe, and with his personal intellect and pen, he made of it the most serious and realistic organ published in support of the popular movement. In the journal a real harmony existed between the ideas of the intellectuals abroad and the nature of the struggle of the people within Iran. In short, scholars are unanimously of the opinion that, Sharia’ti’s period of study in France was marked by constant reflection and activity, and he came to embody one of the most influential currents of thought among Iranians abroad.

Shariati on Iranian Soil

Shariati’s returning to his own soil in 1964 was taken as a challenge by the exiting autocratic Shah regime. Shariati had brought with him a valuable gift – “the Islamic revolutionary ideas” for Iranian society but quite not for the existing regime. Before he could build up an Islamically oriented opposition to the Shah’s regime, was arrested and immediately sent to prison. Six months later, as a result of international pressure on the Iranian regime, he was released and permitted to assume a succession of teaching posts. Even after being released from prison, he was obliged to work for many years as a teacher at various high schools and the College of Agriculture, at the

\[15\] Ibid.
\[16\] Ibid.
same level he used to each before going abroad, this despite his doctorate from Paris. Throughout his life, his homeland was a prison for him where solitude, tribulation and all kinds of pressures bore down on him; but at the same time, this made him more determined to continue his struggle.\textsuperscript{17} After a number of years, without his seeking any appointment, he was appointed to the University of Mashed. He began to devote himself to the direct guidance of the young generation, and the students of different faculties took great pride in calling themselves his students. Shariati preferred free methods of teaching to conventional methods, and found no distinction between freedom and knowledge. But he was soon honoured with forced retirement.

Thus, this retirement from the University of Mashed gave him the opportunity to enter a new stage of intensive activity. By means of his lectures, free classes and analytical books written on social and religious topics, he created a new current of thought in the younger generation and in society as a whole. Shariati lectured at the celebrated \textit{Husayniya-yi Irshad}, a religious centre in Tehran that succeeded in attracting overflow audiences to its meetings and lectures on Islamic themes. At this centre he pursued the evolution of his distinctive theories on the sociology and history of Islam. Very soon Husayniya-yi Irshad was closed down and Shariati was imprisoned again for a period of 18 months.

Shariati was, in the fullest sense of the word, a committed believer in \textit{tauhid}, an intellectual with acute sense of social responsibility who never shirked his responsibility for a moment. In the age of ignorance, he demonstrated, together with a

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

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few other self-sacrificing souls, how it is still possible to give one’s entire life – study, profession, work and even family to the task of conveying the message. He devoted all of his time to jihad and to struggle to the propagation of religion, in the hope that he might save this forgotten and unenlightened generation from its confusion and bewilderment.

Shariati’s Understanding about Islam

Shariati’s approaches to the understanding of Islam was different from the religious clergy. They were issues and topics beyond established religious dogmas, addressed fundamental and vital problems. He questioned the popular believe that ‘talking is no longer of any use, and that to speak of our suffering is of no benefit. Shariati argued:

"Until now, we have constantly talked and discussed our sufferings without doing anything or undertaking any action. We must therefore close the era of talking, and everyone must begin acting by reforming his family or city."

Thus Shariati tried to corelate the issue of sufferings with concrete action plan. He opined that this view is based on an oversight, because in reality we have not talked up to now, we have not spoken of our sufferings, we have not closely and scientifically analysed our sufferings. We are a religious society; the basis of our work must be religious; but we still do not know our religion. I do not wish to say

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19 Ibid
that this is not a time for action and work, because speaking and action, analysing and applying, must always be joined together. This was the practice of prophet: he never divided life into two sections, the first consisting exclusively of talk and the second, exclusively of action...I am also convinced that lamenting in pain must be abandoned. Instead, we must speak concerning our sufferings, out of a sense of suffering, but also "scientifically". Shariati in the context of religion tried to convince that Islam stood for action, and thus action will lead to a change. Those who had set to work in Iran and elsewhere in the Islamic world in the hope of accomplishing something had seen very little result for their efforts, or no result at all. "The reason is that when they set to work, they did not know what needed to be done, and it is certain that as long as we do not know what needed to be done, and it is certain that as long as we do not know what we want, we will also not know what to do." 

Shariati put greater emphasis on the knowledge of Islam as a religion and various schools of thought. Besides the knowledge of Allah and comparing Him with the objects of worship in other religions, the knowledge of Quran and comparing it with other heavenly books and knowledge of the personality of the prophet of Islam and comparing him with the great reforming personalities existed throughout history, Shariati finally underlined the great need and importance of the knowledge of the outstanding personalities of Islam and comparing them with the prominent figures of other religions and schools of thought. This was the very basis of Shariati’s

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20 Ibid
21 Ibid
understanding of Islam — "The duty of today's intellectual is to recognise the know
Islam as a school of thought that gives life to man, individual and society, and that is
entrusted with the mission of the future guidance of mankind. Intellectuals should
regard this duty as an individual and personal one, and whatever be his field of study,
he should cast a fresh glance at the religion of Islam and its great personages from the
viewpoint of whatever may be his field of study. "Since Islam has so many different
dimensions and varying aspects that everyone can discover a fresh and exact vantage
point for viewing it within his field of study."23

There are several important topics in the human sciences that, Shariati
discovered with the aid of the Quran that were not discussed by these sciences. One
such subject was of migration. Shariati had different opinion about migration. “From
the tone in which migration is discussed in the Quran, I came to perceive that
migration is a profound philosophical and social principle ... is an infinitely glorious
principle..., the primary factor in the rise of civilisation throughout history.24

In the light of Quran, Shariati tried to prove the fundamental factor behind
social development and change are not – personality, tradition, accident but the *al-
nas*, "the people". It is for this reason that we see throughout the Quran addresses
being made to *al-nas*. The prophet is sent to *al-nas*, he addresses himself to al-nas; it
is al-nas who are accountable for their deeds, al-nas are the basic factor in decline – in
short, the whole responsibility for society and history are borne by al-nas. The word

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
al-nas is extremely valuable one, for which there exist a number of equivalents and synonyms. But the only word that resembles it, structurally and phonetically, is the word “mass”. Mass means, therefore the people without any particular class or social form. This is how Shariati reminded the people of their duties and roles in restructuring and reforming the society.

Islam, as a scientific school of sociology, believes that social change and development cannot be based on accident... further, man possesses liberty and free will, so that by intervening in the operation of the norms of society, once he has learned of them, and by manipulating them, he may plan and lay the foundations for a better future for both the individual and society. Personalities in Islam are those who understand well the divine norms; who have discovered these norms by means of a scripture, and make of this the secret of their success. In Islam, the personality of the prophet had a fundamental and constructive role in bringing about change, development and progress, in building a future civilisation and in changing the course of history. The prophet of Islam thus appeared in such circumstances that his personality was – from the point of view of a sociologist – the greatest factor in the change and development of society and history.

Shariati laid greater emphasis on the ‘discovery of truth’ as an important measure in the process of social change and revolution. He asked:

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
“Why did Europe stagnate for a thousand years, and what happened to cause a sudden change in direction, so that in the course of three centuries, it discovered truths it had failed to perceive in a whole millenium?”

Comparing the approaches adopted by great genius people of the world, Shariati says that even inferior genius have discovered the correct method of reasoning, which became means of discovering the Truth. What is that correct method? “We must be innovative in the choice of method. We must of course learn the scientific methods of Europe, but we do not necessarily need to follow them.”

As far as Islam is concerned, a single unique method cannot be chosen for the study of Islam, since Islam is not a one-dimensional religion. It is not based solely on the mystic intuition of man and restricted to the relationship between man and God. In order to study this dimension, a philosophical method must be followed, because man’s relation to God is discussed in philosophy. Regarding learning Islam correctly, precisely and in accordance with contemporary methodology, Shariati suggested two methods. First, the study of the Quran taking it as the compendium of the ideas and the scientific and literary output of the person known as “Islam”, and second, the study of Islamic history, taking it as the sum total of the developments undergone by Islam from the beginning of the prophet’s mission down to the present.

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28 Ibid
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
Shariati on the Sociology of Islam

Shariati was instrumental in popularising the ideology of Islam as a way of life and attracted mass support among the youth and intelligentsia of Iran for the establishment of a government based on Islamic principles and doctrines. He used Shiaism and the teaching of the first Imam, Ali (according to Shi’ite belief) as the basis for his powerful argument in order to mould society by discarding the burdens of dependence and false western values. He writes about his spirit of society and revolution in the following words:

"I, in the part of the world and at this moment of history, am expecting, in a future that might be tomorrow or any other time, a sudden world revolution in favour of Truth and Justice and of oppressed masses; a revolution in which I must play a part; a revolution which does not come about with prayers... but with a banner of a sword, with a holy war involving all responsible believers. I believe that this movement shall naturally triumph." 31

He denounced Marxism as tyrannical and capitalism as exploitative and called for the return to what he saw as a spirit of equality and compassion taught by Hazrat Ali. The clergymen accused Shariati as Islamic Marxist to undermine his revolutionary ideas. Their opinion indicates that Shariati was very close to Marxism. The Mojahedin and Shariati retorted that although they “respected Marxism as a progressive social philosophy but their true culture, inspiration, attachment and

ideology was Islam.” The ideas of Shariati and the Mojahedin were so close that many scholars concluded the former had inspired the later.

According to Shariati the question of Man is the most important of all questions. The civilisation of today is based upon humanism, the nobility of man and the worship of man. It is believed that the religions of the past crushed the personality of man and compelled him to sacrifice himself to the gods. They forced him to regard his own will as totally powerless when confronted by the will of God. They compelled him always to be seeking something from God by the way of prayer, supplication and earnestly. The philosophy of humanism is, then, a philosophy that, since the Renaissance, has opposed religious philosophies --- philosophies founded on belief in the unseen and supernatural realm and its aim has allegedly been to restore nobility to man. The roots of humanism lie in Athens, but as a universal philosophy, it has become the basis of the modern civilisation of the West. In reality, it arose as a reaction to scholastic philosophy and medieval christianity.

Man is representative of God and cannot be corrupt. In order to understand the place of “humanism” in different religions, and the concept of man that each of them holds, it is best to study the philosophy of the creation of man that each has set forth. First God addresses the angels, saying, “I wish to create a vice-regent for Myself upon earth”. Shariati comments, see how great is the value of man according to Islam! Even the post-Renaissance humanism of Europe has never been able to

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conceive of such exalted sanctity for man. The whole mission of man according to
Islam becomes evident from this divine address. The same mission that God has in
the cosmos, man must perform on earth as God's vice-regent.

Shariati argued that man has been created for a greater cause to bring a
radical change through revolution to setting up an ideal society. He presented purified
and practical Islam, before the educated world, which advocated for a major shift
from tradition to modernism. He used symbolic and highly philosophical language
and justified his new thought provoking ideas in the light of Islamic principles. While
discussing the languages of religion, Shariati writes, "The language that a religion
chooses in order to convey its concept must, then, be a versatile and multi-faceted
language... religion must employ a symbolic language, they are addressed to different
human types and different generations of men." 33

To Shariati, there are numerous concepts in religion that were not clearly
understood at the time of their appearance. If religion had not, on the one hand,
expressed its ideas in common, familiar language, it would have been
incomprehensible to the people of that age; but if it had expressed its ideas in
common language, religion would have had no meaning in later times.

Tauhid (One God belief) is the crux of the Islamic belief system. Shariati gave
a radical interpretation to the concept of tauhid by calling it in the sense of a world-
view. "But tauhid as a world-view in the sense I intend in my theory means regarding

33 Ibid
the whole universe as a unity, instead of dividing it into this world and 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. There are many people
who believe in tauhid, but only as a religious-philosophical theory, meaning nothing
but “God is one, not more than one”. But I take tauhid in the sense of a world-view,
and I am convinced that Islam also intends it in this sense.”

It is something beyond “God is one not more than one.” Tauhid sees the
world as an empire; shirk (more than one God) as a feudal system. “I regard shirk in
a similar fashion; it is a world-view that regards the universe as a discordant
assemblage full of disunity, contradiction and heterogeneity, possessing a variety of
independent and clashing poles, conflicting tendencies, variegated and unconnected
desires, reckoning, customs, purposes and wills”. Shariati interprets Tauhid in the
sense of the Unity of nature with metanature of man with nature, of man with man, of
God with the world and with man. The world-view of Tauhid is the negation of the
dependence of man on any social force.

“The difference between my world-view and that of materialism or naturalism
lies in this, that I regard the world as a living being, endowed with will and self
awareness, percipient, and having an ideal and a purpose. Existence is therefore a

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34 Shariati, Ali, On the Sociology of Islam, pg: 82
36 Ibid
37 Ibid

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living being, possessing a single and harmonious order that is endowed with life, will, sensation and purpose, just like a vast and absolute man".  

To put it differently, if we take a man endowed with awareness, creativity and purpose, exemplary to the utmost degree in all of his aspects, and then enlarge him to the utmost degree, we will have before us the world. And, thus Tauhid represents a particular view of the world that demonstrates a universal unity in existence, a unity between three separate hypothesis ---- God, nature, and man---- because the origin of all three is the same. All have the same direction, the same will, the same spirit, the same motion, and the same life.  

Ali Shariati is of the opinion that, in this world-view of tauhid, being is divided into two relative aspect: the unseen and the manifest. These two terms correspond in current usage to the sensible and the supra-sensible, or, more exactly, to that which lies beyond the scope of examination, observation and experiment (and hence knowledge) and is hidden from our sense-perception, and that which is manifest and observable. According to Shariati, this does not represent a form of dualism or bisection of being; it is a relative classification relative to man and his means of cognition. The division into unseen and manifest is, in reality, an epistemological one, not an ontological one. It is also a logical division, not only accepted but also applied by science. 

Finally Shariati concludes that, Tauhid bestows upon man independence and dignity. Submission to Him alone---the supreme norm of all being---impels man to revolt against all lying powers, all the humiliating fetters of fear and of greed.

38 Ibid
39 Ibid
Shariati enlightened the educated people through his lectures on various topics. He wanted to create a committed and radical leadership for a revolution and thus an ideal society. The **Ideal Society of Islam** is called the **Umma**. Taking the place of all the similar concepts which is different languages and cultures designate a human agglomeration or society, such as "society"; "nation"; "race"; "people"; "tribe"; "clan", etc., is the single word umma, a word imbued with progressive spirit and implying a dynamic, committed and ideological social vision.\(^40\) The umma is therefore, a society in which a number of individuals, possessing a common faith and goal, come together in harmony with the intention of advancing and moving toward their common goal.

In Shariati's opinion the other expressions denoting human agglomerations have taken unity of blood or soil and the sharing of material benefit as the criterion of society. Islam, by choosing the word umma, has made intellectual responsibility and shared movement towards a common goal the basis of its social philosophy. The infrastructure of the umma is the economy, because "whoever has no worldly life has no spiritual life." Its social system is based on equity and justice and ownership by the people, on the revival of the "system of Abel," the society of human equality and thus also of brotherhood ---the classless society.\(^41\) In Shariati's hypothesis, this is a fundamental principle, but it is not the aim, as in western socialism, which has retained the world-view of the western bourgeoisie. The political philosophy and the form of regime of the umma is not the democracy of heads, not irresponsible and direction less liberalism which is a plaything of contesting social forces, not putrid aristocracy, not anti-popular dictatorship, not a self-imposing oligarchy. A leadership must be responsible for the movement and growth of society on the basis of its world view and ideology and for the realisation of the divine destiny of man in the plan of creation.

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\(^{40}\) Shariati, Ali, "the Ideal Society---the Umma" On the Sociology of Islam, (Ibid)

\(^{41}\) Ibid
Shariati welcomes Ideal man for revolution. To him ideal man must be a rebel against oppressive regime. Shariati's ideas find radical mood even while analysing dialectics of sociology. The Ideal man is the theomorphic man in whom the spirit of God has overcome the half of his being that relates to Iblis, to clay and to sediment. He has been freed from hesitation and the contradiction between the "two infinities". "taken on the characteristics of God"---this is our whole philosophy of education, our sole standard! For it is a negation of all fixed and conventional standards in favour of assuming the characteristics and attributes of God. 42 Shariati advocates it as a progression towards the absolute goal and absolute perfection, an eternal and infinite evolution, not a molding in stereotyped forms of uniform men.

"This man, the man that ought to be but is not, is a bi-dimensional man, a bird capable of flying with both wings. He is not the man of those culture and civilisations that cultivate good men and powerful men separately from each other---on the one hand, men pure and pious but with weak consciousness and awareness, and on the other hand, powerful and brilliant geniuses, but with narrow hearts and hands polluted by sin. There are, on the one hand, men whose hearts are devoted to the inner life, to beauty and the mysteries of the spirit, but whose lives are spent in poverty, decline, humiliation and weakness, like those hundreds of thousands of Indian ascetics who despite their spirituality, their inner wonders, their subtle and exalted feelings, were for long years the playthings and wretched prisoners of a handful of English colonels. On the other hand, there men who tend the earth, the mountains the sea and the heavens, with the power of their industry, who create a overflowing with abundance, enjoyment and prosperity, but in whom feeling and all sense of value have been suspended, and the peculiarity human capacity to perceive the spirit of the world, the profundity of life, the creation of beauty, and the belief in something higher than nature and history has been weakened or paralysed." 43

42 Ibid
43 Ibid
In Shariati's opinion Ideal man passes through the very midst of nature and comes to understand God; he seeks out mankind and thus attains God. He does not pass nature and turn his back on mankind. He holds the sword of Caesar in his hand and he has the heart of Jesus in his breast. He thinks with the brain of Socrates and loves God with the heart of Hallaj. As Alexis Carrel desired, he is a man who understands the beauty of science and the beauty of God; he listens to the words of Pascal and the words of Descartes... like the Buddha, he is delivered from the dungeon of pleasure-seeking and egoism; and like Confucius, he meditates on the fate of society. Like Spartacus, he is a rebel against slave owners, and like Abu Dharr, he scatters the seed for the revolution of the hungry. Like Jesus, he bears a message of love and reconciliation, and like Moses, he is the messenger of jihad and deliverance. And thus, an Ideal man, is a man whom philosophical thought does not make inattentive to the fate of mankind, and whose involvement in politics does not lead to demagoguery and fame-seeking.  

Ideal man has three aspects: truth, goodness and beauty--- in other words, knowledge, ethics and arts. In nature, he is the vice regent of God; he is a committed will with the three dimensions of awareness, freedom and creativity. He is the great rebel of the world. His existence is a smooth path trodden by the will of God, who desires to accomplish the ultimate purpose of His creation in him and by him. ..... Resurrection is about to begin, and a project unfolds among God, man and love, a project for the creation of a new world, for telling the tale of a new creation.

Thus it was that the Trust God proposed to the earth, the heavens and mountains, they all forebore from assuming; it was only man that accepted it.

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44 Ali Shariati; The Ideal Man---the Vicegerent of God, On the Sociology of Islam. (Ibid.)
Man, this rebel against God
Who has given one hand to the devil---------intellect
And the other hand to Eve--- love,
Who bears on his back the heavy burden of the Trust,
Descended from the paradise of painless enjoyment,
Alone and a stranger in this world.
He is a rebel, but constantly yearning to return.45

Shariati's Political Theory

Ali Shariati was the philosopher of the Revolution. Mohamed Heikal, author of 'the Return of the Ayatollah' notes "When I was having my discussion with the students inside the American Embassy in Tehran, I found that any one of them would, in the space of a few minutes, quote Khomeini at me five times and and Shariati at least three times."46 Part of his teaching, which had a profound effect on Iranian youth, was that every man is in four prisons. First he is in the prison imposed on him by history and geography; from this he can liberate himself through science and technology. Next he is in the prison of historical necessity, and from this he can free himself by an understanding of how historical forces operate. The third prison is the social and class structure; only a revolutionary ideology can provide the way of escape from that. The fourth prison the self. Each individual is compounded of divine and satanic elements, of good and evil; each individual must choose between them.

45 Ibid.
Shariati admitted that his ideas were an amalgam of Islam and Marxism, of Sartre’s Existentialism and the Sufism of el-Hallaj, with a dash of Pascalian humanism.

The central theme in many of Shariati’s works is that Third World countries such as Iran need two interconnected and concurrent revolutions: a national revolution to end all forms of imperial domination and to vitalise – in some countries revitalise the country’s culture, heritage and national identity; and a social revolution to end all forms of exploitation, eradicate poverty and capitalism, modernise the economy, and most important of all, establish a “just”, “dynamic”, and “classless” society.

According to Shariati, the task of carrying forth these two revolutions is in the hands of the intelligentsia, the raushanfekran. For it is the intelligentsia that can grasp society’s inner contradictions – especially class contradictions, raise public consciousness by pointing out these contradictions, and learn lessons from the experiences of Europe and other parts of the Third World, and finally the intelligentsia must guide the masses through the dual revolutions.

The Iranian intelligentsia, Shariati added, was fortunate in that it lived in a society whose religious culture, Shi’ism was intrinsically radical and therefore compatible with the aims of the dual revolution. For Shi’ism, in Shariati’s own words, was not an opiate like many other religions, but was a revolutionary ideology that permeated all spheres of life, including politics, and inspired true believers to fight all forms of exploitation, oppression, and social injustice. He often stressed that the

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47 Hallaj, a Persian mystic, was brutally executed by the Abbasid authorities in Baghdad in 922 AD and is regarded by many Persian as a martyr.
49 Shariati; Ali, Rasa/lat, Published speeches, Tehran pp. 19-20.
prophet Muhammad had come to establish not just a religious community but an ummat (community) in constant motion toward progress and social justice. The prophet's intention was to establish not just a monotheistic religion but a nezam-i tauhid (unitary society) that would be bound together by public virtue, by the common struggle for "justice", "equality", "human brotherhood" and "public ownership of the means of production", and, most significant of all, by the burning desire to create in this world a "classless society". 

Furthermore, the Prophet's rightful heirs, Husayn and the other Shi'i Imams, had raised the banner of revolt because their contemporary rulers, the "corrupt caliphs" and the "court elite", had betrayed the goals of the ummat and the nezam-i tawhid. For Shariati, the muharram passion plays depicting Husayn's martyrdom at Karbala contained one loud and clear message: all Shi'is, irrespective of time and place, had the sacred duty to oppose, resist, and rebel against contemporary ills. Shariati listed the ills of contemporary Iran as "world imperialism, including multinational corporations and cultural imperialism, racism, class exploitation, class oppression, class inequality, and gharbzadeh (intoxication with the west)."

Shariati denounced imperialism and class inequalities as society's main long-term enemies but he focused many of his polemics against two targets he viewed as immediate enemies. The first was "vulgar Marxism", especially the "Stalinist" that

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50 Shariati; A, Shi'i: yek hizb-i tamam (n.p. 197, p. 27).
53 Ibid.
54 Shari'ati, Shi'i, p. 55.
had been readily accepted by the previous generation of Iranian intellectuals. The second was conservative Islam, notably the clerical variety, that had been propagated by the ruling class for over twelve centuries in order to stupefy the exploited masses. Thus many of Shariati's more interesting and controversial works deal precisely with Marxism, particularly the different brands of Marxism, and with clericalism, especially its conservative misinterpretations of Shi'ism.  

**Shariati and Marxism**

The study on Shariati and Marxism is controversial. At times he vehemently denounces it; on other occasions he freely borrows from it. This contradiction has led some to conclude that he was militantly anti-Marxist. Other suspect he was a secret Marxist who hid his true beliefs under the veil of Islam.

These apparent contradictions disappear once one realises that for Shariati there was not one Marx but three separate Marxs, and three separate varieties of Marxism. The Young Marx was predominantly an atheistic philosopher, advocating dialectical materialism and denying the existence of God, the soul, and the afterlife. According to Shariati, the atheistic aspect of Marx was blown out of proportion by European socialists and communists who, in fighting their reactionary churches, automatically denounced all forms of religions. The second Marx was the mature Marx, predominantly a social scientist revealing how rulers exploited the ruled, how

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56 For this attitude towards Marxism, see 'Shariati, Islam Shenasi, lessons 2-7; Cheh bayad Kard? pp. 1-157, Entezar, pp. 36-37 and Mazhab ’aliyeh mazhab, pp. 1-19.
the laws of "historical determinism" – not "economic determinism" – functioned, and how the superstructure of any country, particularly its dominant ideology and political institutions, interacted with its socioeconomic infrastructure. The third Marx was the elder Marx, chiefly a politician forging a revolutionary party and often making predictions which may have been politically expedient but which certainly did not do justice to his social science methodology. According to Shariati, this variety of "vulgar" Marxism eventually overshadowed "scientific" Marxism.

Of these three Marxism, Shariati clearly rejected the first and the third but willingly accepted much of the second. He stressed that one could not understand history and society without some knowledge of Marxism. He argued with much of the paradigm that divided society into a socioeconomic base and political-ideological superstructure. He even agreed that most religions should be placed in the latter category, since rulers invariably "drugged" the masses with promises of rewards in the next world.57 He accepted the view that human history was a history of class struggles. "Since the day of Cain and Abel mankind had been divided into to antagonistic camps: on one side stood the oppressed the people; on the other side stood the oppressors, the rulers."58 He also dispelled the notion that Marx had been a crude materialist who viewed mankind as cynical, self-seeking animals uninterested in ideals. Shariati even praised Marx for being far less materialistic than most "self-styled idealists and so-called religious believers."

58 Shariati, Ali, The Philosophy of History: Cain and Abel.
But Shariati rejected the “institutionalised” Marxism of the orthodox Communist parties. He claimed that these parties had lost their revolutionary fervour and had succumbed to the iron law of bureaucracy. In criticising the communist movement, Shariati raised a number of issues against the Tudeh Party, the main Marxist organisation in Iran. He claimed that the Tudeh had applied Marxism in a mechanical manner, without taking into account that Iran, unlike Europe, had been molded by the “Asiatic mode of production” and had not experienced the Renaissance, the Reformation, the industrial Revolution, and the dramatic transition to capitalism. For Shariati, the peoples of the Third World could not defeat imperialism, overcome social alienation, and mature to the point when they could borrow western technology without losing self-esteem, unless they first rediscovered their national heritage and their popular culture. In a series of lectures entitled Bazgasht (Return), he argued that Iranian intellectuals needed to rediscover their national roots and that these were to be found not in Aryan mythology – for such mythology left the masses unmoved – but in Shi’ism, which permeated most spheres of popular culture.59

In discussing Marxism he argued that what defined a true Muslim was not possession of a “subjective” faith in God, the soul, and the afterlife, but, rather, the willingness to take “concrete” action for the true: “Examine carefully how the Quran uses the word Kafer. The word is only used to describe those who refuse to take

59 Shariati; Ali, Bazgasht, p. 49. (Ibid)
action. It is never used to describe those who reject metaphysics or the existence of God, the soul and the resurrection."\(^{60}\)

**The Intellectual left and Shariati**

Ali Shariati's *Eslamshenasi* took him on the critical agenda of lefts. It did not take long for the left to respond to *Eslamshenasi*. In the spring of 1968, while *Eslamshenasi* was still in lecture-note form, Ali Akbar Akbari (a member of the God-Worshipping Socialist in his youth later joined the Iranian Peoples Party and became a Marxist in 1961) published an article in the monthly edition of *Hirmand*. The Hirmand article was followed up by a review article in the left literary magazine *Faslha-ye Sabz*,\(^{61}\) and in 1969 by a book, with the somewhat ambiguous title of *An Analysis of Certain Social Problems (Barrasi-ye chand Mas'aleh-e Ejtemai)*.\(^{62}\)

In this introduction, Akbari explains that he not only wishes to criticise Shariati's work but also to present an alternative view on social and philosophical topics. Akbari's book, however, is essentially a Marxist attempt at demonstrating that despite Shariati's radical assertions, his beliefs and theories are nothing but a revamp version of old 'idealist' and 'reactionary' thoughts based on a


\(^{62}\) Akbari's book was originally supposed to be called, 'The theories and beliefs of Ali Shariati'.
Akbari wishes to caution Shariati's disciples that their intellectual mentor is only a pretender whose path would neither lead to development nor to liberation. In a polemical tone Akbari maintains that:

Through the use of reactionary ideas, falsification of history, distortion of science, the falsification of the theories and ideas of others, Mr Shariati misleads his students and readers from a correct understanding and a scientific grasp of society, thereby increasingly assisting the forces of reaction and underdevelopment.64

Akbari takes issue with Shariati on a number of points. First, he disagrees with Shariati's definition of class. According to Shariati social classes are either based on economic and material conditions of social life or on religious and popular beliefs.65 Shariati makes a clear distinction between 'economic classes' and 'belief classes' is his original contribution.66 He maintains that in ancient societies classes were formed on the basis of beliefs, in recent epochs classes are essentially rooted in economic conditions. Ignoring Shariati's distinction, Akbari rejects the notion of belief classes. He invokes the Marxist argument that classes are the product of material or economic relations between individual, whereas ideas and beliefs are ideological relations and are therefore simple emanations of the real material base. Akbari concludes that 'belief classes' are figments of Mr. Shariati's imagination and have no real foundations nor have they ever existed in any society at any time.67

63 Akbari (2536) p. 9
64 Ibid; p. 10
65 shariati, C.W.30,p.22
66 Ibid; p.22.
Shariati and Clericalism

While advocating a return to Islam and Shi'ism, Shariati frequently criticised the traditional ulama in order to differentiate himself conservative clerical Islam.\(^68\)

It is not enough to say we must return to Islam. We must specify which Islam: that of Abu Zarr or that of Marwan the Ruler. Both are called Islamic, but there is a huge difference between them. One is the Islam of the caliphate, of the palace, and of the rulers. The other is the Islam of the people, of the exploited, and of the poor. Moreover, it is not good enough to say that one should be "concerned" about the poor. The corrupt caliphs said the same. True Islam is more than "concerned". It instructs the believer to fight for justice, equality and elimination of poverty.\(^69\)

Shariati accused the ulama of becoming an integral part of the ruling class, of "institutionalising" revolutionary Shi’ism and thereby betraying its original goals. He also blamed them for failing to continue the work of such nineteenth century reformers as Jamaluddin al-Afghani. He sharply criticised the clergy’s opposition to progressive ideas formulated in the west, particularly the radical concepts advocated by the constitutional revolutionaries of the 1905-11 period. He spoke out against their demanding “blind obedience” from their congregations, retaining a “monopoly” over the religions texts, and preventing the people from gaining access to true Islam. He claimed that the clergy refused to look ahead and instead looked back at some

\(^{67}\) Akbari (2536) p.39.
\(^{68}\) For this attitude toward the clergy, see ‘A. Shariati, *Islam Shenasi*, Lessons 2-7; *Cheh bayad Kard?* pp. 1-157, *Mazhad ‘aliyeh mazhad*, pp. 1-19.
mythical "glorious age" and treated the scriptures as if they were fossilised, scholastic parchments rather than inspirations for a dynamic revolutionary world outlook. In his view, they failed to grasp the real meaning of vital terms such as ummat, thus forcing Muslim intellectuals to seek the truth in the works of European orientalists.

Shariati often stressed that the return to turn Islam would be led not by the ulama, but by the progressive raushanfekran (intelligentsia). In Bazgasht he argued that the Islamic "Renaissance", "Reformation", and "Enlightenment" would be brought about more by the intelligentsia than by the traditional clergy. In a lecture entitled Mazhab 'aliyeh mazhab (Religion against Religion), he claimed that in the modern age the intelligentsia were the true interpreters of religion. In Cheh Bayad Kard? (What Is To Be Done), he insisted that the progressive intellectuals were the genuine exponents of dynamic Islam. Similarly, in a pamphlet entitled "Entezar" (Expectations), he argued that scholastic learning could remain in the hands of the theologians but that true Islam belongs to Abul Zarr, the mujahidin (fighter), and the revolutionary intelligentsia.70

The logic of Shariati's arguments clearly threatened the legitimacy of the clergy. If revolutionary Islam was the only true Islam, then scholastic Islam was false Islam. If deeds rather than piety were the sure marks of a genuine believer, then revolutionaries – even if uneducated were be – Her Muslims than the learned but conservative ulama. If faith rather than learning gave one true understanding, then devout lay fighters had a better understanding of Islam than the scholastic clergy. And
if social sciences were the key to understanding the dual national-social revolutions, then concerned Iranians should study sociology and political economy rather than theology.\textsuperscript{71}