

The Islamic Ideology of Ali Shari'ati

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Abstract

It has been thirty years since the Islamic revolution of Iran of 1979, and the name of Imam Khomeini remains alive in the minds of the people as its leader. However, little is known about the contribution of Ali Shari'ati (d. 1977) in awakening the educated youth to realize Islam's political relevance and to participate in the struggle against the shah's despotism. The new generation of Iranians know even less about his vision of governance and how it differs from Khomeini's concept of governance by the ulama.

This paper attempts to answer the following questions: Why did Shari'ati appeal to the students and intellectuals? What philosophical and theological elements make up his Islamic ideology, his Islamic sociology, and his concept of struggle (jihad)? How did he manage to blend Shi'ite theology and Marxist dialectical struggle to produce his own brand of Islamic ideology? Is the role of the sociologist to describe or to transform society?

Introduction

In 2009, one million people marched in Tehran to protest against the election outcome that favored President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This is surely a sign that people want change, not only as regards the president, but also in the regime itself. Disappointed by or actually antagonistic toward a cleric-

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dominated Islamic state, they loathe the Islamic restrictions being imposed upon them and blame the state for Iran's high unemployment rate and for the loss of a million lives in the Iran-Iraq war. Ironically, the Islamic Republic of Iran came about with the intention of establishing the religious law, hoping that people would conform to Islamic morality and religious practices. But it appears that this intention has not been fulfilled, for many Iranians are turning against religion and few people attend the Friday congregational prayer. Abandoning Islam, however, is not an option for Iranians who identify themselves as Muslim. Either they continue to accept the Islamic Republic, but with greater decision-making power given to the modern educated elite, or they adopt a secular democracy with less decision-making power accorded to the clerical elite.

It is apparent that the Iranian youth, especially the students and intellectuals, are disillusioned with the current regime and its clerical leadership. Some top clerics have also critiqued the regime. In fact, were it not for them many more Iranians would have turned away from religion itself. While it is important for Islamic thinkers to critique the system, at the same time they need to provide alternative ways of governance that do not conflict with Islam's basic values.

Ali Shari'ati is an example of a non-clerical Islamic thinker with whom Iranians could perhaps identify in order to provide an alternative vision for governing the country. The question we need to ask, however, is even if his message was relevant for Iran and appealed to the youth and intellectuals before 1979, would it still have the same relevance and appeal for both groups today? This article seeks to answer such questions and to place Shari'ati's Islamic ideology, sociology, and concept of jihad within his biographical and Iran's wider historical context.

Brief Biography

To understand Shari'ati's Islamic ideology, we need to provide some basic information about his life and works. Born in 1933 in northeastern Iran, he was educated in Mashhad and did his doctorate in Persian philology at the Sorbonne University in Paris. While there, he was influenced by the writings of Louis Masignon, Frantz Fanon, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Shari'ati moved to Tehran in the late 1960s and based himself at the Husaini Irshad, established in 1965 to promote the principles of Imam Husayn.

Upon his return to Iran, Shari'ati was arrested at the border and imprisoned on the pretext that he had participated in political activities while

studying in France. Released in 1965, he began teaching again at Mashhad University. As a Muslim sociologist, he sought to explain the problems of Muslim societies in light of the Qur'an; however, because of his popularity he was compelled to terminate his courses. He moved to Tehran to lecture at the Husaini Irshad Religious Institute, but the police forced him to discontinue his lectures. Imprisoned again under harsh conditions, public pressure obliged the regime to release him. Although free, he was nevertheless kept under close surveillance and forbidden to publish or lecture. In 1973, when the Husaini Irshad was forcibly closed by government troops and he was released from yet another period of imprisonment, he was allowed to leave Iran; he went to London. His sudden and unexpected death on 19 June 1977, at the age of forty-four, was presumed to be the work of SAVAK, the shah's secret police. Another view is that he died naturally of a heart attack.

Shari'ati was neither a fanatic who opposed anything new, nor was he westernized to the extent that he imitated the West without independent judgment. Knowledgeable about world conditions and ideologies, he began to enlighten students and intellectuals. He introduced the Qur'an and Islamic history to the youth so that they might discover their true identity and resist the ongoing decadence of Iranian society.

In his view, Islam was a political movement. While he opposed the secular nationalism that had dominated the 1960s, he also rejected the traditional Sunni and Shi'ite view that relegated political struggle to a secondary concern. He broke away from the established religious and political orders, attracted a new generation of Muslim youth, and managed to alienate the middle-class and the ulama. The 1960s, a decade when nationalist ideologies gripped Muslim countries, was shaped by home-grown elites who had fought to overthrow European colonization and then led their countries to independence in the aftermath of the Second World War. The nationalist sentiments among Iranians had fragmented the historic land of Islam into nation-states that pursued the agendas of Arab or Iranian nationalism. The nationalists took control of the modern media and placed it at the service of their own secular ideals, thereby excluding the ulama, who were accustomed to the traditional religious forms of expression. Shari'ati rejected the nationalist goals and sought to reactivate Islam as a political standard for Muslim behavior.

Since contemporary Muslim revivalists saw Islam as an alternative ideology to capitalism and socialism, they embraced the tools of modern technology and the media to serve the interest of the Islamic state. Shari'ati, being more interested in struggling to remove an unjust regime, proposed a

utopian classless society – not an Islamic state – based on the concept of *tawhid* (God's unity). Many Iranian ulama criticized him both for this viewpoint and also because he inspired the socialist Mujahidin al-Khalq.

Shari'ati's death made him a martyr and a source of inspiration for a more vehement struggle against social injustice in Iran. His lectures at the Husaini Irshad were recorded, transcribed and disseminated throughout the country, and translated into English after his death. His fearless lectures moved people to activism and jihad against the tyranny of the "oppressive" regime.¹ His unique style integrated both the idiom of the West and of Islam. S. H. Haidar states: "Reading Shari'ati, one cannot help but recognize that it is the prose-poetry that gushes forth from a spirit and an intellect that has been nourished by the power of the Qur'an, the wisdom of the Prophet, and [the] eloquence of Ali bin Abi Talib."² His sincerity and eloquence, combined with his Islamic worldview, inspired millions of modern Iranians to regain confidence in Islam as a vibrant religion for contemporary times.

The Iranian Historical Context

In early 1979 a terrorist group assassinated the brilliant religious scholar Ayatullah Murtada Mutahari, claiming that its members had been inspired by Shari'ati, who was known to be anti-clerical. According to Hamid Algar, this was an attempt by the revolution's enemies to discredit Shari'ati and give the impression that his followers and those of Khomeini were working against each other.³ It is true that Shari'ati was anti-clerical – but only of those clerics who collaborated with oppression. Although his works were filled with references to western thought, this did not mean that he was against the institution of religious leadership. In fact, even Khomeini criticized those clerics who were so obsessed with minor rituals that they ignored their social responsibilities. But unlike him, Shari'ati did not call for an Islamic state governed by the "rule of the Islamic jurists" (*wilayat al-faqih*), because he saw the roles of these two social actors as complementary. Despite their differences, they influenced different segments of society with one goal in mind: to unite the people against the despotic regime. This is not to say that different loyalties did not emerge, for even today there are Iranians who are pro-Shari'ati and anti-Khomeini.

Iran's Marxist radical groups gripped the imagination of students, many of whom had studied abroad, mostly in the United States. Student radicalism drew upon two sources: Marxism and "socialist Shi'ism." The former did not filter through to the masses, because its intellectuals were more

steeped in the bookish culture of the proletariat rather than having any real contact with the grassroots of Iranian society. Aware of this shortcoming, a few Marxist intellectuals projected the communists' messianic expectations onto revolutionary Shi'ism. Shari'ati represented this strand of Shi'ism, one that stressed the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and found expression in the People's Mujahidin.⁴ The secular middle class, however, did not identify with this movement's violent radicalism.⁵

The students were generally distrustful of the ulama; however Khomeini, who used the term *mustad'afun* (oppressed), which was also frequently employed by Shari'ati, was able to win over the Shi'ite socialist students. The political connotations of Shi'ism changed, and under the reinterpretation of Imam Husayn's martyrdom at Karbala the struggle against the shah became a modern incarnation of this historic event. The dominant Shi'ite tradition was to forgo activism in favor of passivism, and the Ashura ritual had become characterized by grief and lamentation, not activism and resistance to injustice.

For Shari'ati, however, the Shi'ite doctrine of Imamate became identified with the idea of leadership in the struggle for liberation from imperial domination. In Alid Shi'ism he found a strong emphasis on justice, as exemplified in the revolt of Ali and his sons against Umayyad tyranny, a kind of struggle that the Safavid Shi'ites, who promoted the idea of the Twelve Imams' infallibility, had largely hidden away. People were conditioned not to expect justice from their leaders during the Twelfth Imam's absence, and were therefore acculturated to obey the oppressive governments and those religious leaders who cooperated with them. He maintained that Safavid Shi'ism had depoliticized Islam and made religion the "opium of the people." In this respect he agreed with Khomeini; however, he differed with the latter on the role of the *mujtahid*, for he believed that a sincere person could be more Islamic than a *mujtahid*. For him, the Husayni Irshad had provided an exposition of Islam as an ideology, not a passive Islam promoted by the nation's seminaries.⁶

Shari'ati blamed the success of imperialism on the ulama, who had perpetuated the people's resignation to inevitable injustice by focusing on the Twelfth Imam, who will eventually return to correct those injustices. Since only this person can bring righteousness to the world, the Muslims should resign themselves to their current suffering and hope for a better life in the future. This acquiescence left no room for any protest against despotism.

According to him, Safavid Shi'ism had perverted *taqlid* to mean "blind obedience to the ulama" and left justice in this world to the shahs, according

to the un-Islamic principle of “render to Caesar that which is Caesar’s.” He saw Islam as political, and the Safavids and the ulama of having depoliticized it. Khomeini shared his view that waiting for the Twelfth Imam’s return to set things right was no more than a rationale for political passivity. Whereas they both abhor the rule of a monarchy as un-Islamic, Khomeini differs in his insistence that the government should be ruled by Islamic jurists.

In his *Hukumat-e-Islami* (Islamic Government), Khomeini justifies the concept of *wilayat al-faqih* and, for the first time, extends the idea to include government by the *fuqaha*’ (Islamic jurists). This meant that the religious scholars alone should have the authority to rule – and he regarded himself as the guardian jurist of the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁷ Although this is a very untraditional view of *wilayat al-faqih*, he managed to vindicate it in the following manner: The Twelfth Imam’s absence must not be used as an excuse to disregard Islamic law. A thousand years have passed since his occultation, and another thousand years might pass and he would probably still not reappear. In the meantime, should we leave society to be controlled by a monarchy when we have the solution to every problem, be it commercial, industrial, or agricultural? If Islamic governments would apply Islamic law, he reasons, Muslims surely would not now be facing a situation in which the Zionists have occupied their lands and the al-Aqsa mosque.

The role of an Islamic government is not confined to Iran alone, for it must work to promote the *ummah*’s unity, liberate its lands from the colonialists, and topple colonial governments. Khomeini quotes Imam Reza, the Eighth Imam, that it would have been illogical for God to have left His creatures without a guide or a guardian. The Islamic government must be the representative of God. God is the only legislator, but the supreme ruler should be a jurist (*faqih*). Real sovereignty belongs to the jurists, who, even in times of the sultanate, would order – and actually expect – the pious sultan to carry out the laws they told him to implement. The knowledgeable ruler may be called an imam, but not in the Shi’ite sense of an Infallible Imam.⁸

But for the uneducated, Khomeini was the imam in the Shi’ite sense. This must have given him considerable power, for he was regarded as both a jurist and a mystic. Although he only discussed *wilayah* in the juristic (and not the mystical) sense, one cannot ignore the word’s dual meaning, as it connotes his saintliness and status of being a representative of the Twelfth Imam. One hadith narrated from the Eleventh Imam states that the people

should follow the pious *faqih*. Even before he became internationally known, Khomeini was a practicing Sufi. Moreover, his early writings are of a mystical and ethical nature. Another Shi'ite hadith mentions Qum, a city that would be a sign of the Mahdi's coming; yet another one speaks of a man who will come from Qum and call to the truth.⁹ Perhaps Khomeini regarded himself as this person, and perhaps the masses of Iran also believed this to be the case. Thus it is not surprising that he received such popular support as the revolution's supreme imam.

For Shari'ati, however, in the Twelfth Imam's absence Muslims should continue to fight injustice, establish the society of *tawhid*, and model themselves in this struggle on the sacrifice and martyrdom of Imam Husayn. Unlike Khomeini, Shari'ati did not explain the need for an Islamic government and definitely did not support the need for a government ruled by the ulama. This is Khomeini's innovation; Shari'ati's was his attempt to reinterpret some Qur'anic verses, especially those lending themselves to a justification of dialectical struggle along Islamic lines. And he did all of this, using both Islamic and western idioms, in order to spread his ideas' appeal among the secular educated Iranian youth. Khomeini sought to vindicate his new position through theological arguments and emphasizing the urgent need for political change within the Muslim world. For Shari'ati, waiting for the Twelfth Imam means that Muslims should be ready for him at all times, and those whom he loves the most are those who follow the example of Ali and Husayn, both of whom struggled for justice. The Twelfth Imam, although hidden, is not necessarily absent at all: he lives in the real world and has his "feet on the ground. Muslims may even meet him without recognizing him, for he might be the farmer in that field over there or that merchant in his shop in the bazaar."¹⁰

Mutahari was one of those ulama who worked with Shari'ati at the Hussaini Irshad. But he also disapproved of some of the latter's ideas, especially his affinity to Marxism. Shari'ati, however, had rejected Marxism as a revolutionary ideology in his *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies*, which originally appeared as lectures in the Tehran newspaper after 1976. Nevertheless, he adopted the concept of dialectical struggle and the utopia of a classless society, both of which he integrated into an Islamic context.¹¹

Islamic Sociology and Ideology

Western sociology focuses on describing, not changing, society. Sociology should not only study a social group, but should have a wider practical appli-

cation. Islamic sociology could help sociology be less Eurocentric due to its message of social justice and such religious practices as the Friday congregational prayer, hajj, and the poor due (zakat), all of which have a social orientation. Shari'ati contributed to the creation of an Islamic sociology by portraying Islam's social dimensions.¹²

But for him, the true sociologist has a clear ideological orientation, one directed at social transformation.

Islam, as an ideology, is not a scientific specialization but is a feeling one has in regard to a school of thought as a belief system and not as a culture. It is the perceiving of Islam as an idea, and not as a collection of sciences. It is the understanding of Islam as a human, historical and intellectual movement, not as a storehouse of scientific and technical information. And, finally, it is the view of Islam as an ideology in the minds of an intellectual and not as ancient religious sciences in the mind of a religious scholar. Islamology then, should be taught in this way.¹³

Thus Islam as an ideology has a worldview that favors social action, one that is open to both the religious and the social sciences. According to him, modern sciences could be integrated into an Islamic worldview, for "[i]f one believes in a school of thought, one's beliefs, emotions, way of life, politics, social views, intellectual, religious and philosophical concepts are not separate, but interrelated. They are alive in one spirit, existing harmoniously in one form."¹⁴

Ideology assumes a particular worldview, and hence a person's orientation. Only with such a worldview will the individual know who he/she is, what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what is not, and what has meaning for oneself and what has no meaning. If one does not know who he/she is, from where he/she comes, and to where he/she is going, that person is confused, disoriented, and without a meaningful identity. Although Islam provides the best framework for an ideology, other frameworks and ideologies are also meaningful to their adherents. In addition, having any framework or ideology is certainly better than having no ideology, worldview, or meaningful orientation to life at all.

While one cannot know the mind of a physicist if that person does not have a school of thought, one can know the mind of a person who has a worldview.¹⁵ A person without a worldview is like someone who has furniture but no home, for although he/she is always moving house and unpacking, he/she never seems capable of finding a suitable place for the furniture. Similarly, ideas cannot be placed in context but will always float around,

unless they take root in a home in which they can prepare a base and a strong position to make changes to other surrounding ideas. Islamic ideology provides the home for belief and knowledge, in the sense that it means to be conscious of one's self, social class, national situation, and historic destiny. Ideology is a belief system that interprets all of these elements and answers such questions as who are you, what do you do, and what should you do?

Furthermore, to explain the difference Shari'ati compares ideology to Abu Dharr the *mujahid* and science to Ibn Sina the philosopher. An ideology emerges from a worldview.¹⁶ As alluded to above, Shari'ati was not a speculative thinker, but a social activist academic who was less concerned with causal explanations for social behavior than with transforming social behavior.

Shari'ati does not claim absolute objectivity for a worldview, for every worldview inevitably has a bias. Rather, he believes that the materialistic ideological bias should be replaced by an Islamic bias, for the latter is not a mere human bias rooted in conjecture, but a standpoint inspired by the Qur'anic revelation. Thus it cannot be measured according to the criterion of modern science. Muslim social scientists try to please God; consider themselves accountable to Him¹⁷; and have a clear, coherent view of humanity and its place in society, both of which are shaped by Qur'anic principles. All social scientists have this clarity, including Ibn Khaldun, Georg W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Arnold J. Toynbee.¹⁸ For Shari'ati, the Islamic worldview basically comprises belief and struggle (jihad). Islamic social scientists study both the social effects and causes of society and then seek to overcome the evils found therein by providing moral guidance based on the Qur'anic worldview.¹⁹

Nineteenth-century sociology divorced itself from ideology by separating "science from its mission and essential responsibility to serve humanity and to bring consciousness and guidance to humanity."²⁰ Thus scientists who adhere to this type of sociology cannot identify with class struggle or express their indignation over oppression. Only through a commitment to an ideological bias within sociology can one commit oneself to class struggle. Social scientists without a theological worldview no longer serve God and thus have become the servants of tyrants and the ideology of capitalism.²¹

Modern sociology, like modern science, attempts to study the human subject as an object, something free of interpretation. Natural science seeks to describe the world without any subjective properties. But this is not possible with human beings, who are more complex, for the human self can only be defined in terms of what is significant to that particular individual,

which is determined by his/her self-understanding. In the name of objectivity, modern sociology tends to ignore a person's, as well as a community's, subjective realities. Any conclusions derived from such a naturalistic approach to humanity are, therefore, bound to be reductionist.

Shari'ati is not suggesting that subjectivity is a virtue; rather, any pre-judgment is wrong, as the tradition states: "Anyone who interprets the Qur'an with his/her own opinion will be burnt in [the Hell]fire."²² This is pre-judgment, an interpretation based on caprice or conjecture. Reason must be employed not to justify conjecture, but so that one can be guided by the Qur'anic worldview. This is how Muslims can create a society of morality and unity (*tawhid*).²³

There are two current theories about science: (1) science supports a belief system and justifies preconceived notions and (2) science is divorced from a belief system and has no purpose and social responsibility. Shari'ati proposes a third way: scientists must pursue their research without any *a priori* beliefs. Once their thesis is proven, however, they have to promote its conclusions and commit themselves to its truths.²⁴

Before undertaking any study, scientists must not be committed to the extent that through the studies they are about to undertake, they will of necessity, prove their own preconceived notions. Rather, the result of the research, not the researchers, should show the truth to them, and then this proven truth becomes a belief for researchers. After realizing the truth, they should be committed to it and realize their responsibility to it as well as their responsibility towards people and their times for their own scientific consciousness. That is, [is] the belief or idea which their research proved to them. This way, then, neither enslaves science nor confirms preconceived ideas. It does not prevent science of performing its guidance and showing the way of salvation to the people. It does not remove it from seeing the needs of the human being, service to human society, criticizing, offering solutions and showing truth and falsehood. It does not isolate science in the university, nor is it to be used exclusively by the powerful opportunists, or those who wish to deceive.²⁵

Sociologists should not use knowledge to defend preconceived beliefs or be satisfied with only scientific analysis. After discovering the truth via dispassionate research, they should guide people in a "prophetic-like way"²⁶ and reject both preconstructed models of science and non-committal attitudes toward it. True sociologists are evolutionary beings, always in a state of becoming, never reaching their point but always moving toward a direction – a direction that is committed to social change.²⁷

Muslim thinkers can have an ideological bias, but this should not mar their objectivity. Traditional Islamic scholars see things from within the Islamic tradition, not from outside it. A view from outside will broaden one's perspective. To clarify his point, Shari'ati provides the image of a house.

Abdolkarim Soroush holds that Shari'ati saw himself as a religious enlightened thinker (*rowshanfikir-e-dini*) who was ahead of his time and thus would benefit later generations more than the current one. Such people undergo an internal conflict between their deep religious faith and the secular knowledge they have acquired. Shari'ati was inspired by Muhammad Iqbal, the Indian poet-philosopher whose *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (1930) was a bold attempt to rearticulate the philosophy of Islam in the light of modern thought. While al-Ghazali sought to revive the religious sciences (*ihya' 'ulum al-din*), Iqbal tried to reconstruct the religious sciences. Al-Ghazali eventually became disillusioned with rationalism and, later in life, resigned himself to focusing on the purification of the soul and the Afterlife. Iqbal, while acknowledging the importance of intuition and the Afterlife, viewed Islam as world-affirming.

The world-negating view held by many mystics was not an option for Shari'ati, who was inspired by Iqbal. Personal reformation is important, but it should not make one unresponsive to social ills. Shari'ati provides us with a brilliant imagery to illustrate the insider and outsider view of Islam.

Imagine that you live to the end of your life in one [house], and never leave it. Of course, you know all the rooms and corridors; perhaps, bit by bit you get to know its bricks, lights, ceilings, floors, heights and dimensions, and count and measure them. Yet, despite all this, there is one thing you clearly do not know, and that is the architecture of the [house], its external appearance, and its situation vis-à-vis other [houses] around it.²⁸

Furthermore, he states that when one stands on the roof and sees other houses, one acquires a wider range of vision and a full view of one's own house. Such a view will enable one to derive new ideas of how to reconstruct one's own house by working with the materials being used by one's neighbors. Al-Ghazali looked to the inside of the house of Islam, opening locked doors to hidden apartments, whereas Shari'ati looked at the outside of the house from a larger context and thus saw all of the comings and goings.²⁹ This is what makes modern figures like Shari'ati and Iqbal so different from many of the classical scholars.

Shari'ati "believed that his mission was to begin an in-depth Islamic renaissance on a very wide scale with an ideological image for the leaders,

giving consciousness to the people and propagating, completing and deepening what remains from the past.³⁰ His mission was directed mainly toward the western-educated youth and intellectuals who had lost interest in religion and become more attracted to secular forms of revolutionary ideology, or he thought that he could convince them of the power of religious truths. He did not just criticize modern secular thought as well as some classical Islamic thought, especially the reactionary theologies of Umayyad Sunnism and Safavid Shi'ism, but also challenged the secular ideologies of capitalism and communism. His ideology was essentially inspired by the Qur'an.³¹

Shari'ati lived in a time when Iranian students and intellectuals were becoming alienated from their own religious and cultural traditions. Being familiar with both western thought and the Islamic tradition, he was the best qualified to provide an intelligent critique of western ideologies and a credible defence of Islam. Hence, he redefined Islam in the light of modern consciousness and thus sparked the reemergence of a Muslim identity among Iranians, especially among the enthusiastic university students who were suffering from cultural alienation.³²

For Shari'ati, Islam is the only acceptable religion for humanity because only it maintains a balance between the individual and society, between this world and the next.³³ Abdollah Vakily argues that his methodology is more scientific than Islamic. Ilyas Ba-Yunus' criterion for an Islamic sociology is that it should be theoretical (based on principles of human nature and society), critical (have comparative techniques that enable people to discover their society's deviance from the ideal), and strategic (whereby the deviance can be minimized).³⁴ According to this criterion, Shari'ati's sociology is Islamic.

Religious beliefs are shaped by social mechanisms, and religion is expressed through various social institutions. In other words, sociology has a role to play, albeit a limited one, for it cannot explain spiritual beliefs and metaphysical concepts. Taner Edis holds that Muslim sociologists have not produced a distinctly Islamic sociology, as they rely mainly on western social sciences.³⁵ Islamic sociology merely affirms Islamic theology and uses western methods to analyze social phenomenon. He considers Shari'ati an example of such a trend. While it is true that Shari'ati drew inspiration from western concepts, this does not preclude the emergence of an Islamic sociology. History shows that such an event is possible if western concepts are compatible with Islamic values, as was the case when classical Greek ideas were integrated into the Islamic context.

Edis classifies Shari'ati's attempt to formulate an Islamic sociology as theological, not scientific, on the grounds that it sought to produce an ideal Islamic society that is moral.³⁶ For Shari'ati, however, faith and morality are essential for Islamic sociology, for without them the resulting "sociology" could not be "Islamic." The people (*al-nas*) who have to bring about social change must be people of faith and morality. As Marx wrote, it is the "enlightened thinkers" who must mobilize the people through revolutionary discourse. Since the Muslim masses cannot be left on their own, they must be guided by the "enlightened thinkers" (*raushanfekran*), a specific group of people that included the "true" Islamic social scientists: the bridge-builders who, leaving their isolated ivory towers and mixing with the common people, radicalize them to revolt against their oppressors. These are the radical Islamic thinkers who believe fervently in the Islamic ideology, are willing to die for it, and are driven to guide the slumbering masses. They identify the causes of society's backwardness and propose appropriate solutions.

Dialectical Jihad and Islamic Ideology

Shari'ati's ideology can be summed up as follows: Islamic societies are suffering from internal and external oppression, revolution is the only alternative left for effecting change, and Islamic ideology is the main instrument for such a social transformation. When the masses consciously choose Islamic ideology as a tool for changing their unbearable condition, it becomes a threat to corrupt governments. The Iranians must not moan over their lot, but should rather analyze their condition in order to discover the catalysts for change.

Philosophers such as Ibn Sina and mystics such as al-Hallaj did not create social change. Real change comes about through such figures as Imam Husayn and Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, whose thought and piety were followed up with action to bring about a just society. Islam is the best cultural expression for authentic revolution, but it needs to be reinterpreted into a worldview that is conducive to active change. Since Islam is biased toward the poor, it is a suitable ideology for their liberation. It provides the worldview that gives shape and direction to the jihad against *shirk* (polytheism) in order to establish a society of *tawhid* (monotheism), the type of society that comes from the monotheistic Islamic worldview of submitting to the One God, not to a tyrant or a man-made system.

Islamic ideology is shaped by an Islamic worldview. Shari'ati's syncretic mix of Islamic theology and Marxist sociology engendered his special

brand of Islamic ideology. Within this framework, the specifically Shi'ite perspective of the dialectical struggle between good and evil, monotheism and polytheism, and the oppressed masses and the oppressive rulers needs to be understood.

Shari'ati, who espoused a dialectic view of jihad as a struggle of *tawhid* against *shirk*, condemned western societies for their *shirk* and Iranian society for its imitation of them. The ideal Muslim society is one of *tawhid*, a classless society characterized by integration. Unlike Khomeini, he did not call for a society ruled by clerics or the Shari'ah. Although he criticized Marxism for its materialistic worldview and for divesting individuals of their free will,³⁷ a closer analysis of his concept of jihad reveals its influence.

Based upon his worldview, Shari'ati divided human society into two types: that of *tawhid* (characterized by a worldview of unity) and that of *shirk* (characterized by a worldview of disunity and contradiction). For him, human salvation is the summation of a dialectic, an ceaseless inner struggle that goes on at all levels of individual and social life until *tawhid's* ultimate triumph unites the conflicting separate parts of human existence, brings nature and society within an integrating sketch of the universe, and restores absolute equality as the primeval state of social life. Given his view of history as a struggle between various opposites (e.g., truth and falsehood, monotheism and polytheism, oppressed and oppressor), he states: "History ... is dominated by a dialectical contradiction, a constant warfare between two hostile and contradictory elements that began with the creation of humanity."³⁸

The opposing poles of God and Satan also exist in human nature and human fate, a reality that creates within each person a "dialectical, ineluctable, and evolutionary movement, and a constant struggle between two opposing poles in man's essence and his life."³⁹ He uses the Biblical story of Cain and Abel as a metaphorical framework to depict these two opposing forces engaged in struggle throughout history. The monotheistic worldview, which was once Adam's view, was gradually transformed into a contradictory worldview reflecting a dual-class society: Cain (the oppressor) represented evil, and Abel (the oppressed) represented good.⁴⁰ Cain is the owner, the landlord, and the usurper, whereas Abel is the dispossessed, the peasant, and the exploited.⁴¹

The influence of historical determinism, although he had integrated it into the context of an Islamic worldview, is recognizable in his writing. Thus Shari'ati did not speak the language of the clerics and was influenced by western ideology. This is why Mutahari and others were critical of him.

Mutahari, who used to collaborate with Shari'ati, later broke with him because he criticized those Muslim scholars who interpreted the Qur'an according to Marxism. Mutahari said that such scholars reinterpreted the Qur'anic word *al-nas* as "the proletariat," but that this was not the only class the Qur'an was addressing.⁴² This was precisely what Shari'ati did, which means that Mutahari must have been referring to such people. This break, therefore, is not surprising.

Islam teaches that if one dies while performing jihad, one dies as a martyr. Martyrdom is especially important in Shi'ism, given its emphasis on suffering, death, and redemption. The martyrs *par excellence* are the members of the Imams' family, descendants of the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law Ali and especially the latter's son al-Husayn, who was killed in 680 at Karbala (southern Iraq). They consider Husayn the "martyr of martyrs" (*shahid al-shuhada'*) and commemorate his death each year on its anniversary: the tenth day of Muharram. Those who are slain while seeking to preserve the Shi'ite faith and community are also regarded as martyrs.⁴³ Shari'ati stressed martyrdom as a revolutionary weapon, saying that its utility lies in its being an integral part of Shi'ite Islamic ideology, which motivates people to become martyrs, the heartbeat of history. Husayn's martyrdom, a protest against tyranny and a witness to Islam's true values, guaranteed that the faith would survive. This is the true jihad, the one that guarantees honor, faith, and the future of the powerless. It transforms passive Muslims who only follow into active Muslims who participate in the struggle against unjust despotic rule.

In his 1970 lecture on *shahadah* (martyrdom) at the Husainiyah Irshad, Shari'ati stated:

The concept of *shahadat* should be studied within the context of the school of thought of which Husayn is the manifestation *par excellence*. In the flow and struggle of human history, Husayn is the standard bearer of this struggle and his Karbala, a battlefield among battlefields. ... But in our culture, *shahadat* is not a death imposed by an enemy upon our warriors. It is a death desired by our warriors, selected with all of the awareness, logic, reasoning, intelligence, understanding, consciousness. ... *shahadat* ... is the only means of resistance so that truth, right and justice can remain alive at a time and under a regime in which uselessness, falsity and oppression rule.⁴⁴

Neither Khomeini nor some of the other Iranian ulama find anything reprehensible in the questions of jihad and martyrdom, for they also supported jihad as a means of social change. It is just that Shari'ati viewed the struggle

from within the context of Islamic ideology and believed that the enlightened thinkers, who were not necessarily the ulama, have to be its guides. Such thinkers, who must also emerge from among the Muslim academics and social scientists, are the ones who must guide the masses toward revolutionary struggle and social transformation. Change will not come about by those who possess merely a book-knowledge of Islamic law or from academics who are confined to their ivory towers. Rather, change will come from those who are sincerely committed to the struggle for justice. Here we note that Shari'ati did not accord that much importance to the role of the *mujtahids*. And, as already mentioned, he differed with Khomeini on their role in government. Given the above, it is hardly surprising that the clerics did not accord him the respect that he deserves.

Shari'ati also expressed other ideas that the ulama considered to be in conflict with traditional Shi'ite learning. For example, he was inspired by Sunni sources when he referred to the election of the first caliphs as an example of Islam's democratic spirit and also when he suggested that Muslims turn to Saladin, who suppressed the Shi'ite Fatimid caliphate, as a pan-Islamic hero. Regarding his work at the Husainiya Irshad as more important than all of the book-learning received by the ulama at the country's seminaries, he even blamed them for chasing the youth away from Islam and causing them to take refuge in western culture.⁴⁵ Given these opinions, his Islamic revolutionary ideology found little favor among the ulama, who accused him of being an agent of Sunnism, Wahhabism, and communism. Khomeini, however, did not challenge him personally and even issued a laudatory statement upon learning of his death.

Although Shari'ati stressed social commitment more than juristic learning and academia for its own sake, he did not undermine the importance of learning as such.

[The Muslims should] oblige one group among them to specialise in the theoretical knowledge of Islam, the deducing of Islamic laws, and the resolution of the problems of society and the events of the time. They should confine to this group social and ideological leadership as well as responsibility for people's destiny. This group can decide the best, most honourable, most conscientious, most enlightened, and purest person for their guidance. And they can elect from among themselves, someone in place of the Imam – which is the place of the Prophet of Islam.⁴⁶

Thus, because of their specialized knowledge, the ruler is to be chosen by the *mujtahids*, who, in turn, are to be chosen by the people. This is close

to Khomeini's supreme guardian-jurist concept, except that Shari'ati did not espouse an Islamic regime dominated by *mujtahids*. As mentioned above, he disparaged those ulama who were steeped in book-learning and yet had no inclination to work for any positive social change. According to him, they should be respected only insofar as they have the necessary Islamic knowledge to help elect a ruler; they should not become the rulers.

A powerful orator, he popularized the idea that jihad was not an obscurantist concept, but rather a genuine way of liberation and enlightenment. This was good for the revolution, but would it also have been good for the Islamic Republic? Would he have been tolerated in post-revolutionary Iran if he had persisted in his unconventional theological ideas and revolutionary objectives? From the passage below, we note that he would not have tolerated any obstacles to his revolutionary struggle.

Its aim [Islamic ideology] is not that everyone by his vote or his acquiescence should be its partisans, but it is to make a society reach the level where, on the basis of this doctrine, it begins to move toward this most elevated goal and to realize its revolutionary objectives. If there are people who do not believe in this path, and whose conduct leads to a stagnation or corruption of society, and if there are some who abuse with their own power, with their own money, this liberty, and if there are social formations and traditions, which keep men in this stagnation, we must suppress these traditions, condemn these ways of thinking, and save society from its own fossilized moulds, by any means possible.⁴⁷

Thus for the Islamic ideology to work toward its revolutionary objectives, the opposition should be suppressed "by any means possible." We cannot say with certainty what Shari'ati meant by this statement, which echos Sayyid Qutb's call, found in his *Milestones*, for an aggressive armed struggle (jihad) as the way to uproot *jahiliyah* (ignorance) from corrupt Muslim governments. Shari'ati abhors those who would oppose his revolutionary objective and who are guilty of corruption and abuse of power. Were he alive today, he would probably be a harsh critic of the regime, considering that his dialectical conception of jihad works against every form of *shirk* and every form of abuse of power by the ruling elite, both of which make the people poor and unemployed.

As a result, many of his thoughts and attitudes would not have found favor with the republic's *mujtahids*. Naturally, the reverse can be said as well. To be sure, Shari'ati would have earned the regime's anger and, given its ruthless intolerance of criticism, would have been forcibly stopped from

public participation. Hashem Aghajari encountered this wrath when he was sentenced to death for apostasy, although he was a university professor who had lost a leg in the war with Iraq. Dismayed by the repression going on in the name of Islam, in his address commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Shari'ati's death he spoke out against the system and was subsequently arrested. Calling for reform, he stated: "Dr. Shari'ati would have said that this clergy is not descended from heaven; they are modern although their minds are medieval."⁴⁸ Aghajari was sentenced to death; however, the mass student protests that soon broke out in many parts of the country caused his sentence to be reviewed and eventually modified.

It is ironical that Shari'ati's Islamic ideology, which many believe to have brought about the revolution, could have been falsified and discarded by extremists. Shari'ati was opposed to blind obedience (*taqlid*) to religious authority and asserted that every Muslim should engage in his/her own reasoning about the sacred law's relevance. Hasan Youse Eshkevari, a religious scholar and head of the Shari'ati Foundation in Iran, was imprisoned for defending the separation of state and religion and opposing compulsory veiling for women.⁴⁹

Like Shari'ati, Bani Sadr, the Islamic Republic's first president, also attempted a synthesis between Shi'ism and Marxism and made *tawhid* central to his thought (viz., divine unity should be reflected in the whole of society). For Bani Sadr as well, *tawhid* meant the negation of every other power. But unlike Shari'ati, he extended this negation to the Twelve Imams, for if they were God's representatives on Earth this would infringe upon the doctrine of *tawhid*. In this respect, he diverged even more than Shari'ati from Khomeini's doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih*.⁵⁰ It is interesting to note that although Bani Sadr, a prominent liberal, was elected president in January 1980, the supreme power rested with Khomeini. Therefore, it was not unexpected when extremist clerics drove him out. Apparently fearing for his life, he fled to France.

Bani Sadr's reinterpretation of the Imamate was far more radical than Shari'ati's. After all, the latter had only challenged the people's passive response to it, especially their expectation that since justice would prevail only after the Twelfth Imam's return, nothing could be done to bring about social transformation. Nevertheless, Khomeini, Bani Sadr, and Shari'ati all shared the view that Islam is relevant to politics and that even the ulama should participate in it. Although they were all inspired by a Shi'ite conception of jihad, the struggle was not presented as a Shi'ite struggle, but rather as an Islamic revolutionary ideology that was in dialectical opposition to the

unjust Pahlavi ideology. The revolution took on this universal dimension and thus was widely accepted throughout the Muslim world.

Conclusion

From the foregoing we note that Shari'ati considered social transformation of paramount importance in any academic pursuit, whether in the social or the Islamic sciences. He criticized social science academics who were isolated in their ivory towers and unwilling to work on solutions to social problems, as well as those scholars of Islamic sciences who collaborated with despots and preached a passive Islam. True academics and religious scholars, according to him, are actually those enlightened thinkers who work tirelessly toward social change and liberation.

In Shari'ati's opinion, social scientists must have a worldview in order to give shape to their vision of the individual and society, a worldview that can also serve as the basis for their mission to change society from one divided by class and *shirk* to one characterized by the lack of classes and integrated by means of *tawhid*. Although critical of Marxism, his view of society and history reveals the influence of dialectical materialism. He used the story of Cain and Abel as a metaphorical framework to depict the dialectical struggle between evil and good, *shirk* and *tawhid*, oppressed and oppressor; directed his innovative dialectic conception of jihad against social injustice and tyranny and successfully integrated it into his Islamic ideology; and did much to awaken the educated classes to Islam as a dynamic ideology that stands for fundamental change in this world. Their support for the revolution would not have been possible without his contribution. But he envisaged a classless society built on *tawhid*, not an Islamic state governed by the ulama.

Shari'ati did not live to see the success of the revolution, but his Islamic ideological struggle provided a genuine way for liberation and enlightenment. Iranians have become disillusioned with religion because of the imposition of religious laws, the hypocrisy of religious leaders, and the suppression of free speech. Although the Iranians are less religious today, abandoning Islam is not an option for them. It is important that they not confuse religious leaders with Islam, for these are not necessarily compatible. But it is difficult for them to separate these two things, as in Shi'ism the religious leaders, especially the infallible Imams, are representatives of Islam itself. Khomeini, whom the uneducated masses perceive as a saintly figure, virtually represents for them the Twelfth Imam.

Iranians need to find a new way toward social transformation. They can find inspiration from the earlier leaders, especially those Islamic thinkers who were not favored by the ulama. Shari'ati is such an example, but would his message appeal to the youth of today? Are they really aware of his contribution? Some educated youth in Hamadan expressed disillusionment with the current regime and the politicization of Islam. This does not mean, however, that they prefer the West over Islam. They are critical of America's interference with Iran's nuclear energy, stating: "America has no right to interfere with our nuclear programme. We alone, as Iranians, should take care of our own national interests." This is an expression of Iranian nationalist sentiment, not of Islam.

If such nationalist feeling is pervasive, it is unlikely that the educated youth would identify with Shari'ati's Islamic ideology.⁵¹ Nevertheless, it is still important to know that he criticized the ulama and did not envisage a dominant role for them in the government. This in itself would appeal to the educated youth, and if they should identify with Islam it would be because of Shari'ati and those like him, not because of the clerics. But if they were to prefer a secular democracy for Iran, then what freedom would there be for Islam and religious people within that democracy?

Shari'ati, a multi-faceted figure who is difficult to categorize, was committed to the cause of the oppressed and was willing to both sacrifice and be sacrificed in the revolution that would establish his envisaged ideal classless society. He popularized the idea that jihad was a genuine way of liberation and enlightenment. This was good for the revolution, but will it also hold good for the Islamic Republic's citizens? Shari'ati, who was disillusioned with establishment Islam, offered an Islamic ideology that was partly inspired by Marxist thought. The real absolute for him seems to have been the classless society, with Islam being the means to achieve that goal. Only time will tell whether his message will be a source of inspiration for the new generation of Iranians who are struggling to bring about social change in their country.

Endnotes

1. He was fearless in his speech, as noted by a friend who attended his lectures in Tehran. He said that Shari'ati once received a death threat while giving a lecture, an event that did not deter him but rather caused him to change his topic to martyrdom. The result was one of his most inspiring lectures ever.
2. Ali Shari'ati, *Haji*, trans. Laleh Bakhtiar (Tehran: Foundation of Beedhat Publications, 1988), xxii.

3. Ali Shari'ati, *Marxism and other Western Fallacies*, trans R. Campbell (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980), 11.
4. This was the Sazman-i-Mujahidin-i-Khalq-i Khalqi-Iran (Organization of the Jihad-fighters of the Iranian People), which was formed in the mid-1960s and were inspired by Ahmad Reza'i, whose book *The Movement of Husain* held that *tawhid* does not only imply the worship of One God, but also the elimination of class distinctions. In addition, Imam Husayn was a revolutionary who gave his life to form a classless society, one free of capitalism, despotism, and imperialism. Although the organization was also inspired by Shari'ati's ideas, its main inspiration came from Reza'i.
5. Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 2006), 108.
6. Edward Mortimer, *Faith and Power: The Politics of Islam* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 337-39; Kepel, *Jihad*, 111.
7. Saiyad Nizamuddin Ahmad, *Fatwas of Condemnation: Islam and the Limits of Dissent* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization [ISTAC], 2006), 271.
8. Mortimer, *Faith and Power*, 327-28.
9. Ahmad, *Fatwas of Condemnation*, 272-75.
10. Mortimer, *Faith and Power*, 338.
11. Mutahari wrote a profound critique of Marxism from an Islamic point of view in his *Social and Historical Change: An Islamic Perspective*. Here he criticizes Muslim thinkers who reinterpret Islam in accordance with Marxist dialectical materialism. He does not mention Shari'ati by name, but I am sure he was referring to him. See below.
12. The same would apply to Islamic anthropology. See Akbar S. Ahmed, *Discovering Islam, Making Sense of Muslim History and Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 214.
13. Ali Shari'ati, *School of Thought and Action*, trans. C. Bakhtiar and introduction by H. Y. Ashkvari (Tehran: Abjad Book Designers, 1972), 24.
14. *Ibid.*, 25.
15. *Ibid.*, 26.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 29. Ibn Khaldun was also averse to speculation, but unlike Shari'ati's focus on transforming society, he was more concerned with providing a scientific description of society.
19. *Ibid.*, 30-31.
20. *Ibid.*, 32.
21. *Ibid.*, 33.
22. *Ibid.*, 34.
23. *Ibid.*, 34.
24. *Ibid.*, 35.

25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 35-36.
27. Ibid., 42.
28. John Cooper, "The Limits of the Sacred: The Epistemology of Abd al-Karim Soroush," in *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, ed. J. Cooper, R. Nettler, and M. Mahmoud (London and New York: I.B. Taurus, 1998), 51.
29. Ibid., 51-52.
30. Ibid., 11.
31. Ibid., 12-20.
32. Abdollah Vakily, "Methodological Problems in the Study of Islam and Ali Shariati's Proposed Methodology for the Study of Religions," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 18, no. 3, (summer 2001): 95.
33. Ibid., 94-102.
34. Ibid., 106.
35. Taner Edis, *An Illusion of Harmony: Science and Religion in Islam* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007), 183.
36. Ibid., 177-79.
37. Shari'ati, *Marxism*, 87-91.
38. Ali Shari'ati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, trans. H. Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979), 89.
39. Ibid., 89.
40. Ali Shari'ati, *Man and Islam* (Houston: FILINC, 1981), 18-19.
41. Shari'ati, *Hajj*, xviii.
42. Murtada Mutahari, *Social and Historical Change: An Islamic Perspective*, trans. R. Campbell (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1986), 96-99; Yasien Mohamed, "Jihad and Fitrah in the Thought of Qutb and Shari'ati," *Journal for Islamic Studies* 16 (1996): 3-26, Mellville, 1996, 13; H. Enayat, *Modern Islamic Political Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 115.
43. Michael Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 77
44. Ali Shari'ati, *On Martyrdom (Shahadat), Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives*, ed. J. J. Donohue and J. L. Esposito (New York and Oxford, USA: Oxford University Press, 2007), 364.
45. Mortimer, *Faith and Power*, 338.
46. Ibid., 340.
47. Ibid., 342.
48. Nasrin Alavi, *We Are Iran* (London: Portobello Books, 2005), 99.
49. Ibid., 98.
50. Ibid., 339.
51. Interview with young Iranian teachers of English, Hamadan, November, 2009.