

Shariati and the Reconstruction of Social Sciences

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Ali Shariati was a Muslim reformer who laid much of the intellectual groundwork for the Iranian revolution of 1979. His inspiring speeches and written works aroused the people, particularly the students, to the state, where they were easily mobilized by Khomeini and his co-workers. Killed by the Shah's agents in London in 1977, he is still remembered as a great martyr to their cause. His ideas on the nature of Islam are of interest to us today.

Ali Shariati was born in 1933 in the village of Mazinan near Sabzawar in Khurasan, Iran. He came from a family whose members were known for their scholarship, knowledge, and righteousness. He attended the Teacher's Training School, and taught in high school for some years before pursuing graduate work in Europe. He was also active in his father's Center for the Propagation of Islamic Truth.

Shariati's views were greatly influenced by his learned father who was fortunate enough to acquire a personal library of nearly two thousand books. He was also influenced by the political events in Iran, especially during Dr. Muhammad Mosaddeq's premiership, and by the various underground movements after the fall of Mossadeq in 1953. Particularly important was the Muslim Socialist Movement founded in the early 1940's in Tehran. This group believed in Islamic ideals but emphasized the socialistic tendencies of its economic system. In the manner of Amir Ali, the author of *Spirit of Islam*, Shariati wanted to emulate the lives and ideas of early Muslims whom he admired. He often referred to Prophet Muhammad, Abu Dhar al-Ghaffari, Ali, Husayn, and others as men who ought to be followed as examples.

In his formative years, he was influenced by many people including Frantz Fanon, al-Afghani, Taleqani, and Muhammad Iqbal. In my opinion, Shariati was more influenced by Iqbal than any other scholar, whether in the East or the West. I have pointed out this influence in my book, *Ideological Revolution in the Muslim World*.

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“The greatest success of Iqbal,” wrote Shariati, “is that relying upon the rich cultural heritage of the old and the new, he built a model which he considered to be his school of thought. That model was Islam. This is the reason for his importance and his success in our society and our century.”¹

Referring to Iqbal’s efforts to influence reform, Shariati pointed out that, though Iqbal was a mystic in nature, he did not believe in seclusion. He believed in continuous effort and activism. Following in the footsteps of Iqbal, Shariati called for restructuring of Islamic ideology.

After studying the Qur’an, Shariati was able to formulate his theory in social change and development. Many factors affect change in society. However, Shariati found many references in the Qur’an which state that it is al-Nas, the people or the masses, who are the prime movers of revolution. It is the collective human will which is of primary importance not the individual will.

No one denies the fact that righteous individuals can exist in a society, but clusters of righteous individuals do not constitute the collective will of the society. To bring about a lasting change, there must be a profound change. Shariati urged people to return to the Qur’an and to study it intently. Islam is a movement of masses. It opposes oppression, imperialism, and exploitation. The individual does not have the option to overlook injustice in the world. An awareness of Islamic ideology would set man, the individual and the collective masses in the right direction. Iqbal, according to Shariati, understood the very heart of the Islamic message. He was an aware anti-imperialist who worked diligently to free the Muslims from the yoke of British power and control. His goal was establishment of a Muslim state based upon the concept of the ummah. Iqbal did not look at Pakistan as a country but as a first step towards the creation of an Islamic state.

It is clear that in Islam the will of man, that is the collective will of the masses, is responsible for the destiny of a society. There is no clerical hierarchy or ecclesiastical clergy.

Shariati wrote:

Perhaps the greatest revolution of Islam in human, social, and intellectual history is changing the direction of the power of religion as a whole. . . Islam destroyed the power structure of despotism and exploitation, eradicated mass ignorance, strengthened the spirit of freedom, expanded knowledge, and urged the study of sciences. This is the only path to the “reform of man”, to cleansing the soul, to achieving moral perfection and piety, to the reforming of self.²

¹ Ali Shariati, *Ma wa Iqbal* (Tehran: Irshad, 1978), p. 41.

² *Ibid*, p. 50.

When Islam repudiated the clerical structure, it made man individually responsible to God, responsible both for himself and his fellow man. That is why Shariati claimed that the reform of individuals was not possible in Islam. Reforms must be collective, total, general, and must take place among the masses as a whole. Reforms of individuals are only an extension of collective reforms and not vice versa. "It is not possible to reform oneself through seclusion from Society," wrote Shariati. One cannot, therefore, forget his social responsibility in Islam.

Social responsibility supersedes individual responsibility. Social awareness, in Islam, takes precedence over personal self-cleansing. Of course, this does not mean that reform of the individual is not important. It is a derivative of the reform of the society and not vice versa. These ideas are abundant in the Qur'an and Islamic heritage. The constant reference to al-Nas or the people, the eradication of intermediary between man and God i.e. the abolition of the ecclesiastical order, the concept of "enjoin the lawful and forbid the sinful act", etc.

Shariati maintained that it is important to clarify Islamic ideology, because Islam seems to be in a jumble when compared to other schools of thought. Islamic points of view are not clear-cut. Shariati wrote that Muslims ought to "know the direction of their school, its aims, and their place in the framework of the realities of the present time."³

Shariati believed that history consisted of a struggle between truth and falsehood, a clash between the oppressed and the oppressor, a battle between monotheism and polytheism, i.e. *tauhid* and *shirk*. This struggle is set in symbolic terms in the Qur'an, for example the struggle between Moses and Pharaoh, and the struggle between Cain and Abel. Shariati believed that Western concepts and terminologies were useless in analyzing Third World societies. Terms and expressions native to the culture and its literature must be used. Translation and repetition of European sociological concepts have no value at all because they have nothing in common with the realities of life in the Third World. European concepts of society and sociology are not applicable to Africa, Asia, or Latin America.

The first step in the restructuring of social sciences and finding solutions to our social and political ills is to recognize that Islam is a complete school of thought which will provide for present needs and serve as a guide in the future. Islam has different dimensions for it is a tauhidi society and every man should look at it from the angle he is most familiar with. That is why Shariati interpreted *mi'raj* and *isra'*, for example, in sociological terms rather than religious or physical. After all, his field of study was sociology.

Shariati viewed the Qur'an not only as a religious guide but as a source of knowledge in the fields of history, science and human sociology. He noted the following interesting concepts:

³ Ali Shariati, *Zamine-ye Shinakht-i Qur'an* (Tehran: Bi'that, n.d.), p. 7.

1. *The concept of migration.* Shariati recognized from the tone of the Qur'an and the life of Prophet Muhammad, that migration was more than a movement of people from one place to another which may have geographical and political factors. Migration is a major cause for the rise of civilizations throughout history. Shariati elaborated that about twenty-seven civilizations blossomed from a migration that preceded them, the Summerian civilization, Islamic civilization, and American civilization among them.

2. *The concept of prime factor in change and development in society* which I already discussed but I am going to elaborate a bit further. What causes civilizations to rise and fall? Among the factors which sociologists discuss that affect social change are accident, personalities or heroes, historical determinism, or even divine will. According to Shariati, when one studies the Qur'an he might conclude that al-Nas (the masses) are the prime factor in social change and development.

His examples include the constant reference of the Qur'an to al-Nas. It was the people of Sodom and Gomorrah who went astray. It was the people of Israel who did not listen to the warning. The prophets were sent to the people, addressing the people in their totality. The people are accountable before God for their deeds. In short, the responsibility for society and history is borne by the masses. Of course, the masses is defined as an entity that has no class distinction, racial identification, or other distinguishing characteristics.

3. *The Concepts of Humanism.* Addressing the question of whether or not humanism is compatible with Islam, many Western Orientalists in their ivory towers, have asserted that Islam is not compatible with humanism. Shariati maintained that Islam itself is innately humanistic from its inception. This idea was deduced by Shariati from the story of creation.

As is well known, the story of creation is simply this: God created Adam—the symbol man—from mud and blew His spirit into him. According to Shariati, the language of religion, especially Semitic religions, is symbolic for a simple, straight forward language has no permanence. Interpreted in that light, there are certain social, philosophical, and religious meanings to this story which when examined carefully are very interesting. In summary, we can mention the following conclusions:

a) Because of the way Islam has developed the story of creation, one can conclude that Islam is humanistic by nature. By choosing man as His vicegerent, God has relegated the noblest position to man.

b) By virtue of being created of two opposite poles, earth and the spirit of God, man is composed of a dual nature. The distance between mud, which is low, base, earthly, to the spirit of God which is high, lofty, and good is the distance between the two poles.

c) Man has a will which enables him to strive for betterment and progress.

d) The dualism of which I spoke earlier is within man, not in nature as it was believed by other religions. Outside man, there is no struggle between God and Satan or the so-called forces of light and darkness.

e) God taught the names to Adam which is interpreted by Shariati as knowledge. Thus, the path to excellence of man is by way of achieving knowledge. This social concept means that knowledge is a differentiating factor in the excellence of man.

f) The creation of Eve from Adam's rib has been a sore point in man-woman relation. Shariati's interpretation of the creation of Eve is the first of its kind and carried significant social implications. The Semitic religions have allocated a lower position to woman with respect to man, largely based on the story of creation. Shariati's interpretation reversed such sexist notion. The word "rib" is an incorrect translation according to Shariati. He maintained that the real meaning of the word, in both Arabic and Hebrew, is nature. God said, "We have created Eve from the same nature as that of man." Since the word also means rib, the story of Eve's origin from Adam's rib was created. I checked Shariati's statement about "rib" in Arabic. With my limited resources, I was able to reach the following conclusions:

Rib, in Arabic, has many meanings. *Dhil'* (ضلع) means rib, side, inclination, corrugation, drawing or bending, or folding. Other etymologically related words are:

Dhala'a (ضلَع) which is the verb meaning to bend, to incline, to curve.

Dhalla'a (ضَلَع) which is the verb meaning to corrugate, to wrinkle, to draw or bend into folds, in other words, to bring forth. God brought forth woman from the same nature as that of man.

Going back to Shariati, his interpretation of Eve's creation has a great social significance. Man and woman are on a par in the eyes of God.

4. *Cain and Abel*. Cain and Abel were two brothers: sons of Adam. Cain was a farmer and Abel was a herdsman. Cain was jealous of Abel so he killed him. That is considered to be the first bloodshed in human history.

Is God talking about the Story of two brothers? According to Shariati, no. Cain and Abel represent two different stages of history. Abel represents man's era of pastoralism and equitable distribution of wealth while Cain represents the era of private ownership and monopoly. It is the beginning of class struggle, oppression, slavery, exploitation, and tyranny. Cain and Abel represent two different periods in human history. The death of Abel, the herdsman, at the hand of Cain, the farmer (i.e. land owner) symbolizes the end of an egalitarian system and primitive socialism and the beginning of private ownership, the ruler and the ruled, the oppressor and the oppressed.

5. *Mi'raj and Isra'*. Shariati does not deny the physical possibility of Prophet Muhammad's *Isra'* and *mi'raj*. He only adds another dimension to it. The dimension is philosophical and historical.

According to Shariati, one of Muhammad's prophetic missions was raising man from his animalistic condition toward God: this is the perfection and ascension of man. . . *Mi'raj*, according to Shariati is a symbolic explanation of the Prophet's role in man's ontological ascension from earth to God.

Isra', on the other hand, has to do with the unity of revelation from the time of Adam to Muhammad. according to the prophet, there is only one religion in the history of man. It is Islam. Islam belongs to mankind. Prophets only invite the people to Islam, they do not create religion. Muhammad continued the movement that began with Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Therefore, his greatest mission was to create a historical alliance between the three religions of Moses, Jesus, and Islam. The Aqsa Mosque, the symbol of Judaism and Christianity, is situated in Jerusalem. The Ka'bah is the symbol of Islam and Muhammad's journey from the Ka'bah to Aqsa Mosque manifests the continuity of the two places of worship of the three great monotheistic religions. In his being, Muhammad wished to bind the two places symbolically to emphasize the spiritual connection between Islam, Christianity and Judaism and to provide a foundation for an alliance between monotheistic religions against *shirk*. *Isra'*, Muhammad's journey to Jerusalem, manifests the joining of the two symbols of the three religions of the world.

Therefore, *Mi'raj* is a philosophical discussion of an ontological nature. It describes an ontological height, man's ontological perfection. *Isra'* is an event of historical and social significance.

6. *Shariati's New Interpretation of Shi'ism*

Shariati was motivated by a sense of universal value and fair play. In his attempt to reconstruct Islam as a unified entity he found it necessary to speak his mind on Shi'ism. His number one goal, in my opinion, was to bring about the unity of Muslims. He recognized that without unity, imperialism, the number one enemy of Islam, could not be defeated. In his stance on Shi'ism, by the way, we see that Shariati practiced his own teaching. If we narrow the scope, we can see that if Shariati had not spoken out on superstitious practices of the Shi'ites, he would have betrayed the very principle he taught which was that the whole society ought to be reformed. To believe that Shi'ism is in need of reforms without preaching it constitutes the reform of an individual in "seclusion".

According to Shariati, Shi'ism is a movement of protest against continuation of pre-Islamic practices. Emerging in the Umayyad period, it established itself as a movement against the status quo and Shariati believed it must continue as a protest movement. Without protest, i.e. the state of continuous alert, Shi'ism loses its significance.

It is in that light that Shariati spoke of Safavid dynasty with utter contempt and disdain for their rule broke the Shi'ite tradition of protest. The movement of protest of Ali was replaced by Safavid Shi'ism

bringing submission, superstition, and stagnation. Protest, said Shariati, is an ever-surging torrent that winds and bends and constantly changes, lifting the obstacles while expediency and intrigue solidify, crystalize, and transform it into a system of status quo. The aims of these two forms of Shi'ism are completely different. Ali's Shi'ism bravely seeks new avenues of approach while the Safavid form of Shi'ism is in constant fear of losing the status quo, of losing power. This sort of fear crystalizes the mind.

Among his new interpretations are a whole range of topics including *wisayet*, *ismat*, *taqlid*, *intizar*, etc. *Intizar* is the cornerstone of his Shi'ite thesis. *Intizar* is waiting in a state of preparedness which implies total involvement and activism. For the imam to appear seeking his followers ready, knowledgeable, aware, willing, and thinking individuals is most conducive to bringing about success that is the establishment of justice and fairness in the world.

On the question of *Wisayet* and *Shawra*, Ali Shariati was ambivalent. On the one hand, he reasoned that historical facts do not indicate that Muhammad appointed Ali, while on the other hand he argues that a teacher ought to choose his successor, especially a teacher like Muhammad whose rule was not only political but also spiritual. Shariati gives the example of choosing a successor to a heart surgeon. The best candidate will not be chosen by people ignorant of surgery. Indeed, the surgeon himself would probably choose the best successor. This ambiguity and ambivalence has been criticized by many on both sides. I personally feel that Shariati had no choice. His admiration for Ali and the Shi'ite concept of protest and intellection (*ijtihad*), his awareness of the fact that both Shi'ism and Sunnism are realities to be dealt with pragmatically, his passion for ridding the Muslim world of its general malaise and imperialistic forces, and his firm belief that Shi'ism in its dynamic stages and states provided great thinkers and scholars all over the Muslim world, it would have been utter idiocy to reject the spirit of Shi'ism which he rightly named Alid Shi'ism.

In conclusion, Shariati in relation to the Islamic movement can be described simply as a bright star resting comfortably among many other bright stars. Shariati was not interested in picking a few verses here and there as proof that Islam has talked about certain sciences the way that the apologetics used to do. He believed that the Qur'an has certain principles of history and sociology inherent in it. Shariati's reconstruction of Islam is based on his belief that Islam provides a philosophy of history.

The Islamic movement has had and will have many architects. Shariati's passion, perserverence, and keen insight are qualities that should be cultivated by future scholars. Not everyone will agree with everything Shariati had to say but we must not ignore his views for finding some of them unpalatable to our taste.