

Ali Shariati's View of Islamic Modernity

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Abstract

Influenced by Iqbal's Ideology and Philosophy Dr. Ali Shariati (1933-77) Philosopher-activist, Revolutionary thinker, is one of the most outstanding modern interpreters of Islamic thought. He awakened a new interest and confidence in Islam. He was neither a reactionary fanatic who opposed anything that was new without any knowledge nor he was westernized intellectual who imitated the West without independent judgment. Ali Shariati is one of the most brilliant Islamic thinkers, having studied Islam and contemporary Western thoughts and presented an Islamic critique, which remains of tremendous value to young Muslim generations who are swept away from Islam by the glamour of Western capitalism or Marxism. Ali Shariati is extensively recognized as the intellectual ideologue of the Iranian revolution. Shariati presents a very complex and diverse mix of ideas: radical Islamic fundamentalism, traditional Muslim thought, a mystical Sufi modes, dialectical Marxism, Western existentialism, and anti-imperialism. In the present study his views are presented which point out the causes of backwardness, deterioration, stagnation and called for launching of religious revival, that is, awaking them of slumber and making society going back to life and movement and fighting suppressions. He presents the way of enlightenment to the society that would be able to transmit his understanding outside the narrow and limited group of his generation.

Keywords: Ali Shariati, Islam, Islamic Modernity, Renaissance

Ali Shariati, contends that the two types of Islam, that had confronted one another in Islamic history were 'the degenerate and narcotizing religion' and 'the progressive and awakening religion'. Shariati was convinced that Islam had been reduced by the traditional religious leaders, or *Ulama* and others to a 'degenerate and narcotizing religion' and had to be replaced by an Islam, which could be progressive and dynamic. At the same time, he was against those Muslim intellectuals who imitate the Western ideologies, which are being imported into the Muslim society "like canned and packed products to be opened and consumed."¹ Ali Shariati says:

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“Strictly speaking, ‘modernized’ means modernized in consumption. One who becomes modernized is one whose tastes now desire ‘modern’ items to satisfy his wants. In other words, he imports from Europe new forms of living and modern products, and he does not use new types of products and a lifestyle developed from his own original and national past. Non-Europeans are modernized for the sake of consumption. Westerners, however, could not just tell others they were going to reshape their intellect, mind and personality for fear of awakening resistance. Therefore, the Europeans had to make non-Europeans equate ‘modernization’ with ‘civilization’ to impose the new consumption pattern upon them, since everyone has a desire for civilization. ‘Modernization’ was defined as ‘civilization’ and thus people cooperated with the European plans to modernize.”²

According to Ali Shariati, modernity is one of the most delicate and vital issues confronting us, the people of non-European countries and Islamic societies. A more important issue is the relationship between an imposed modernization and genuine civilization. We must discover if modernity as is claimed is a synonym for being civilized, or if it is an altogether different issue and social phenomenon having no relation to civilization at all. Unfortunately modernity has been imposed on us, the non-European nations, in the guise of civilization.³ Shariati further says:

“Modernization is changing traditions, mode of consumption and material life from old to new. People made the old ways; machines produce the new. To make all the non-Europeans modernized, they first had to overcome the influence of religion, since religion causes any society to feel a distinctive individuality. Religion postulates an exalted intellectuality to which everyone relates intellectually. If this intellect is crushed and humiliated, the one who identifies himself with it feels also crushed and humiliated. So native intellectuals began a movement against ‘fanaticism’.”⁴

Ali Shariati after describing all the ills of society brings attention towards the responsibility and duty of the society so as to know the reason and cause of backwardness, deterioration, and stagnation, and to find out the way, that is to educate the snoozing society. Afterward, he ought to find out the ways and means and rational solution in the available resources. By proper utilization of resources then one should know the causes of problems, sufferings, miseries, and other factors, that is, of external and internal nature. At last, an enlightened being would be able to transmit his understanding to the society outside the narrow and limited group of his generation.

Shariati was innovative, seeking to apply Islam to the contemporary context and make it relevant to modern times. He aimed at

transforming Islam from a private moral and religious system to a revolutionary movement. Shariati called for launching of religious revival that is, awaking them from slumber. By revival and renewal he wants to revitalize and make them aware and making society going back to life and movement, and fighting suppressions. He alleged that going back to life and motion the society will regain the revival and renaissance of cultural independence in countenance with Western culture. He pleaded that the destruction of various factor affecting Islam, hindered, and obstructed the development of thinking and destiny of the society. Shariati also called for eliminating the imitation and replacing it with independent reasoning, that is, *Ijtihad*. He alleged that Islamic societies were in distress due to oppression, internal and external, and the only solution is revolution. The moving force for revolution is ideology. By ideology fatalism is replaced with the psycho-moral ethos “ought to be” by which the present utopia can be ousted.

Shariati believes that Islam needs revival and renewal which will be beneficial and helpful for the change. He thinks Islam has the solution of every problem. He finds in the Qur'an the people (*al-nas*) are the chief force inducing social change. The masses collectively represent God and the Qur'an equalizes God with masses in social matter which like Marxist conviction, legitimizing mass mobilization by revolutionary Islamic discourse. Ali Shariati says, an enlightened Muslim must be aware of truth that he has inimitable culture which is neither completely spiritual, mystical, or philosophical, nor completely materialistic and technological like Western. It's the combination of spirituality, idealism, faith, justice, equality. He advised the Muslim intelligentsia to gain resources from present day social life and society.

There exists no universal type of enlightened person, with common values and characteristics everywhere. Our own history and experience have demonstrated that whenever an enlightened person turns his back on religion, which is the dominant spirit of the society, the society turns its back on him. Opposition to religion by the enlightened person deprives society of the possibility of becoming aware of the benefits and the fruit of its young and enlightened generation.⁵

According to Ali Shariati the progressive Muslim should know that the Islamic strength covers his moral codes, culture, and historical process which are all designed by Islam. Shariati thought that only the enlightened intellectuals and not the traditional *Ulama* could spearhead an Islamic resurgence. This can be accomplished through scientific research and logical analysis of political, religious, and philosophical ill-motives and class factors which had been at work throughout our history as well as through diagnoses of religious innovations, deviations and

negative justifications that have occurred throughout history plus their negative social effect and ominous ideological and practical consequences in the lives of the Muslims.⁶ According to Ali Shariati:

“An enlightened person should start with ‘religion’. By that I mean our peculiar religious culture and not the one predominant today. He should begin by an Islamic Protestantism similar to that of Christianity in the Middle Ages, destroying all the degenerating factors which, in the name of Islam, have stymied and stupefied the process of thinking and the fate of the society, and giving birth to new thoughts and new movements. Unlike Christian Protestantism, which was empty-handed and had to justify its liberationist presentation of Jesus, Islamic Protestantism has various sources and elements to draw from. Such a movement will unleash great energies and enable the enlightened Muslim to:

- *Extract and refine the enormous resources of our society and convert the degenerating and jamming agents into energy and movement;*
- *Transform the existing social and class conflicts into conscious awareness of social responsibility, by using artistic, literary and speaking abilities and power as well as other possibilities at hand;*
- *Bridge the ever-widening gap between the ‘island of the enlightened person’ and the ‘shore of the masses’ by establishing kinship links and understanding between them, thus putting the religion, which came about to revive and generate movement, at the service of the people;*
- *Make the weapon of religion inaccessible to those who have undeservedly armed themselves with it and whose purpose is to use religion for personal reasons, thereby acquiring the necessary energy to motivate people;*
- *Launch a religious renaissance through which, by returning to the religion of life and motion, power and justice, will on the one hand incapacitate the reactionary agents of the society and, on the other hand, save the people from those elements which are used to narcotize them. By launching such a renaissance, these hitherto narcotizing elements will be used to revitalize, give awareness and fight superstition. Furthermore, returning to and relying on the authentic culture of the society will allow the revival and rebirth of cultural independence in the face of Western cultural onslaught;*
- *And finally, eliminate the spirit of imitation and obedience which is the hallmark of the popular religion, and replace it with a critical revolutionary, aggressive spirit of independent reasoning (ijtihad). All of these may be accomplished through a religious reformist movement, which will extract and refine the enormous accumulation of energy in the society, and will*

enlighten the era and will awaken the present generation. It is for the above reasons that I, as a conscientious teacher who has risen from the depth of pains and experience of his people and history, hope that the enlightened person will reach a progressive self-awareness. For whereas our masses need self-awareness, our enlightened intellectuals are in need of 'faith'.⁷

The social theory of Ali Shariati is based on the concept of Man, that is, the creation of Man. Initially God addresses angels say, "I wish to create a vicegerent for Myself upon earth"⁸. The angels replied, "You wish to create one who will engage in bloodshed, crime, hatred and vengeance"⁹. God replied, "I know something that you do not know",¹⁰ and created man. After the completion of Man's creation, God taught the names to His Vicegerent. Shariati says in the light of various verses of the Qur'an, the real humanism, as:

See how great the value of man according to Islam is. Even the Post-Renaissance humanism of Europe has never been able to conceive of such exalted sanctity for man. God, who in the view of Islam and all believers is the greatest and most exalted of all entities, the creator of Adam and the master of the cosmos, addresses the angels and presents man to them as His vicegerent. The whole mission of man according to Islam is evident from this divine address. The same mission that God has in the cosmos, man must perform on earth as God's vicegerent.¹¹

See how great is the dignity and stature of man, so great, indeed, that all the angels, despite their inherent superiority to man and the fact that they are created of light while he is created of mud and clay, are commanded to fall down before him. God tests them because of their protest, and asks the angels concerning their names, they do not know the names, but Adam does know them. The angels are defeated in this test and excellence of Adam, which lies in his knowledge of the names-becomes apparent.¹²

The bowing down of Angels to the human being shows the value and importance of Adam, that is the Islamic concept of man. Man in Islam is two dimensional being who needs a religion which will also be two dimensional, after that he will be able to maintain balance.

Two-dimensional man, bearing the burden of such responsibility, needs a religion that transcends exclusive orientation to this world or the next, and permits him to maintain a state of equilibrium. It is only such a religion that enables man to fulfill his great responsibility.¹³

According to Ali Shariati, religion is a road or path, initially moving from clay to God, and passing on man from depravity, unawareness, and

stagnation from the lowly life of clay and satanic character, towards adoration, movement, visualization, and the life of spirit and divine character.¹⁴ He says people plays effective and basic role for change in society in every school of thought. Both individual and society have the duty towards the maker and creator and at the same time determines his fate as well. The superior the knowledge of human beings of rules, regulations, customs and traditions then, greater the responsibility he has, and more autonomy in changing and transforming the society.¹⁵

According to Shariati the roots of the three contemporary intellectual trends of the West viz. Western liberalism, Marxism, existentialism, and their consequent interpretation of the role of religion are based in the Renaissance movement of humanism and its materialistic worldview. Hence, there exists a relationship between them. Ali Shariati says that the material world of “Marxism and Capitalism” revolved round the cognition of matter instead of knowing the nature of ‘man’, his spiritual and moral needs; they are engaged in gaining power over economic resources. Their worship is to provide material comfort to man and in doing so they have forgotten the value of man himself and have brought him under the dominance of machines. For them advancements means to conquer space and provide modern technology for various purposes, as in agriculture, industries, and war weapons etc. their purpose of life becomes satisfaction of instincts and economic needs dominate over all other human needs. So in this situation, externally a man, who is equipped with all the material needs of the world, appears powerful and strong, while internally he is as disintegrated as a mount of sand, because whatever he had gained was meant for his external survival and safety and his soul becomes weaker. So we find a downward curve in human moral values.¹⁶

Ali Shariati then moves on to one of the branch of existentialist’s view of human nature, which dismisses God and place man in his place, who is bestowed with all divine qualities. Existentialist puts all its emphasis on man’s action, that is, action through free choice and is guided by his own inner desire and passion.¹⁷ Ali Shariati contends that, Islam on the other hand, goes beyond granting humanity an honoured place in nature, that is, Man is God’s trustee.¹⁸ In order to enlighten and inform the Muslim who, unaware of the philosophical foundations of Marxism and are somehow swayed by it, Shariati claims Western liberalism is a movement which try to improve the socio-economic conditions of the Western society through the separation of church and state. Since that exercise resulted in the appearance of the excessive ills of Capitalism, Marxism arouse as a movement aimed at achieving the socio-economic justice as denied by Western Capitalism.

Shariati intends to develop an Islamic view of humanity, which stands in total contrast to the other views such as Western Liberalism, Existentialism and Marxism. His purpose is to do away with the static and narrow view of humanity presented in medieval thought, which developed during the period of crises of the caliphate and continues even in the modern times. Further, the Muslim being a part of third world have become the victim not only of colonialism but also neo-colonialism in all sense: economically, politically and ideologically. And as a result of communist propaganda, they have fallen into the trap believing that liberation lies in the adoption of the Marxism as an ideology due to its strong criticism of capitalism. Shariati seeks to bring back the Muslims out of this situation through his own critique.¹⁹

Describing the Islamic view of humanity and how it contrasts itself from Marxism and other Western ideologies, Shariati says that in Islam God, human being and nature each has an independent existence but is related through the principle of *Tauhid*-Unity of God. It is a relationship of cooperation and not of dialectical materialism:

*Tauhid in the sense of oneness of God is of course accepted by all monotheists. But Tauhid as a world-view in the sense I intend in my theory means regarding the whole universe as a unity, instead of dividing it into this world and the hereafter, the natural and the supernatural, substance and meaning, spirit and body. It means regarding the whole of existence as a single form, a single living and conscious organism, possessing will, intelligence, feeling and purpose.*²⁰

According to Ali Shariati, '*Tauheed* sees the world as an empire, Shirk as a feudal system.²¹ *Tauheed* means that man fears only one power, and is answerable before only one judge. *Tauheed* 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.²² In Islam, through the principle of *Tauheed*, it resolves the issue of opposition between man, nature and God by describing their positive existential relationship with each other.

Islam requires from humanity that it should build and establish its own destiny, both spiritual as well as the material for life itself. It's a 'trust' or 'freedom' endowed with humanity. In other words, there is neither divine fore-ordination nor material predestination in Islam. It is required for human reason that it comprehends and constantly reinterprets revelation in changing circumstances:

Every ideology, religious or anti-religious necessarily revolves around the question of the human, and it is in fact at this point that Marxism diverges from Islam. This ever-increasing divergence is the natural result of the two opposed world-views from which the two ideologies

*arise, and which underlie their whole manner of interpreting phenomenon. From this point on, Islam and Marxism prove incompatible in all areas of politics, economics, ethics and social concerns. Islam interprets and evaluates man on the basis of Tauheed, and Marxism does so on the basis of production.*²³

Ali Shariati says that through the principle of descent (of Adam and Eve i.e., from heaven to earth): “The conversion of the ‘Adam in heaven’ to the ‘Adam on this earth’ exemplified the character and behavior of mankind today. It was a portrayal of the rebellious, aggressive and sinful man who was swayed by Satan. Although he was expelled from heaven, exiled onto earth and subdued by nature. Adam nevertheless ate fruit of ‘the forbidden tree’. What was the outcome? Adam acquired the wisdom, consciousness and insight of a rebel. Opening his eyes and finding himself naked, Adam entered the state of ‘knowing himself’.”²⁴ It dispatches him into earthly life, so that he may realize heaven through his Will, Love, Awareness, and Responsibility, amid contradiction and suffering, and so that he may forge his ultimate destiny with his own hand. The resurrection is ‘The Day on which man will see what his two hands have sent forward.’

Ali Shariati says, the ideal society of Islam i.e., “*Umma* is 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”²⁵ and has made the intellectual responsibility and shared movement based on its 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.*²⁶

After defining the ideal society of Islam, “*Umma*”, then he defines the ideal Man, ‘The Vicegerent of God’, who is a theomorphic man whom the spirit of God has overcome the half of his being that relates to *Iblis*, to clay and to sediment.²⁷ He passes through the very midst of nature and comes to understand God; he seeks out mankind and thus attains God. He does not bypass nature and turn his back on mankind.²⁸ He is not a man who has been created by his environment; on the contrary, it is he who has created his environment. He has freed himself from all the forms of compulsion that constantly pressing down upon man and impose their stereotypes on him by means of science, technology, sociology and self-awareness, through faith and awareness.²⁹ His ideology reveals a marked influence of Iqbal.

He 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. Science has not deprived him of the taste of faith, and faith has not paralyzed his power of thought and logical deduction... He is a man of Jihad and Ijتهad, of poetry and sword, of solitude and commitment, of emotion and genius, of strength and love, of faith and knowledge. He is a man who has dissolved his transient individuality in the eternal identity of the human race, who through the negation of self becomes everlasting.³⁰

It can be concluded that Ali Shariati attempted to develop the social vision of Islam and showed its essential distinction for the other ideologies by isolating the foundation on which the sociological thought of Islam should proceed in modern times. Islam concerns with humanity, to whom the Qur'an presents its message,³¹ indicates the essential universality of Islam. Shariati believes that the Islamic thought of today, too, can benefit from studying and entering into dialogue with other prevailing intellectual currents. He believes that a dynamic interpretation of Islam, which takes into account the contemporary issues of human mind and society, is required. For Islam with its multi-dimensional world view rooted in the concept of *Tauheed*, incorporates within itself mystical sensitivity and concern for social justice, and also treats the existential questions about human existence in an integrated manner.

Ali Shariati's comprehensive and humanistic understanding of Islam is reflected in his recognition that humanity as a whole faces common problems of freedom, equality and justice, in response to which have appeared the one dimensional approaches of mysticism, Marxism, Existentialism, etc., the issues addressed by the above three intellectual currents are not restricted to West, in fact, they extended to all humanity. Islam no doubt addresses itself to such commonly faced human problems and offers scope for responding to them. Yet in its expressive aspect of Islamic thought it has failed to answer these questions, and as a result its own community finds itself caught between different worldviews. The reason for this is the ignoring *Ijtihad* and lack of confidence in its own thought process evident in the contemporary Islamic thought that is highly repetitive rather than creative and development. And this is what he expects from the contemporary Islamic thought to do. *Shariati* was thus able to revive the confidence, giving them a more purposeful view of life, human existence and how to attain social justice in an Islamic framework in the contemporary period of political corruption and intellectual stagnation found in galore in the Muslim world.³²

In short, Ali Shariati, in: *Where shall we begin*, addressed the essential issues of human existence, i.e., questions about the creation of Man, his place, and purpose of existence that every human being asks.

Contemporary Islamic thought in its current stagnated form has neglected this question and what few attempts it has made have been in the form of medieval perspective that are irrelevant and un-meaningful for today's humanity, or of offering a highly ritualistic interpretation of Islam failing to explain in contemporary terms the world view bearing to it and its (Islamic world view's) social implications. Shariati points out that the tragedy is that, on the one hand, those who have controlled our religion over the past two centuries have transformed it into its present static form and, on the other hand, our enlightened people who understand the present age and the needs of our generation and time do not understand religion. As a result, our Islamic society, despite Islam with its rich culture and history which would have otherwise enabled it to emancipate itself, could not acquire the religious awareness necessary for its salvation. The intellectuals erroneously fought Islam and the reactionaries used it to narcotize the masses and to maximize their own gains. Meanwhile, true Islam remains unknown and incarcerated in the depths of history. The masses buried in their own static and restricted traditions and the intellectuals isolated from the masses and disliked by them. Therefore, whereas our masses need self-awareness, our enlightened intellectuals are in need of faith.

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