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Ali Shariati



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Abstract

This entry examines Ali Shariati's ideas, which provide a modern interpretation of emancipatory and revolutionary Islam in the context of Shia thought. Shariati merged political, social, and intellectual activism. He not only addressed internal divisions within Shiite Islam but also established a socially just and left-leaning model for Muslims worldwide to advocate for an Islamic alternative to Western methods of thinking. Leaving aside the validity of ambiguous labels such as "Islamic Marxism" or "socialist Islam," Shariati's Islamic interpretation is rooted in a socialist philosophical and ethical framework. He drew upon Islamic history and the Islamic canon, modifying his interpretation of pretext (tradition, history, and institutional structures) and text (canon) to create a revolutionary con-text, a revolutionary interpretation of Islam. His criticism of capitalism, as a manifestation of his economic understanding, combined with his

interpretation of religion on both concrete and abstract levels and took on an activist character. Shariati's economic and philosophical defense of a populist and social justice line fills his unique value in the history of thought. In addition to the specific conditions of Iran, these aspects demonstrate the intellectual adventure of the world's Muslims.

Keywords

Ali Shariati · Revolutionary Islam · Shi'ism · Socialism and Islam

Introduction

Ali Shariati (1933–1977) was a significant political figure in the production of Islamist thought, greatly influencing contemporary Muslims with his political activism and intellectual orientation. He called upon intellectuals to not dismiss religion as the prevailing spirit of modernized Islamic societies, advocating for its role in shaping these societies. Shariati's ideas align with those of Sayyid Qutb, establishing him as an intellectual of an emancipatory ethos. This ideology of emancipation has been labeled as "representatives of revolutionary Islam" due to its revolutionary tones. According to Algar (1979), one of Shariati's primary objectives was to reintroduce modern youth to faith and Islam. Shariati, born in Iran as the son of a reformist cleric, treated Islam as a

revolutionary ideology and wrote more like an ideologue than a traditional intellectual. At the core of Shariati's interpretation of Islam is the principle of social justice with a socialist emphasis, as well as a desire for liberation. Essentially, Shariati revised Islam with favorable consideration to "the people" and an anti-institutional outlook as part of his reformist approach. It is worth remembering, however, that he positively viewed religious reform and considered it imperative. Rahnema (1998) states that according to Shariati, the Protestant movement that introduced a new religion was viewed as a positive Western-modern experience that is worth emulating.

Socialism in Favor of Islam

Although Shariati's interpretation of Islam is a political movement, the transformation he seeks is mainly sociological. Hamid Dabashi (2006) claims that Shariati is a Marxist, but Abrahamian (1989) argues that he rejects the young philosopher Marx and the old political Marx and embraces the sociologist Marx. Shariati's use of the term "Islamology" is also primarily sociological in nature. Based on the relationality of a liberationist language that links theory to action on the theme of social justice, his understanding of Islam emphasizes this point.

Shariati argued that Shiite sect must be renewed and transformed into a comprehensive revolutionary faith. Kanaaneh (2021) supports this viewpoint. Pure Shia Islam is revolutionary and authentic, according to Shariati, distinguishing it from the passive and inauthentic Safavid Shia Islam. The distinction between the former and latter has facilitated an interpretation of the Qur'an and Islam in modern and socialist contexts. For instance, prophets have been depicted as leaders of oppressed peoples worldwide. Shariati classifies the former as revolutionary ideology – *mujahideen* – and the latter as scholastic knowledge – *mujtahids* – Abrahamian. His objections to institutionalism stem from the complex knowledge acquisition processes established by traditional Islamic scholars. He asserts that the Islam of the *mujtahid* demands

intensive study by scholars, jurists, and theologians, while the revolutionary ideology of Islam can be comprehended even by uneducated devotees. The methodological similarity between this and other interpretations to the ideas of Italian communist and revolutionary, Antonio Gramsci, is striking. Shariati's transformation of *Abu Dharr al-Ghafari*, one of the Prophet's companions, into a revolutionary prototype is also attributed to his preference for the first group. Rahnema highlights Shariati's emotional proximity to *Abu Dharr* by stating that he viewed himself as his reincarnation. The depiction of Hussein in Shariati's work presents a more dynamic, instructive, and revolutionary interpretation. This perception diverges from the painful narrative commonly known as *ascetic Shi'ism*. We can conclude that Shariati has refined the perception of Shiism by culling aspects that no longer support the religion's core values.

Akhavi (2018) argues that Shariati was an ideologue who utilized social theory, citing his integration of Marxist political economy and sociology, existentialist philosophy, liberation theology, and sociology of religion. However, it is noteworthy that while the Sayyid Qutb article associates systematicity and holism with Qutb's thought, Shariati's mature thought lacks those qualities and displays sporadic intellectual shifts. Shariati's intense contemplation positions him as an eclectic thinker with a dialectical methodology who delves extensively into his subject. His thought dynamism, akin to the reflection of the dialectic that renders Islamic thought dynamic, is due to this dialectic. Shariati's critical approach has particularly influenced his work. Despite the postmodern connotations of the term, it is feasible to label Shariati as a deconstructionist.

Shariati critically opposes legalism and the ulema, which goes against dominant interpretations of religion centered on the law, also known as black Islam or clerical Islam. Despite positioning himself against the clergy class and advocating for red Islam or the Islam of the *mujahideen*, which is in favor of the masses, Shariati's stance on a group of conscious thinkers presents an elitist perspective according to Akhavi (2018). Nevertheless, it is important to note that Shariati's seemingly elitist formula is a theoretical necessity and

does not negate the principle of equality in reference to conscious thinkers. His critique of the Shi'ite ulema – along with his positive perspectives – is due to the fact that the clerical class poses an elitist and self-interested challenge to mass liberation. Shariati's critique is a matter of methodology, not categorization. He calls for a revision that favors the people and the masses. A revolutionary consciousness is essential for Islam to achieve its revolutionary potential.

Shariati's revolutionary thinking stresses the significance of consciousness. He has applied Marxist political economy as a critical mechanics of thought, in a distinctive manner, aligned with the socialist narrative's emancipatory ethos, rather than its theoretical Marxist sense. His involvement in third world liberation and resistance movements has caused him to blend religion and Marxism, citing the active role of religion in these contexts. Some suggest that Shariati perceives Marxism through an Islamic lens, while others contend that he is a Marxist camouflaged by Islam. The mere existence of these two opposing claims serves to demonstrate how polarizing Shariati is. However, it is worth noting that his focus on achieving an egalitarian society is grounded in his aspiration to establish an Islamic society founded on the principles of social justice. Thus, it is more reasonable to argue that he adopted Marxist ideas as a conceptual and intellectual resource. Shariati is a representative of the left-leaning intellectual wing of Islamic thought that asserts the superiority of Islam over Western ideologies. Furthermore, he suggests that Marxism could have drawn its commendable values from Islam.

In Shariati's Islamist interpretation, there is a methodological manifestation of economic understanding. He critiques the economic knot between ulema and tradesmen, which can be untied structurally. Therefore, he emphasizes the importance of unraveling the dialectical economic bond between mullahs and tradesmen (merchants), which could lead to cultural and financial capital. His interpretation of the relationship between these two groups is grounded in a capital-focused perspective influenced by Marxist methodology. This represents an objective critique of the

superstructure within the Islamic field. Additionally, he scrutinizes the charitable institution, echoing Qutb's call for social justice. The institution of charity is often criticized in favor of a social justice-based approach, particularly due to the technology of philanthropy involving the accumulation of wealth by individuals. According to Shariati, the Islamic economic system serves as a means to prevent this accumulation of wealth. He opposes capitalism at both the concrete and abstract levels, criticizing its understanding of human beings. The eclectic use of Marxism by Shariati is mentioned because he reverses Marxism's infrastructural economism, which is sometimes accused of economic determinism. Shariati asserted that the economy does not constitute an infrastructural element and that beliefs, ideas, and ethical values are not superstructural elements predetermined by the economy. He stressed that these values have independent causality, free from modes of production. In this context, Shariati endorses ethical socialism, albeit intermittently using Marxism and its conceptual framework as a critical method. Indeed, Kanaaneh notes that Shariati's conception of socialism does not center on the economic value of collective appropriation of surplus value. Instead, he views socialism as a monotheistic system of liberation that allows individuals to be closer to God.

Shariati's criticism of class-based society not only critiques the economics but also establishes a philosophical-ethical framework that shapes his interpretation of history. Just as Qutb's theory of ignorance proposes, Shariati employs the story of Cain and Abel to illustrate his interpretation of history and representation. Abel symbolizes primitive communism and equitable social structures, while Cain represents capitalism, and previously, feudalism, in other words, oppressive and exploitative social structures. In his interpretation, Abel embodies the pasture-based economy of primitive socialism that predates private property, while Cain symbolizes the agricultural system and individual or monopolistic ownership. Overall, his view on religion is shaped by a popular affirmationism that stands in opposition to institutional religion.

Ali Shariati presented a modern interpretation of emancipatory and revolutionary Islam that evolved within the context of Shiite thought. He combined political and social activism with intellectual activism, while avoiding subjective evaluations. Shariati intervened in the internal divisions of Shi'a Islam and offered a social-justice and left-leaning exemplary path for Muslims globally to defend an Islamic alternative to Western ideologies. Additionally, he used precise language and avoided bias in his writings. Leaving aside the validity of mixed labels like "Islamic Marxism" or "socialist Islam," Shariati's interpretation of Islam is primarily based on a socialist philosophical and ethical foundation. He referred to Islamic history and the Islamic canon to update his pretext (tradition, history, and institutionalities), and text (canon) interpretation into a context of revolution (revolutionary Islamic interpretation). Shariati's criticism of capitalism stems from his economic perspective. He also offers his interpretation of religion at both the concrete and abstract levels, taking on an activist character. Besides reflecting the unique conditions of Iran, his economic and philosophical defense of a populist and socially just line within the intellectual journey of the Muslim world highlights his historic value.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Iran Islamic Revolution \(Ie\)](#)
- ▶ [Islamic Socialism](#)
- ▶ [Sayyed Qutb](#)
- ▶ [Shia View Of Islamic Finance And Economics](#)
- ▶ [Social Justice In Islam \(Sayyed Qutb\)](#)

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