

Ali Shariati, or the Intellectual in Pursuit of Justice

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“Government can endure with unbelief, but not with injustice.”
Imam ‘Ali (as quoted in Ernst, 2003. 118)

Abstract

This essay, drawing on ‘Ali Shari’ati’s most important works on what is an Intellectual and what is Justice, will try to address how he conceived the role of the intellect and of the intellectual in the pursuit of justice. For Imam ‘Ali, the ‘true intellectual’ (al-aqil) is one who not only thinks correctly but also acts ethically, and, at the deepest level, one who seeks to realize the ultimate Reality. The intellectual is defined as one who ‘puts all things in their proper place’, which is the very definition of justice also. Only the true intellectual can, therefore, be fully ‘just’, for only one who sees things as they truly are is able to put them in their right place. Thought, action and realization are all the concern of the true intellectual, the aqil. With this text, I hope to show how ‘Ali Shari’ati emphasised both the harmony between intellect and revelation, and the distinction (though not conflict) between intellect and reason, and how his intellectual endeavours were, ultimately, a pursuit for Justice. Shari’ati, in particular, criticised the Western project of positivism for falsely proclaiming the ability to separate knowledge from its human context. He also argued that all science should actively affirm its human interests, rather than pretending to rise above them. Human knowledge should thus always be recognised as having been produced through human social relations.

Key Words: Intellect; Justice; Knowledge; *Al-aqil*; *Adl*

Introduction

What is an intellectual? Who is an intellectual? What is Justice? As Reza Shah-Kazemi explains (Shah-Kazemi, 2006. 35), being true to one's intellect, to the treasures buried deep within it and not just to the rational functions operative on its surface, is tantamount to being "spiritual". For Imam 'Ali, the "true intellectual" (al-aqil) is one who not only thinks correctly but also acts ethically, and, at the deepest level, one who seeks to realise the ultimate Reality. The intellectual is defined as one who "puts all things in their proper place", which is also the very definition of justice; only the true intellectual can, therefore, be fully "just", for only one who sees things as they truly are is able to put them in their right place. Thought, action and realisation are all the concern of the true intellectual, the aqil. Correct thinking, impeccable virtue and authentic being are inextricably tied up with the intellect, in the spiritual ethos being considered here.

This essay, drawing on Ali Shariati's most important works on what is an Intellectual and what is Justice, will try to address how he conceived the role of the intellect and of the intellectual in the pursuit of justice, and hopes to show how Ali Shariati emphasised both the harmony between intellect and revelation, and the distinction, not conflict, between intellect and reason, and how his intellectual endeavours were, ultimately, a pursuit for Justice. Shariati criticised the Western project of positivism for falsely proclaiming the ability to separate knowledge from its human context, arguing that all science should actively affirm its human interests, rather than pretending to rise above them. Human knowledge should thus always be recognised as having been produced through human social relations.¹

The Pursuit of Justice through the Intellect

An important subject that Ali Shariati approached was the debate on culture and barbarism, or the question of who is civilised and who is modern², discussing it in the light of Islamic doctrine, and stressing that this point had to be kept in mind, particularly as a matter of concern for individuals within the educated classes of Islamic societies upon whom laid the burden of responsibility and leadership of the *ummah*.

Modernity was one of the most delicate and vital issues confronting the people of non-European countries and Islamic societies. A more important issue was the relationship between an imposed modernisation and genuine civilisation. One had to discover if modernity – as was claimed – was a synonym for being civilised, or if

it was an altogether different issue and social phenomenon having no relation to civilisation at all. Unfortunately, modernity had been imposed on non-European nations under the guise of civilisation. The intellectuals should have understood years ago and made people realise the difference between civilisation and modernity, but they failed to do so.

Shariati defined certain terms on which he intended to concentrate, which, if left ambiguous would render the discussion vague:

Intellectual: An intellectual is one who is conscious of his own “humanistic status” in a specific social and historical time and place. His self-awareness lays upon him the burden of responsibility. He responsibly, and self-consciously, leads his people in scientific, social and revolutionary action.

Assimilation: This was at the root of all the troubles and constraints facing the non-western and Muslim countries, applying to the conduct of an individual who, intentionally or unintentionally, starts imitating the mannerisms of someone else. A person exhibiting this weakness forgets his own background, national character and culture, or, if he remembered them at all, recalled them with contempt. Obsessively, and with no reservation, he denied himself in order to transform his identity. Hoping to attain the distinctions and the grandeur which he saw in another, the assimilator attempted to rid himself of perceived shameful associations with his original society and culture.

Alienation: The process of forgetting or becoming unfamiliar with or indifferent to one’s self, *i.e.*, one loses the self and directs their perceptions from within another person or thing. This grave social and spiritual illness manifested itself in many different shapes and forms depending on various factors. A factor which contributed to the alienation of the human being was the tools with which someone worked. It is seen as another kind of “control by jinns,” which possessed humanity and alienated individual or even an entire class from itself. Yet, that which was more real, more frightening, and more damaging, was the omnipresent form of alienation; such alienation thoroughly affected the Iranians, the Muslims, the Asians, and the Africans: that is, “cultural alienation.” Non-European societies became alienated by European societies; their intellectuals no longer felt eastern, groaned like an eastern person or aspired to be eastern people. The intellectual did not suffer because of his own social problems, rather he conceived of the pain, sufferings, feelings and needs of a European in the final stage of capitalistic and materialistic success and enjoyment.³

The problem concerned making people in Asia and Africa consumers of European products. Their societies had to be structured so they would buy European products. That meant changing a nation literally. They had to change the nation, and they had to transform the man in order to change his clothing, his consumption pattern, his adornment, his abode and his city. The first part of him which needed to be changed was his morale and his thinking. Who could change the spirit of a society, the morale of a society and the way of thinking of a nation? In this respect, there was little the European capitalist, engineer or producer could do. Rather, it was the business of the enlightened European intellectuals to plan a special method of perverting the mind, the taste and lifestyle of the non-European, not in a way that he himself chooses – since the change he desires might not necessitate the consumption of European products – rather his desires, his choices, his suffering, his sorrow, his tastes, his ideals, his sense of beauty, his tradition, his social relations, his amusements, all had to be changed so that he could be coerced into becoming a consumer of European industrial products. Thus, the big producers and big European capitalists of the 18th and 19th centuries let the intellectuals handle this project. This was the project: all the people of the world had to become uniform. They had to live alike and they had to think alike. However, it was practically impossible for all the nations to think in the same way. What structural elements go into the personality and spirit of a man and nation? Religion, history, culture, past civilisation, education and tradition – all of these are the structural elements of a man's personality and spirit and, in its general term, of a nation. Clearly, these elements differed from one society to another. They resulted in a European form, while another developed in Asia and in Africa. Yet, according to the European capitalist, they all had to become the same. The differences in spirits, as well as intellectual traditions, of the nations of the world had to be destroyed in order for men to become uniform. They had to conform, wherever they were, to a single pattern, a pattern provided by Europe: it showed all Easterners, Asians, Africans, how to think, how to dress, how to desire, how to grieve, how to build their houses, how to establish their social relations, how to consume, how to express their view, and finally how to like and what to like. Soon it was realised that a new culture called “modernisation” was presented to the whole world. Modernity was the best method of diverting the non-European world from its own moulds, thoughts and personalities. It became the sole task of Europeans to place the temptation of “modernisation” before the non-European societies of any complexion.

For Shariati, strictly speaking, “modernised” meant modernised in the realm of consumption. One who became modernised was one whose tastes desired “modern”

items to satisfy his wants. In other words, he imported from Europe new forms of living as well as modern products, and he refused to use new types of products and lifestyles developed from his own national past. 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 “modernisation” with “civilisation” to impose the new consumption pattern upon them, capitalising on the universal desire for civilisation. “Modernisation” was defined as “civilisation,” and thus people cooperated with the European plans to modernise. Even more than the bourgeois and capitalist, the non-European intellectual laboured mightily to change consumption patterns and lifestyles in their societies. Modernisation changed 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 modernised, they first had to overcome the influence of religion, since religion caused any given society to feel a distinctive individuality. Religion postulated an exalted intellectuality to which everyone related intellectually. If this intellect was crushed and humiliated, the one who identified himself with it felt also crushed and humiliated. So, native intellectuals began a movement against “fanaticism.” As Frantz Fanon said: ‘Europe intended to captivate the non-European by the machine. Can a human or society be enslaved by a machine or certain European product without taking away or depriving him of his personality?’⁴ No, it could not. The personality had to be wiped out first. Since religion, history, culture, as a totality of intellect, thought, amassed art and literature gave personality to a society, they all had to be destroyed, too. They would deprive him of his personality. He had to be dispossessed of all the “I’s” he felt within. He had to be forced to believe himself related to a humbler civilisation, a humbler social order, and accept that European civilisation, western civilisation and the European race were superior, and the non-European societies themselves strove to become modernised under the leadership of their sophisticated intellectuals.⁵

As Jean-Paul Sartre, in the preface to Fanon’s *the Wretched of the Earth*, pointed out,

We would bring a group of African or Asian youth to Amsterdam, Paris, London... for a few months, take them around, change their clothes and adornments, teach them etiquette and social manners as well as some fragment of language. In short, we would empty them of their own cultural values and then send them back to their own countries. They would no longer be the kind of person to speak their own mind; rather they would be our mouthpieces. We would cry the

slogans of humanity and equality and then they would echo our voice in Africa and Asia.⁶

These were the persons who convinced people to lay aside their orthodoxy, discard their religion, get rid of native culture (as these had kept them behind the modern European societies) and become westernised from the tip of the toe to the top of the head. But it was not so simple to civilise a nation or a society. Civilisation and culture were not European-made products whose ownership made anyone civilised. But they had to make believe that all modernisation nonsense was a manifestation of civilisation, and ‘we eagerly threw away everything we had, even our social prestige, morality and intellect, to become thirsty suckers of what Europe was eager to trickle into our mouths’. This is what modernity really means. Thus a being was created devoid of any background, alienated from his history and religion, and a stranger to whatever his race, his history and his forefathers had built in this world; alienated from his own human characteristics, a second-hand personality whose mode of consumption had been changed, whose mind had been changed, who had lost his old precious thoughts, his glorious past and intellectual qualities and had now become empty within. As Jean Paul Sartre put it: ‘In these societies an “assimilate” – meaning a quasi-thinker and quasi-educated person – was created, not a real thinker or intellectual.’⁷ For Shariati, a *real* intellectual was one who knew his society, was aware of its problems, could determine its fate, was knowledgeable about its past and who could decide for himself. However, those quasi-intellectuals in non-European societies succeeded in influencing the people by being intermediaries between those who had the products and those who had to consume it. Acquainted both with the Europeans and with his own people, the mediator eased the way of colonisation and exploitation, and that was why they created native intellectuals who did not dare to choose for themselves, who did not have the courage to maintain their own opinions and who could not decide for themselves.

They had created a people who did not know their own culture, but still were ready to despise it. They knew nothing about Islam but said bad things about it. They could not understand a simple poem but criticised it with poorly chosen words. They did not understand their history but were ready to condemn it. On the other hand, without reservation they admired all that was imported from Europe. Consequently, a being was created who, first became alienated from his religion, culture, history and background, and then came to despise them. He was convinced he was inferior to the European, and when such a belief took root in him, he tried to refute himself, to sever his connections with all the objects attached to him, and

consequently tried to make himself into a European, who was not despised and looked down upon.

In *Where shall we begin?*⁸, Ali Shariati wanted to draw the attention to where one should strategically proceed in a particular society, in a given period of time, in order to achieve the shared objectives and to protect the values which were at the time subject to cultural, intellectual and social onslaughts. The gravest tragedy in traditional societies in general, and in the Muslim societies in particular, was that there was a lack of communication and a difference of outlook between the masses and the educated class. Due to the broad influence of mass media, literacy, and education in the industrial countries of the West, the masses and the intellectuals understood each other rather well and shared a relatively similar outlook. Unfortunately, under the modern culture and educational system, the young people of non-western countries were being educated and trained inside invincible and fortified fortresses. Once they reentered the society, they were placed in certain occupational and social positions completely isolated from the masses. In effect, the new intelligentsia lived and moved alongside the people, but in a closed “golden cage” of exclusive circles. As a result, on the one hand, the intelligentsia pursued life in an ivory tower without having any understanding of their own society, and on the other hand, the uneducated masses were deprived of the wisdom and knowledge of the very same intellectuals whom the masses had sponsored (albeit indirectly) and whose flourishing they had provided for.

The greatest responsibility of those who wished to rebuild their society and bring together the unintegrated, and at times, antagonistic elements of the society into a harmonious whole was to bridge the gap between those two poles – the pole of theory and the pole of practice – and to fill that great abyss of alienation between the masses and the intellectuals. For any responsible enlightened soul who wanted to achieve something, regardless of his ideological conviction, it was a duty to build a bridge between the beautiful, valuable, and the mysterious (in the mind of the masses) island of the intellectuals and the land of the masses; a bridge across which both the intellectuals and the masses could interact. Regardless of any answer to the question ‘Where shall we begin,’ and regardless of the agreement with Shariati’s answer, one could not help but accept and agree with that fundamental principle: the first step was to build such a bridge.

Implicit in the question ‘Where shall we begin?’ there was an understanding on the part of the audience, and the person who posed such a question, that two prior questions namely, ‘Who should begin?’ and ‘For *what* purpose?’ had already been

answered. Obviously, the question of where to begin was asked by those who had a sense of responsibility with regard to their time and society and wished to do something about it. Undoubtedly, they were the enlightened souls, for only such individuals felt a social responsibility and had a sense of social mission. One who was not enlightened was not responsible either.

Shariati notes that he stresses “enlightened souls” and not those who had obtained degrees. “Enlightened” did not mean “intellectual,” a word which had incorrectly been translated into Persian as “enlightened” (*roshan fekr*), and which referred to a person who did mental (as opposed to manual) work. Such an individual may or may not be an enlightened soul. Conversely, a person may not be an intellectual if he worked in a factory for example – but he may nevertheless be an enlightened soul. The relation between the two was not that of two interrelated concepts. Not every intellectual was enlightened and vice versa. The enlightened soul was a person who was self-conscious of his “human condition” in his time and historical and social setting, and whose awareness inevitably and necessarily gave him a sense of social responsibility. And if he happened to be educated, he may be more effective; if not, perhaps less so. But this was not a general rule, for sometimes an uneducated individual may play a much more important role.

In the modern time, when man had reached a dead end within his evolving society, and when the underdeveloped countries were struggling with numerous difficulties and shortcomings, an enlightened soul was one who could generate responsibility and awareness and give intellectual and social direction to the masses. Accordingly, an enlightened person was not necessarily one who had inherited and continued the works of Galileo, Copernicus, Socrates, Aristotle, and Ibn-Sina. Modern scientists such as Einstein and Von Braun complemented and continued their achievements. In principle, the responsibility and the role of contemporary enlightened souls of the world resembled that of the prophets and the founders of the great religions – revolutionary leaders who promoted fundamental structural changes in the past. Prophets were not in the same category as philosophers, scientists, technicians or artists. The prophets often emerged from among the masses and were able to communicate with the masses, introducing new mottos, projecting new visions, starting new movements, and begetting new energies in the conscience of the peoples of their particular time and places. The great revolutionary *uprooting* – and yet *constructive* – movements of the prophets caused frozen, static and stagnant societies to change their directions, life-styles, outlooks, cultures and destinies. Those prophets were therefore neither in the category of the past scientists or philosophers, nor were they in the category of unaware common

people. Rather, they belonged to a category of their own. They neither belonged to the commoners, who were usually the products and captives of ancient traditions and social structures, nor did they belong to the community of the scientists, philosophers, artists, mystics, monks or clergymen, who were captives of abstract concepts and often overwhelmed with their own scientific or inner explorations and discoveries.

Similar to the prophets, the enlightened souls also neither belonged to the community of scientists, nor to the camp of the unaware and stagnant masses. They were aware and responsible individuals whose most important objective and responsibility was to bestow the great God-given gift of “self-awareness” (*khod agahi*) to the general public. Only self-awareness transformed the static and corrupt masses into a dynamic and creative cantor, which fostered genius and gave rise to great leaps, which in turn became the springboard for the emergence of civilisation, culture and great heroes. Clearly then, it was the enlightened soul who should begin preaching the call for awareness, freedom and salvation, to the deaf and unhearing ears of the people; it is the enlightened souls who should inflame the fire of a new faith in the hearts of the masses, and show them a new social direction in their stagnant society. This was not a job for the scientists, because they had a clear-cut responsibility: understanding the status quo as well as discovering and employing the forces of nature and of man for the betterment of the material life of the people. Scientists, technicians and artists provided scientific assistance to their nations, or to the human race, in order to help them to improve their lot and be better at what they are. Enlightened souls, on the other hand, taught their society how to “change” and provided the orientation of that change. They fostered a mission of “becoming” and paved the way by providing an answer to the question, ‘What should we become?’

A scientist justifies, explains, and creates the conditions for producing as affluent, comfortable, strong, and leisurely life as possible. At most, he discovers the “facts,” whereas an enlightened person identifies the “truth.” A scientist produces light, which may be utilised either for right or wrong objectives; an enlightened person, analogous to a “tribal guide” (*ra'id*), is the vanguard of the caravan of humanity, showing society the right path; he invites us to initiate a journey, and leads us to our final destination. Since science is power and enlightenment light, from time to time, the scientist serves the interests of oppression and ignorance, but the enlightened person, of necessity and by definition, opposes tyranny and darkness.

Shariati then explores the word *hekmat* (wisdom), which is often used in the Qur'an and within the Islamic cultural milieu. It conveyed the same meaning he had attributed to enlightenment. Even when there was a discussion of knowledge ('*elm*'), it did not refer to technical, scientific or philosophical learnings. It meant neither "religious knowledge" (those disciplines which a religious student studied, *i.e.*, jurisprudence, tradition, life of the Prophet, the Qur'anic interpretation, ethics, theology etc.) nor "temporal knowledge" (those disciplines which were pursued by social and/or natural science students, *i.e.*, physics, medicine, sociology, literature, psychology, history, etc.). These were collections of specialised information and cultural knowledge, which were taught particularly as courses in a specific educational system. While religious and secular knowledge could be helpful for enlightened awareness (*agahi-e-roshanfekri*), and may serve as valuable tools at the disposal of the enlightened individuals, they were not in-and-of-themselves the desired "light" or awareness. That kind of knowledge ('*elm*'), which was emphasised in Islam, was an awareness unique to man, a divine light and a source of consciousness of the social conscience. As the famous tradition put it, 'Knowledge is a light which God shines in the heart of whomever He desires.' It was this awakening, illuminating, guiding and responsibility-generating knowledge which Shariati called the "divine light," not the teachings of physics, chemistry, literature jurisprudence, etc.: the goal of the enlightened soul was to bestow upon their contemporaries a common and dynamic faith, as well as to help them acquire self-awareness and formulate their ideals. The greatest responsibility of the enlightened soul was to identify the real causes of the backwardness of his society and discover the real cause of the stagnation and degeneration of his people. Moreover, he should educate his slumbering and ignorant society as to the basic reasons for its ominous historical and social destiny. Then, based on the resources, responsibilities, needs and suffering of his society, he should identify the rational solutions, which would enable his people to emancipate themselves from the status quo. Based on appropriate utilisation of the resources of his society and an accurate diagnosis of its suffering, an enlightened person should try to find out the true causal relationships between misery, social illness and abnormalities, and the various internal and external factors. Finally, an enlightened person would transfer this understanding beyond the limited group of his colleagues to the society as a whole.

Contemporary "intellectuals" generally believe that dialectical contradictions at work in any society, of necessity, move the society forward toward freedom and revolution, and give birth to a new state of being. According to this logic, mere "poverty" or "class differences," which symbolised the existence of social conflicts,

inevitably lead to a dialectical contradiction, which in turn create motion in the society. In reality, however, this is no more than a big illusion. No society would be mobilised to obtain its freedom merely because of the existence of class difference or tragic disparity between rich and poor. Poverty and class conflict may exist in a society for thousands of years without causing any structural transformation. Dialectics has no *intrinsic* motion. Considering that motion in any given society is the product of transformation of the social conflict from within the society into the conscience of its members, the responsibility of the enlightened person is obvious. Briefly, it is 'to transfer the shortcomings and abnormalities of his society into the mind and conscience of the members of that society.' Then, the society would take it from there. Another definition of the enlightened person was that he was one who was aware of the existing social conflicts and their real causes, who knew the needs of his age and his generation, who accepted responsibility for providing solutions as to how his society could be emancipated, who helped his society to shape and define its collective goals and objectives and, finally, who took part in mobilising and educating his static ignorant society. In a word, a contemporary enlightened person should continue in the path of the prophets. His mission is to "guide" and work for justice, his language is compatible with his time, and his proposed solutions conform to cultural values of his specificity.⁹ Opposition to religion by the enlightened person deprived society of the possibility of becoming aware of the benefits of its young and enlightened generation. Due to their unique worldviews and awareness, enlightened individuals can play the most effective and long-lasting role in educating and mobilising the masses of their society. With great intensity, the society expected its enlightened persons to educate it concerning various elements of danger, reactionism, corruption, anachronism and confusion. To emancipate and guide the people, to give birth to a new love, faith, and dynamism, and to shed light on people's hearts and minds and make them aware of various elements of ignorance, superstition, cruelty and degeneration in contemporary Islamic societies, an enlightened person should start with "religion." By that Shariati meant 'our peculiar religious culture and not the one predominant today.'¹⁰

Such a movement would unleash energies that would enable the enlightened Muslim to:

1 – Extract and refine the enormous resources of the society and convert the degenerating agents into energy and movement;

2 – Transform the existing social and class conflicts into conscious awareness of social responsibility, by using artistic, literary and speaking abilities, as well as other possibilities at hand;

3 – Bridge the ever-widening gap between the “island of the enlightened person” and the “shore of the masses” by establishing kinship links, fostering understanding between them, thus putting the religion, which came about to revive and generate movement [in the sense of action], at the service of the people;

4 – Make the weapon of religion inaccessible to those who had undeservedly armed themselves with it and whose purpose was to use religion for personal reasons, thereby acquiring the necessary energy to motivate people;

5 – Launch a religious renaissance through which, by returning to the religion of life and motion, power and justice, would on the one hand incapacitate the reactionary agents of the society and, on the other hand, save the people from those elements which were used to narcotise them. By launching such a renaissance, these hitherto narcotising elements would be used to revitalise society, give awareness [in the psychological sense, as a first step to empowerment], and fight superstition. Furthermore, returning to and relying on the authentic culture of the society would allow the revival and rebirth of cultural independence in the face of western cultural onslaught;

6 – And finally, eliminate the spirit of imitation and obedience, which was 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 would extract and refine the enormous accumulation of energy in the society, enlighten the era, and awaken the present generation. It was for the above reasons that Shariati, ‘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”.’¹¹

Conclusion

As Dawud Reznik asserts¹², epistemologically one must be aware of Shariati’s critique of Cartesian dualism. He describes the Islamic worldview as fundamentally anti-dualist, since it is impossible for humans to access the unmediated realm of absolute Knowledge, which is only God’s to behold. For Shariati, attempts at

achieving epistemological objectivity, contingency-less truth, and factual purity are misguided and idolatrous. In particular, Shariati criticises the western project of positivism as falsely proclaiming its ability to separate knowledge from its human context. He describes this deceit as a sinful skirting of social responsibility; science has been separated from the fabric of society, and, as such, it has lost touch with people's thoughts. Not being able to criticise the present situation, it no longer helps solve life's problems. It no longer concerns itself with the fate of society and its ability to control its own destiny and achieve its ideals.

Shariati chastises the *mala*, or intellectuals, for aligning themselves with the *mutrif*, or exploiting classes, arguing that all science should actively affirm its human interests, rather than pretending to rise above them. Human knowledge should thus always be recognised as having been produced through human social relations. What separates Shariati's epistemological perspective from other critiques of Cartesian dualism made by the *Geisteswissenschaften* schools of pragmatism, phenomenology, and postmodernism, is his emphasis on the inherent axiological quality of knowledge. He sees the inextricable link between subject and object as judgment. In this regard, he believes that humanity's defining feature is its ability to approach the world in terms of value, which consists of the link that exists between man and any phenomenon, behaviour, act, or condition where a motive higher than that of utility is at issue; it might be called a sacred tie, as it is bound up with reverence and worship to the extent that people feel it justifiable to devote or sacrifice their very lives to this tie. What grants man, a non-material being, an *independence* from – as well as a *superiority* over – all other natural beings, is his high regard for value. Shariati has thus introduced a new co-founding principle to the standard existentialist doctrine: it is an *ethical* existence that precedes essence. All human knowledge, including basic self-awareness, emerges from a fundamental position relative the universal values of Good and Evil, or as Shariati calls them the “infinitely exalted plus” and “infinitely vile minus” (Shariati, 1979. 88-97).

Using this epistemological framework, Shariati argues that all developments in knowledge, even the supposedly secular rationalism of the Enlightenment, represent a form of religion as an ethical proposition of faith: history knows no era or society which lacks religion. That is, there is no historical precedence of a non-religious society. There has been no non-religious human being in any race, in any era, in any phase of social change on any part of the earth. Since all human knowledge is intrinsically tied to the human knower, and all humans are religious, all knowledge is thereby necessarily religious. In short, Shariati views the history of thought as a struggle of religious concerns. Specifically, epistemological conflict through the

ages has symbolised the struggle between the religion of legitimation (*shirk*/polytheism) and the religion of revolution (*tawhid*/monotheism). Multitheism is characterised by idolatry, beliefs in various forms of determinism and predetermination, and reactionary attempts to conserve the conditions of dualism and inequality that have pervaded human societies throughout history. Monotheism reflects the prophetic attempt to destroy all idols, abolish all social hierarchy, and thus construct the Kingdom of God on earth. Within this context, Shariati distinguishes between Good and Evil using the transcendental dimension of human existence as his defining criteria. The evil multitheists worship the idols of either the measurably physical (materialism) or the manifestly thinkable (idealism), without recognising that neither is as virtuous as the supernatural and supra-logical spirit of God that can never be fully begotten; man's propensity for what actually exists degrades him. By pursuing values that do not exist in nature, he is lifted above nature, and the spiritual and essential development of the species is secured. In other words, Good knowledge emerges from love of existence as a dynamic movement oriented towards the future, rather than servitude to the idols of the present-past.¹³

Methodologically, and consistent with the axiological anti-dualism of his epistemology, Shariati prescribes a methodology of critical hermeneutics. Because only God has universal knowledge of cause and effect, any attempts at unearthing an absolute semiotics is futile and impossible. Instead, Shariati argues that the only appropriate model for advancing human knowledge is the continuous interpretation of facts relative to their social construction and religious politics. Broken down into its constituent parts, Shariati's hermeneutical method involves 'objection, criticism, and the inner choice or selection of the individual'.¹⁴

This process of negative dialectics emerges from the idol-destroying tradition in Islamic monotheism; one must seek out and supersede the fundamental contradictions of human thought, since only God's thought is complete, infinite, and limitless. The first part of Shariati's method calls for objecting to any human knowledge that claims to be universal and free from interpretation: 'the necessity of the religion of monotheism is rebellion, denial, and saying "no" before any other power.'¹⁵

The point here is that Godly knowledge cannot be humanly beholden, and so any human attempts to build Godly knowledge must be resolutely rejected as the construction of a temple of idolatry. In Shariati's words, 'How disgraceful... are all fixed standards. Who can ever fix a standard?' (Shariati, 1979. 94) Following the

objection to supposedly pure knowledge, human agency must be recognised as the basis for the production of all human knowledge. Hence Shariati advocates a line of interpretive criticism that traces the construction of knowledge back to the human presence and power relations. He calls on all monotheists to recognise that ‘the course... [a multitheist] has chosen for our humiliation is the best guide for us to choose as the way to our glory: Returning from the same way that he has led us’ (Shariati, 1992. 34).

The negation of God that the multitheist has promoted through an idolatrous claim to value-freedom, must thus be itself negated. Criticism can only be accomplished by discovering the contradictions and limits of the knowledge in question, particularly with reference to its axiological quality; fixed and motionless forms that have become crystallised into ineffective “sacred” institutions should be transformed into moving and active elements, with a clearly defined role in the existential movement of society. This process, of recognising the qualitative aspects of knowledge, allows for a nuanced understanding of the history of any knowledge. In particular, Shariati urges the situating of knowledge relative to the political struggle between multitheists and monotheists. These combined efforts of both objection and criticism ultimately result in a religiously-vital democratisation of knowledge, as persons can only begin to make informed decisions about faith when idols have been destroyed. Citing the example of the Prophet and his companions, Shariati encourages all to become conscious self-aware *mujahideen*. Shariati asserts true belief in God can only be actualised through this process, which comes as a result of critically interpreting all knowledge: Correct thought is the prelude to correct knowledge, and correct knowledge is the prelude to belief. These three taken together are the necessary attributes of an aware conscience and of any movement that strives in practice and theory for the attainment of perfection. When knowledge has been negated, critiqued, and situated relative its axiological-religious roots, the enlightened individual can perform his/her prophetic-like duty of shining the light of revelation on others so they too can begin to ‘discern things as they really are.’¹⁶ Representing a truly democratic understanding of religious faith, Shariati’s method calls for criticism of all knowledge in order to attain consciousness of its limitations and ethical implications, and only then can the individual make the ‘dutiful and aggressive passage’ (Shariati, 1992. 207) to monotheistic faith.

Finally, in what refers to social ontology, Shariati’s imagery for social order is perhaps the most important element of his liberation theology. Much of his writings are dedicated to detailing the subtle nuances of *tawhid*, or the Islamic concept for the absolute unity of God, as a social ontology. This metaphor allows for the

indivisibility of humanity without the imposition of abstract structural mechanisms or systemic metaphors, since all humans are understood to be God's creation. As with his discussions of epistemology and methodology, Shariati describes *tawhid* first by contrasting it from its opposite, *shirk*, or the legitimization of social inequality based on multitheistic beliefs and idolatry. *Shirk* rears its ugly head in realism and nominalism, the traditional social ontologies of western mainstream thought. Realists conceive of society as a structural whole requiring the assimilation and integration of its individual parts according to an abstract, mechanistic logic that is supposedly divorced from human agency.

This imagery of society as an autonomous system *sui generis* has historically been used by social theorists as a way to control what they perceive to be the innate chaos and disorder of individuals if left to their "human nature." Employing his critical hermeneutical method, Shariati rebukes realist social imagery. He points out the political interests of multitheism as the axiological underpinnings of realist ontologies that legitimate an assimilatory social order; it is multitheism which continuously denies social power, social control, and the responsibility of human beings in their fate, their expectations and the physical, spiritual, and instinctive needs of individuals, all to the advantage of the coercive and wealthy forces. Hence Shariati highlights the power interests involved in the western realist tradition, including the neo-liberal ideal of the capitalist market as a supposedly neutral arbiter of social life. Nominalism, on the other hand, posits that only the individual is existentially real, and thus social ties are simply utilitarian means for achieving self-centered, egocentric ends. This social Darwinist image of society legitimates a survival of the fittest scenario, whereby individuals compete for a scarce quantity of resources to survive. Shariati shrewdly points out that the same multitheist interests involved in realism are at play in promoting nominalism. In his eyes, individualistic social imagery is used as a means to divide-and-conquer the masses and reinforce the inequalities in society produced by *shirk*; it is also multitheism which opens separate metaphysical accounts for each of its members so that, through this means, the assembling of people would be transformed into dispersion and isolation. His point here is that a religion of revolution is thoroughly undermined when the masses are viewed as self-interested monads competing for individual salvation. Shariati also identifies the undemocratic nature of realist conceptions of history, which are supposedly driven spontaneously or by elites. This contradicts the model set forth in the Qur'an, which posits that *al-nas*, or "the masses," are actually the ones behind historical change. Thus, according to Shariati, the religion of legitimization offers two contradictory images of social order to keep persons from recognising their inherent

equality as common creations from God: society as a structural whole constraining its individual parts and society as an aggregation of autonomous, sovereign atoms. Both of these social ontologies are used by those who profit from an alienated, fragmented, and unequal society to keep the masses from recognising their common existential ancestry in God and consequently effecting revolution. In opposition to the realist and nominalist metaphors of *shirk*, Shariati defines *tawhid* as simply ‘the unity of nature with metanature, of man with nature, of man with man, of God with the world and with man.’¹⁷

Shariati describes the personage of society as the “Household of God,” a metaphor which asserts the existential equality of all humanity as the common product of the divine realm of creation. *Tawhid* also mandates the liberating framework of praxis, or the unity and simultaneity of thought and action. Shariati again cites the example of the Prophet and his companions, who did not ‘divide up life into two sections, the first consisting exclusively of talk and the second, exclusively of action’ (Shariati, 1979. 41).

With *tawhid*, social order is presupposed between persons without having to resort to the assimilatory ideals, contractual obligations, or other structural props of realist social imagery. In other words, humans need not belittle or deny themselves to fit into an autonomous social totality. Instead, as Shariati points out, the relation of God and man is one of reciprocity, where self-knowledge and knowledge of God come to be synonymous, or, alternatively, where the former functions as a preliminary to the latter. Hence in *tawhid*, true actualisation of one’s individuality reinforces the inherent sociality of human existence and the essential unity-in-diversity of God’s creation. At the same time, however, Shariati describes the individual in *tawhid* as fundamentally different from the nominalist notion of atomistic, zero-sum sovereignty. In *tawhid*, the individual can only recognise his/her uniqueness relative to another, which means having to always see oneself in reference to the totality of God’s creation. In this manner, Shariati argues that to the extent that the man of *tawhid* perceives his poverty, he perceives his wealth; to the extent that he feels humility, he feels a pride, a glory, within himself; to the extent that he has surrendered to the service of God, he rises against whatever powers, systems, and relations exist.¹⁸

Note

1. This essay is based on a previous paper of mine, Mohomed 2017.
2. Ali Shariati. Reflections of Humanity. Available at http://www.iranchamber.com/personalities/ashariati/works/reflections_of_humanity.php.
3. Ali Shariati. Reflections of Humanity.
4. As quoted by Ali Shariati in Reflections of Humanity.
5. Ali Shariati. Reflections of Humanity.
6. As quoted by Ali Shariati in Reflections of Humanity. First published in French in 1961, Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la Terre* had a preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, and has been translated into many languages, including Persian by Ali Shariati.
7. Ali Shariati. Reflections of Humanity.
8. Ali Shariati. Where shall we begin? Available at <http://www.shariati.com/english/begin/begin7.html>.
9. Ali Shariati. Where shall we begin? For further details on Shariati and Justice, see Vakily 1991.
10. Ali Shariati. Where shall we begin? second paragraph.
11. Ali Shariati. Where shall we begin, last paragraph.
12. Robert Heck and Dawud Reznik. "The Islamic Thought of Ali Shariati and Sayyid Qutb", available at <https://pt.scribd.com/document/28702122/The-Islamic-Thought-of-Ali-Shariati-and-Sayyid-Qutb>.
13. For further details on Shariati's conception of monotheism and multitheism, see his "The World-View of Tauhid" in *On the Sociology of Islam* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979), pp. 82-87, and particularly to his lectures which were published in *Religion vs. Religion*. Translated from the Persian by Laleh Bakhtiar and foreword by Andrew Burgess. Albuquerque: Abjad, [1988?], p. 47.
14. Ali Shariati. *Religion vs. Religion*, p. 52.
15. Ali Shariati. *Religion vs Religion*, p. 39.
16. Ali Shariati. *Religion vs. Religion*, p. 12.
17. For further details on Shariati's conception of the masses (al-nas), see his "The Philosophy of History: Cain and Abel", and, especially, "The Dialectic of Sociology" in *On the Sociology of Islam* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979). Also useful is Gabrani 1987.

18. Ali Shariati. "Mysticism, Equality, and Freedom" in *Marxism and other Western Fallacies: an Islamic Critique*. Translated by R. Campbell. N.p.: Islamic Foundation Press, n.d., p. 76.

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