

IQBAL AND ALI SHARIATI:
AN ENGAGEMENT WITH MODERN
SOCIOLOGICAL THOUGHT

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ABSTRACT

Iqbal and Ali Shariati are the two most illustrious social reformers of contemporary Muslim Ummah, and the reliable commentators on the concept of culture, values, norms, traditions, modernity etc. Their thought can help us to steer the past and face the challenges of new century. This paper is focused on the Iqbal's and Ali Shariati's concern about the future of mankind and clash of various civilizations. Iqbal's and Ali Shariati's contribution to Muslim social reformation is immense. In contemporary scenerio, when the world at large is living in chaos, confusion, distress and misery, the thought of Iqbal and Ali Shariati become is more important. The world is in a critical need of a deep and comprehensive philosophical thought based on Iqbal's and Ali Shariati's multi-faceted philosophy. Iqbal and Ali Shariati, have contributed to sociology of religion, culture, individual, society and gender justice. Their concepts of values and norms, culture and civilization have immense importance in the contemporary sociological thought. This paper will discuss the sociological thought of Allama Iqbal and Ali Shariati, their concepts of social change and the impact of Iqbal's thought on Ali Shariati.

Whether we trace the roots of metropolitan sociological theory to the so called classics of the late 19th century or to the much deeper tradition of early modern jurisprudence, we do not escape from liberal social theory. The premises of that theory are ever the same. They comprise four ideas: a common human nature that is rational but also passionate and ungoverned; a social world of distinct, diverse, and often conflicting institutions and groups; a body of internally consistent law; and the incarnation of social order in some sovereign form that by this law unifies the passionate people and diverse groups on the basis of a few essential things that they share in common. These premises become starkly visible when we read social theory from outside the liberal tradition, as we must if we are to encounter the true diversity of the social imagination.¹

The work of Ali Shariati and Allama Iqbal well illustrates this alternative to liberalism. At the center of Shariati's and Iqbal's thinking is Islam, and not an Islam simply embodied in a theocratic state, but an Islam conceived as a relation to God that shapes everything from individual consciousness to personal relations to state policy. In the social thought of Western Europe, we must return to Jean Bodin at the latest to find such opinions, and even Bodin limited the sovereign with natural law, of which there is no obvious analogue in Shariati and Iqbal, and as for religion authoritatively governing social life, the history of Europe after 1500 is a two-century debate over that question, a debate conducted not only in the treatises and tracts of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, but also on battlefields from Naseby and Lutzen to Moncontour and Muhlberg, not to mention the long list of horrors with names like Magdeburg and St. Bartholomew. By 1685, when Louis XIV revoked the last vestiges of the Edict of Nantes, no one in Europe other than the Sun King himself really imagined that Christendom could be recreated as a unified religious, political, and personal system. Absolutism might endure, but Christendom would not. Even the early modern period, then, contains no real parallel to the utterly comprehensive theoretical project of Shariati. We must rather return to the Middle Ages, to writers like John of Salisbury and John of Paris, to find European thinkers who take as given the

inherent unity of all social, political, and religious life. And even John of Paris aimed to split the spiritual and temporal powers, as did his subversive successor, Marsilius of Padua. It is such an indivisible social matrix, however, that Shariati and Iqbal aimed to recreate in 20th-century Islam. In the metropolis, their efforts were read as traditional theocracy and Islamic nationalism. But to a less political eye, their work sometimes reads more like quietist Protestant pietism. It roots itself in the Quran. It emphasizes personal discipline and growth. It decries theocracy as wrongheaded, materialism as vacuous, Marxism as tyranny. It decries elites and leaders and upper classes. Yet for all its self-conscious, pedagogic simplicity, it is at the same time both literate and articulate. Its critique of metropolitan life is thoroughgoing and acute, even as it shares many themes with metropolitan arguments like Marxism and existentialism. All these facts make the long-standing ignorance of Shariati and Iqbal puzzling, although, to be sure, their work saw some revival after the great transitions of the 2020s. Even now, three-quarters of a century after their death, the details of Shariati's life remain unclear. He was born in 1933 in northeastern Iran the exact location is not certain, then under the modernizing dictatorship of Reza Shah Pahlavi. Shariati's father and grandfather had been active Islamists, the former having founded the Center for the Propagation of Islamic Truth in Mashhad around 1940. After high school, Shariati studied in a teacher-training college and early took up a vocation as a teacher. While teaching in the early and mid-1950s, he finished his bachelor's degree and began active involvement in nationalist politics, then in crisis over British claims about oil concessions, such political involvement led Shariati to radicalization and arrests. But in the late 1950s he surprisingly won a fellowship for travel to France for further education. There he pursued a degree in letters, eventually submitting a thesis in philology, but also reading widely in Western literature, social science, and philosophy. On the political side, he also read the work of Frantz Fanon and became active in the latter phases of the Algerian independence conflict. On his return to Iran in 1964 he was again arrested, apparently because of his Parisian activities. On his release, he taught at Mashhad and other Iranian colleges for some time, then lectured at Husayniyah Irshad, an informal university in Tehran, in which he played a central role. In 1972, Shariati was again arrested the arrest of his father seems to have been used to persuade him to give himself up. After months in confinement, he was released to house arrest in 1975. After two years, he went to England and died there under unknown circumstances in June 1977. Accounts of his death are many and

various, ranging from natural death to assassination by the Shah's agents to assassination by the clerical branch of Islam. There remains no scholarly consensus on the matter. More than most theorists, Shariati and Iqbal must be read both in context and out. They must be read in context to understand what they might have thought they were actually saying, to which interlocutors, and for what reasons. Above all they must be read in context for a sense of what they might have thought they were saying to themselves. Yet they must also be read out of context because their work quickly floated free of its original venues, being widely distributed and read for the plain content of the texts, shown of the unwritten understandings Shariati and Iqbal themselves may have brought to them. As a first context, we must remember that Shariati's and Iqbal's writings were those of a young and active man rather than those of a mature man and an academic. They have notes to him, or lectures explaining complex insights in simple terms, or celebrations of common religious stories and events. They are not systematic, disciplined arguments. Moreover, they wrote under a regime that permitted no overt political critique. Thus, for them Islam was not only their faith, but also the only available language for political and social discussion. In this connection, it is striking that Shariati's contemporary Martin Luther King, Jr., used the same homiletic style and the same invocation of religious symbols and language. That King's successors abandoned this stance may signify less a difference between King and Shariati than a difference in their successors' appropriations of them. Immediate context also sometimes shapes Shariati's remarks in more specific ways; his occasional contempt for Marxism no doubt reflects his having met it during one of its more extravagantly silly moments—French academia in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Shariati did not leave any single systematic work. There is, to be sure, no reason he should have. Iqbal's and Shariati's intent in social theory was to midwife the *umma*, not to win renown as a social theorist. But as a result his writing often lacks consistency, a fact particularly noticeable in their attitude towards the other Abrahamic religions. Sometimes for him Judaism and Christianity join in the common religious critique of secular liberal society. At other times, they are part of that liberal society, themselves secularized and baleful. Yet there is a coherence of vision underneath. Shariati's and Iqbal's thought has two basic moments, the first is directed outward, at the litany of philosophies, ideologies, and religions that is the recorded history of the world culture Shariati confronted when he left Iran. The second is directed inward, at a particular moment in the history of Shariati's own faith. The first is objective and external.

The second is subjective and internal. More important, the first is mainly concerned to judge the past, while the second's aim is to make the future. *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies* contains the crucial elements of Shariati's judgment of what he viewed as the alternatives to Islam. The first essay, "On Humanism," notes how ostensibly secular versions of humanism invariably smuggle transcendent values into their core arguments. It also begins a specific quarrel that runs through much of Shariati and Iqbal's their demonization of the medieval Catholic Church, here derided for beliefs that are in fact not medieval at all, but rather Augustinian and later on, Protestant. The medieval Catholic Church was a problem for Shariati and Iqbal precisely because the Christendom it animated was the last Western equivalent of the encompassing religious society that they sought to recreate in a new *umma*. They could not afford to recognize medieval Christendom as having been a prior example, lest its degeneration serve as an unwelcome prediction of a potential future for his new Islam. In *Modern Calamities*, Shariati and Iqbal begins with a denunciation of capitalism and communism little different from that later articulated by the environmental radicals of the 2000–2020 period. Then, after a deft rejection of Marxism and various transcendental religions including the Islamic caliphate for their degeneration into routinized, self-interested societies of ideological officialdom, Shariati moves to a quite amusing demolition of existentialism and particularly its Marxist variant for its pretensions, its internal contradictions, and its not-occasional racism. The essay is a triumph of invective, containing nonetheless enough home truths to be well worth reading. "Humanity between Marxism and Religion" is a much more serious and extended work. Here Shariati clears the ground quickly of the various alternatives; only Marxism and Islam, he feels, remain as serious alternatives for the advance of humanity, since only those two schemes are comprehensive views of the religious, social, and material worlds. As I noted earlier, Shariati could not take Christendom as a model or precursor because of the heritage that followed it: Reformation, religious war, and the privatization of religion under the ensuing liberalism. Christendom thus figures in his essay only as one of the several degenerations of good religion into self-interested officialdoms. That the caliphate also figures as one of these degenerations should not be seen as fairness as one might think, because Shariati appears to judge Islam as harshly as he does Christianity, but rather as a reminder that the concept of Islam. As used in the text refers to Shariati's never fully stated but quite particular version of that religion. In this connection, it is also

noteworthy that Shariati's language sometimes relegates Sufism to the status of non-Islam.²

Iqbal and Ali Shariati called for Muslims to keep their minds open to re-interpretation of the Quran and Islamic law so that they remained relevant in a fast-changing world. They are also strong in their condemnation of the myth-making Mullahs who were not equipped to answer the questions of the modern Muslims on contemporary issues. They were apprehensive of their bigotry and intolerance against science, Art, and original thought and wanted to set up a university for *Ulema* and religious scholars to equip them with the modern tools of knowledge. They believed that rather than spurning the discoveries of the modern world as un-Islamic the Muslim world should use the technological and scientific discoveries of the west without subordinating itself to western values and culture. Iqbal and Ali Shariati has a special significance for young men who often lack the virtues of their forefathers and possess none of the good qualities of the dominating races of Asia and Europe. They have forgotten all about Islam as well as the golden history of their past glory and general prosperity.³

Iqbal and Ali Shariati being thorough revolutionaries knew that these tasks could not be accomplished without a re-interpretation of the received Islamic doctrines. Much of their poetry and the whole of their prose is an attempt at such a re-interpretation. Unfortunately this essential aspect of their work has not been given the attention it deserves, especially by the younger generation. The task has to be undertaken if we are to emerge from the slough of despondence into which we have sunk on account of repeated failures of the Muslim *Ummah* to meet the challenges of the time. Instead it is the only way, Iqbal and Shariati did not believe in any rigid system of philosophy simply conceived as the result of abstract reasoning, Iqbal and Ali Shariati turned from the decadent old system and looked for a personality that could build a new world⁴:

From the above discussion it becomes crystal clear that the thought of Iqbal and Ali Shariati has a great relevance in the contemporary world. Because the honour of humanity is at stake. The preachers of human rights are abusing humanity. Masses of men are being trampled ruthlessly under the heavy feet of the powerful. There is dearth of love in the world these days, chaos and confusion, distress and misery have deeply eroded in the Muslim societies. They were the messengers of love. Their message of love is universal, the humanity needs them. We do need them without any doubt.

NOTES AND REFERENCE

- ¹ *Ali Shari'ati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution*," *MERIP Reports*, no. 102, *Islam and Politics* , Janaury 1982, P.24-28.
- ² Shireen T. Hunter, *Islamic Reformist Discourses in Iran: Proponents and Prospects*, in *Reformist Voices of Islam: Mediating Islam and Modernity*, Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2008, P. 56.
- ³ *Ibid*, p-89.
- ⁴ Dar, Bashir Ahmad, *Articles on Iqbal*, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 1994, Pakistan. P-123.