

## **‘Alī Shari‘atī on the Crises of Modernity**

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### **Abstract**

Modernity is one of the most prominent & eminent discourses of the post-colonial Muslim ummah; a challenge that threatened the existence & survival of Muslim societies around the globe, regardless of culture & nationality. Islamic modernity & its intellectuals emerged & debated the vital & delicate issue of modernity; this discourse included the impact of modernity on Muslim societies as it confronted Muslim civilization. Dr. Ali Shari'ati is one of the most outstanding thinkers, philosophers & interpreters of Islamic thought. He presented a social vision of Islam, identifying degenerating factors that led to the backwardness & stagnancy of Muslim societies. Shari'ati's discourse on modernity reflects what the Muslim civilization could take away from modernity, as well as what it had to contribute to it in the form of the emerging idea of "Islamic Modernity". He emphasized the need to launch a religious renaissance based on the understanding of the concept of man, god, humanity & the inter-connectivity of these elements in the light of Islamic & Qur'anic teachings to develop a dynamic interpretation of Islam that can enter into dialogue with modern intellectual trends.

**Keywords:** Ali Shariati, Modernity, Islamic Modernity, Iranian Scholarship, Modernity Discourse

### **Introduction**

From 16<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century C.E., the Muslim world witnessed a significant historical era; its subjugation to European colonialism. It underwent subsequently a long and exhausting struggle to free itself from the 'colonial masters'. This historical period influenced the Muslim world as a whole,



posing a grim challenge to the religious, cultural and social values of the Muslim world.<sup>1</sup> Muslim thinkers of great eminence emerged as a response to the onslaught of western thought onto the Muslim mind, aiming to preserve the individual Muslim identity by arguing that Islam, science & progress, revelation & reason are all mutually inclusive and can serve to restore Islam, and to reinterpret it according to the requirements of the modern era. These thinkers & Muslim scholars discussed & debated the religious, socio-cultural, political and scientific challenges posed by modern thought, with an aim to formulate new responses to these challenges.<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Ḃbduh (1849 – 1905) in the Middle East, Sir Syed Aḥmed Khan (1817 – 1898), Jamal Al-Dīn Afghani (1839 – 1897) and Muḥammad Iqbal (1877 – 1938) in South Asia – among others – were all a part of this generation of scholars. Each of these thinkers and scholars emphasized upon Islam’s dynamism & its potential for progress that had been subdued by certain internal & external factors.<sup>3</sup> One such thinker is the Iranian Dr. Ali Shari’ati (1933 - 1977), who addressed the impact of modernity on Islam, and identified the internal & external factors that paved the way for modernity into the Muslim world & the Muslim mind; Dr. Shari’ati underlined the internal weakness of the Muslim Ummah & suggested an original Islamic social paradigm to revive Islam in the modern era.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Shari’ati believes that it is not modernity alone that challenged the Muslim identity, but also the fact that Islam has become a stagnant, non-progressive religion due to the passive role of its traditional religious leadership. It is this passivity in the face of modernity that created space for modernity within Muslim thought, and Muslim culture. Instead of this passivity, a dynamic, progressive and productive Islam was needed; one equipped to face the challenges of modern times.

#### **Criticism on the Muslim scholars for Imitating Wester Ideologies**

Ali Shari’ati condemns the Muslim scholars who emphasize on imitating the western ideologies imported into the Muslim world from time to time like "canned and packed products to be opened and consumed"<sup>5</sup> wholly with no attempt at analysis or critique. According to him, Muslim intellectuals must play their roles in the reinterpretation of Islam in the modern context. He contends that the Muslim ummah –at large – has committed a momentous intellectual error: the acceptance of modernity as a civilization. In Shari’ati’s

view, modernity is consumption alone. "Therefore the European had to make non-Europeans equate modernization with civilization to impose the new consumption pattern upon them, since everyone has a need for civilization. Modernization was defined as civilization and thus people cooperate with the European plans to modernize." <sup>6</sup> Dr. Shari'ati holds the view that the western colonial powers targeted religion as part of the campaign to introduce modernity into the Muslim world because of its widespread subscription to religion. Allegations like the one that religion narcotizes nations were rampant and loud. Dr. Shari'ati does not – interestingly enough – completely deny the existence of a narcotic form of religion; he believes that the form of religion propagated by traditional scholars of Islam is indeed a narcotic one that lulls its followers to intellectual sleep. There is another form of religion that he believes is the exact opposite; the religion led by enlightened individuals who lead their people to progress and development. An inquiry into modernity's synonymy with civilization is integral; is it the same as civilization, or is it an altogether different phenomenon from civilization? Such an inquiry, unfortunately, has not been launched into the nature of modernity before its mass imposition onto the Muslim masses. Shari'ati, when highlighting the strategic manner in which Modernity has entered the Muslim world, 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 & humiliated, the one who identifies himself with it feels also crushed & humiliated. So native intellectuals began a movement against fanaticism." <sup>7</sup> After mentioning these ills of the Muslim world, he suggests a two-fold strategy:

1. Responsibilities of enlightened intellectual individuals in the context of the modern era; and,
2. Responsibility of society

### **Dead End of Modern Man**

Shari'ati strongly believes that the modern man has reached a dead end, and that it is the enlightened soul (the one who is "self-conscious of his human

condition in his time and historical settings, and who is aware of the issues and challenges posed by modernity and is aware of his social responsibility”) <sup>8</sup> that can breach this impasse for the Muslim world. The responsibility of society is to identify the reasons behind the Muslim world’s regression & stagnation, and then to attempt to find a way out. Here, an enlightened individual, utilizing all resources, would be able to share her/his understanding and vision for their society, with it. Dr. Shari‘atī attempted an innovative interpretation of Islam in the context of modernity, and proved that Islam is relevant in the modern world and has the innate ability to address humanity’s challenges. To make use of this potential in Islam, however, the Muslim world must let go of the ultimate myth of secularism (religion is a private matter) and accept that Islam has the potential to become fuel for a revolutionary movement. It has the ability to regenerate & rejuvenate any Muslim society, and stimulate a cultural renaissance in the Muslim world. The prolonged colonial rule and the post-enlightenment subjugation of the Muslim mind resulted in its lack of faith in tradition & religion, and its simultaneous acceptance of western modernity. Shari‘atī attempted to counter these notions using the Islamic principle of *Ijتهād*, and insisted that this principle could pave the way for an Islamic intellectual revolution. <sup>9</sup> For him, the stimulant to any revolution is ideology, and the ideology that has the potential to fuel an intellectual revolution in the Muslim world is rooted in Islamic sources. In particular, he saw ideological potential in the Qur’an. Shari‘atī identifies some important Qur’anic concepts that he believes can lead to the cultural and intellectual renaissance of the Muslim world if interpreted innovatively. On the basis of the conviction that any solution Islam can present to the modernity crisis is present in the Qur’an, Shari‘atī sets out to attempt a dynamic interpretation of the scripture. He suggests that the Qur’an recognizes the people – *Al-Nas* – as the basic agents of revolutionary social change. They collectively represent Allah, and the Qur’an equalizes Allah with the masses that can be mobilized by revolutionary Islamic discourse. He says that the enlightened Muslims must be aware of the fact that s/he holds in their hands a unique culture that is simultaneously spiritual, mystical & philosophical, and able to cater to and address the material needs of humankind unlike the Western modernity

imported into the Muslim world blindly, for the latter caters solely to man's material needs. Shari'ati appears to believe in the presence of a potential Islamic modernity, understanding it to be a unique combination of spirituality and materialism where each element complements the other. For the creation of such a combination, he knew that Muslim intellectuals would have to learn from the intellectual resources of modernity itself. "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 fruits of its young and enlightened generation."<sup>10</sup>

### **Responsibility of the enlightened Muslim to initiate the Islamic revolution**

It is, in Shari'ati's thought, the social responsibility of the enlightened Muslim intellectual to initiate the Islamic revolution at a massive social scale, and for this purpose, he understands that help must be readily accepted from science and logic to carry out the rational analysis of political, religious and philosophical drawbacks. Without the benefit of these fields to resolve them, these drawbacks could potentially regress the entire movement. According to him, "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."<sup>11</sup> He then provides a comprehensive plan<sup>12</sup> to achieve this objective of initiating the Islamic revolution to counter Western Modernity. The first step of his plan is to extract and refine the degenerating resources of our society to convert them into energy & movement; Secondly, the present class conflict must be transformed into a conscious awareness of social responsibility through art, literature and rhetoric. In third place, he suggests

that the gap between the masses and the enlightened intellectuals must be bridged through the development of symbiotic relationships between them, thus enabling the masses to be in harmony with religion. In his view, the manipulators of religious authority for personal gain must be identified and extracted from the revolution at this stage of the revolution. A religious renaissance must be launched helmed by a dynamic and progress-friendly face of religion. Such a renaissance could be used to refute superstitions, revive the authentic culture of Muslim societies and gain cultural independence. Through it, a nation could witness its rebirth. The spirit of limitation, submission & obedience must be replaced by a critical, revolutionary and aggressively intellectual spirit of Independent Reasoning or Ijtehād. Man, according to Shari'ati, is the agent of social change, and his place in the universe is a very specific one as decreed by the Qur'an. When man is created by God, He addresses his angels saying,

”إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً<sup>13</sup>”

"Surely I am going to place a vicegerent upon the earth."<sup>14</sup>

To which they replied, saying,

”أَتَجْعَلُ فِيهَا مَنْ يُفْسِدُ فِيهَا وَ يَسْفِكُ الدِّمَاءَ- وَ نَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَ نُقَدِّسُ لَكَ<sup>15</sup>”

"Wilt Thou place therein one who will act corruptly therein and shed blood, while we hallow Thy grace and glorify Thee?"<sup>16</sup>

Allah said in response:

”إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ<sup>17</sup>”

"Verily I know what you do not know."<sup>18</sup>

It is not an overstatement to say that man's status is divine in Islam; greater than the angels despite their clear superiority to him in strength & worship, and closeness to God, and greater than the djinn, thus the edict that they bow to man. With that bow, the excellence of Man as the ultimate creation was manifest. This creation of man, as recounted in the Qur'an, shows his value and importance, and emphasizes on the fact that man has got a very unique role in creation as Allah's vicegerent. Shari'ati now delves into the nature of man – this proclaimed agent of change in the society – claiming that it is two-fold. He says, “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 the state of equilibrium. It is

only such a religion that enables man to fulfill his great responsibility.”<sup>19</sup> He thus highlights the importance of religion in his social theory – which is the fundamental element of Islamic modernity – unlike western modernity that believes in excluding the factor of religion completely, labelling it the people’s narcotic. According to him, religion is a road or path, that encourages movement from clay towards Allah, and enables man to move from depravity, unawareness, stagnation – the qualities of clay – to adoration, movement, visualization and the life of spirit and divine character.<sup>20</sup> He highlights the responsibility of society too, in addition to the responsibility of the individual. Both owe their creator a duty, and if both would only perform their duties, the fate and destiny of both would be clear. The enlightened intellectual, aware of his values, culture and civilization, owes it to society to share these with it. The society, in its turn, must accept these notions and embody them, thus countering Western modernity and cementing itself as a progressive society.

#### **Analyses of the components of western Modernity**

Shari’ati analyses the components of western modernity to identify its weaknesses. He focuses on the three contemporary trends of western modernity; western liberalism, Marxism, and existentialism, and shows that their interpretation of the role of religion is based on the renaissance movement of humanism & its materialistic worldview, which has no space within itself for spirituality. This is a common factor between these three western schools of thought – the focus of Marxism and capitalism on the cognition of matter alone instead of man and his nature, and the ignorance in particular of his spiritual and moral need, for instance. Their effort in its entirety is to gain economic prosperity, their goal is to manage man’s material conflict, but in doing so, they make the grave error of disregarding man himself; his spiritual and moral needs are drastically neglected and he is turned into a mere cog in a large money-making and bread-baking machine. Shari’ati argues that advancement – for western modernity – means ‘to conquer space & technology’. The objective of life is to satisfy the impulses of man, his whims and his material needs. There can be no doubt that a man whose material needs are fulfilled is a powerful one, but this power is superficial; it is a bravado that camouflages a morally and spiritually weak core.

This is a person who owns the resources needed for survival, but does not understand why he must live. His survival is sustained by an almost animalistic instinct that when examined, appears meaningless. Though some western schools of thought talk about the nature of man, Shari'ati believes that they do not identify the proper status of man and thus misplace him by giving him the status of a God possessing divine qualities. They focus similarly on man's actions through free choice and independent will, guided by his own inner desires. Islam on the other hand gives a special and unique status to man and humanity. Man is not God, but God's trustee. While western liberalism is a movement that aims at improving the socio-economic status of the Western society with a purely secular agenda - which exercise resulted in the appearance of capitalism - Marxism emerged to tackle the socio-economic injustices spawned by Western capitalism. Here, Shari'ati presents his paradigm of Islamic modernity, holding the view that it is a potential counter-system to Western Liberalism, Existentialism & Marxism. For him, the Islamic notion of humanity is comprehensive and dynamic, whereas the western modern one is static and narrow. Another important point he raises here is the neo-colonialist period he understands the Muslim world to be going through that has affected its politics and its ideology; the practice of inculcating western culture and values into the eastern is a manifestation of this very point. Shari'ati is attempting in his work to bring it to light by analyzing and criticizing western modernity and its components.<sup>21</sup> As far as the Islamic concept of humanity is considered, according to Dr. Shari'ati, Islam believes in the independent existence of God, human being & nature and they are related through the concept of *Tawḥīd* (oneness). *Tawḥīd* or oneness of God occupies central status in the concept of Islamic modernity. The nature of this relationship among God, human being and nature, is cooperative and not dialectical. "While *Tawḥīd* in the sense of oneness of God is of course accepted by all monotheists, *Tawḥīd* as a worldview in the sense I intend in my theory means regardin 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 existence as a single form, a single living and a conscious organism, possessing will, intelligence, feeling and purpose."<sup>22</sup> *Tawḥīd* in this sense considers this

world as an empire, and *shirk* is a feudal system<sup>23</sup>, *Tawḥeed* calls for the fear of only one power and man is answerable to only one supreme judge. In this way, *Tawḥeed* ensures the dignity and honor of man, and teaches him to revolt against quasi-authority, that gives birth to fear and greed. It plays an important role in developing a strong relationship between man, God, and nature. The responsibility of Muslim intellectuals is to comprehend the changing circumstances and to reinterpret revelation to suggest appropriate solutions to issues, and to guide humanity. He says, “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 worldviews from which the two ideologies arise, and which underline the whole manner of interpreting phenomenon. From this point on Islam & Marxism, prove incompatible in all areas of politics, economics, ethics & social concerns. Islam interprets man and evaluates on the basis of *Tawḥeed*, and Marxism does so on the basis of production.”<sup>24</sup>

#### **Descent of Adam to earth**

Now Dr. Shari’ati interprets the descent of Adam to earth, and how it resembles the behavior and character of human beings today. It reflects the idea that a Muslim must attain self-consciousness or awareness (*khud-āgahī*); Adam - rebellious and sinful - was enticed by Satan into disobeying God. This disobedience in turn led to his expulsion from heaven to earth, and Adam first tasted the consciousness that comes with rebellion as he realized his own nakedness and entered a state of knowing himself. With this self-awareness came the striving to a better life. He learnt that through his will, love, awareness and responsibility amid suffering and contradiction, he can gain his ultimate destiny with his own efforts. The resurrection is the day – according to Ali Shari’ati – when a man will see what his two hands have sent forward for him to the ultimate reality. According to Ali Shari’ati, the ideal society of Islam is a society in which all individuals possess a common faith to achieve a common goal. The role of the ideal man is very important. He is Allah's vicegerent and has a divine aspect in his being, for the spirit of God has overcome the half of his being that relates to Iblīs - to clay. He passes through the phases of nature and comes to understand god. This ideal man does not

turn his back to nature and humankind; he creates his environment around them and through them. The ideal man should free himself from all the forms of compulsion that constantly press down upon him and impose on him stereotypes by way of science & technology, sociology and self-awareness, and faith. Where the faith has a central status, self-awareness is needed. “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 *Jehād* and *Ijtehād*, 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 ever-lasting.”<sup>25</sup>

### **Conclusions & Findings**

Dr. Shari'ati is an original thinker who derived his vision of a modern Islamic society from Qur'an & Islamic sources. Islamic modernity in his eyes is rendered distinct by its view of humanity, where western modernity fulfills only the material needs of human beings. For him, Islamic thought progresses and is dynamic and has the ability to enter into dialogue with western modernity. The Islamic worldview is rooted in *Tawḥīd*, and becomes the strength of its ideal human. The principle of *Ijtehād* can play a vital role in the interpretation of Islam in the context of the modern era to address the twofold needs of humanity; spiritual and material. The social paradigm presented by Dr. Shari'ati is based upon a comprehensive and humanistic understanding of Islam that can become the call of peace, justice and equality for the whole humanity. Ali Shari'ati's model of Islamic modernity requires the confidence of a Muslim in his resources - particularly religious - and gives him/her a constructive objective in life. He has also discussed the important issues of human existence; its creation, its status, responsibility and its objectives. He has identified many factors that made Islam a stagnant and non-productive religion and attempts to suggest ways to overcome all these issues in the context of the modern era with special emphasis on Islamic resources. He has also successfully broken down the ideas of self-awareness and faith, and has beautifully described them for the masses. Shari'ati's work

is a supreme example of innovative interpretation of religious scripture, and serves as proof that religion - specifically Islam - is not a narcotic but the exact opposite if only engaged with by an active interpreter who is aware of its multidimensional nature and embraces the many potentialities of the text in an attempt to fashion through it a systematic counter-narrative to that pushed by the western, liberal, modern world.

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