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Ali Shariati: Red Shiism and Revolution in Iran:

**“If I had to have a religion, it would be that of Shariati”
-Jean Paul Sartre**

Far too often are broad generalizations made concerning the ideological framework of the Iranian Revolution. Though the Islamic Republic that took power in 1979 has been a staunch enemy of the United States in the unipolar world that emerged following the Cold War, few learn of the historical origins of Iranian political motivations or how the history of the transition from the Pahlavis to the Ayatollahs still haunts the Republic to this day. Indeed the entire history of the region during the past 50 years, including the rise and fall of the dynamic Iranian left, the vicious Iran-Iraq War which claimed some 1.5 million lives² and the US led coup against the government of Mohammed Mosaddeq in 1953 are shrouded in a thick historical fog. This haze when it comes to Iranian history is compounded by a popular image of Iran that makes the entirety of Persian society composed of “Islamist” hardliners like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the Ayatollahs of the Guardians Council.³ Furthermore, this image of Iran, promoted by those

¹ I would like to thank Professor Cooley for her support and encouragement of my studies and research during the past two years; if not for her I probably would never have embarked upon this project .

² The Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988 was one of largest of recorded human history, scarring each nation beyond measure. Furthermore, the war was framed in terms of Sunni contra Shiite and Arab contra Persian sectarian propaganda. Though the United States played a massive role in prolonging the conflict (by selling advanced weapons to Iran while providing intelligence to Iraq), few in the west have the slightest inkling of its unremitting brutality. Through its as yet unmatched use of chemical weapons as well as its massive superiorities in armour and air-power, Iraq stymied Iran’s massive “human wave” offensives in southern Mesopotamia to emerge a Pyrrhic victor.

³ Iran’s highest ranking executive authority, composed of chosen Ayatollahs.

who see a conflict with this region of 63 million souls as an inevitable or even desirable occasion, provides the radical right both in the Western and Persian worlds with a monopoly on just what “Islam” is within the context of the Islamic Republic and the history of its formation. In this paradigm of Iranian history and politics, a discourse of the current regime, a repressive police state by any account, emerges in which both Bill O’Reilly and Ahmadinejad can claim that it channels both a pure font of Islamic thought as well as the real legacy of the broad-based people’s movement that defeated the dreaded Shah in 1979. This version of Iranian history is invalid on each count, and is designed to serve the interests of those in power in both Washington and Tehran⁴. In reality, the Islamic Revolution was a complex, multifaceted affair ideologically which contained not only elements of traditional Shiite Islam, but also a wide range of thought systems from the Western world that had been imported by Iranians educated abroad. Some of these native, Persian speaking thinkers of Iran’s intelligentsia⁵ attempted to combine the ideals of traditional Shiite theology, with its own venerable revolutionary undertones directed against institutional violence⁶, and the ideals of Marxism, Existentialism and anti-colonialism.

One such Iranian scholar was Ali Shariati who, behind the chaotic backdrop of Iran’s Pahlavi dictatorship, attempted to reform Shiism back to what he saw as its anti-status quo and anti-authoritarian roots as a form of radical monotheism. Shariati’s work as a radical Islamic theologian and political philosopher brought him into bitter conflict with Iran’s authoritarian regime and often led him into entanglements with its deadly security service, the SAVAK. As his journey as an activist and intellectual continued, he came to see the forces of industrial

⁴ Facts that some critical theorists in the West are indeed aware of, see Slavoj Zizek in *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*, 123.

⁵ A small Iranian working and middle class had begun to emerge under the Pahlavis, especially following the “White Revolution of the 1960s. Correspondingly, an educated strata of civil society, of which Shariati was a member, came to prominence .

⁶ This trend being especially personified in the figures of the Imams Ali and Hussein, who each died at the hands of the rising Sunni Caliphate in 661 and 680 CE respectively. The deaths of these blood descendents of the Prophet provided the rationale for Shiite messianism and elevated each of them to the status of blessed martyrs who are still revered in religious holidays in the present.

capitalism, the police state and Pahlavi monarchy as representatives of the forces of heretical “Polytheism” encroaching upon the Islamic world. Despite the many travails of his life as a public intellectual⁷, Shariati introduced a wide range of ideas into the Iranian academic world, translating seminal leftist texts of the 20th century such as Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* and Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* into Farsi. An academic himself, Shariati introduced Iranian students to new modes of critical thinking while teaching at the Universities of Mashhad and Ershad. Though he became known as one of Iran’s foremost professional academics, Shariati was first and foremost as Islamic theologian of the Shiite tradition who sought an enlightenment or reform movement in Islamic society which would allow it to utilize western science and philosophy without bypassing its own dialectic of historical development. Furthermore Shariati, like many Christian liberation theologians⁸ of the same era, argued that his faith was conducive to a political platform of anti-colonialism and societal liberation. Though the process was never smooth, he managed to integrate Marxism’s critique of capitalism and Sartrean Existentialism’s assault on the premises of the “common sense” of modern humanism into his own work. By the peak of his tenure as an academic during the 1960s and 1970s, Shariati influenced a wide swath of Iranian students who would go on to play pivotal roles in the revolution of 1979. Indeed, at the time he was referred to by many as a “grandfather” of the Islamic Revolution despite the fact that his anti-clericalism, amongst many things, put him into direct opposition to the hardliner clerics who appropriate his legacy to this day. Though his work and name are often forgotten, his writings introduced Persian civil society to a range of ideas pivotal to the denouement of 1979.

In this paper, I will argue that Shariati and the Islamic liberation theology of “monotheism” that he concocted are prime examples of how diverse the ideological ground upon which modern Iran truly stood and still stands today. Examples of this intellectual diversity that I will examine in particular include the works of Jean Paul Sartre, Marx, Frantz Fanon, French

⁷ A term which I borrow from Jean Paul Sartre, whose concept of the “public intellectual” was a immense influence on Shariati.

⁸ Leonardo Boff and Gustavo Gutierrez will be compared to Shariati in particular due to the clarity and completeness of their texts on liberation theology.

theologian Louis Massignon, Pakistani Islamist Muhammad Iqbal and the well known Sufi mystics Al Hallaj⁹ and Rumi, all of whom influenced Shariati's thought. While I am making no attempt to outline the material causes of the Iranian Revolution per se, I am like Edward Said in his magnum opus *Orientalism*, seeking to find the tools and methods by which the hegemony of the Islamic Revolution came to exist in Iranian civil society. Again, like Said, I want to make commonly accepted dualisms appear as actually rooted in a deep interrelatedness of the subjects at hand¹⁰, whether these are "Islam vs. the West" or "Marx" vs. God" in the context of the 1979 Revolution's Islamic ideology. The work of Shariati, in its very diversity, serves as an invaluable reflection of the multifaceted ideological base of the Iranian Revolution and the Islamic Republic that still exists today. By examining the work of Shariati, we can make problematic the very notion of a purely Islamic nature of this revolution, however and deny those such as Samuel Huntington¹¹ another opportunity to propose a climactic struggle between East and West. First, however, I shall provide the reader with some basic historical context for Shariati's life and work.

The life of a public intellectual:

Shariati was born to a relatively poor family in 1933 and, through the years of the Second World War II, attended school like any child in the slowly modernizing region¹². Shariati was a promising student as a young adult, being as he was a voracious reader¹³ of books concerning

⁹ The impact of Mansur al-Hallaj upon the thought of Shariati will be measured through the work of Louis Massignon, Shariati's mentor.

¹⁰ See Edward Said, *Orientalism*, preface, 28-29.

¹¹ I am specifically referring to his well-worn concept of a "Clash of Civilizations" which surfaced upon the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

¹² The height of the Shah's "White Revolution", a series of reforms in the Iran's rural regions aimed at modernization of agriculture, health care and education, did not take place until the 1950s and 1960s.

¹³ see Ali Rahnama, 45. Rahnama's book *An Islamic Utopian, A Political Biography of Ali Shariati*, will be cited numerous times in this paper due to his grasp of Shariati's written corpus, much of which has yet to be translated

politics, philosophy and Sufi Islamic mysticism¹⁴. Despite his modest origins, Shariati studied in Paris during the mid to late 1950s, where he came into contact with a range of existentialist, Marxist and anti-colonialist thought. During his later years as an academic in Iran, he quickly became known as a trenchant critic of the Pahlavi regime¹⁵ and by the 1970s was having frequent encounters with the deadly SAVAK internal security agency, who at times convinced Shariati to tone down his powerful rhetoric. Shariati's work as an academic focused in particular upon the subservience of the Iranian monarchy to the United States and on the repressive nature of the regime's security apparatus. Despite some setbacks, Shariati inspired many Iranian students to take up arms against their government. Many of the members of the militant MeK¹⁶, an Islamic-Marxist guerrilla army that waged war against both the Pahlavis and the Islamic Republic itself, could claim many members as former students¹⁷ of Shariati who had been introduced to Marxist thought in his classrooms. Indeed he was highly regarded amongst university students due to his unorthodox and conversational approach to lectures and debate¹⁸.

While the hundreds of books and essays he penned inspired many to oppose the regime, Shariati himself was increasingly marginalized by both the SAVAK and the revolutionary

into readily available English-language editions. The author would recommend that anyone interested in further reading on the subject of Shariati should look no further than this volume.

¹⁴ Sufi poetry was a passion of his throughout his life; its influence upon his work will be explored below.

¹⁵ The focus of Shariati's critiques was typically upon the westernization of Iranian civil society as well as the imbalanced economic relationship between Iran and western powers.

¹⁶ Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization of Iran, whose dynamic ideological admixture of Shiite theology, revolutionary Marxism and women's liberation made them a prime opponent of both the Pahlavis and the Ayatollahs. Though the group lost much of its support within Iran following its siding with secular Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War, it retains followers to this day amongst the Iranian Diaspora under the umbrella of the People's Mojahedin of Iran (PMOI).

¹⁷ see Rahnema, 355

¹⁸ See Rahnema, 179. On a separate note, one could also argue that he practiced a form of critical pedagogy in the Iranian context, providing his students a "breath of fresh air" in which they were free to speak their minds concerning the rapidly changing society in which they lived.

movement itself. By the late 70s, as the clerics such as Khomeini, whose associates despised Shariati¹⁹, came to the fore, the seeds of dissension amongst the Iranian revolutionaries had already been sown. Indeed, many of Shariati's students, as well as virtually the entirety of the Tudeh, the Iranian Communist Party, were purged not by the Pahlavis but by their fellow revolutionaries—the founders of the Islamic Republic. As is noted in Arjomand's *The Turban for Crown*, many who supported Khomeini's revolution did so not knowing the damage that it would inflict upon their own organizations²⁰. It was to this backdrop of chaos and dissension in Iran that Shariati died under mysterious circumstances in 1977 while on vacation in England. His untimely death preceded the revolution by more than a year. Despite this, and the allegations voiced by some that the SAVAK may have played a role in his demise, Shariati's shadow has continued to stretch across the Islamic Republic's history.

Though he did not live to see the events of 1978-1979, his popularity amongst those in Iran of a leftist or anti-imperialist persuasion is still quite alive to this day. Though the few that remember his intellectual contributions to the Iranian dissident movement often see only his undeniable influence on the current generation of Iranian hardliners, his life and work ultimately reinvigorated Shiite Islam with new, rather than venerable, ideas. As I will describe in a case by case manner below, Shariati introduced several new thought systems into the mainstream of Islamic political philosophy and fostered the ideological spectrum of revolutionary Islam. Furthermore, the ideology he constructed, an Islamic liberation theology of the highest order, is still useful in combating the repressive power structures that dominate not only Iran but also the entire Persian Gulf region. One particular aspect of his thought which I will trace throughout this paper is his intense commitment to an extroverted mysticism focused upon monotheistic "oneness" in the universe, which I will define here as a system of thought and practice that renders the "divine" real and the "real" divine. One can find the roots of this dissenting Islamic worldview in his early years as a student in Paris during the mid to late 1950s.

¹⁹ See Rahnema 268-269.

²⁰ See the *Turban for the Crown*, 105.

Shariati and French Existentialism:

The philosophical structure of French import that had the greatest impact upon Shariati's theology was Sartrean Existentialism²¹. Shariati's formative years coincided with the golden age of Existentialist thought's ascendancy over the European mind—an ascendancy which was largely owed to the literary prowess of Jean Paul Sartre himself. Furthermore, Shariati's years in Paris during the 50s, the years in which his political leanings outgrew his interests in traditional Sufi mysticism, exposed him directly to Existentialism as it evolved from its origins as a philosophy of interpersonal alienation into a credo of political dynamism. Shariati's romance with existentialism followed the same trajectory as that of Sartre, Camus, de Beauvoir and Fanon: what type of ethics and implicitly political commitments does the thought of *Being and Nothingness* demand in order for individuals to avoid bad faith and live a life of authenticity?

While Sartre committed himself to radical Marxism (a shift in his thought apparent in the play *The Devil and Good Lord*²²) and though Camus adopted a more libertarian approach to politics, Shariati, Fanon and de Beauvoir all focused on the specifics of existentialism's relation to ethics in the world. De Beauvoir famously applied existentialist ontology to feminism (*The Second Sex*) while making a courageous attempt to answer the ethical question of *Being and Nothingness (the Ethics of Ambiguity)*²³ while Fanon explicitly used Sartre's thought to attack the very foundations of European colonialism (*The Wretched of the Earth*). Shariati borrowed

²¹ Which is defined as the existentialism brought forth from Sartre's magnum opus *Being and Nothingness*. Heidegger, whose work was instrumental to Sartre's, influenced Shariati indirectly yet will not be discussed in detail here. It should be noted, however, that there were many similarities in the work of Heidegger and the Iranian, especially in terms of their phenomenological study of the concept of the divine.

²² I've found that this play, rather than his other overtly "political" work, is the most powerful of his statements concerning class relations and the issue of revolution.

²³ This text is by far the best attempt at an existentialist ethics ever penned, de Beauvoir picks up where Sartre left off and applies his thought to concrete choices in the world. I cannot recommend it enough, it has helped the author through many ethical quandaries.

from each of these approaches; like de Beauvoir he attempted to develop an existentialist ethics, in the context of Shiite Islam, while simultaneously elaborating upon the anti-colonialist thought of Fanon. Shariati's ethical thought is found scattered throughout his work and is, not surprisingly, strikingly similar to that of a mature Sartre insofar as authenticity in commitment and human responsibility are concerned²⁴. For Shariati, Sartre's belief that existence precedes essence, and that the human subject is condemned to make its own destiny (read, essence) were perfectly valid, yet needed to be qualified by a grounding in Islamic theology and anti-colonialist political commitments of those such as Fanon.

The result of this was an explosive cocktail of Sartre's thought and radicalized mysticism: Shariati claimed that existentialist ideas could easily be compatible with faith, despite Sartre's staunch atheism²⁵. Shariati achieved this synthesis by answering Sartre's ethical question, left wide open by Sartre's rejection of the divine, by adding a superstructure of Sufic mysticism atop the base ontology of existentialism. This form of extroverted mysticism, as defined above, expressed itself as a divinization of the universe that held the only reality to literally "be" God²⁶. This type of identification of the universe as God and God as the universe was common to Sufi philosophy and was found to be highly compatible with Sartre's vision of being, as we shall see below with Shariati's concept of "*tauhid*". Shariati argued that he was merely recovering a theology more compatible with the thought of the *Qur'an*, but he was actually reorienting the dominant philosophical current of the day into the context of an Islamic mysticism. Dr. Shariati believed that the Allah as "truth" (Haqq) discussed by Rumi and Mansur al-Hallaj (who will be discussed below) was not only compatible with the mantra "existence precedes essence" but made that mantra possible; the old Sufi dictum of the absolute, total unity in the universe

²⁴ Rahnema, 127.

²⁵ Rahnema, 128.

²⁶ This Sufi concept will be referred to as either A: "Tauhid", Shariati's contemporary version or B: "unity of being", Monism. Shariati's concept of Tauhid is very similar to older Sufi ideals of radical monism in the universe.

(monism) demanded that one find the deity literally *in all forms* of being. In the Gnostic²⁷ universe inhabited by Shariati, an existentialist ontology of human authenticity through commitment was totally compatible with venerable Sufi philosophical traditions. Indeed, Shariati considered French Existentialism to be the “worthiest of all doctrines”²⁸ due, amongst other things, to its focus upon “being in the world” rather than metaphysics. The major difference between the two currents is found in the concept of God’s relation to humanity espoused by Shariati, who found Allah’s attributes assigned to humanity²⁹ in the unfolding of history, and thus in the “being there” (dasein) of Martin Heidegger. This is an Allah of history that maintains a special relationship with the *praxis* of humanity. Shariati also held that, according to the Quran, “man” was created not only in the image of God, but with the same intrinsic condemnation to freedom faced by Allah³⁰. Humankind is not all powerful or all knowing, but is the machine of meaning/s, both the child and component of the ultimate meaning machine. Shariati holds that “man’s” unique condition places him in a relationship with the deity that displaces even the angels of ancient lore³¹.

Again, Shariati felt that Sartre and others of his ilk had been grossly mistaken in denying the existence of the divine³², yet was excited by existentialism’s focus upon human responsibility. Shariati even partially exonerated Sartre and Camus for their atheism in *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies* due to Sartres’ apparent regret for his formulation of a universe in which a

²⁷ This term is used due to Shariati’s focus upon the possibility of an inner, esoteric knowledge of the divine. The section on Shariati and Sufism below will expand upon this topic. Shariati was fascinated by Gnosticism as a concept and did not adhere to the beliefs of the Gnostics of Late Antiquity.

²⁸ Rahnema, 127.

²⁹ See Shariati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies*, 46.

³⁰ See Shariati, *Man and Islam*, 2-3.

³¹ Shariati, *ibid*.

³² This is also not to say that Sartre was a knee-jerk anti-theist as many Christian commentators depict him as, he merely considered the western concept of an absolute God the “in-itself for-itself”, an impossibility in a world of being (in-itself) and nothingness (for-itself, the human).

deity was an impossibility)³³. Shariati couches his critiques of existentialism in attacks against the premise of “man is a useless passion” as well as Existentialist Marxism³⁴ while continuing to praise Sartre’s focus on human responsibility. In the end, however, both Sartre and Shariati found that their conceptions of the human condition were not only burdening, but potentially liberating in the historical sense. This focus upon history and the elimination of the very historical and recently constructed institutions of industrial capitalism and European colonialism, especially in the context of the developing world, put Shariati’s mystical existentialism in the same league politically as that of Sartre and the emerging Christian liberation theologies of the day. The only real difference between the two concerned the issue of the divine, which Shariati saw as intrinsic in-itself to the march of history. For both Shariati and Sartre, the paramount nature of this existence did not entail a mere materialism, but a respect for the human need and capacity to make meaning in an often absurd and inexplicably cruel world. This did not mean, however, that he had accepted the “logical” atheism of Sartre’s work. To the contrary, Shariati’s great gift to the corpus of existentialist thought was his groundbreaking work on a fusion of Sufi theology and the work of Sartre, an extroverted mysticism that retains the best aspects of each system. This fusion brought forth an existential theology that made the extroversion and hence worldliness of his mysticism possible.

A mystical interlude; Massignon and al-Hallaj:

Another important influence on Shariati’s pursuit of a mysticism engaged in this world was the work of French thinker Louis Massignon. Massignon, a historian of religion, was a prominent scholar of religion in his day³⁵, focusing particularly upon Sufism and radical Sufi’s such as Mansur al-Hallaj, who had been executed by the Caliph of Baghdad because of Hallaj’s

³³ See Shariati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies*, 100. For Shariati, the “spirit” of their work, and especially Sartre’s firm belief that nothingness was a tangible “non tangible” in the universe was acceptable in the context of theology. Remember that Christian Existentialism, such as that of Gabriel Marcel, was another powerful philosophical current at the time.

³⁴ Shariati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies*, 47.

³⁵ One of the most enjoyable aspects of this project for me personally has been my discovery of many seminal thinkers in the field of Religion as a body of critical theory.

proclamations that he had achieved a mystical union with Allah. Though Massignon was a Roman Catholic, the young Shariati became greatly attached to this seminal figure of Religious Studies, garnering much of his own knowledge on the subject under his tutelage in Paris. The figure of al Hallaj, whom Massignon devoted an entire volume too, also figured prominently in Shariati's discourse on radical Sufism. Hallaj fascinated Massignon and Shariati for the same reasons; here was a figure who proclaimed himself to have become subsumed within the deity in his quest for mystical union. He then went on to preach amongst the peoples of the vast Abbasid Caliphate, making multiple pilgrimages to Mecca and even traveling to the lands of the steppe Turks and India. Many of Hallaj's ideas were found by Massignon and Shariati³⁶ to be quite radical politically, especially when one considers the consequences of a Sufi having attained such a union on this plane of reality, Massignon writes: "At the height of his sanctity, in the consummation of divine union, the saint is more than a prophet entrusted with an exterior mission to fulfill, delegated with a law whose observance he is sent to put into effect; the saint who has perfectly united his will with the will of God is in everything and everywhere interpreting directly the essential will of God, and participating in the divine nature, "transformed" in God."³⁷

Accused of heresy not only for claiming to be one with the deity, but also for turning his mystical ardor outwards upon Abbasid society in the form of "miracles" of a supernatural nature (Massignon, 81-82), Hallaj was imprisoned for eleven years before being executed. Hallaj made his mystical pursuit a public crusade and was a practitioner of the same type of *manifested* mysticism as against the state that, through the works of Massignon and others, would greatly affect Shariati's quest for his "Red Shiism" and by default the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Furthermore, Massignon's own focus upon the many commonalities between the mystical currents of Christianity and Islam—his belief in the "Abrahamic" project—were warmly received by his student, who also came to lean heavily on the figure of Abraham in his own

³⁶ I must note here that, in the context of this paper, the author is heavily reliant on the work of Massignon and Rahnama concerning al-Hallaj and his influence upon Shariati due to the lack of first hand sources on the subject in English.

³⁷ Massignon, 134.

theology³⁸. Shariati even considered Massignon as a master or guru of sorts: “In Shariati’s eyes, Massignon was a great spirit and perfect human being. He was proud of his love and fascination for the man and had no desire to hide it. In more than one way he told his readers that Massignon, the Christian Orientalist was his spiritual master and guide in his Gnostic quest.”³⁹ Though Massignon was labeled by some as an “orientalist”, his radical anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist politics made him unique amongst early scholars of religion and in the context of the Cold War. Though Shariati and Massignon certainly romanticized Sufis such as al-Hallaj to serve the needs of their own thought, their conclusions on the subject were to have far reaching impact. Shariati, amazed to found a mystic who desired both a unity of the Abrahamic faiths *and* a rapprochement with the politics of the “New Left”, used Massignon’s ideas to propose a new dialectic of faith--based revolution in the Islamic world, as is noted by Rahnema:

Inspired by Massignon’s deeply felt compassion for the poor and the oppressed and his belief in justice as a fundamental religious principle, Shariati ascribed a socio-political mission to all monotheists and true believers of any of the Abrahamic religions” and “Having established the unity of all Abrahamic religions, Shariati explained Abraham’s act of smashing the idols as an act of eradicating all socio-economic injustices and discriminations. The social expression of monotheism, Shariati argued, was the establishment of unity among mankind through the uprooting of class differences. (Rahnema, 122).

Just as Catholic liberation theology in Latin America depended both upon venerable social gospel and the critical tools of Marxism, so did Shariati’s conception of revolutionary Islam demand a renewal of the old through the thought of his own society. Shariati, most importantly, formulated a conception of class struggle based upon the precepts of previous Sufi

³⁸ See Rahnema, 122.

³⁹ Rahnema, 123.

thinkers⁴⁰. This did not mean, however, that he was uncritical of the orthodoxies of non-Persian thinkers, as we shall see in the case of Shariati's engagement with Marxism.

Shariati and Marxism, a difficult relationship:

Marxism and its impact upon the historical project of the Islamicate world was another major focus of Shariati's studies. Though an avid user of Marxist terminology, critical terms and analysis, Shariati never embraced Marxism as an all-encompassing system per se, preferring to use aspects of its critique of capitalism in a manner that did not allow it to divert attention from his theology. Many of Shariati's detractors, both amongst political Islamists in the Persian and Arabic speaking worlds and the "neo-conservative" movement in the West, have accused him of simply dressing up Bolshevism in Shiite clothing. To label this man a mere believer in historical materialism, however, would be a grave disservice to the complexity of his thought. Just as Leonardo Boff and Gustavo Gutierrez had given Latin America a new window on Marxism⁴¹ through their liberation theologies, so did Shariati serve as an importer and interpreter of Marxist ideas. Despite spending much time and energy critiquing orthodox Marxism and pronouncing its incompatibility with his Red Shiism, Shariati ultimately trained and radicalized a new generation of Iranian Marxists (particularly the MEK guerrillas) who, his opposition to their to their methods aside⁴², came to be known as some of the most dangerous enemies of both the Pahlavi and Khomeinist regimes.

Iran had long been exposed to Marxist thought before Shariati's intellectual ascendance, as is evidenced by the sheer size and political power of the Iranian Communist Party (the Tudeh) during the Pahlavi era. This prevalence of Marxist political organizations in Iran had long

⁴⁰ This was one of his greatest achievements as a political economist and theologian. This conception of class struggle, in which a classless society is essential due to the equally essential oneness of the universe, is a highly original amalgamation of Rumi and Marx on his part. Rahnema does an particularly outstanding job of making such a dense exegesis understandable to beginners in the field of Islamic Studies.

⁴¹ See Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 126 on Marxism's contribution to his "theology of hope".

⁴² Though he would come to exonerate them with time, Shariati eventually praised revolutionary action as essential whilst under the Shah's rule (Rahnema, 263).

frightened the Pahlavis and their American backers, while simultaneously providing a focal point for radical dissent against the status quo. These native Communist groups, however, adhered to the orthodoxies of the USSR and Warsaw Pact⁴³, a fact which did not endear them to Shiite revivalists, Islamic modernists and many others who were nonetheless still fascinated by Marx's work. Shariati, who shared the Iranian Marxist's disdain for the institutions of the clergy in Iran took a complex stance on the subject. First and foremost, he decried the determinism of historical materialism, stating that:

In failing to perceive in his cosmology any factor other than matter and its unseeing, unconscious conflict, he (Marx) necessarily plunges the humanity he has exalted in his ideology into the pit of insensate matter and, in the final analysis, ranks it among natural objects (Shariati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies*, 66).

Despite his assault, Shariati continued to make use of Marx in his own critiques of industrial capitalism. His primary fear concerning Marxism was that it would: posit man as an "insensate object" merely to be manipulated in order to achieve a state-capitalist utopia and that its ascendance in Iran and throughout the developing world would lead to a mere knee-jerk reaction against all forms of faith and religious practice, a trait found in both the Warsaw Pact and the western "New Left" of the 60s that he loathed. Just as he had partially exonerated Sartre's atheism by noting that his existentialist lodestar had come to "regret" a universe devoid of the immaterial, so did he also note that Marx was observing religion in 19th century Europe as the "sigh"⁴⁴ of the working class:

⁴³ See Hamid Dabashi, *Rebels with a Cause*, 160-163.

⁴⁴ Marx writes: "Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusion about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions" Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1843).

The most important factor prompting Marx to say “I loathe God” is the principle of worship and obedience inhering in the relation between God and man. In contrast to Marx, however, who infers this principle from its corrupted and vulgarized forms, prevalent among the backward and superstitious, and sees in it a manifestation of man’s misery, affliction, and alienation from himself, Islam, in God’s words, interprets it as a factor for the growth and perfection of the divine nature in mankind (*Marxism and Other Western Fallacies*, 69).

Shariati recognized that, in the eyes of Marx, religion could be interpreted as indeed being a mere anesthetic—he never denies that systematized religion as a top-down institution, as a power structure, can be anything more than that. Indeed, the young Marx categorized religion, as human phenomena, as an a-priori introversion⁴⁵, a term that is remarkably in keeping with Shariati’s rejection of introverted, traditional Shiism. Where Shariati diverged from the majority of “Marxists” is on the issue of popular faith, the day to day practices that can be interpreted as being in dissent against power and in the power of mystical experience and experiential faith as separated from the realm of institutional “religion”.

For him, *Shiite Islam’s*⁴⁶ traditional practices, centered on the life and death of the Imams and in particular the heroic figures of Ali and Hussein, who died due to their dissent against the monarchist tendencies of the first Caliphate, were perfect examples of faith as being a revolutionary engine situated in opposition to the status quos. Shiite Islam could then, in his eyes, become just as “Red” as Marxism, albeit without the latter’s historical determinism. While Shariati found the faith of his homeland to contain an explicitly anti-authoritarian basis, he found much to dislike in the official hierarchy that dominated its affairs, a problem that he shared with Catholic liberation theologians like Leonardo Boff⁴⁷. Indeed in some respects,

⁴⁵ See Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 53

⁴⁶ Such respect was not meted out by Shariati towards Sunnite practices.

⁴⁷ Whose repeated silencing at the hands of the Vatican and especially Cardinal Ratzinger make his struggle to be heard similar to that of Shariati.

Shariati went even further than Marx in his critique of a specifically clerical class⁴⁸, focusing his vitriol on the Ayatollahs of Iran's Qom seminaries throughout his written corpus. In his eyes, the Ayatollahs were representative of the "Black Shiism" "of mourning" instituted by the Safavid dynasty of Persia⁴⁹ in the 17th century and thus were responsible for the faith's ongoing alliance with the monarchy. Like the Marxists, he argued that the type of Islam practiced by the traditional clerics could only serve as an inoculation against revolution.

Thus, it can be argued that when Shariati exclaimed to his students that he was indeed "a Marxist"⁵⁰ he was speaking a partial truth. He gladly utilized an openly class-based analysis of present, past and future⁵¹ and devoted his work to the creation of a classless society. This society, however, was to be attained by the reunion of the children of Abraham; its classlessness was to be a union of humankind in communal brotherhood and sisterhood, a communion that was to be the flipside of the Sufi master's union with the truth of Allah and the shattering of all temporal hierarchies, political, economic and clerical. History, as in Marxism, was seen by Shariati as a dialectical process⁵² that reveals not only the struggles between social classes but which unveils the human longing for an attainment of the divine in history itself. In my opinion, his Marxism is that of an extroverted mystic and Islamic existentialist. For Shariati, Marxism could be used only insofar as it served our historical projects and no further. The moment Marxist theory or its attendant political manifestations preached a dogma of historical determinism, in which capitalism was to be overthrown not because of its alienation of the human from its labors, but due to its mere technical obsolescence, it was to be rejected.

⁴⁸ One must remember that Shariati came from a society imbued with an extremely well-defined clerical class, however.

⁵⁰ see Rahnema, 262

⁵¹ He was accused by many Marxists in Iran, however, of ignoring class based analysis in the pursuit of his reforming project within Islamic theology. While it is certainly true that he did not adhere to the rigid determinism of Marxist-Leninist class analysis (this type of Marxism was dominant in Iran at the time), he was no way ignorant or not receptive of Marx's analysis of class relations. He did, like other existentialists, believe that the condition could in no way be explained exclusively through this avenue, however.

⁵² Rahnema, 292-293.

Finally, Shariati certainly could not stomach the knee-jerk atheism of orthodox Marxists whose work ridiculed the popular faith of many Iranians as well as the mystical devotions of the Sufi tradition. Just as Leonardo Boff, in a Christian and Latin American context during the same era, considered Marxism to be only a critical tool of his theology⁵³, so did Shariati proclaim that the “new Islamic man” must swim in an ideological sea not only of Marxism, but also of Sartrean existentialism and Sufism⁵⁴.

Shariati and Fanon; the anti-colonialist struggle:

The thought of Algerian anti-colonialist Frantz Fanon’s is another key piece of Shariati, and Iran’s, ideological puzzle. Fanon’s work, which spoke uniquely to the situation of colonialism in the Muslim world, provided many important precedents for the Muslim left and for those who sought to modernize Islamic societies from within, such as the Iranian revolutionaries. His radical prescriptions against the colonized mindset of the “third world” made him especially attractive to a new-wave of thinkers like Shariati, who shared Fanon’s belief in the necessity for effacing all aspects of western imperialism from the very psyches of its victims. Furthermore, Shariati translated Fanon’s opus *The Wretched of the Earth* into Persian, rendering its maxims available to the Iranian population during the tumultuous period of modernization and revolution during the 1960s and 70s.

Shariati had encountered Fanon’s thought as a student in Paris where, in 1962, he had even attended mass-meetings and study groups focusing upon the anti-colonialist message of *The Wretched of the Earth*⁵⁵. Fanon’s thesis, that the modernization of the developing world must happen from within rather than without⁵⁶, that its destiny must no longer be entwined exclusively with that of the dying European empires and that the histories of these regions would pass through periods of violence against the colonizers rang true to the minds of many

⁵³ Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 28

⁵⁴ See Shariati, *Marxism and other Western Fallacies*, 122.

⁵⁵ see Rahnema, 119

⁵⁶ See Fanon, 313

Iranians at the time. Fanon's focus upon the sheer military force and physical violence with which colonialism had imposed itself upon the globe especially appealed to Shariati, whose own personal experiences of the brutality of the Pahlavi's SAVAK organization are well known⁵⁷. This language of institutional violence thus found its way into the early writing of the late doctor, a fact noted by some of Shariati's collegiate teachers, who detected a decidedly "fanonian" aspect to his writing samples⁵⁸.

In terms of their political thought, these two thinkers shared a great deal. Both Fanon and Shariati are often misinterpreted, and thus critiqued, for what is seen in the political mainstream as their legitimization of political violence in the name of eliminating the shackles of colonialism⁵⁹. While neither of these men were pacifists, they certainly did not condone wanton thuggery⁶⁰. Violence in the eyes of Fanon was a given in colonial society which had been established and maintained through violence in the first place. Though Sartre's preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* appears to argue that Fanon is outlining a revolution to be made solely by force of arms, later chapters in Fanon's text, such as the one entitled "Colonial War and Mental Disorders"⁶¹ display a deep concern for the effects of political violence on the minds of human subjects⁶². Shariati saw the subject in a similar light, and argued throughout his career that violence was an inescapable fact of the dialect at work between colonized and

⁵⁷ During the mid 70s he was detained for a time (see Rahnema, 330-337). Throughout his career, Shariati played what Rahnema describes as a "cat and mouse" game with the secretive and deadly intelligence organization. During and immediately following his imprisonment, his critiques of the Pahlavi regime in print and lecture were sharply curtailed.

⁵⁸ See Rahnema, 143

⁵⁹ Much of this can actually be traced back to Jean Paul Sartre, whose preface to the French edition of *The Wretched of the Earth* contains a series of rationales behind political violence directed against colonial power structures. See Sartre's preface at the fore of the version of Fanon cited in my bibliography for more.

⁶⁰ Indeed, Shariati had many questions as to the effectiveness of the guerrilla tactics pursued by the Iranian left, yet still championed their cause. See Rahnema, 277-279).

⁶¹ Fanon, 249-310

⁶² Here, Fanon goes over specific case studies of individuals in colonial Algeria who have suffered from mental health issues related to the violence of the civil war in that region from 1954-1962.

colonizer while simultaneously condemning those who sought to overthrow the Pahlavi regime through force alone⁶³. Still, it must be noted that Shariati, like Fanon, possessed a certain flair for the romantic in the struggles of the revolutionary guerrilla columns that dominated the psyche of the left during the 60s and 70s.

Fanon's work instilled an intellectual and critical rigor into Shariati's thought that stood in sharp contrast to his continued interests in Sufi mysticism and Shiite messianism. Alongside Sartre and Massignon, Fanon was the third important figure whose ideas Shariati discovered in the cultural ferment of post-war Paris. The anti-colonialism and post-colonial consensus as achieved by dialectical movement in history posited by Fanon fascinated Shariati to no end—one can find Fanon's marriage of psychoanalysis and Marxism throughout Shariati's writings directed against the Pahlavis and their Western masters. Fanon, however, was in no respect an Islamic reformer or theologian as Shariati claimed to be, and thus his work could only be utilized to a certain extent in the constructing of Shariati's later Red Shiism. Other Islamic modernists, such as Iqbal in the Indian subcontinent, spoke to Shariati's aspirations in Islamic politics in a manner that atheists like Sartre and Fanon could not.

Shariati and Iqbal; the return of Islamic modernism:

Amongst modern Islamic thinkers it is fair to say that Mohammed Iqbal was the greatest influence upon Shariati's thought concerning society as a whole⁶⁴. Iqbal had been a major intellectual figure in early twentieth century India (later Pakistan) famous for his groundbreaking work concerning the experiences of South Asian Muslims under the British rule. Having started out as a mystical poet in the same vein as his (and later Shariati's) heroes Hafiz and Rumi, Iqbal became more radical as the Indian independence movements as well as the Muslim League came to champion an independent Pakistan. Iqbal, who attained prominence

⁶³ Shariati was absolutely correct about this in the context of Iran, those (The MeK especially) who sought a Bolshevik style revolution during the 1980s were eventually reviled by many Iranians for the extreme usage of violence. Their failure has left a black mark on the Iranian left to this very day.

⁶⁴ That is to say, he was a theologian and a social scientist simultaneously.

during the 1920s and 1930s, was a proponent of a separate Muslim identity and polity in the South Asian sub-continent who relentlessly critiqued the political institutions of the British regime as well as those within his homeland who sought to abandon what he considered to be a vital Islamic heritage. An Islamic revivalist through and through, Iqbal was, like Shariati, a man torn between two cultures; devoted to poets like Rumi and Dante as well as seemingly oppositional philosophers such as Ibn Arabi and Nietzsche⁶⁵.

Iqbal attempted to unite the ideas he had absorbed into a singular system of Islamic thought which would be relevant to a world in which the majority population was subjected to the power of the British and French Empires. Iqbal, just as Shariati and many of his students, joined the ideals of Sufi thinkers to the world of materialist and existentialist thought introduced to him by the west. Eventually, Iqbal rejected both Sufi mysticism as defeatist escapism⁶⁶ and the then new theories of Marx as crude materialism⁶⁷. Instead, he posited a program of integral Islamic revival that championed the creation of an independent Pakistan⁶⁸ in South Asia and a return to a more “dynamic” practice of faith itself in the Muslim world. Iqbal provided Shariati with a powerful example of a Muslim reformer devoted to an Islam of praxis. Iqbal eliminated the dissonance between his Sufi inclinations and his attention a politics of radical “desire” (ibid, 56) in this world by bringing the mystical aspects of traditional Islam to the fore of everyday personal choices and broad based social movements such as Jinnah’s Muslim League. In short, he eliminated the esoteric and ascetic urges of thinkers such as Rumi and Ibn Arabi and applied their ideas to an ethics of Islamic political life.

The aspect of Iqbal’s work that was especially attractive to Shariati was his constant insistence that an Islamic worldview, both metaphysically and politically, must be determined

⁶⁵ Here it must be noted that Shariati also found Nietzsche to be a profoundly important philosopher (see “Man and Islam” 3). Shariati’s exposure to the entirety of the modern existentialist canon (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre and Camus) puts him in a league of his own amongst Persian academics of his era.

⁶⁶ see *The Ardent Pilgrim*, 50

⁶⁷ *ibid*, 59.

⁶⁸ Like Shariati, Iqbal was a “nationalist” in a certain sense (that of South Asian Muslim identity) but was also a universalist in terms of his greater political project (he argued for a greater Muslim world community).

by an unwavering application of the old concept of *Tawhid*⁶⁹ or “oneness” in the universe. Like Shariati, Iqbal argued that humanity, as if on a ceaseless pilgrimage, is essentially seeking the union with the deity, the only “reality” of being. This pursuit of union and the elimination of bloodshed and inequality amongst human beings would occur through Islam’s overturning of the “static” worldviews of the past:

As a cultural movement Islam rejects the old static view of the universe and reaches a dynamic view. As an emotional system of unification it recognizes the worth of the individual and as such, rejects blood relationship as a basis of human unity. The search for a purely psychological foundation of human unity becomes possible only with the perception that all human life is spiritual in its origin (Iqbal, quoted in *The Ardent Pilgrim*, 107).

Furthermore, as is stated by Iqbal Singh⁷⁰, a scholar of Iqbal, Islam in this worldview:

Not only freed the human mind from the static view of the universe, it also liberated it from the Magian and Messianic complex—indeed, from the burden of prophecy⁷¹ “No more prophets after the prophet—that is the message. Henceforth man is to create his own new ideals by developing and perfecting his ego, his personality. He is to make his own destiny through his own exertions. This is precisely the meaning of *itjihad*, which means to “exert”, and which represents “the principle in the structure of Islam (ibid, 107).

⁶⁹ The concept of *Tawhid* is often associated with the singularity of the deity in political and revivalist Islam. Traditionally a term signifying a pure monotheism in Islam, it will be revisited in this paper in the guise of Shariati’s concept of *Tauhid*, which bears many similarities to the former.

⁷⁰ Sighs’ book on Iqbal, *The Ardent Pilgrim*, is a good place to start for those interested in learning more concerning this Islamic modernist.

⁷¹ Again we find this tendency in Shariati’s work as well, as Muhammad serves as “the seal” of the prophets, humanity is no longer burdened with the need of such revelations from God. Thus we can unfold our destiny upon history in the face of a “silent” God without anxiety.

This concept of Islam's message as being one of liberation from the obstacles to both union with the divine and one's own self⁷² (similar to Marx's concept of the "species being") is what makes Iqbal's work so important to Shariati. Here Shariati discovered a forerunner in the field of Islamic liberation theology who, while continuing to utilize the traditions of Sufi spirituality, managed to re-ground his thought metaphysically in a manner akin to Shariati's extroverted mysticism⁷³. Though Iqbal was a failure politically, his work proved to Shariati that one could indeed forge a new theory of Islamic political life in the face of colonialism. This boldness in Iqbal's work, especially in finding new ways to combine Sufi metaphysics and the themes of western existentialism in the Islamic context, would prove prophetic for Shariati's new program.

Sufism and Shariati, rejection or reinterpretation?

The long tradition of Sufi Islam, through both its ritual practices and its intricate theology, affected Shariati's politics and theology throughout his life in spite of his newfound enthusiasm for secular thinkers such as Fanon or even Iqbal⁷⁴. Indeed, many who comment on his work tend to neglect Sufi thought's effects on Shariati throughout his career. Sadly, this is not surprising considering the popular ignorance of the social scope and breadth of Sufism as a whole beyond the realm of its literary impact. Sufism, though often labeled as an independent or distinct sect within Islam, is in reality a mystical, Gnostic tendency that expresses itself through a *wide range* of Islamic mediums. The popular mysticism found throughout the Islamic world and in all Sunni and Shiite sects is often labeled Sufi without further clarification as to whether one is discussing the theology, artistic expression or popular practice of such a

⁷² This becomes even more fascinating when one considers the full implications of the meaning of the very word "Islam": submission.

⁷³ They were each talented at "shooting down" the aspirations of those who would dream of the unattainable. Their war against esotericism and the pursuit of a universe beyond God's is echoed in Camus, a philosophical cousin of each: "If there is a sin against life, it consists perhaps not so much in despairing of life as in hoping for another life and in eluding the implacable grandeur of this life".

⁷⁴ Iqbal was no atheist but, like Shariati, certainly occupied a realm less mystical than Hafiz, Rumi or al-Hallaj.

movement⁷⁵). Regardless of this problem of definition, I will trace the immense influence that Sufism had on Shariati in terms of both A: its theology (theory) and B: its popular practice (method) in various Islamic contexts.

Shariati often made use of the term “Gnostic” rather than “Sufi” in his discussion of this subject⁷⁶, a distinction that reflected the theological nature of his interest in the field. Indeed, Shariati described Gnosticism as “his essence of faith”⁷⁷ and argued that the quest for union with Allah, for knowledge of the divine within oneself rather than merely without, was essential to the creation of authentic human meaning in the world. This Gnostic corpus within Islam includes both the dense philosophical exegesis of Ibn Arabi, the mystical love poetry of Rumi and Hafiz (each of which wrote in Persian, Shariati’s native tongue) and other works. This entire tradition of thought did, however, share a single important idea: that of *vahdat-e vojud*, the “unity of all being”⁷⁸. This concept of totalistic unity in the universe was updated by Shariati through his similar concept of *tauhid*, a term which he also used to describe humanities’ special relationship with the “nothingness” of the divine in the material world⁷⁹. Shariati believed

⁷⁵ See Ernst, *The Guide to Sufism*, 30. Professor Ernst’s book is a good introduction to the world of Sufi practices across the broad spectrum of philosophy, poetry and most importantly, popular ritual practice. His attention to how 19th century orientalist coined the term “Sufi” (see the introduction of his work cited in the bibliography) is especially relevant to this section.

⁷⁶ Meaning specifically Shariati’s interest in Gnostic theology and its focus upon esoteric and self-centered knowledge of the divine. Examples of what I refer to here include the *Gospel of Thomas*, the work of Rumi and the modern idealizations of Sufi thought promoted by L. Massignon.

⁷⁷ *Rahnema*, 150. *Rahnema* will be cited numerous times in this section (as in several above) due to the fact that many of the journals and lectures of Shariati pertaining to Sufi practices have yet to be translated into English. Despite this, *Rahnema* does a fantastic job in Chapter 11 of his text “Mystical Murmurs” of bringing Shariati’s well known interests in this subject to the fore.

⁷⁸ Do not confuse this with our conception of “Pantheism” often preached in the context of bourgeois “new age” circles. This type of Gnostic Sufism has, for a millennia, described this concept as “all in God” rather than “all is God”. The former also leaves more room for humanity to a relationship to God than the latter. The last thing that Shariati, Leonardo Boff and Marx wanted us to believe was that a stone contained as much capacity for joy and suffering as a human being.

⁷⁹ Shariati, *Marxism and other Western Fallacies*, 120.

that the “truth” of all religion, of all human spiritual practice, was to be found in “illumination” of this Gnostic path towards God rather than through mere “reason” and “religious practices”⁸⁰. This type of mystical experience fascinated him to such an extent that he even claimed, later in his life, to have had mystical experiences in the same vein as the medieval Sufis during his youth⁸¹. On this quest, “Shariati the Gnostic was born only after the death of Shariati the political activist”⁸², interesting considering the fact that his rapprochement with Sufism seemed to merely fuel a greater political commitment on his part. This interest in the experiential nature of Sufism, however, did not restrain Shariati from bitterly condemning the institutionalized Sufi system that had emerged in the Islamicate world, as promoted by metaphysicians like Ibn Arabi, as is noted by Rahnema:

Disgusted by institutionalized Sufism, which had developed its own establishment, rites and rituals, Shariati argued that in Sufism there are no such things as “convents, sects or poles”. Holding Ibn Arabi⁸³ responsible for the institutionalization and systematization of Sufism, Shariati charged that under his influence, “whoever got to learn the stages and grades (of the Sufi path) came to be considered a Sufi, whereas Sufism is unattainable through learning”. Shariati rejected the systematization of an experience which he believed was a gift from God (Rahnema, 151)

⁸⁰ see Rahnema, 150.

⁸¹ Rahnema, 152.

⁸² Rahnema, 147.

⁸³ Arabi’s work was certainly an influence on the Gnostic tendencies of Shariati’s theology, especially in terms of his concept of “theospony” or “the knowledge of God obtained through direct mystical insight” (Rahnema, 152). Theospony is at the core of all major Sufi thinkers and many Sufi ritual practices. This concept’s influence on Shariati is impossible to measure, especially considering his preference for “experiential” faith.

Shariati rejected introversion in mysticism, especially in a range of thought as esoteric as that of Sufism. This tendency did not halt his admiration for Sufi poets such as Rumi and Hafiz⁸⁴. Many aspects of the life of the wondering dervish-poet figure in Sufi, and especially Persian Sufi, lore were far more attractive to Shariati. Like Rumi⁸⁵, Shariati was a spiritual non-conformist whose allegiance to Islam entailed a constant questioning of the status quos of their respective eras. Rumi, though often considered an apolitical poet today, spent much of his time questioning the nature of what constituted the truly “real” in the universe. Since the “real” for Rumi could only be constituted by the divine, his poems often appear both extremely worldly, grounded in the material world, and entirely mystical, aloof in the language of what Sufis referred to as the “names of God” that Shariati held to have been given to man and man alone by Allah. Rumi’s poems often attack static power in manners which, though oblique, were striking, as is seen in this “Solomon Poem” rendered into English by Coleman Barks:

Solomon was busy judging others, when it was his personal thoughts that were disrupting the community. His crown slid crooked on his head. He put it straight, but the crown went awry again. Eight times this happened. Finally he began to talk to his headpiece. “Why do you keep tilting over my eyes?” “I have to. When your power loses compassion I have to show what such a condition looks like”. Immediately Solomon recognized the truth. He knelt and asked forgiveness. The crown centered itself on his crown. When something goes wrong, accuse yourself first. Even the wisdom of Plato or Solomon can wobble and go blind (Barks, *Collected Rumi*, 191).

This poem, as well as others found in Barks, underline a discourse of dissent against temporal political structures on the part of some Sufis—especially those of an itinerant nature like Rumi. Shariati used this aspect of Sufism throughout his career as a theologian and political

⁸⁴ Shariati took note of his hero Iqbal’s love of Rumi as well (see Muhammad Iqbal located [here](#)).

⁸⁵ And the 16th century reformer Thomas Muntzer.

philosopher, citing examples of figures such as al-Hallaj who had died due to the public nature of their incendiary Gnostic revelations⁸⁶. Furthermore, such thinkers (and especially Rumi) declared the same unity of Abrahamic faiths that Shariati proposed. This obsession with oneness in the universe, along with the divinity of the real and the reality of the divine claimed amongst experiential Sufis, won them Shariati's lifelong admiration in spite of his condemnation of *institutionalized* Sufism's otherworldly focus, which he felt became separated from Islam itself.

Thus, he discovered two contradictory visions of Sufism; one which stood quietly as worldly power was deployed against humanity in the form of a stratified society, and another which dissented vigorously against such power's assumption of the mantle of God's truth⁸⁷. For Shariati, there was both a Sufism that appeared solely to the status quo and another in which the human subject, rather than annihilating him/her self in an abstract God, is annihilated in the "creatures of God", their brothers and sisters on this Earth, and their aspirations for a more equitable society. Thus, Shariati and Ernst⁸⁸ allude to Sufis who led peasant insurrections⁸⁹ based upon the precepts of their mystical relationship with the real. His case for an extroverted mysticism becomes clear: "Thus Shariati replaces the Sufi concept of self-annihilation and subsequent assimilation or living in God with self-annihilation and subsequent annihilation or living "in the people". This is certainly a novel interpretation. According to it, Che Guevara becomes an armed and socially responsible reincarnation of Hallaj" (Rahnema, 159).

⁸⁶ Remember that al-Hallaj was executed by the state due to the nature of his Sufism. His belief that he had become "part of God" made him a dangerous rebel in his time.

⁸⁷ See Rahnema, 157-158.

⁸⁸ See Ernst, 30.

⁸⁹ The figure of Islamic revolutionary Abu Zarr (see Rahnema, 58-60) was especially important to this tack of Shariati's. Though his life was certainly embellished by the late doctor, such stories made him a paradigm of the Islamic socialist. See Shariati's long essay on this figure, *Abu Dhar* accessed from [here](#).

The culmination of Shariati's work: Red Shiism:

The wide range of thinkers and thought systems, both within and beyond the Islamic world, described above all contributed to Shariati's development of a Shiite liberation theology for his own era. This Red Shiism, as discussed in his essay "Red Shiism vs Black Shiism", built upon the base of an idealized messianic and revolutionary Shiite Islam and added a superstructure of modern anti-colonialist, Marxist and Existentialist thought that guided its praxis in the present. Shiite movements of the past, as is noted by Hamid Dabashi⁹⁰, had typically started with the messianic fervor of the Imams Ali and Hussein only to emerge tyrannies like their Sunnite predecessors. Both Shariati and Dabashi take note of the fact that the Safavids, Qajars and Pahlavis, Iran's ruling dynasties during the past 500 years, despite their Shiite underpinnings, became ruthless regimes upon taking power of the state. Shariati sought to alter this trend by grounding his theology in non-Islamic thought that offered him critical tools with which he could aggressively critique structures of power such as the traditional Shiite clergy and the Pahlavi regime.

Firstly, Shariati observed two specific trends in Shiite thought itself. Just as he noted the possibility of two Sufism's, one of passive, introverted mysticism that yields to tyrants⁹¹ and another that stands alongside the down and out of society and takes a preferential option for the poor, so did he see a "Red Shiism" of social revolution and a "Black Shiism" of mourning and subservience to illegitimate power structures. This dichotomy is unacceptable to Shariati, who considers Black Shiism to be just as poisonous as Sunni "Islam of government"⁹². Shariati claims to wholeheartedly embrace the Red, "Alavite"⁹³ Shiite school of the Imams Ali and Hussein,

⁹⁰ Dabashi, *Islamic Liberation Theology*, 68-70. Dabashi correctly argues that there exists a paradoxical dilemma within the history of revolutionary Shiism: how does one apply a charismatic religious movement to politics. Sadly, as a Shiite anarchism has yet to emerge, the answer has usually been in the form of an authoritarian state structure. The Islamic Republic today is a continuation of this paradox identified by Dabashi. Shariati also takes note of this disturbing trend with his labeling of the "Red" and "Black" variation.

⁹¹ See Shariati, *Red-Black Shiism*, 4.

⁹² Shariati, *Red-Black Shiism*, 4.

⁹³ Or "based upon the Imam Ali".

which he argues to be in solidarity with those who dissent against power. At the same time he provided it with a stable metaphysical basis upon the ground of his conception of total existential unity in the universe, *Tauhid*. Through his very Sufi conception of *Taudid* (unity of God, unity of being), Shariati manages to make the divine real and the real divine for the human “for-itself” in a powerful sense—all in the context of an “Islamic” worldview, as he noted himself:

Islam, in holding to the world view of *Tauhid*⁹⁴, is able to justify man as a divine essence, grant him transcendental attributes, extend his evolution to the infinite, and thus situate humanity in a living, meaningful, and infinite universe whose dimensions extend far beyond what even the sciences can represent” (Shariati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies*, 87).

From this starting point, Shariati justifies the Imam Huessin’s desperate stand and ultimate martyrdom against the forces of the Caliph Yazid⁹⁵ as an act of symbolic defiance against the status quo not only in days of the early caliphate, but symbolically throughout history against the “polytheism”⁹⁶ of those who serve more than one master⁹⁷. He goes on to trace the historical development of Shiism, taking note of other examples of Shiite insurrection against power structures throughout history⁹⁸. All of this, for Shariati, stems from a conception of

⁹⁴ Again, this term is similar to yet not identical to the older Islamic concept of monotheism known as *Tawhid*.

⁹⁵ The second Umayyad Caliph whose reign was consumed by civil strife in the early Muslim world, strife that would produce the first splintering of Sunnis and Shias.

⁹⁶ “Polytheism’s” rejection of the unity of tauhid being its prime cause to err in Shariati’s eyes.

⁹⁷ For Shariati, polytheism as a concept meant something far more insidious than merely being a non-Muslim. His tolerance for those of other faith’s was legendary, as was his intolerance of those who served the interests that extract the human from the self.

⁹⁸ Shariati, *Red-Black Shiism*, 6. Another key example of a successful Shi’ite revolutionary movement in Islamic history is that of the Fatimid Caliphate, an Ismaili Shi’ite regime that ruled in North Arica, Egypt and the Levant during the era 909-1171 CE. In defiance of Sunni Abbasid authorities.

Islam intrinsic to Shiism that, in his own words: “Made its appearance in the history of mankind with the cry of “No!” from Muhammed, the heir of Abraham, the manifestation of the religion of the unity of God and the oneness of mankind; a “No” which begins with the cry of “Unity”, a cry which Islam reiterated when confronted with aristocracy and compromise.” (Shariati, *Red-Black Shiism*, 1).

Thus for Shariati, Sufi and Shiite practices of Islam should be predicated upon a rejection of the temporal authority and not a retreat into ritual introversion. In terms of institutions, this type of Islamic political thought demands temporal authority only in the form of the imamate or rule by the representatives of the hidden Imam as the final Imam went into hiding and thus disappeared according to Shiite theology⁹⁹. This leap of faith on the part of Shariati is one area where many have found him to be on common ground with the Islamic Republic and its *Velayat-e Faqih* or “guardianship of the jurists”¹⁰⁰, the system of government by clergy so controversial at home and abroad. What is certain, however, is that Shariati rejects the traditional Caliphate model of Islamic governance entirely¹⁰¹ and holds that: “Shiites do not accept the path chosen by history. They deny the leaders who ruled the Muslims throughout history and deceived the majority of the people through their succession to the prophet” “Shiites turn their backs on the opulent mosques and magnificent palaces of the Caliphs of Islam and turn to the lonely, mud house of Fatima.” (Shariati, *Red-Black Shiism*)

⁹⁹ Hence the Shiite concept of the “Occultation” or “hiding” in which the faithful await the return of the lost Imam. In Twelver Shi’ite Islam, twelve Imams (starting with the Imam Ali) succeeded Muhammed as leaders of the faithful in spite of the continued civil conflict within the Islamic Empire over the succession to the Prophet. The twelfth Imam is said to have disappeared one whose return will signal an apocalyptic reign of justice upon the world. Ismail Shi’ites and other sects of the Shi’ite persuasion argue for different lines of succession within the Imamate (the Fatimid Caliphs of Egypt were Ismaili) and survive to this day as well.

¹⁰⁰ It must be noted here that, in terms of political forms, Shariati rejected representative democracy just as much as dictatorship (see Rahnema, 237). Also see Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, 491-492 for the obvious links between *Velayat e-Faqih* and European radical discourses.

¹⁰¹ Shariati, *Red-Black Shiism*, 2.

In this theology, Muslims must take a preferential option for the poor¹⁰². Though there remains some controversy as to how far Shariati would have argued for a government ruled entirely by the religious establishment, it is certain that, through his many clashes with the Iranian clergy that came to power after 1979¹⁰³, he never endeared himself to the traditional clerical class and maintained his bottom-up concept of popular religious and political practice. He was, however, intrigued by the concept of government by Imamate, and was, like the Iranian Communists, disdainful of representative democracy¹⁰⁴. Thus, I argue that Shariati, though similar in many of his arguments to Khomeini¹⁰⁵, actually intended for a wider sweeping revolution in Iranian society that would have resembled something more akin to Nicaragua under the Sandinistas. The comparison to Latin American political events of the same era is especially valid considering the many similarities, hinted at above, in the preferential option for the poor found in Shariati's work and in those found in the work of Leonardo Boff and Gustavo Gutierrez. Ultimately, Boff and Gutierrez sought to re-orient Catholicism in their homelands towards the bottom of the social pyramid of capitalism rather than the top--just as Shariati did in the context of political Islam. Furthermore, all three theologians utilized thinkers from beyond the scope of their faith, such as Marx, Sartre, Massignon, Marcuse and others in order to provide faith with the critical tools necessary in order to critique the institutional violence endemic to their societies¹⁰⁶. Finally, this theology was the ultimate development of Shariati's extroverted mysticism, that which is defined as a Gnostic thought-system that renders the real

¹⁰² Which is not entirely dissimilar to those found in Catholic liberation theology, see Leonardo Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, 44

¹⁰³ See Rahnema, 274-275 and 354.

¹⁰⁴ It also must be noted that Shariati's rejection of representative democracy was also shared by Iranian Marxists, whose adherence to a Stalinist tradition placed a great handicap on their attempts to overthrow the Pahlavi's (see Dabashi, *Rebels with a Cause*, 160-163).

¹⁰⁵ Khomeini himself resisted the urgings of those of his followers who desired an end to Shariati's critiques of the clergy. The extent to which Shariati was interested in an Islamic government based upon the precepts of Shiite clericalism, as seen in *The Turban for the Crown*, 104, is unknown.

¹⁰⁶ It must be noted that the author is aware of his use of largely Western, Christian theoretical categories at this juncture, I am using these in order to highlight what I would argue are profound theological and political similarities between liberation theologians and Shariati.

divine and the divine real insofar as it expresses the aspirations of the mystic's quest into praxis. Shariati's claim to fame, both for Iranian politics and the study of religion, was his assertion that faith was not the introversion of the for-itself, as Marx argued, but that it was the engine of authentic becoming in the world and hence a potentially revolutionary force waiting to be unleashed¹⁰⁷.

Conclusions, Shariati as Islamic Iran's interpreter:

The sheer breadth and range of resources¹⁰⁸ that went into Shariati's scathing critique of the Pahlavi regime was a harbinger of the diversity of the Iranian political spectrum today. Though his work was mostly focused upon the dialectic between theology and liberatory praxis, its echoes can still be found in a range of institutions that sprouted up in Iran following the revolution including the massive state controlled welfare state¹⁰⁹, the Islamic finance system and even the strictly nationalized Iranian oil industry. Though the ideal Islamic society that Shariati theorized never came to fruition following the Shah's fall, many have tried to appropriate his legacy within Iran, a testament to his continued influence. Thus one must ponder; just what did he do to Iran, what did it do to him? Did his ideas propel Iran into its present situation; did he not see the danger of allowing the clergy that he so often attacked to take power? Even worse, is he Iran's Martin Heidegger, a brilliant thinker whose work opened new ground yet whose political commitments are not only faulty but beyond the pale¹¹⁰? We will never know just how supportive of the contemporary clerical regime he would have been, especially considering the extenuating circumstances of the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988, a war in which the new Islamic Republic increasingly began to behave with the same wanton brutality

¹⁰⁷ This is, again, an argument largely shared by the liberation theologians mentioned above.

¹⁰⁸ See Rahnema, 370

¹⁰⁹ Dominated by "Bonyads", or religious establishments run on Islamic principles. See the below article link for more:

<http://www.payvand.com/news/09/feb/1327.html>, accessed 3-26-2010.

¹¹⁰ I refer here to Heidegger's support for the regime of Nazi Germany and the possibility of Shariati's work being used to bolster Iran's authoritarian regime of the present.

as its foe, Iraq. What we do know is that many of Shariati's students became members of the MeK and other radical factions during the Iranian Civil War, factions on the left who were brutally suppressed by the Ayatollahs during the 1980s. Thus, I would argue that Shariati's work inspired—and continues to inspire—both friends and enemies of the Islamic Republic within Iranian civil society. His thought, as well as his translations, have become, as is stressed by renowned Iranian studies scholar Hamid Dabashi¹¹¹ the basis for a wide range of leftist Islamic theology as well as a critical moment in the history of Shiism¹¹². Thus, he was the “last Shiite metaphysician and the first Shiite ideologue”¹¹³, a thinker who reinvigorated his field by both going back and going abroad in terms of his chosen credos, all of which makes it highly difficult to come to hard and fast conclusions concerning his legacy. Shariati, like the movement that overthrew the Shah, has left an ambiguous mark on history due to his versatility and the sheer range of his own influences.

Shariati's use of non-Persian thinkers in order to construe a dissenting corpus of Islamic thought is a good barometer of how diverse Iranian civil society still is today. Through the most basic of surveys of his work, one can observe how the Iranian Revolution, far from being merely the outpouring of a pure “font” of Islamic thought, was in reality the result a broad based and ideologically varied movement's unexpected victory over the *ancien regime*. As is noted by Arjomand, the concept of “Islamic Revolution” proper was a “social myth”¹¹⁴ which held sway for just long enough to topple a regime with no popular support. This confusion still holds in modern Iran, whose political spectrum and power structures are far more than the result of a return to some long lost form of Islamic polity (its image in both the popular mind of the West and amongst the Iranian clerical establishment). Though Shariati would have argued that he actually was attempting to re-formulate the original Islamic governance, just as the Christian reformers of the 16th century and liberation theologians of today claim to have resurrected

¹¹¹ Dabashi, 92-93

¹¹² One could argue that Shariati left Shiite Islam with a final choice between Red and Black variations of itself.

¹¹³ Dabashi, *ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *The Turban for the Crown*, 103.

original Christianities, he knowingly incorporated a plethora of non-Islamic thinkers into its social praxis, especially that of Marx. Shariati even admitted that a fusion and mutual interchange of ideas new and old was essential to creating an authentic or, more importantly, coherent path to live by in the political sphere¹¹⁵.

Shariati's life and work are a valuable prism through which one can glimpse an actual discourse of modern Iran. Many would be shocked to discover that the work of Jean Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon and Rumi, all contributed mightily to the Iranian Revolution's ideological critical mass¹¹⁶. Also shocking to many Americans would be the sheer diversity and intellectual richness of that very revolution, a revolution so often denigrated as an historical regression or anomaly yet one which was fueled by the work of titans of Islamic scholarship such as Shariati. As hawks in both Tehran and Washington proclaim to their captive populations that a war between the "Islamic" Iran and the "Anglo-Saxon" American Empire is necessary, Shariati's work becomes more relevant than ever, insofar as tracing the sources and inspirations behind his corpus makes it impossible to reduce these events to a "clash of civilizations"¹¹⁷. Indeed I would argue that the extroverted mysticism and Islamic liberation theology that flowed from Shariati's pen had as much to owe to thinkers from the West as it did from political Islam per se, a reality which is also true for the power structures of Iran as a whole¹¹⁸. In this respect, the Islamic Revolution was no different from those of Russia or Nicaragua, in which scholars and

¹¹⁵ Shariati, *Marxism and other Western Fallacies*, 122

¹¹⁶ Many may find the assemblage of Shariati's influences and the manner in which he used them to be a form of intellectual "cherry picking". I would argue, however, that he is one of the great ideological and theological synthesizers of ideas in the Islamic modernist movement. Though others might have focused upon fewer of his intellectual influences in this paper, I think this mode of presentation is essential to comprehending the richness of his thought.

¹¹⁷ Of course, for the views of opponents to theses such as mine, see Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the remaking of World Order*.

¹¹⁸ Indeed, Iran has integrated itself into the "world system" of today as a major producer of natural resources for the global market, benefactor of Shiite religious practice (through the great seminaries of Qom) and prime opponent of American foreign policy in the Persian Gulf region...it behaves very much as a *nation state* of the western model created following the treaty of Westphalia (1648). One must remember that the French and Russian revolutionary regimes each fell into such practices as well following their own "thermidor" moments.

intellectuals (such as Lenin himself) *imported* new ideologies¹¹⁹ and sets of critical tools into a transitioning society and adapted them to local conditions. When drawing conclusions from the events of 1979, one cannot declare that Islamic polities as a whole are doomed to authoritarianism any more than those of communism or democracy are—simply because in none of these cases are the ideologies being deployed into a vacuum, but rather into existing social structures. Thus, even if the Islamic Revolution ended in stagnation and reaction (just as those of Russia and the liberation theologians of Latin America), this does not mean that we should reject the ideas behind them as obsolete, but should rather look at them as the “paths not taken” of history. The work of Doctor Shariati, in its very diversity, serves as an invaluable reflection of the multifaceted ideological base of the Iranian Revolution and the Islamic Republic. By examining the work of Shariati, we can make problematic the very notion of a purely “Islamic” Revolution and actually come to appreciate the revolution of 1979’s legacy of discontent against the status quo, a legacy made possible by Shariati’s messianic, radically engaged Islamic liberation theology.

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