Westerners commonly perceive the Iranian Revolution as an atavistic and xenophobic movement that rejects all things modern and non-Muslim, a view reinforced by the present leaders of Iran. They claim that the revolution spearheads the resurgence of Islam, and that the revolutionary movement is an authentic phenomena uncorrupted by any alien ideas and inspired solely by the teachings of the Prophet and the Shi‘i Imams. This conventional wisdom, however, ignores the contributions of Dr. ‘Ali Shari‘ati, the main ideologue of the Iranian Revolution. Shari‘ati drew his inspiration from outside as well as from within Islam: from Western sociology—particularly Marxist sociology—as well as from Muslim theology; from theorists of the Third World—especially Franz Fanon—as well as from the teachings of the early Shi‘i martyrs. In fact, Shari‘ati devoted his life to the task of synthesizing modern socialism with traditional Shi‘ism, and adapting the revolutionary theories of Marx, Fanon, and other great non-Iranian thinkers to his contemporary Iranian environment.1

Readers coming to Shari‘ati at this point in time face a number of difficulties. The revolution not only made him into a household name in Iran, but also transformed him into a trophy in the contests of competing political groups. He is more eulogized than analyzed, more quoted—obviously in a selective manner—than published, and more seen in light of immediate conflicts than in the context of his own 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, dubious works have been published under his name.

Compounding these problems is the fact that there is not one Shari‘ati but three separate Shari‘atis. First, there is Shari‘ati the sociologist, interested in the dialectical relationship between theory and practice, between ideas and social forces, and between consciousness and human existence. This same Shari‘ati is committed to understanding the birth, growth, and bureaucratization, and thus eventual decay, of revolutionary movements, especially radical religions. Second, there is Shari‘ati the devout believer, whose article of faith claimed that revolutionary Shi‘ism, unlike all other radical ideologies, would not succumb to the iron law of bureaucratic decay. Third, there is Shari‘ati the public speaker who had to weigh his words very carefully, not only because the ever-watchful secret police were eager to accuse him as an “Islamic Marxist,” but also because the high-ranking ‘ulama’ [leading clergy] instinctively distrusted any layman trespassing on their turf, reinterpreting their age-old doctrines. As Shari‘ati often pointed out to his listeners, contemporary Iran was at a similar stage of development as pre-Reformation Europe, and consequently political reformers needed to learn from Luther and Calvin, take up tasks appropriate for their environment, and always keep in mind that the Shi‘i ‘ulama’, unlike the medieval European clergy, enjoyed a great deal of influence over the city bourgeoisie as well as over the urban and the rural masses.2

His Life

‘Ali Shari‘ati was born in 1933 in a village near Mashad. His father, Muhammad Taqi Shari‘ati, was a reform-minded cleric who had doffed his clerical garb and earned a living by running his own religious lecture hall and by teaching scripture at a local high school. Because he openly advocated reform, the conservative ‘ulama’ labelled him a Sunni, a Baha‘i, and even a Wahhabi. In later years, ‘Ali
Shari'i ati proudly stated that his father, more than anyone else, had influenced his intellectual development. As a schoolboy, the younger Shari'i ati attended discussion groups organized by his father, and in the late 1940s father and son joined a small group called Nahzat-i Khoda Parastan-i Sosiyalist [the Movement of God-Worshipping Socialists]. This group was intellectually rather than politically significant: it made the first attempt in Iran to synthesize Shi'ism with European socialism.

Following his father's profession, Shari'i ati entered the teacher's college of Mashad and continued to study Arabic and the Koran with his father. After graduating from college in 1953, he taught for four years in elementary schools in his home province. While teaching, he translated—in a somewhat liberal manner—an Arabic work entitled Abu Zarr: Khoda Parast-i Sosiyalist [Abu Zarr: The God-Worshipping Socialist]. Written originally by a radical Egyptian novelist named Abul Hamid Jowdat al-Sahar, the book traced the life of an early follower of the Prophet who, after Muhammad's death, had denounced the Caliphs as corrupt and had withdrawn to the desert to lead a simple life and speak out on behalf of the hungry and poor against the greedy rich. For al-Sahar and Shari'i ati, as for many other radicals in the Middle East, Abu Zarr was the first Muslim socialist. The elder Shari'i ati later wrote that his son considered Abu Zarr to be one of the greatest figures in world history.3

In 1958, Shari'i ati entered Mashad University to study for a masters degree in foreign languages, specializing in Arabic and French. Completing the MA in 1960, he won a state scholarship to the Sorbonne to study for a PhD in sociology and Islamic history. In Paris at the height of the Algerian and Cuban revolutions, he immersed himself in radical political philosophy as well as in revolutionary student organizations. He joined the Iranian Student Confederation and the Nahzat-i Azad-i Iran [Liberation Movement of Iran] which was formed in 1961-62 by lay religious followers of Dr. Mossadeq. He organized student demonstrations on behalf of the Algerian nationalists—after one such demonstration he spent three days in a hospital recovering from head wounds. He also edited two journals: Iran Azad [Free Iran], the organ of Mossadeq's National Front in Europe; and Nameh-i Pars [Pars Letter], the monthly journal of the Iranian Student Confederation in France.

Shari'i ati took a number of courses with such famous Orientalists as Massignon and attended lectures by Marxist professors. He avidly read the works of contemporary radicals, especially Jean-Paul Sartre, Franz Fanon, Che Guevara, Giap, and Roger Garaudy (a prominent Christian Marxist intellectual). Shari'i ati translated Guevara's Guerrilla Warfare and Sartre's What Is Poetry?, and began a translation of Fanon's Wretched of the Earth and the Fifth Year of the Algerian War (better known to English readers as A Dying Colonialism).5

While translating the last work, Shari'i ati wrote three letters to Fanon, challenging him on the question of religion and revolution. According to Fanon, the peoples of the Third World had to give up their own traditional religions in order to wage a successful struggle against Western imperialism. But, in Shari'i ati's view, the peoples of the Third World could not fight imperialism unless they first regained their cultural identity. In many countries, this was interwoven with their popular religious traditions. Thus, Shari'i ati insisted, the countries of the Third World had to rediscover their religious roots before they could challenge the West.5

Shari'i ati returned to Iran in 1965. After spending six months in prison, and on being denied a position in Tehran University, he returned to his home province Khurasan. He taught first in a village school and later in Mashad University. In 1967, however, he was able to move to Tehran and take up a lectureship at the Husseinieh-i Ershad, a religious meeting hall built and financed by a group of wealthy merchants and veteran leaders of the Liberation Movement. The next five years were to be the most productive in his life. He regularly lectured at the Husseinieh, and most of these lectures were soon transcribed into some fifty pamphlets and booklets. Tapes of his lectures were widely circulated and received instant acclaim—especially among college and high school students. Shari'i ati's message ignited enthusiastic interest among the young generation of the discontented intelligentsia.

Shari'i ati's prolific period did not last long, for in 1972 the Husseinieh ceased its activities. The hall was closed for several reasons. Shari'i ati's popularity aroused concern among the secret police, and the Mujahidin, the Islamic guerrilla organization, was suspected of having a presence there. Intellectual hacks hired by the government accused Shari'i ati of "leading youth astray with anti-clerical propaganda."6 Even reform-minded clerics such as Ayatollah Mottaheri felt that Shari'i ati was stressing sociology at the expense of theology and borrowing too freely from Western political philosophy.7

Soon after the closing of the Husseinieh, Shari'i ati was
arrested, accused of advocating “Islamic Marxism,” and put in prison. He remained in prison until 1975, when a flood of petitions from Paris intellectuals and the Algerian government secured his release. In an attempt to create the false impression that Shari’ati had collaborated with his jailors, the government doctored one of his unfinished essays, added simple-minded diatribes against Marxism, and published it under the title of Ensan-Marxism-Islam [Humanity-Marxism-Islam].* After his release, Shari’ati remained under house arrest. It was not until May 1977 that he was permitted to leave for London. There, only one month after his arrival, he suddenly died. Not surprisingly, his admirers suspected foul play. But the British coroner ruled that he had died of a massive heart attack at the young age of 43.

His Political Theory

The central theme in many of Shari’ati’s works is that Third World countries such as Iran need two interconnected and concurrent revolutions: a national revolution that would end all forms of imperial domination and would vitalize—in some countries revitalize—the country’s culture, heritage, and national identity; and a social revolution that would end all forms of exploitation, eradicate poverty and capitalism, modernize the economy, and, most important of all, establish a “just,” “dynamic,” and “classless” society.

According to Shari’ati, the task of carrying forth these two revolutions is in the hands of the intelligentsia—the rashanfekran. For it is the intelligentsia that can grasp society’s inner contradictions, especially class contradictions, raise public consciousness by pointing out these contradictions, and learn lessons from the experiences of Europe and other parts of the Third World. Finally, having charted the way to the future, the intelligentsia must guide the masses through the dual revolutions.*

The Iranian intelligentsia, Shari’ati added, was fortunate in that it lived in a society whose religious culture, Shi’ism, was intrinsically radical and therefore compatible with the aims of the dual revolution. For Shi’ism, in Shari’ati’s own words, was not an opiate like many other religions, but was a revolutionary ideology that permeated all spheres of life, including politics, and inspired true believers to fight all forms of exploitation, oppression, and social injustice. He often stressed that the Prophet Muhammad had come to establish not just a religious community but an ummat [community] in constant motion towards progress and social justice.* The Prophet’s intention was to establish not just a monotheistic religion but a nezam-i towhid [unitary society] that would be bound together by public virtue, by the common struggle for “justice,” “equality,” “human brotherhood” and “public ownership of the means of production,” and, most significant of all, by the burning desire to create in this world a “classless society.”

Furthermore, the Prophet’s rightful heirs, Hussein and the other Shi’i Imams, had raised the banner of revolt because their contemporary rulers, the “corrupt caliphs” and the “court elites,” had betrayed the goals of the ummat and the nezam-i towhid.11 For Shari’ati, the Muharram passion plays depicting Hussein’s martyrdom at Kerbala contained one loud and clear message: all Shi’is, irrespective of time and place, had the sacred duty to oppose, resist and rebel against contemporary ills.12 Shari’ati listed the ills of contemporary Iran as “world imperialism, including multinational corporations and cultural imperialism, racism, class exploitation, class oppression, class inequality, and gharebzadegi [intoxication with the West].”13

Shari’ati denounced imperialism and class inequalities as society’s main long-term enemies, but he focused many of his polemics against two targets he viewed as immediate enemies. The first was “vulgar Marxism,” especially the “Stalinist variety” that had been readily accepted by the previous generation of Iranian intellectuals. The second was conservative Islam, notably the clerical variety, that had been propagated by the ruling class for over twelve centuries in order to stupefy the exploited masses. Thus many of Shari’ati’s more interesting and controversial works deal precisely with Marxism, particularly the different brands of Marxism, and with clericalism, especially its conservative misinterpretations of Shi’ism.

Shari’ati and Marxism

At first glance, Shari’ati’s attitude towards Marxism seems contradictory. At times he vehemently denounces it; on other occasions he freely borrows from it. This apparent contradiction has led some to conclude that he was militantly anti-Marxist. Others suspect he was a secret Marxist who hid his true beliefs under the veil of Islam. Still others dismiss him as a confused and confusing third-rat intellectual.

These apparent contradictions disappear once one realizes that for Shari’ati there was not one Marx but three separate Marxs, and three separate varieties of Marxism.14 The young Marx was predominantly an atheistic philosopher, advocating dialectical materialism and denying the existence of God, the soul, and the afterlife. According to Shari’ati, this atheistic aspect of Marx was blown out of proportion by European socialists and communists who, in fighting their reactionary churches, automatically denounced all forms of religion. The second Marx was the mature Marx, predominantly a social scientist revealing how rulers exploited the ruled, how the laws of “historical determinism”—not “economic determinism”—functioned, and how the superstructure of any country, particularly its dominant ideology and political institutions, interacted with its socioeconomic infrastructure. The third Marx was the elder Marx, chiefly a politician forging a revolutionary party and often making predictions which may have been politically expedient but which certainly did not do justice to his social science methodology. According to Shari’ati, this variety of “vulgar” Marxism eventually overshadowed “scientific” Marxism. Engels, in his view, distorted the central themes. The working class parties, as they grew, became “institutionalized” and “bureaucratized.” And Stalin misused selective aspects of the young and old Marx, at the expense of the mature Marx, in order to reduce Marxism to a rigid dogma that accepted nothing but narrow-minded economic materialism.

Of these three Marxs, Shari’ati clearly rejected the first and the third but willingly accepted much of the sec-
ond. He stressed that one could not understand history and society without some knowledge of Marxism. He agreed with much of the paradigm that divided society into a socioeconomic base and a political-ideological superstructure. He even agreed that most religions should be placed within the latter category, since rulers invariably "drugged" the masses with promises of rewards in the next world. He accepted the view that human history was a history of class struggles. In his own words, since the days of Cain and Abel mankind had been divided into two antagonistic camps: on one side stood the oppressed, the people; on the other side stood the oppressors, the rulers. He also dispelled the notion that Marx had been a crude materialist who viewed mankind as a cynical, self-seeking animal uninterested in ideals. Shari'ati even praised Marx for being far less "materialistic" than most "self-styled idealists and so-called religious believers."

But Shari'ati rejected the "institutionalized" Marxism of the orthodox Communist parties. He claimed these parties had lost their revolutionary fervor and had succumbed to the iron law of bureaucracy. He criticized these parties for not accepting the fact that in the modern age the main struggles evolved not around capitalists and workers but around imperialists and the Third World. He also accused the Communist and Socialist parties of Europe of not helping national liberation movements in such places as Algeria, Tunisia, and Vietnam.

In criticizing the Communist movement, Shari'ati raised a number of issues against the Tudeh Party, the main Marxist organization in Iran. He claimed that Tudeh had applied Marxism in a mechanical manner, without taking into account that Iran, unlike Europe, had been molded by the "Asiatic mode of production" and had not experienced the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, and the dramatic transition to capitalism. He also claimed that the Tudeh had failed to teach the public true Marxism, and had not even translated such classics as Das Kapital. Instead, the Tudeh had offended the country's religious sensibilities by publishing such atheistic-sounding titles as "The Materialistic Concept of Humanity," "Historical Materialism," and "The Elements of Matter."

Shari'ati's main objection to the Tudeh and Marxism, however, related directly to his earlier correspondence with Fanon. For classical Marxists, nationalism was a tool used by the ruling class to distract the masses from socialism and internationalism. For Shari'ati, the peoples of the Third World could not defeat imperialism, overcome social alienation, and mature to the point when they could borrow Western technology without losing self-esteem unless they first rediscovered their national heritage and their popular culture. In a series of lectures entitled Bazgasht [Return], he argued that Iranian intellectuals needed to rediscover their national roots and that these were to be found not in Aryan mythology—for such mythology left the masses unmoved—but in Shi'ism, which permeated most spheres of popular culture.¹⁵

It is significant that Shari'ati, in his polemics, did not resort to the stock argument that the clergy in variably used against the left: that Marxists are atheists and kafar [blasphemers], and blasphemers are by definition amoral, corrupt, sinful, and wicked. On the contrary, in discussing Marxism he argued that what defined a true Muslim was not possession of a "subjective" faith in God, the soul, and the afterlife, but rather the willingness to take "concrete" action for the truth:

Examine carefully how the Quran uses the word kafar. The word is only used to describe those who refuse to take action. It is never used to describe those who reject metaphysics or the existence of God, the Soul, and the Resurrection.¹⁶

Shari'ati and Clericalism

While advocating a return to Islam and Shi'ism, Shari'ati frequently criticized the traditional 'ulama' in order to differentiate himself from conservative clerical Islam.¹⁷

It is not enough to say we must return to Islam. We must specify which Islam: that of Abu Zarr or that of Marwan the Ruler. Both are called Islamic, but there is a huge difference between them. One is the Islam of the Caliphate, of the palace, and of the rulers. The other is the Islam of the people, of the exploited, and of the poor. Moreover, it is not good enough to say that one should be "concerned" about the poor. The corrupt Caliphs said the same. True Islam is more than "concerned." It instructs the believer to fight for justice, equality, and elimination of poverty.¹⁸

Shari'ati accused the 'ulama', of becoming an integral part of the ruling class, of "institutionalizing" revolution-
ary Shi’ism, and thereby betraying its original goals. He also blamed them for failing to continue the work of such 19th century reformers as Jamal al-Din “al-Afghani.” He sharply criticized the clergy’s opposition to progressive ideas formulated in the West, particularly the radical concepts advocated by the constitutional revolutionaries of the 1905-11 period. He spoke out against their demanding “blind obedience” from their congregations, retaining a “monopoly” over the religious texts, and preventing the public from gaining access to true Islam. He claimed that the clergy refused to look ahead and instead looked back at some mythical “glorious age,” and treated the scriptures as if they were fossilized, scholastic parchments rather than inspirations for a dynamic revolutionary world outlook. In his view, they failed to grasp the real meaning of vital terms such as ummat, and forced Muslim intellectuals to seek the truth in the works of European Orientalists.

Shari’ati often stressed that the return to true Islam would be led not by the ulama, but by the progressive rashan fekran [intelligentsia]. In Return, he argued that the Islamic “Renaissance,” “Reformation” and “Enlightenment” would be brought about more by the intelligentsia than by the traditional clergy. In a lecture entitled Mahzab ‘Aliyeh Mahzab [Religion Against Religion], he claimed that in the modern age the intelligentsia were the true interpreters of religion. In Cheh Bayad Kard? [What Is To Be Done?], he insisted that the progressive intellectuals were the genuine exponents of dynamic Islam. Similarly, in a pamphlet entitled Entezar [Expectations], he argued that scholastic learning could remain in the hands of the theologians but that true Islam belonged to Abu Zarr, the mujahidin [fighters], and the revolutionary intelligentsia.

The logic of Shari’ati’s arguments clearly threatened the whole legitimacy of the clergy. For if revolutionary Islam was the only true Islam, then scholastic Islam was false Islam. If deeds rather than piety were the sure mark of a genuine believer, then revolutionaries—even if uneducated—were better Muslims than the learned but conservative ulama. If faith rather than learning gave one true understanding, then devout lay fighters had a better understanding of Islam than the scholastic clergy. And if social science was the key to understanding the dual national-social revolutions, then concerned Iranians study sociology and political economy rather than theology.

Shari’ati and Present-Day Iran

During the Islamic Revolution, Shari’ati emerged unchallenged as the most popular writer of modern Iran. Tapes of his lectures were widely circulated even among illiterates. His works were frequently republished. His slogans were often seen in street demonstrations. And his ideas were freely discussed by the revolutionaries, especially radical high school students. In fact, his ideas were far better known than those of Ayatollah Khomeini. Shari’ati, therefore, can truly be characterized as the ideologue of the Islamic Revolution.

Because of this unprecedented popularity, Shari’ati’s name has now become a major prize, fought over by rival political groups. The clerics heading the dominant Islamic Republican Party eulogize him, write sermons about his life, and often cite his works concerning Shi’i roots, cultural revolutions, shortcomings of communist movements, the need to struggle against foreign imperialism. Not surprisingly, they often censor his anticolonial views and deny that he was ever influenced by the West. The Mujahidin, on the other hand, emphasize his call for a social revolution and de-emphasize—especially after Mujahidin leader Masud Rajavi fled to Paris—Shari’ati’s stress on national unity against the ever-present imperialist danger.

We cannot know where Shari’ati himself would stand if he were alive today. Many of his admirers have joined the Mujahidin, but many others, despite reservations, continue to back the Islamic Republic. This support of the regime is motivated by several important factors: the need to consolidate the anti-imperialist revolution; the fear of a military counter-revolution; the aggression of neighboring Iraq; and finally, the mystique that still surrounds Khomeini and influences large segments of the population.

FOOTNOTES


3 One of Shari'ati's followers and former President of the Islamic Republic Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr later completed and published the Persian version of the Wretched of the Earth.


6 N. Minuchi, "Husseinieh-i Ershad was not a Building but a Historic Movement," Itiha'at, December 21, 1980.

7 A. Shari'ati, The Intelligent's Task, pp. 19-29.


11 Ibid.


14 A. Shari'ati, Return, p. 49.

15 A. Shari'ati, Islamology, Lesson 13, pp. 7-8.
