

## Book Review

***What is to be done: The Enlightened Thinkers and Islamic Renaissance.* By Dr. Ali Shari'ati. Edited and Annotated by Farhang Rajaee. Foreword by John L. Esposito. Houston, Texas, USA: The Institute for Research and Islamic Studies (IRIS), 1986, pp. 181. ISBN 0-932625-04-5, ISBN 0-932625-01-0 (pbk.)**

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This is a collection of lectures delivered by Dr. Ali Shari'ati in 1970. The quest of Shari'ati to establish an Islamic theory of change and revolution was mainly constructed on a number of main themes, including the role of intellectuals, education, reviving sciences, scientific research, and propaganda. He discussed his Islamic renaissance project from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Some of the lectures tackled the theoretical aspects of the project, including: "Where shall we begin", "What is to be done", and "Surah al- Rum "The Roman": A Message to Enlightened Thinkers" tackled the theoretical part of his project. Meanwhile, the lecture entitled "What is to be done: A Practical Plan for Husayniyah Irshad", which appeared in the last part of the book, presented a practical plan of action for this project.

As a whole, *What is to be Done* uncovered the ideal epistemological guide of Ali Shari'ati with regard to reforming the Muslim world in general and his native Iran in particular. The ideas he presented were so controversial mix of ideas that it is very difficult for a critic to fairly determine the school of thought that he belonged to. His consistent borrowing of key Marxist concepts such as "class struggle", "classless society", "imperialism" and "class exploitation"

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instigated some authors to describe him as a reformist who had been influenced by the social ideas of Marxism (Bayat, 1977). This tendency was shared by many of Shari'ati's contemporary intellectuals and associates, including Frantz Fanon, Julius Nyerere. Such association incited some researchers to consider Shari'ati a member of the "Third-Worldist Populism Movement", which represented a blend of nationalism, radicalism, anti-"dependencia", anti-industrialism, and somehow anti capitalism (Assef, 1990). Some critics regarded him as a radical Muslim fundamentalist, while others considered him as a pro-Western existentialist. Nevertheless, Sharia'ti was regarded by the majority of the thinkers as the ideologue of Iran's Islamic revolution (Esposito, 1986).

One of the chief focuses of this collection is to conceptualize intellectualism and to determine the role and responsibility of the intellectual in the society. The world of intelligentsia in Iran and in the rest of the Muslim world, according to Shari'ati, can be divided into two different groups: the intellectuals and the enlightened ones. He limited the definition, role and responsibility of the former in obtaining degrees, and doing mental work which complements and continues the achievements of previous scientists and scholars (Rajaei, 1986). This group is the one commonly and dutifully produced by formal educational institutions world-wide. The definition and roles of the latter however are broader. They are similar to the duties of social prophets and involve social responsibilities.

The enlightened soul is a person who is self-conscious of "his human conditions" in his time and historical and social setting, and whose awareness inevitably and necessarily gives him a sense of social responsibility. (Rajaei, 1986)

The lecture "Where Shall We Begin" provided a detailed explanation of the concept of an enlightened Muslim. The latter, according to Shari'ati is a person who carries the mantle of the prophets after the end of the age of revelation and follows in the tradition of bringing consciousness to the people during the age of reason (Rāhnamā, 1994). His role is to transform the existing social conflicts, from the context of the society into the feelings and self-consciousness of its members.

Displaying a great level of realism, Shari'ati ruled out the existence of a universal type of enlightened person with common values and characteristics. He called upon the enlightened Muslim to be aware that he belongs to that unique culture that is neither completely spiritual, mystical, or philosophical; nor completely materialistic and technological. It is a perfect combination of spirituality, idealism, faith, justice, and equality (Rajaei, 1986)

Shari'ati considered as imperative the understanding of the belief system of the masses by the enlightened, in order to establish an effective system of communication with them. The reason for this is that religion is deeply rooted in the culture and experience of the latter. He says:

To emancipate and guide the people, to give birth to new love, faith, and dynamism, and to shed light on people's hearts and minds, and make the aware of various elements of ignorance, superstition, cruelty and degeneration in contemporary Islamic societies, an enlightened person should start with "religion". By that I mean our peculiar culture and not the one predominant today. (Rajae, 1986)

He sets main tasks which must be executed by the enlightened Muslims, but warned them from what he portrayed as deviant and reactionary elements among the traditional clergy, which have always been against the masses, and have played with their destiny, and exploited them (Rajae, 1986). They have, according to him:

Misused religion as an effective weapon to divert the feelings and the attention of the masses from their present affairs and make them think about past problems only. They divert people's attention from the present as well as the actual and material problems while in the name of religion, keeping the people preoccupied with the after-life as well as abstract and subjective issues, so that Muslims are prevented from stirring for a comfortable, affluent, and free life... Paying attention to life on this earth is considered a source of corruption while mysticism and eschatology are greatly encouraged. (Rajae, 1986)

The second lecture, "What is to be Done?" deals with theoretical issues. He began his discussion with a fierce attack against the modern model of Western civilization and culture. He accused that model of being materialistic using every means to transform countries into market places for goods and products (Rajae, 1986). To achieve that purpose, all nations must be "stripped of their authenticity", a term that he used to refer to cultural heritage and religion.

He accused the West of destroying the intellectual productivity of the colonized societies. Religion was the first in the list of cultural components which must be annihilated. To achieve this objective, Shari'ati claimed that the colonizers manufactured two groups, the pseudo-enlightened, a type of assimile, who completely abandoned their historical and cultural heritage (Rāhnamā, 1994). These disseminated the western culture inside traditional societies. The second group were the reactionary traditional religious leaders who, according to him, have reduced Islam into a "degenerated and narcotizing religion". He maintained that although these two groups appear on two conflicting fronts, the reality is that they have been serving one common guide, the western master.

Shari'ati explained the danger posed by fake enlightened people and stressed that the colonizing movement of assimilation was hidden behind slogans of enlightenment, modernization and progress. He traced their first appearance in Iran to the efforts of Mirza Malkum Khan (1833-1908) and Hasan Taqizadah (1878 – 1970). As for the second group, Shari'ati underscored that their role is a more difficult one, because these victors, as he described them, must destroy religion by propagating it. He traced the aspects of such fake religious leaders to the early history of Islam.

In his attempt to portray what he considered a true progressive Shi'a Islam that is based on the principle of "blood and sword", and to support his claim, Shari'ati utilized some historical events, such as the challenges mounted by Abu Dhar and Imam Hussein to the ruling authorities of their respective times. However, a careful reading of the same history demonstrates that the principle of "blood and sword" was not always applied the way Shari'ati has claimed. In fact, early imams like imam Hasan, a couple of years before the rebellion of his brother imam Hussein in Karbala, accepted to relinquish his caliphate rights and accepted to transfer them to his arch rival Mu'awiyah, a decision that an infallible imam would not never take if it was deemed in conflict with the principles of true Islam.

He then summarized the role of this group into three tasks: 1) Turning the masses away from the present. 2) Transforming earthly, everlasting and pertinent Islam of life into an Islam that attracts the soul only to the past or to the Hereafter. 3) Propagating the claim that Islam is too valuable to limit itself to this world.

Shari'ati then elaborated on the animosity between Islam and Western civilization and attributed it to religion, not to the economy as the pseudo-intellectuals always claimed. "What is the solution?" is the principle question in this lecture. Shari'ati believed that cooperation between enlightened persons is the only way out from the crisis of duality and nominous contradictions. For him the solution is to incorporate what he called the messianic Islamic spirit in the skeleton of the society, so that the wandering generation may return to itself and to its cultural heritage, to its historical and moral self, and to "self-awareness". It is an intellectual revolution and an Islamic renaissance based on our belief system. The present duality in the fabric of society makes such an objective difficult to achieve. According to Shari'ati, Muslims in Iran are fortunate because among both university-educated and traditionally-educated, there exist individuals who can think for themselves, see for themselves, understand for themselves and finally choose for themselves.

He further disclosed their project (or his project) in three objectives: a) to bring the new educated generation from its "monkey-like" following

of the West to the right path. b) to mobilize and free the old stagnant and religious masses from their reactivity chains, and, c) to extract and refine the religious power and transform it into a constructive and dynamic energy where upon intellectuals can become faithful and religious masses can acquire self-consciousness.

At the end, Shari'ati summarized what he previously elaborated into nine goals and admitted that there is no universal answer or fixed formula to what should be done to achieve these goals because of two reasons: 1) every individual will answer this question according to his world view and his particular school of thought, and 2) depending on whether the audience is an individual or a group or a particular class. But as a general rule, in traditional societies with "unaware masses" the primary responsibility of the enlightened individual is to give awareness to their own people.

In the third lecture: Surah al-Rum (The Romans) a message to enlightened thinkers. Shari'ati tried to extract lessons which are relevant to the conditions of Muslims in modern time, and to inspire the oppressed masses that they own the means for change even if the circumstances imply otherwise.

He began his lecture with a typical traditional religious introduction in which he emphasized that he is seeking blessings from God and the Prophet (pbuh). He then mentioned Imam Ali and Abu Dhar, two personalities whom he regarded as examples for al mustad'afin (the oppressed) of the past and the present. Shari'ati's fascination with Abu Dhar was immense, especially when he addressed issues related to justice and freedom, as well as when citing examples of fair and just freedom fighters and leaders. However, he neglected the brighter example of Omar bin al-Khattab, apparently due to his sectarian affiliation. The latter was a very influential and universally recognized figure, who exemplified the ideal, just, and honest leader of the Islamic community.

He called upon the followers of Shi'a Islam to be united by following the true Islamic teaching and to enjoy friendship and understanding. The common goal and strategy which should be adopted by Muslims throughout the world is to follow the Qur'an as a source of guidance and enlightenment. According to Shari'ati, Surah al- Rum could have been revealed just today to the Muslims, because it precisely reflects their present conditions. This surah is an example used to confirm the fact that the Qur'an is always alive while other things change.

As he mentioned; "because of time constraints", he selected the verses which he thought are more relevant to the actual conditions of Muslims. He considered verses 1-4 to comprise the essence of this Surah because they made a prediction of which no one was aware of, and gave a precise description of the upcoming defeat of the Romans.

Among the lessons derived from the Surah, Shari'ati underscored that the actual great powers will fall in decay because of God's will or what he called the "destined end." Then he continued to explain the selected verses such as 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 then 30, 24, 40-48 and 50-58 and lastly verse 60. The interpretations of these verses were based on their dimensions and implications on Muslims' social reality by setting examples about people from the past, a call for mankind to reflect back on the characteristics and powers embedded in them in order to discover their true nature, understanding Allah's laws of creation and Allah's guidance for mankind. He further explained that Allah addressed both the oppressor and the oppressed by informing them that their situations will be reversed: the oppressor's power will perish and the weakness of the oppressed will turn into power. However he warned if the oppressed remains oppressed, it means that he is the one helping the oppressor to oppress him.

Shari'ati was clearly innovative in his study of Surah al-Rum. Instead of solely following the traditional methodology of exegesis which primarily relies on the text, he tried to relate the verses to the history and geography of the place of revelation and the socio-psychological conditions of the recipients. In this context, the prophet and his followers were few, weak, unarmed and impoverished and yet the Surah predicted that they would defeat one of the most powerful empires of the time. In this atmosphere of weakness, desperation and helplessness, the prophet informed his companions:

You will be the victors of history. Neither the superpowers, the great kingdoms nor the great Caesar, but Muslims, will dominate the world. Not only will you rule Arabia, Mecca or the Quraysh, but you will also conquer Persia, Byzantium, Yemen and Egypt (i.e the contemporary East and the West. (Rajae, 1986)

The context of history and geography in Shari'ati's methodology of interpretation is clearly reflected when he stated that although Arabia was not significant to the powerful states of that time, the prophet predicted (based on the revelation) that one day his followers will rule the world, a world that he did not know and was not even able to comprehend, as he was an illiterate man. In addition to this innovative method of interpretation, he used sociological terminology to interpret this Surah. Among the key terms he used are: races, classes, societies, powers...etc.

He stated that "the claim that an oppressor always remains in power and the fate of mankind lies in the hand of the Caesars and the Khusrows is false. They are temporary powers and the subject of daily news; they exist today and are gone tomorrow. If one appreciates the essence of "a destined

end” one discovers that the ruling powers will only survive for a short period of time.” (Rajae, 1986)

Does believing in predestination and fate alone fulfill this prophecy or are there other more realistic reasons? For a great power to cease to lead, there must be another force in the making which becomes more qualified to take over the historical cycle. This is what Muslims in our time need to understand. Believing alone will never be sufficient to reach any goals. Faith has to be associated with work and self-empowering. By taking such a stand, Shari’ati appeared as the inspiring, motivating and propagating speaker who wanted to gain the minds and the hearts of his followers and make them believe in a prominent salvation which could probably defy the laws of power and positions. Here it is obvious that the convictions of the devoted believer submerged the rationality of the thinker. Or possibly this type of discourse was deemed the most suitable for addressing the common murids (audience) of the husayniah. The rational thinker in Shari’ati’s personality reemerged while discussing verses 9 and 10. Here, Allah addressed both the oppressor and the oppressed. He told the rulers that their power would perish. As for the masses, He informed them that their weakness would be temporary and that they would soon gain power.

In the fourth lecture “What is to be done: A Practical Plan for Husayniah Irshad” Shariati addressed all responsible intellectuals and all committed and aware Muslims who are seeking new ways to serve Islam and Muslims. He laid down a well detailed practical Islamic program for social change. This program, as it was implemented in Husayniah Irshad, consisted of three organizational units for the purpose of Research, Education and Propaganda, and a fourth unit for support and logistics.

For the first part which was mainly about “Research” he called for the revival of *ijtihad* which he considered the most outstanding feature of the scientific spirit and ideological outlook of Islam, because *ijtihad*, which is a free and progressive endeavor, will prevent Islam in general and the religious text in particular from becoming static and alienated with the passing of time and social change. He believed that what has hampered the implementation of the Islamic spirit throughout the history of Islam and made the Islamic culture and the world view anachronistic, is the death of the spirit of independent reasoning (*ijtihad*). He also believed that *ijtihad* is an important tool to prevent Islam, as a revolutionary school of thought, from becoming a conservative stagnant order. When he called for opening the doors of *ijtihad*, he claimed that: “The superiority of Shi’a jurisprudence over other schools of Islamic jurisprudence (which shut the door of *ijtihad* after the death of Abu Hanifah, Malik, Sha’fi, and Ahmed ibn Hanbal), is in that it has kept the door open indefinitely for new research, new inferences and even enactment of new ordinances and laws.”

The fact that Shi'a jurisprudence kept the doors of *ijtihad* open was not only due to the conviction about the importance of *ijtihad* but it was a strategic action to create a parallel system of jurisprudence to replace the rejected main stream sunni jurisprudence.

Shari'ati continued highlighting some examples from the vision of Husayniah Irshad in relation to research. The responsibility of the research project was designated to six research groups namely: Islamology, Philosophy of History and the History of Islam, Islamic Sciences and Culture, Social sciences, Islamic Countries and Art and Literature. He described in detail the scopes, meanings, objectives and scientific values for each field. Regarding education, Shari'ati called for the establishment of a "free Islamic University" in which education would be based upon the Islamic philosophy and training. He also called for the development of a modern curriculum valid for the condition of modern times. For the division of proselytizing (*tabligh*) or propaganda, Shari'ati identified suitable domains that were deemed necessary for this division to be effective. These included the skills of preaching in public places, conferencing, arranging seminars... etc. Finally, he highlighted the duties of the division which extended from documentation to photocopying, collecting theses, newspaper and magazine articles which were published about Islamic issues.

Although, he tried to broaden the base of his audience by citing the names of Sunni intellectual authorities like Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Muhammad Iqbal, Shari'ati could not free himself from the shackles of his inherited Shi'a heritage. At some points of his analysis he appeared as a devoted sect follower trying to camouflage himself under the guise of a tolerant universal enlightened revolutionist, especially when he analyzed the history of conflict between Islam and its covetous enemies, who tried to destroy it from inside, and in his interpretation of the true revolutionist and progressive Islam.

What is the point of dealing with issues raised in this collection of Shari'ati's lectures? The reason is that the theoretical and practical issues raised by this Iranian intellectual still possess value and relevance. Debate on the definition of enlightened intellectual and his role in post-Islamic revolution Iran is still ongoing, and the broader Muslim world is still wandering about issues of secularism, religion, and relationship with the West, and modernity. The fact that there is a climate of mistrust between the state and the intellectual makes revisiting Shari'ati a credible act. Furthermore, it is not fair to blame Shari'ati if he appears in some of his interpretations of history and religion as a devoted shi'a thinker, as he has always declared his full allegiance to the school of imamah, revolution and justice.



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