

Radical Interpretive Hermeneutics as Methodology

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Abstract

This study introduces Ali Shariati's methodology in his approach to understanding religion as a social phenomenon and an evaluation of religion as a potentially emancipatory force. It is our belief that Shariati's methodology is in the tradition of interpretive hermeneutics with built-in dialectical logic. His aim was to present an understanding of the world of phenomena by employing the medium of language and as a counterhegemonic interpretation of reality through radical textual reading. His emphasis on and the interpretation of religious texts -particularly Islam, affirms his belief in the emancipatory power of religion.

Conditions for rendering religion as an emancipatory force involve taking an inventory of concepts (written and oral) and a review of its prevailing ontology (the study of the nature of being), epistemology, and human beings' role in history. Shariati viewed religions as revolutions in thoughts and orientation regarding the fundamentals of *sacred* and *profane*, socio-historical, and structural context. Accordingly, religions like all other social phenomena are subject to manipulation, abuse, and misrepresentation by the powerful forces in society. For Shariati, inherited (real) religions have been, throughout their history, subjected to distortions often in the service of powerful classes in society. To understand the truth of a religion, all aspects of religious thought must be reexamined if religion is to fulfill its ideal role—the emancipatory role. Reexamination requires appropriate methodologies which in turn are dictated by the context (the subject) and the worldview. Methodologies, however, are ordinarily identified with science and scientific procedures. As a collection of methods employed by a researcher in pursuit of truth, methodology and “religion” have had a tense relationship. The relationship between religion and science is often presented as two diametrically opposed phenomena. For the ordinary scientists, only the observable phenomena are worthy of discussion and debate and for the ordinary believers in religion, the denial of unobservable phenomena such as spirit and God is tantamount to blasphemy and occasionally deserves harsh punishment including execution. The consideration of religion as a social phenomenon relieves both troubled and inherited traditions from their misery, narrowness of vision, and sordid predicament. Shariati set the parameter by stating that he believes in the “religion that came after science” and not the one before it. This is a significant statement for two reasons; first, it rejects the inevitability of conflict between religion and science, and

second, it views science as an important ally in understanding the historical and social role of religion. Historical evidence suggests that both traditions have been manipulated as strategies for social, economic, and political domination. Therefore, the need for an understanding of the ontological and epistemological frame through theoretical constructs along with appropriate methodologies is felt. In his first lecture at Ershad Institute in 1968, Shariati spoke of the necessity of starting a “methodic revolution for rereading the history of the formative years of Islam,” and much to the dismay of traditional religious authorities stated, “...Now it is not the time to worship what we don’t know.” This statement was the beginning of the process of inquiry in pursuit of truth. It was the guiding principle in his attempt at liberating Islam from the control of hegemonic classes while exposing the utter disregard for the history of Islam and the Quran particularly in seminaries (CW#28:55, 69). Furthermore, he pointed out the problem with historiography by stating that the available resources that are considered historical material are not history. They are the material which with the aid of science and scientific inquiry, history should be written (CW#28:69). One of the essential features of the methodic revolution is decentralization and demopolization of textual interpretations and historiography by defanging anti-science and the employment of humanities and social sciences. “The purpose and the aims are to take a multidisciplinary—approach in thoughts, views, and methods.” The method has an incredible role in the progress and indeed the demise of thought process.... research method can improve or stifle progress but does not create talent” (CW#28:54). Aristotle was much brighter than Francis Bacon and Plato more brilliant than Rogers. Bacon and Edison knew nothing of philosophy compared to the third-generation followers of Aristotle, but the contributions of Bacon and the inventions of Edison by far outweigh the work of philosophers. The reason is the selection of the correct method (CW#28: 55-56, 69, 305; CW30: 4, 455).

The methodology seeks internal logic, coherence, answers to questions, problem-solving, and a conclusion all based on observable facts and the relationships between them. Among Shariati’s thirty-six collected works (CW), ten of them (4, or 7, 14-18, 22, 28, 30, and 31) contain specific references to and discussions of religion and methodology. It is important to note that after five decades of discussing Shariati’s work, no specific study regarding his approach to religion – methodology has been produced, and if produced has been a non-critical and mainstream discussion of his views on religion. A deliberate misreading of the text and lack of adequate knowledge of history, philosophy, and social sciences have generated two labels of “devout Shia” and “the Ideologue of the Islamic Revolution.” Not only are they both inadequate and misleading, but they are also obstacles to viewing the larger structure of his thought as a broad social and philosophical school. Moreover, a review of the hostile attitude toward Shariati, particularly in the aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, shows the unanimity of anti-Shariati in context, content, and tenor. They also show a disturbing display of inadequate background. For some, the attack on Shariati has become a source of economic gains, social/intellectual position, and a vehicle for self-aggrandizement. In this regard, there is no or very little interest in maintaining the integrity of the scientific methods and processes. The rules of social/scientific methods dictate that social facts should be viewed as real. But the pursuit of the truth of any reality is an entirely different matter. Shariati pursued the truth of social facts. To that end, his methodology is reflective of foundational issues in his thoughts including but not limited to methods of rediscovering the truth of the religious belief and in a systematic fashion delineating the organic relationship between them. To

understand Shariati's methodology one must understand his views regarding religion, its philosophy and history, and the socio-economic and political context in which religion is functioning. He states that his method is that of Husserl's "phenomenology," and a variety of context-dependent methods are used in Shariati's thought structure. In the philosophy of history, in sociology, and in anthropology he uses the dialectical method and when discussing, freedom, equality, social conflict, and social justice, he emphasizes PRAXIS (thought and action). Praxis is introduced to expand the boundaries of language. When reading Quran, he uses the method of interpretive hermeneutics in its most radical (liberating) form.

Shariati links Western progress in science and technology and indeed in social and philosophical thoughts to advances in methodology. In the realm of qualitative research method, both Husserl's phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology (expanded on by Martin Heidegger and Hans Georg Gadamer) have experienced a remarkable growth (CW# 4&7). This is partly due to the inherent problems with "manipulation" and "biases" in quantitative research and partly due to broader capabilities of qualitative research in attempting to find answers to fundamental and ontological questions. Husserl believed that phenomenology was a new science of existence (mind and matter). Through this, he helped discard dominant Western duality of mind and matter. Both Martin Heidegger and Gadamer were influenced by Husserl but added new dimensions and produced Hermeneutic phenomenology. While Husserl was concerned with consciousness in understanding phenomena, Heidegger with his emphasis on Dasein, pointed out the importance of the manner of existence in an alienated world.

The subjective method, according to Shariati (CW#31:50) is simple, with strong logic and substantial abilities and sharpness. But its actual accomplishment is negligible. Philosophical research conducted with the subjective (Aristotelian) method occupied the mind with everything (particularly afterlife issues) except the important dimension of existence which is the material reality (CW#31:51). Of all the causes of the advances in the past few centuries, and in particular advances in Western civilization, is the change in the method of social, scientific research from subjective realm to objective. (CW#31:221).

Shariati attributes the socio-economic and political development of the "West" and the underdevelopment of the "East" to profound changes in Western methodology. In fact, he reiterates the belief that the Renaissance (14th to 17th century) in the beginning was nourished in various phases, by the scientific and philosophical accomplishments during the golden age of Islam (7th to 14th century) and only later declared its independence. (CW#31:220). 16th and 17th were the centuries of Scientific Revolution and ideological revolt against the Middle Ages and the Church and in particular opposition to the Pope rather than Christianity. Then as science declared its independence from the church, the intellectual class took control leading to a great event – the change in method. Method is not to be confused with style and tendency of a particular text. For instance, Quran's style is descriptive, analytical, symbolic, recital, and narrational. Its core areas of concern are nature, society, and history, but its methodological approach contrary to the Aristotelian deductive approach is inductive. That is, instead of addressing the primary causes, metaphysics, spirit, and generalities, it presents the specifics about human beings, and natural objective phenomena such as cows, honeybees, ants, spiders, the Moon, the Sun, stars, and

problem societies of Aaad and Thamud” (CW#12:135-136). Kepler, Galileo, and Bacon while attacking the deductive method, adopted the inductive method including essential components such as observation, experiment, and comparative analysis. This is precisely why Bacon is considered the founder of modern sciences even though from the point of view of his knowledge of science, Bacon is not that advanced. The change in a method caused significant progress in thoughts and reasoning and a great leap forward. As science progressed, alienation from religion increased (CW# 12:136). This was partly due to the erroneous belief that religion was an obstacle to scientific progress. The dominant Aristotelian deductive method, whose reign began around 400-year B.C. and lasted until 600 A.D. did not create one single scientific and philosophical thought even though it was not confined to and constrained by scholasticism of the time (CW#12:137). Once science was freed from the Middle Ages, its growth led to the dominance of science and the growth of various areas in philosophy. One such area was the rise of scientific philosophy directly resulting from science frequently experiencing a dead end. Unique to scientific philosophy was an analysis of science itself and the methodologies investigating the spirit of science, scientific view, various epistemologies, and specific philosophical discussions based on scientific knowledge and principles (CW#12:137-138).

Shariati has a particular view of the method and sees a reliable link between method and the discovery of truth. He believes that “method has a significant impact on the progress and decline of human civilizations. It won’t be an exaggeration to state that it is the research methodology that can lead (cause) to stagnation or progress, or the speed of progress and not the innate abilities. For example, in the fourth and fifth century B.C., there were great minds who are not comparable to the geniuses of the 14, 15, and 16th centuries. Without a doubt, Aristotle was much brighter than Francis Bacon, and Plato much brighter than Rogers Bacon. However, why were these people, who were not as advanced as personalities such as Aristotle, great leaders in consciousness-raising and progress in the world and those great pioneers themselves who were the cause of millennial stagnation of the Middle Ages?” (CW#28:54). Shariati answers this question by stating that it is the “method of knowing” that causes the stagnation and or civilizational progress and significant social change and development. It is the method by which “even an ordinary person is enabled to think correctly and find the way towards truth or to invent and discover. Even a great genius without a correct method of observation and analysis cannot utilize his or her genius (CW#28:54). Shariati’s method of knowing, and method of inquiry in the field of religion, society, and culture can be, viewed, not just as a method, or a tool of investigation, but a synthesis of worldviews and thoughts. In his “Method of Understanding Islam” (CW#28) he defines the method as 1) the correct observation of phenomena (the real) and 2) thinking about the connections between phenomena as they relate to the human condition. The critical components of a method that must be carefully selected, are “perspective” (direction) and “insight.” The connection between perspective and insight is an organic connection that must be discussed in the “social, ecological, psychological, literary, and other contexts” (CW#28:55). Only an appropriate method along with a level of sophistication can result in a great research outcome, and it is in this relationship that the “method” finds its most unique meaning (CW#28:55). Shariati expands upon this organic relationship in the context of the dialectic of perspective and insight. If we accept Shariati’s methodology in general, then we can proceed to a discussion of the “method of studying religion” in his theoretical structure. Does Shariati have a conceptual foundation in studying religion or does his study of

religion must be viewed in the category of mainstream sociology of religion and possibly as he is accused of having treated religion as ideology, -- a legitimating force? (2)

In his “Method of Studying Islam,” Shariati states explicitly that his discussion of religions, in general, is not to show “their truth or lack thereof” (CW#28:61), but provide a method that can be used for studying any religion as a social phenomenon (CW#28:60). In other words, Shariati’s method is not in the context of a particular confessional approach, but in the context of any society in which religion is an important social institution and or a source of identity. Regarding his methodology for reading, researching and interpreting the Quran, Shariati (CW#16:23-24), clearly emphasizes the need to avoid prejudgment which is abhorred by the Quran. That is, the preconceived notions about Quran, prior to interpretation force the researcher/interpreter either knowingly or unknowingly to change the true intended meaning of the Quran and/or interpret the text which fits his or her notion of truth. Sadly, this is what one sees in interpretation by various Islamic denominations such as Shia, the Sunni, the Sufi, and even some Islamic philosophers, and that is why each ends up with the same views and findings that they had before reading and researching the text.” That is, the Quran becomes a tool by which their views are proven rather than learning their views from the Quran. The tragedy is that they define “prejudgment” and their preconceived notions as wisdom and have concluded that no one has the right to interpret the Quran with his or her own wisdom as if there are other ways of knowing other than wisdom and intellect (CW#16:24). Boldness in delving into areas considered taboo is a necessary approach to move forward. Traditionally any violation of the red line set by the religious authorities has been considered rebelliousness and even a sin. This is precisely the reason for a long period of stagnation in Islamic societies. “In the history of Islam – throughout the first, second, and third centuries of Islam, one could see in every corner of Islamic countries and cultures, a new scientist and researcher with a new method, approach, and direction. Each was diligently working on the interpretation of the Quran, Islam, philosophy, and the worldview of Touhid (unity). In every Mosque and Madrasah, there was a learned scholar with his own worldview, inventiveness, and creativity in teaching, learning, research, and in pursuit of greater insights in religious and social issues (CW#19:300). To Shariati “The religious worldview is a dialectical worldview. Even in Islam, one sees that the creation of man is based on conflict, created from two diametrically opposed components—the spirit of God and the putrid clay and the beginning of human history is also based on conflict – class conflict, which begins with Cane and Abel” (CW#14:91).

Shariati considers the philosophy and history of any religion as the most important approaches to the study of religion. Shariati emphasizes that the study of religion is not designed to prove or disprove the validity of a religion, but to study the social role of religion, its impact on social life, and its promise of emancipation. Shariati states explicitly that his method of studying religion is derived from various methods used in social sciences and it can be employed in the “study of any religion” (CW#28:60). He states that he uses “... a widely used European method of research which has been used in social sciences” and that his method is context dependent. For instance, when studying religion, he uses “five distinct but universal features common to most religions” and, therefore applicable to most religions with similar features (CW#28:60-61). These five features include the following: 1) God or Gods of each religion, 2) The Prophet of religion, 3) The Book (Text) of religion, 4) The form of appearance and the audience of a prophet (masses of

people, philosophers, the elites of society, centers of power, etc.) and 5) The influential and trained personalities of religion and their role in history and their impact on society (CW#28:60-61). Here Shariati considers his own method of research in the field of religion not as purely theological but as an investigation of the role of religion in society independent of their truth or lack thereof (CW 28:61). In another word, Shariati's method is applicable to all religions across time and space. However, it is also abundantly clear that when studying religion, Shariati does not believe in one fixed method precisely because religion, like all other social phenomena is dynamic and multidimensional (CW#28:56). In his discussion of the history of religions, he views Islam as a social phenomenon and states that if we study Islam as an instance in the history of religions, we will discover that Islam "... is not a religion that is based on mystic feelings and only limited to the relationships between God and human, but they are one of its many dimensions. To understand this dimension, a philosophical method, which can explain the relationships between God and humans would be appropriate. Life in general and humans living on Earth require their own appropriate methods which are available in social sciences. Islam as the religion provides rules of appropriate conduct for individuals while at the same time accords the individuals freedom to choose. Islam is also, as its history shows, a religion capable of constructing society and creating civilization. Yet as documented by his thesis on "Religion vs. Religion," Shariati views the history of the conflict as the conflict within religion (Islam against the practiced Islam, Christianity against the practiced Christianity, and Judaism against the practiced Judaism ...) and not between religions. To study this dimension, sociological and historical methods must be used (CW#28:56). Religions like all other social phenomena appear and grow. Their dimensions evolve and therefore, must be studied by different theoretical perspectives and research methods capable of addressing various dimensions. Quran as a sacred text has various dimensions such as literary, philosophical, and confessional which have been analyzed by "great scholars throughout history" and still remains a "great unexplored anthropological, historical, sociological and psychological dimension" (CW#28:57). In his main work on the topic, Shariati states that he takes a historical and sociological approach to religion rather than theological or philosophical. Specifically, he finds historical sociology and sociology of religion very useful. Interestingly he likens religion to a person (CW#28:57) and to study a great person, there are only two complementary approaches one can take; "first, we study the intellectual, and scientific contributions as supported by writings, speeches, etc., second, we study the personal life (the type of family structure and dynamics, place of birth, race/ethnicity, geography, level of education and the ups and downs of life among others) which may not be readily discernable in his/her intellectual output" (CW#28:56-58). Similarly, when studying religion, one approach concentrates on the complementary method-- "text and history" and the second is the typological approach. For instance, when studying Islam, one must study the Quran and then the history of Islam. In CW#28, Shariati outlines the important elements (components) of concern in the sociological study of the history of religions. He states that to create a biographical context about religion, we must understand what family a religion belongs to. That is, religions like languages, ideas, and societies are subject to categorization. For instance, in the field of religious studies, categories such as "Eastern religions," "Western religions," "Semitic religions," "Iranian religions," "Abrahamic Religions," "Non-Abrahamic religions," Touhidi (monotheistic) religions," "non-Touhidi religions," and ...all other forms of religions are important and must be studied from genesis through various stages. Therefore, Shariati uses the concept of "Family" for categorizing religions and then speaks of "the birthplace" of religions and

says we need to answer the question regarding the birthplace of religion. Another issue that Shariati incorporates into his method of studying religions is the issue of ethnicity, race, and the “geography” of origin (CW#28:58). For instance, what is the relationship between Judaism, ethnicity, and “land” as a source of livelihood? Any reading of Judaism shows that it is not possible to separate Judaism from ethnicity, race, and the geography of its birth. Shariati also pays attention to a less critically studied and, in some cases, a neglected aspect of religious studies which is the “formative years” which he likens to the “early childhood” of a person’s life (CW#28:58). That is, for a comprehensive understanding of religion we must pay attention to its formative years and the specific place of birth and growth. For instance, when speaking of Sikhism, it is important to pay attention to the environment of its birth-Punjab. PUNJAB is, on the one hand, home to Islam and various Hindu religions, and a home enriched by ancient Iranian civilization on the other. Now the impact on Guru Baba Nanak (1469-1539), a founder whose family environment was Hindu, but in the larger structural context was the Islamic civilization, can be ascertained. Baba Nanak and the religion of Sikh are influenced by Hindu and Islam. The question is what has been the experiences of this religion in terms of its growth, successes, and growth in the context of dominant cultural forces each in its own arena? (CW#28:58).

In the first chapter of his main work on the method of studying Islam, Shariati incorporates a series of lectures on the methods of studying religions in the department of History at Mashhad University, emphasizing the need for an expansive genealogy (1) of the pre-Islam Arabs. Of course, his complementary Method” (Text and history) is not limited to temporal and spatial specificities of the rise of the Prophet of Islam. Rather, it includes multifaceted prior civilizational existence and emphasizes that “to know Any religion, movement, or personality, an understanding of the temporal and spatial milieu is necessary. Genealogists and biographers know this well. To avoid unconditional following and repetitious approach to the issue, “... we must not limit ourselves to a superficial view of reality and instead we need to unearth what exists beneath the veneer of reality and discover the relationship between the condition and characteristics of the environment and the condition and characteristics of a religion, a movement, and a personality. Thus, it is important to delineate the relationship between variables, the characteristics and the condition of the Arab society, and their impact on the historical dimensions of Islam. As he states (CW#28:58), “Arabia is a Peninsula located between the Red Sea in the West, the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman in the East, and the Indian Ocean in the South. When studying the geography of Arabia, one must be aware not to fall into the trap of generalization. This is also and often the case when studying the West and treating it as a homogeneous whole without regard for distinct characteristics of component parts” (CW#28:58). In Shariati’s reading, Arabia where Islam appeared, has unique geography; “Najd is in the center and Hijaz is located between Najd and Tahameh and the latter is the landmass between the Eastern Shores of the Red Sea and the higher elevations of the Western areas of the Arabian Peninsula....” (CW#28:58). Then Shariati divides the Arab population into three groups: 1) “The Badneh or Aryeh Arabs who went extinct before Islam... and they were divided into two groups, the Amalegh... and others who were the descendants of Adam Ben Sam to which belongs the 18th century the B.C. Hammurabi Kingdom of Babel. And 2) Ghahtani Arabs who migrated to Yemen following the disintegration of Hammurabi system. Due to their familiarity with the civilization of Mesopotamia (Babel), they reproduced it in Yemen and established civilized political systems such as Shiba, Tababeah, and

Humyriah. After the destruction of Yemen, a great number of tribes migrated to Syria and Iraq. In Syria, the governments of Ghassan, Lakhm, and Kandeh under the tutelage of the Eastern Roman Empire were created, and in Iraq, the government of Hira (Lakhmein) under the tutelage of Persia was formed. And 3) the Arabs of Mostaarebeh whose cultural context facilitated the rise of Islam. These Arabs who migrated to Arabia proper were known as Adnani, (Adnan was one of the sons of Ismael, the son of patriarch Abraham, the founder of monotheism) who were living in Najd and Tahameh and Hijaz (CW#28:9-10). After a detailed analysis of the physical and cultural, and conceptual geography, Shariati points to Yemen and says, “A glimpse at the various social conditions and geographic diversity of the Arabs, shows that any generalization regarding the Arabs of before Islam is baseless. From an earlier time, Yemen has been the center of civilization and a distinguished hub of social and political activity. Its religion and civilization are the heirs to the advanced and illustrious civilization of Mesopotamia and Babel. Yemen’s advanced civilization has influenced greatly the Arab mindset, its mythology, religion, storytelling, and the thought process” (CW#28:9-10). Another important issue that Shariati points out is the long history of competition between Yemen and Ethiopia. “Located on the opposite shores of the Red Sea, both attempted to monopolize the trade between the East and the West” and these competitions “provided the opportunity to the two powerful Empires of Rome and Persia to intervene in pursuit of their own interest” (CW#28:9-11). Even though the civilization and in particular the religion of “... Yemen had their origins in Mesopotamia and Babel, its enduring and expanded contacts with the outside world familiarized it with the Judaic, Christian, and Zoroastrian religions and with the idol-worshipping Arabs of Hijaz. The hostility between Yemen and Ethiopia which initially had racial and economic reasons, intensified by religious animosities with tragic consequences as told by the story Zoonovous and the companions of Okhdood which is mentioned in the ‘Quran” (CW#28:13).

Shariati then points out the Hira and Ghassan tribes, and then he discusses various texts and histories of various religious and world views present in the Arabian Peninsula and writes “without a doubt the existence of various Jewish colonies in the Peninsula.... was the source of familiarity of the Jahili Arabs... and with Christianity which was introduced to the Southern areas of the Peninsula and in particular Yemen by Barthelme—a disciple of Christ. Both Jacobite and Nestory denominations have followers in Arabia....Najran has been the epicenter of Christianity in Arabia and it had a special Theo-political structure with three distinct centers of power—Sayed... in control of military forces and foreign relations, ...Agheb—the interior ministry.... and Grand Bishop as the religious authority of the city.... (CW#28:31-32). This is an important point that stands out in this genealogy which is the basis of Shariati’s methodology. He uses an expansive historical context when studying the social and historical dimensions of religion. He studies Arabs and religious structures of Semitic nations through his complementary method of textual and historical context (with complex and interconnected parts) to evaluate the impact of this historical development on the belief system of Islam.

Shariati believes that “we must not [unconditionally] follow a European methodology such as the methods in natural sciences, or psychological and sociological methods and must strive to show creativity in the selection of methods” (CW#28:56). In other words, not only Shariati encourages us to “go beyond the Eurocentrism” in ontology, epistemology, and foundational issues, but he

also proposes the creation of culturally, historically, and anthropologically relevant methodologies. It is important to mention that Shariati is adamant about studying and knowing European social and philosophical thoughts and methods but urges avoiding unconditional following (CW#28:56). In CW#13, and in CW#25) he takes an anti-positivistic approach when the academic world was dominated by positivism. His radical interpretation is post-positivistic and transcends the boundaries of critical realism and normative/qualitative approach. The contemporary methodology is for a variety of reasons (including deliberate miscommunication) dominated by quantitative approaches in social sciences, and there is very little interest in interpretive hermeneutics as means of meaningful communication.

In his analysis of Vedic and Buddhist religions, Shariati states that when "... studying religion, one of the most difficult issues is a certainty. Contrary to other scientific topics which various sciences are concerned with, intellectual reasoning and scientific analysis alone, cannot ensure that we have understood a religion" (CW#15:137). In social sciences, humanities, physical and natural sciences among others, a scientist must discover and define the principles on which the school of thought is based and then analyze and study its subject matter. Contrary to methods used in these sciences, methods used in the study of religion, however, can deceive a scientist trained in search for answers in known sciences. That is when a scientist treats religion in the same manner that history is treated in humanities and a living structure (body) treated in biological sciences, the conclusion cannot be reliable. For example, when a religious scholar (not a clergy) studies Islam using the scientific methods and arrives at embedded rules, regulations, and principles of Islam, the results will not be reliable since Islam like any other religion is a collection of beliefs, duties, social relations, and ethical values each representing a separate entity within the structure. But these are constitutive elements of a whole which give Islam --as a living entity—its characteristics, specificities, spirit, and its unique world view—characteristics of "Islam as a true religion" (CW#15:137-138). The problem then is with respect to consideration of religion as an "organic" entity and the study of parts and pieces independent of each other which may result in the valid scientific study of the reality of religion but does not show the truth of the religion. A useful analogy would be the dissection of a corpse on a pathologist's table and carefully examining each part of the body in a highly scientific method, which provides information about each part but does not provide an understanding (knowing) of the person with respect to feelings, thoughts, consciousness, etc. Religion as a totality can be studied by scientific methods and in an organic fashion (its body) but does not provide an understanding of the spirit and the mystical dimensions of religion (CW#15:138).

"Dialectic-- the conflicting principle, throughout history from Greece to Hegel and from religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam has viewed the entire universe including humans, society, and history based on conflict. The conflict principle is essentially a specific logical and mystical dimension of religion. Throughout history whether in the East or in the West, whether in the history of Western philosophy or in the Eastern philosophy, only, and only were for the first and last time, the logic of conflict is tied to materialism is in Marxism and the person of Marx. Whereas before this, it was part of the essence of idealism, mysticism, and religion" (CW:28:18). In dialectic, there is a constant principle called LOGOS which was removed by the materialists in the nineteenth century to attach the unattachable to materialism (CW28:19). Contrary to popular belief,

essentially the dialectical thought is based on Eastern worldview and religions ... Based on the endless war due to contradictions, we realize the dialectical process and if its method is discovered, we can follow the progression of society, and society, like any other material/natural phenomenon, grows based on material principles and dialectical process (CW#12:171).

But what is the built-in manifestation of conflicts in Islamic dialectic? Touhid vs. Shirk, Adam vs. Iblis (Satan), Cain vs. Abel (two types of people and orientation rather than existence), Allah vs. Idol (identifying human social orientation and not a philosophical issue), Naas (masses) vs. Malaa (politically powerful), the believer vs. nonbeliever (in their specific meaning, life vs. afterlife, piety vs. wickedness and a great number of other sets of diametrically opposed and conflicting concepts. However, this ought not to be confused with Cartesian Dualism. “Feudalism nurtures the bourgeoisie, and the bourgeoisie inevitably nurtures the proletariat which is its enemy” (CW#12:164). Dialectic is not to be confused with logical correlation, for logic points out the chain of cause and effect and not how the cause creates the effect. Some intellectuals who attack logic in defense of dialectic, overlook the fact that logic is the relationship between rationality and abstraction and search for the unknown through the known. Dialectic is concerned with objective reality in change and evolution. The objective reality is both nature and human society (CW#12:164, 169). Heraclius says one cannot enter a river twice, for the second time neither the river is the same nor the person, and this is the principle of dialectic. The only constant here is change (the basis of progression), and conflict and contradiction are the motor of nature (CW#12:169). Whereas logic considers the unity of the opposites an impossibility, dialectic considers it essential and as an established objective principle. “This contradiction exists in every existence, in the universe, life, history, society, and in thoughts and emotions. Each is the dialectical battleground of contradiction... This contradiction is found even in the realm of mysticism, spirit, and ideas. Mowlana (Rumi) speaks of the war between good and evil, God and Satan, belief and blasphemy, and sickness and health...as the wisdom of creation and proof of righteousness (CW#12:170). In Islam the created man has a dialectical structure— (Putrid Clay and the spirit of God) and history is the war between two poles of righteousness and falsehood, and masses of people on one pole and the rich (motref) on the other. Here is a concrete example from the Quran of the line of demarcation between the believer and an “infidel.” The Quran asks, “who is an infidel?” “Is he someone who does not believe in God? The answer is no. An infidel is the one who “does not incite and encourage people to revolt against the structural causes of hunger.” Instead of using logical and abstract concepts, the Quran uses concepts that specify lines of demarcation, intent, and direction. This is a research method and an epistemological approach and the discovery of the relationship between these concepts in the context of ideology. The difference between this and science is that a physicist knows what an atom is and knows something about its history. However, for someone who has an ideology, the components of the ideology have a logical and organic relationship. An analysis of each item must be in the context of a larger totality— Touhid and the relationship between Touhid and each component part. Taghva (piety) has a close relationship with Touhid, it has a social relationship with Ghest which is a social class issue, an economic issue and a livelihood issue. The totality of all of these makes up a living structure with a will, meaning, and wisdom whose name is Islam (ravesh Bar resi Quran [Method of Studying the Quran]: 33-35).

“... Islam has taught us that an individual evolves only in the process of being engaged in society, in its reconstruction and reform.” (CW#16:168). it is in this dialectical relationship between self and society, that both self and society are enabled in their progress. “In Islam, ‘self’ and ‘other’ actualizations are mutually dependent and not two separate processes.” (CW#16:169). This process requires a “method.” It is in this approach that Shariati encourages his students to take (if they believe in him) his raw theses and build upon them and discover the unknown areas. With a common worldview and method as essential components of epistemology, we create researchers and scientists (CW#16:169). In fact, “some of my students who could not even read a sentence in Arabic, only with the proper method were able to arrive at new discoveries in the Quran which even surprised some of the experts on the Quran (CW#16:171).

Shariati accords considerable attention to the context, particularly the socio-economic and political forces which have an interest in research topics and methodologies. 19th-century sociology was according to the Europeans committed sociology whereas contemporary sociology has, along with other social sciences, abandoned that commitment and has embraced the “value-free” approach and emphasizes only the analysis of social realities and no longer speaks of good and bad, and social, ethical, and human commitment arguing that commitment, beliefs, and aims are bad for science. This forces science to arrive at specific answers which support the aims or the beliefs of the researchers. For when a researcher who believes in a religion, or does not, spirit or matter, socialism or capitalism, freedom, or dictatorship and ... whatever cannot be free of influence or an indifferent observer when pursuing research (CW#16:20-). For example, a socialist cannot be a neutral and free researcher of history, since he or she as a guiding principle, will pursue class conflict and whenever finds a trace of class conflict, it is generalized and when it cannot find, rationalizes and if finds evidence to the contrary, ignores it. This is a clear case of having glasses colored with specific ideas. A physicist who believes in God in his/ her research sees God everywhere and a non-believer physicist sees the absence of God. Therefore, a researcher who sees the physical world as is and is free from the two constraints can be objective (CW#16:21). “...In the Middle Ages, we noticed how science, research, and methods, due to their religious commitment, were condemned to prove things that were ordered and approved by the clergy and compatible with religion and what believers expected. In the 19th century, sciences, and in particular humanities and social sciences specifically history and sociology were trapped in the tight and limited belief structure and party politics and propaganda and national, racial, and class location –new scholasticism was created and-freed science from the servitude of religion in the Middle Ages, has become subservient to the new layers of power in the new centuries (CW#16:21). Sadly, science was stripped from its commitment to human beings, and its mission, which was providing awareness and guidance, was derailed. The slogans of “science for science,” “truth-seeking without prejudice,” “free research,” “neutrality of science,” and “avoiding prejudgment” and without “preconceived notions and ideas,” all exciting and logical slogans,” forced human sciences, particularly history and sociology, which more than any other sciences were able to expand awareness and lead the way for humans, ended up in isolation and its mission limited to analysis of events instead of leading human societies towards progress and development (CW#16:22).

“Return to the Quran” was Seyed Jamal’s slogan, and that is what we select as our slogan. “Return to Quran” is an invitation to scholars, sociologists, politicians, freedom fighters, intellectuals, and so on to unite and act. (CW#16:391). “Quran must be studied from different dimensions and directions; first, it must be studied as a text; second, the study and analysis of the Quran must be in line and in accordance with textual critique in the same manner that we study any other important and significant literary and intellectual texts; and third, expert analysis of various dimensions of Quran such as art, music, concepts, its historical, sociological, scientific concepts and its treatment of natural phenomena (CW#16:392).

On a greater scale, and in terms of strategy of social change, the use of proper methodology is critical. Historically we can see the success and/or failure of some pioneers of the Islamic revival such as Seyed Jamal and Muhammad Abduh. Their aim and intent and cause were great, but their mistake was in their methodology. Instead of appealing to the masses of people who had nothing to lose, but with abundant faith, they appealed to the haves and the powerful who by virtue of their comfortable position were not supportive of larger societal change. In the book “Fatimah is Fatemah,” Shariati states that Prophet’s tradition is not limited to just deed and action, but more importantly there is an embedded emphasis on the method and the strategy for the social struggle towards accomplishing his mission. Here we see that “the Prophet begins his struggle by addressing not the Malaa (the representatives of the politically powerful class), not with Motref (the representative of the obnoxious rich) and not with Raheb (the representatives of official/institutionalized religion), but by addressing the masses of *people* (Naas)” (CW#16:200). Furthermore, research in various aspects of religion requires as any other area of life requires contextualization. Past issues, social issues must be viewed in their specific context and social milieu and not today’s insights and standards. “We must understand yesterday with yesterday’s insights and today-with today’s insight” (CW#16:212). This method would allow for a better understanding of issues in their context in time and space. For example, if we were to evaluate polygamy and in particular try to understand the reasons for Prophet’s number of wives, with today’s standards, level of civilization, and the prevailing concerns for gender equality, we can conclude nothing but the degradation of women. However, if we analyze the issue in the social structure of the time and its institutions, economic condition, and type of the economy, polygamy was allowed as a progressive system of support for women (CW#16:212). Reliable interpretation of historical events (sacred and profane) processes does consider time and space and overall context.

To liberate, uncovering the true meaning of the words embedded in culture and religion is essential. Language in Shariati’s thought is the manifestation of thoughts. It reveals the meaning and constructs bridges between reality and truth. Language is the conveyor of thoughts and structures of the world. The meanings assigned to words by the powerful classes result in a structure not intended by the word. Therefore, Shariati began a process of uncovering the truth of the words and provided interpretation in a radical manner as the first step to liberation, and in this effort, the methodology is of utmost importance. To Shariati, being stuck on the surface of the language structure does not lead to emancipation. Any methodology that does not take this fact into consideration, is neither abstract nor concrete.

Endnotes

1. which is currently known in Iran as the “Foucauldian” approach with considerable followers.
2. Shariati defines ideology as belief and the study of belief. It is a special understanding and awareness, people have of themselves and their surroundings, their social class location, social base, national condition, and the historical and global role that his/her group belongs to, and on that basis of responsibilities and solutions takes a social position and ultimately believes in a special system of values and behavior (CW# 16:42; CW# 23:60). Ideology is a set of beliefs that interprets the social, national, class and the value system, social structure, form of life, ideal condition of individuals and society in all of their dimensions (CW#16:43).

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