The Methodology of Ali Shari'ati: A Comparison with Durkheim's and Weber's Sociology of Religion

Younus Ahmed Mushtaq Ahmed[1] and Zulqernain Haider Subhani
International Islamic University Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Ali Shari'ati was an ideologue par excellence, who through his writings and fiery speeches, was able to attract the young intelligentsia of Iran and prepare them for the cataclysmic movement that took place in 1979. The methodology adopted by Ali Shari'ati in his study of religion was different from two classical sociologists. The objective of this paper is to highlight how Ali Shari'ati differed in his sociology of religion from sociologists, such as Emilé Durkheim and Max Weber. Through thematic content analysis, the works of the authors were reviewed to understand their methodology. The findings of this paper outline the methodology adopted by Ali Shari'ati, which was different, both, in its approach and the tools used to analyze religion. Though there was a shift in methodology when compared to classical sociologists, this paper agrees that the methodology of Ali Shari'ati was the best suited to study a deeply religious Asian society such as Iran.

Keywords: Ali Shari'ati, Methodology, Sociology of religion, Muslim Thinker, Emilé Durkheim, and Max Weber.

INTRODUCTION

Ali Shari'ati, a prominent Iranian intellectual, is considered by many as the 'ideological father of the Iranian revolution who through his writings and fiery speeches was able to reach and communicate with the Iranian youths in way that both the religious class and the secular government of the Mohammed Reza Shah were never able to communicate (Abedi, 1986; Dabashi, 1993; Rahnema, 2000; Sachedina, 1983). He is widely regarded as the Voltaire of the Iranian Revolution (Mahdavi, 2014) who lived during a tumultuous period in Iranian history during which the Shah's Government was determined to undermine the traditional religious culture of Islam and move towards establishing a secular society to achieve social, economic, cultural and political change, especially among the youth.

Iran was and has been a deeply traditional society, but when the modernization reforms started to take place in Iran, "the younger generation were being driven to self-alienation, and, in turn, to a superficial and, at times, distorted comprehension of their role in the society" (Sachedina, 1983, p. 191). The ulama felt the urgency to communicate with the youths who were living under the false message of modern living – their role in contemporary social conditions – however, they were ill-equipped to communicate with the youths as their methods were 'traditional' – not to mean backward but rather unaltered throughout their history. On the other hand, the secularly educated Iranian intellectuals who could have stepped up to guide the youth were complacent and preoccupied with

---

[1] Corresponding author email: younusahmed06@gmail.com

their materialism even to comprehend the existing predicament of the youth (Sachedina, 1983). This task was reserved for Shari'ati for which he must be reserved a special place in the history of modern Iran. Ali Shari'ati was trained in both the traditional teachings of Islam and in the western social sciences. He endeavored to integrate the modern social sciences with that of the traditional beliefs of Islam and thus evolved a new paradigm of Islamic idiom capable of securing the allegiance of the securely educated in Iran and other Muslim societies. Shari'ati demonstrated this in a series of lectures delivered by him and complied into two books: '*On the Sociology of Islam'* and *'Marxism and Other Western Fallacies'* (Shari'ati, 1980; Shariati, 1979).

Shari'ati was among the furious intellectual elites in Iran to be very vocal about the Shah's policies and on the current state of Iranian society. Hamid Dabashi made a keen observation on the convictions of Shari'ati towards the reconstruction of Iranian society based on his understanding of Shi'ite Islam,

> He charted his energy, the revolutionary fury he so consciously and decidedly tapped, with a clear, however tacit, political agenda, all mobilized towards a massive ideological reconstitution of the status quo. The ultimate target of this conscious sublimation of raw energy was political, leading to a tangible social transformation of private pieties into public virtues. (Dabashi, 1993, p. 106)

We do not wish to overhype the role of Shari'ati in the Iranian revolution, as individuals such as Al-e Ahmad, Ayatollah Morteza Motahari, and Ayatollah Khomeini probably had a more central role to play when compared to Shari'ati. Having said that we could not deny the fact that Ali Shari'ati has been recognized as the theorist who "did the most to prepare the Iranian youth for revolutionary upheaval" (Dabashi, 1993, p. 106). It should be noted that "events made this Muslim sociologist, shortly after his death, the ideologist of the revolt" (Keddie, 1981, p. 215).

Shari'ati was an ideologue par excellence, who guided the youth when his country was in a state of continuous flux and sought to return to the original teachings of Shi'ism, exemplified in the teachings of Imam Ali and Husayn (Sachedina, 1983). Shari'ati has left behind a vast body of literature, which includes works on the revival of Shi'ism, sociology of religion, and Marxism among others. We will limit our scope of analysis on the works which are pertinent to the sociology of religion, especially his main work*, "On the sociology of Islam (1979)."*

METHODS

The main objective of this paper is to highlight the methodology adopted by Shari'ati in his sociology of religion and to understand how it differs from the methodology of the classical sociologists – Emilé Durkheim and Max Weber. This paper also seeks to explain the reasons behind Shari'ati's methodology. The objectives of this study were achieved through thematic content analysis on the works of the authors. The main works of the Ali Shari'ati are in Persian. The translated works of the authors in English are used and constitute the primary sources in this context, which is a limitation of this paper. Other secondary sources, including books and journal articles, are also utilized to understand the thinker's methodology, including Durkheim and Weber. Ali Shari'ati's book 'On the Sociology of Islam' is the primary source through which the methodology of Ali Shari'ati is understood.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF ALI SHARI'ATI

Ali Shari'ati was born on 24th November 1933 at Mazinan, a small village on the edge of the desert in Khorasan. Shari'ati came from a family of scholars; his grandfather Akhond Molla Qorban-Ali was the principal religious authority of the region (Rahnema, 2000). Shari'ati was initially educated under his erudite father, Mohamed Taqi, a foremost Iranian scholar of Islam. Mohamed Taqi broke the long-standing family tradition when he shifted from Mazinan to Mashhad, where he established his 'Centre for the Propagation of Islamic Truths' (Rahnema, 2000). It was here that Shari'ati's early education began under his father. Mohamed Taqi was involved in a relentless struggle to bring back the modern-educated youth into the fold of Islam, an effort which was carried out later by Ali Shari'ati (Sachedina, 1983). Ali Shari'ati credits his father for teaching him the art of thinking and being his teacher during his formative years (Rahnema, 2000).

Ali Shari'ati studied to be a teacher at the teacher's training college in Mashhad and later got his degree from Mashhad University in 1959. As a young student at the teacher's training college, the political, social and intellectual struggle of Shari'ati began when the *Coup d'état* of the first democratically elected president of Iran, Mohammed Mosaddeq, took place in 1953 (Rahnema, 2000). After the fall of the democratically elected government, the secular reforms were undertaken by the Shah's government like monitoring the traditional centers of Islamic learning (*madrasas)* and the closure of his fathers 'Centre for the Propagation of Islamic Truths' in 1957, all of which profoundly affected Ali Shari'ati.

Ali Shari'ati received a scholarship from the Iranian government to study in Paris for his exceptional performance at the University of Mashhad. He later went on to complete his Ph.D. from *Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines* of Sorbonne University in 1964, specializing in sociology (see Rahnema, 2000, p. 131). While in Paris, he actively participated in many political movements, particularly in the Algerian liberation. During these formative years, he was influenced chiefly by Franz Fanon, who left a lasting impression on him both intellectually and politically (Dabashi, 1993). Franz Fanon was an influential critical thinker of the post-colonial studies and played an active role in the Algerian liberation. Shari'ati knew Fanon personally and is credited for translating his works in Persian and introducing it to the Iranian audience. In Paris, apart from Fanon, Shari'ati was also influenced by Louis Massignon, George Gurvitch, Jacques Berque and Jean-Paul Sartre (Rahnema, 2000). On his return from Paris, he was imprisoned for six months for his participation in the anti-government protests (Sachedina, 1983). Ali Shari'ati managed to get a teaching position at the Mashhad University during 1966 – 1970, but as his popularity and fame began to rise, the university deemed his lectures to be dangerous and forced him to retire early (Dabashi, 1993). His sociological approach to history and his free methods of teaching brought him into conflict with the university officials who forced him out (Sachedina, 1983). It was after this that Shariati had the most creative and productive period of his life when he began to deliver lectures at the famous '*Husayniya-Yi-Irshad,'* a religious center in Tehran, that attracted many of the religiously minded young intelligentsia. At *Husayniya-Yi-Irshad* Shariati sought to transform Shi'ism from what he considered to be a religious tradition with multiple sets of historical traits and institutions into a political ideology of monolithic revolutionary proportions. As a student of Marxism, actively supporting the revolutionary causes of Cuba and Algeria, Shari'ati had been convinced of the necessity of ideological convictions to augment, or advance, the "material conditions'' of any revolution (Dabashi, 1993). Because of the political impact that his lectures had on Iranian society, the regime arrested him in the summer of 1973. As a result of pressure from the French and the Algerian government, Shari'ati was

released from prison in 1975 and was exiled to his home village of Mazinan under the surveillance of the secret police. He could neither write nor contact his students under the close surveillance of the secret police. Hence, he decided to migrate to London. However, after three weeks of his migration, he passed away on June 19, 1977. Some say that he was martyred (Sachedina, 1983), while others say that he had a heart attack (Rahnema, 2000).

Ali Shariati was a vocal critique of the secular government of the shah as well as the orthodox clergy in his social and intellectual struggle. The best description of Shari'ati's intellectual journey is given by Nadeem Hasnain, who noted that,

> He was a Muslim muhajir who rose from the depth of the ocean of eastern mysticism, ascended to the heights of the formidable mountains of western social sciences, yet was not overwhelmed, and he returned to our midst with all the jewels of this fantastic voyage. (Hasnanin, 2013, p. 160)

METHODOLOGIES FOR INVESTIGATING RELIGION

The general principles behind inquiry in sociology are first understood before exploring the methodologies of the thinkers in their sociology of religion.

Inquiry in sociology

Religion has been of interest to sociologists, whether one was for or against it, ever since the foundation of the discipline. Religion is inextricably linked to every society, whether primitive or modern, and it manifests itself in various forms, making it necessary for every sociologist or anthropologist to study it. Sociologists try to understand the structure of the religious institution and the groups, and the subsequent impact they might have on the behavior of the individual in the society or the conflict between the groups among many other things (see Roberts & Yamane, 2012, p. 21). Having said that the methodology adopted by the sociologists, however, differs in their sociology of religion. Sociology of religion is a sub-discipline of the broader field of sociology, and it subscribes to the fundamental principles of sociology in its characteristics, which are namely reliance on empirical data and objectivity (Riis, 2011, p. 230). Empirical data here refers to information that has been obtained systematically and can be observed through our five senses. A sociologist is obliged to avoid generalizations if he to obtain objectivity in his findings, as Keith A Roberts put it "the sociologists deal in facts that can be measured, observed, and tested" (Roberts & Yamane, 2012, p. 23). There has been a consensus among the sociologists that religion can also be researchable following the same social-scientific techniques used by sociology while following a 'value-neutral approach' that neither claims for or against the truth of the religion, a principle, which for example has been immensely expressed in the works of Weber (Alridge, 2007, p. 9).

Before proceeding any further, we believe, a distinction is essential to make between the term's 'methodology' and 'technique' for clarity as they are used interchangeably and often confused. The former refers to the logic and philosophy behind the scientific method, with its approach, and the explanation or justification followed in the process of intellectual searching; while the latter refers to the special or standard effort taken by the researcher to yield data that can be analyzed, for example, surveys or ethnographies (Means, 1970). The study of religion could be approached from various angles such as micro or macro levels, the relationship between the structure and agency, and each of these would require a different methodological approach and technique in order to achieve its objective (Riis, 2011). Even which aspects of religion are focused on the study would have

implications in the methodology. When quantitative techniques are followed, logical empiricism becomes an essential component in the research, while challenging the researcher to combine theory and empirical data in his dimension of religion (Riis, 2011, p. 232). Survey research has been the dominant aspect of our tradition since the beginning of sociology and by implication sociology of religion, especially when explaining religious practices and beliefs (Means, 1970). However, when one follows the qualitative techniques, providing a thick description of the empirical data is essential, which could include ethnographies or in-depth interviews collected in the natural environment of the people (see Riis, 2011, p. 235). Like any other discipline, even sociology of religion is affected by the contingencies that take place in the historical milieu, thereby encouraging the analysis of historicity in the research on religion (Means, 1970). There has been an effort among the sociologist to study religion by including empirical data and historical analysis, to overcome the most dominant practice of using only surveys to explain the religious phenomenon, because many of the social scientists view our disciplines inevitable connection with history on one hand and philosophy on another hand, as crucial in the theoretical analysis of religion. American sociologist, C Wright Mills, critiqued the dominant methodology in social sciences (i.e., surveys and questionnaires) and called for integrating the social structure with history and biography (Mills, 1959). The debate on which approach, qualitative or quantitative, is better or more suited for the study of religion is never-ending. However, the scope of this paper is beyond this debate. The reason, a brief introduction is presented here is for us to be able to understand and appreciate the methodology adopted by the thinkers in their sociology of religion which will be compared in this paper, i.e., Durkheim, Weber, and Shari'ati.

Durkheim's positivism and empiricism

Emilé Durkheim (1858-1917) is credited for having established sociology as a formal discipline in Europe and gave it credibility as a distinct science by adopting the methodology of physical sciences in the study of society. He was a pioneer in using empirical research in sociology, and the current sociological practice of using statistical data in explaining sociological phenomenon was first expounded by Durkheim. His work on suicide is a classic example. Durkheim's methodology was inspired by positivism, a concept that was first introduced by Auguste Comte. Positivism formed an integral part of the Enlightenment tradition: science and facts opposed metaphysics and speculation; faith and revelation were no longer acceptable as sources of knowledge (Swingwood, 1991). The purpose of Durkheim's sociology of religion was aimed at social reform as "he studied primitive religion to understand the foundations of society so that he could promote his reformist aims" (David & Orenstien, 2012, p. 95). For Durkheim, society is *sui generis* (i.e., the reality in itself) and the source of religion. *Sui generis* reality, a Latin term, expresses a conception that something is a reality in and of itself and cannot be reduced to its subparts or components without loss or destruction of its most central or fundamental characteristics (Durkheim, 1995) However, at the same time Durkheim believed that "prescientific knowledge of the social was distorted mythologization but that social science research gives us objectively unmythologized truth" (David & Orenstien, 2012, p. 95). In other words, scientific research would be able to produce objective truth with a level of certainty.

Though Durkheim looked at society as a reality, he believed that it was intangible and lacked a physical form (Durkheim, 1995). Sociology being a diagnostic science must be able to measure the impact of society, and he proposed the use of indicators in his book, *The rules of sociological method (1895)*, for studying society. The indicators he mentioned as tools were statistical, historical and ethnographic; each of which he highlighted in his works '*Suicide*', '*The division of labor*' and '*The elementary forms of religious life*' respectively.

In his sociology of religion, Durkheim studied a clan-based Australian tribe called the Arunta. His final work, the elementary forms of religious life, was based on ethnographic data collected from the Arunta tribe in Australia; though the ethnographic reports were not his own, given his commitment to empirical science he embedded his thinking of religion on published data (Durkheim, 1995). Durkheim sought to show the roots of religion in the social structure of society. It is a society that defines certain things as sacred and others as profane. Durkheim concluded that religion and society are one and the same, two manifestations of the same general process (Fenn, 2009).

Weber's value-neutral approach

Max Weber (1864-1920) was a great proponent of sociology being an objective social science. By objective, Weber meant that sociology should follow a value-free inquiry, and the data collected should "…create knowledge that is valid in its own right, independent of the value commitments of its producers" (David & Orenstien, 2012, p. 167). He believed that the objective theories of society should be tested and validated by others.

Weber's methodology in his sociology of religion was inspired by the neo-Kantian philosophy and rested on two concepts that were made popular by Weber himself, which are *verstehen*, (a German term which refers to meaning subjective or interpretive understanding of the social phenomenon) and *ideal types*. The latter is a methodological approach first developed by Wilhelm Dilthey which involves the development of the usual, typical, or most complete features of a phenomenon in order to facilitate comparison and analysis. Weber stressed that Ideal types were 'one-sided' and 'partial' descriptions of reality (David & Orenstien, 2012). Max Weber's methodology was coupled with comprehending social acts (verstehen) with the analytical framework of ideal types (what society ought to be, i.e., abstract typification) to make social reality traceable and to understand the religious social phenomenon. Riis (2011) noted that "Weber saw sociology as a generalizing extension of history, which based its analyses on ideal types of social actors" (p. 240).

In his seminal work on the sociology of religion, *the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*, he established an overall historical link between the growth of protestant religious doctrine and the development of modern capitalism. The statistical data used to show empirical co-relation between the rise of Protestants with capitalism was based on *prima facie* evidence. Weber, however, did not attempt to show the proof of causality between the rise of Protestantism and capitalism (Weber, 2001). However, Weber's principles in his methodology did not refrain him from using the tools of statistical analysis in *The Protestant Ethic*, to highlight the relationship between occupations and denominational affiliation. It should also be noted that as Weber saw sociology as an extension of history, and he endeavored to make a careful historical comparison in the study of religion (Riis, 2011). His works on the religion of China, India, and ancient Judaism are an example.

The place of both Durkheim and Weber is assured in the sociology of religion. However, the latter is known for his value-free approach and historical inquiry, while the former is known for his empirical data and substantive analysis (Hall, 2007).

Ali Shari'ati: A shift in methodology

Ali Shari'ati (1933-1977) shifted his approach in the study of religion both in terms of the methodology and the tools adopted by the classical sociologists such as Durkheim and Weber. Ali

Shari'ati though trained to be a sociologist, did not conform to the belief that a sociologist must be a pure observer of the society. He disagreed with Weber's methodology here. This could be understood if we look at Shari'ati as an ideologue first, before we look at him as a sociologist, as the main objective of Shari'ati in studying religion was so that he could undertake a social and political reconstruction of society based on the religious precepts, in particular, Shi'ism (Mahdavi, 2014).

Ali Shari'ati did not believe in the notion of neutrality in the study of society. Shariati integrated his knowledge of sociology and history with his knowledge of the Quran and Islam. While we find that the works of Shari'ati have a religious overtone, they are based on a hermeneutical and a sociological basis. We can find in the work of Shariati a constant dialectic between action and reflection (Shariati, 1979). This dialectic of action and reflection could be seen in his own words when he highlighted that people have only moaned about their problems and not talked about them by noting "how can we say that we have diagnosed our ills and spoken enough concerning them and that now is the time for action?" (Shariati, 1979, p. 40). The purpose of Durkheim's study of religion was the social reconstruction of society, and we find similarity over here with Shari'ati. However, he disagreed with Durkheim that society is the source of religion. Instead, what we find in Shari'ati's work is that Islam takes the central role in understanding the structure of society (Shariati, 1979). The reason for this is that the epistemology of the modern western social sciences is a result of the social realities of their societies. While Shari'ati uses the scientific methods of the modern western sciences, he does not subscribe to the epistemology of the modern social sciences as they do not have anything in common with the values of the contemporary social realities of society such as Iran. Shari'ati believed that "analysis of existing realities is possible only through recourse to the terms, expressions and concepts that exist in our philosophy, culture, religion and literature, which are, in some cases, richer and more exact in their analogues in foreign languages" (Shariati, 1979, p. 31). Hence Shari'ati subscribed to the worldview of Islam, and in his work *tawḥīd* occupies an intellectual and ideological foundation for his study of society. By doing this, he rejected the philosophy of positivism, which rejects faith and revelation as acceptable sources of knowledge.

Tawḥīd to put it simply means the belief in the oneness of God. Shari'ati himself explain what he means by *tawḥīd* in his sociological analysis,

> *Tawḥīd* may be said to descend from heavens to earth, and leaving circles of philosophical, theological and scientific discussion, interpretation and debate, it enters the affairs of the society. It poses the various questions that involve in social relationships – class relations, the orientation of individuals, the various dimensions of the social structure, the social superstructure, the social institutions, the family, politics, economy, culture, ownership, social ethics, the responsibility of individuals and society. *Tawḥīd* thus provides the intellectual foundation for all the affairs of society. (Shariati, 1979, p. 32)

Ali Shariati looked at *tawḥīd* as not just oneness of God but as the unity of all things with God in this world, as opposed to *shirk,* which denotes polytheism and multiplicity (Celarent, 2012). He further clarified,

> I take *tawḥīd* in the sense of a worldview, and I am convinced that Islam also intents it in this sense. I regard *shirk* also in a similar fashion; it is a worldview that regards the universe as a discordant assemblage full of disunity, contradiction, and heterogeneity, possessing a variety of independent and clashing poles, conflicting tendencies, variegated and unconnected desires, reckonings, customs, purposes, and wills. *Tawḥīd* sees the world as an empire; *shirk* as a feudal system. (Shariati, 1979, p. 82)

Now, as far as the tools are concerned in his sociology of religion, unlike Weber or Durkheim who had empirical data – statistical data and ethnographic accounts respectively – Shari'ati did not have empirical data in the strict sense of the word. What he instead did was qur'anic exegesis, based on the critical examination of the circumstances of the revelation, and re-interpretation of its historical setting. This, he adopted from his father (Sachedina, 1983). The source of theorization for Shari'ati was the Quran as opposed to the scientific observation of the society, indicating over here the result of his world-view or epistemology. He believed that Islam has different dimensions and varying aspects, and one could look at the Quran from different fields of study and discover a fresh approach from his field of study. With the sociology of religion being his field, he tried to codify themes based on Islam and drawing on the terminology of the Quran and Islamic literature. He noted,

> I extracted from the Quran, a whole series of new topics and themes to history, sociology and social sciences. The Quran itself, or Islam itself, was the source of ideas, philosophical theory and scheme of sociology and history opened themselves up before me, and when I later checked them against history and sociology, I found them to be fully correct. (Shariati, 1979, p. 43)

Shari'ati being a sociologist, looked at Islam and the Quran from a sociological and historical point of view. He looked at the *Hijra* (migration), the worldview of *tawḥīd* in Islam, the creation of Adam, and the story of Cain and Abel. For him, migration was not a mere movement as described by the scholars of Islam, but rather it was a very significant event that caused the rise of civilization. All the civilizations of the world are a result of migration. Similarly, the concepts of social change in society, humanism, and historical determinism are understood and explained respectively with the worldview of *Tawḥīd*, the creation of Adam, and the story of Cane and Abel (Shariati, 1979).

THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL CLASH BETWEEN CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGISTS AND SHARI'ATI

The use of objectivity in social sciences is a philosophical question that was first expounded by Max Weber. What one considers to be an objective truth is a collection of facts that one has acquired, paid attention to, and drawn conclusions from. In the process, one must ensure that there are no crucial facts left out, which contradicts the conclusion one is making. However, there inevitably is going to be an alternative way of looking at the same set of facts and coming to a different conclusion. Hence, the question of objectivity would differ. Therefore, it is possible to have the same set of people looking at the same circumstances and coming to a different conclusion. Their conclusions differ not because their facts are different but because their epistemologies are different. Weber wanted to understand the origin and unique characteristics of modern western societies and constructed a system of abstract concepts that would be useful in describing and, hence understanding social action in such societies. His methodology was based on concepts such as *verstehen* and ideal type. When Weber emphasized that social sciences must be objective and value-neutral, it was based on his premise that religion was a mere extension of history in understanding social phenomena. The modern western societies that Weber sought to understand were mostly secular in which religion was reserved for private practice. On the other hand, the Iranian society that Shari'ati studied was deeply religious.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber addressed what he considered to be the Occidental phenomenon of rationalization (Hegazy, 2006). From a Weberian viewpoint, Occidental capitalism is specific to Occidental civilization. In his work, Weber separates off all capitalistic enterprises with the pursuits of gains as such (Weber, 2001). Anthony Giddens pointed out

that the desire for wealth has nothing to do with modern capitalism, as such desires have existed in all societies and at all times (Weber, 2001, p. x). Capitalism in the shape of mercantile operation, for instance, has existed in various forms in societies such as Babylon, India, China, and Medieval Europe. Only in relatively recent times, has capitalistic activity becomes associated with the rational organization of formally free labor. By 'rational organization' of labor here, Weber means its routinized, calculated administration within continuously functioning enterprises (Weber, 2001, p. xi). Many of the concepts that Weber used to study religion are not consistent or could even be related to the society that Shari'ati studied. By adopting a different methodology, Shari'ati did not disregard the theoretical constructs of modern western society but instead recognized the bias within the western school of thought. An epistemology based in western societies must be used to study western society only (Hussein, 2006).

Similarly, Shari'ati critiqued Durkheimian sociology of religion for "crafting the most sophisticated thesis against religion" (Byrd & Miri, 2018). Durkheim attempted to discover the roots of religion by studying the totems of Australian Arunta in his *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. While McLennan, Frazer and, Taylor initiated the study of totemism as the earliest form of religious belief, "the credit goes to Durkheim who has conceptualized totemism as a modern sociological thesis against religion, and as a matter of fact, it should be considered as the most sophisticated anti-religious thesis in the contemporary era" (Shari'ati, 2009, p. 60). Through the study of totems, Durkheim sought to highlight the 'collective consciousness' espoused by the society in the worship of the totem. Shari'ati did not share Durkheim's views on totemism as the origin of religions for his framework of reference was dominated by Islam and the rich socio-cultural values of the traditional Iranian society. Shari'ati believed that only by returning to Islam can the collective consciousness be achieved.

Many of the concepts from the western epistemologies, for example, relate to secularism and positivism might not be consistent with the economic, political, and socio-cultural values of the Oriental societies. Shari'ati used the value doctrine of the society he was studying, i.e., Iran, and his essential influence and the point of reference directly came from Islam.

The social environment of the Iranian society

We can understand the reason behind Shari'ati's methodology if we consider two main points, as already mentioned before. First, we must keep in mind that Ali Shari'ati was an Ideologue of the Iranian revolution, whose main objective in studying religion was so that he could bring about a change in the Iranian society that was in a state of flux. He was able to achieve this by re-interpreting the verses of the Quran and presenting it to the alienated youth of the country. Second, the historical setting of the Iranian society and the developments that took place in Iran during the lifetime of Shari'ati made him and his approach very popular among the secularly educated intelligentsia. Iran, as a deeply traditional society, when confronted with modernization, started experiencing cultural lag. Shari'ati was able to address the problems with Islamic points of view. As Celarent noted, "At the center of Shari'ati's thinking is Islam, and not an Islam simply embodied in a theocratic state, but an Islam conceived as a relation to God that shapes everything from individual consciousness to personal relations to state policy" (Celarent, 2012, p. 1289). Ali Shari'ati noted that the most significant obstacle that the youth felt in comprehending Islam was because those who possessed knowledge of Islam did not have access to modern technology to make Islam intelligible to the youth, while those who were trained in modern sciences were alien to the knowledge possessed by the Islamic scholars (Sachedina, 1983). Shari'ati foresaw that overcoming the exclusivity of knowledge and coming

together of these two types of scholars is how actual teaching of Islam could be made available to the youth who were living in a conflicting time of Iranian history. Shari'ati noted that even in the most technologically advanced society, the 'traditional' in man could never be fully extinguished or over-looked (Sachedina, 1983). By using religion to understand his society Shari'ati disagreed with his teacher, Franz Fanon, who held the view that religion should be abandoned in order to be ideologically equipped to either defeat the imperialistic powers or launch a revolution against their government (Keddie, 1981). On the contrary, he sought to use an already-established "ideology" in the Islamic world in order to create the necessary political apparatus to achieve the same revolutionary end. By realizing the fundamental problem of introducing a secular political ideology into a religious world and, at the same time, aiming to mobilize the masses for political ends that the very secular ideology had articulated, Shari'ati sought to achieve his revolutionary ends through the same ancient tradition that other secular ideologies considered as the opium of the masses.

It should be recognized that the usage of 'action' in Shari'ati's methodology behind studying religion comes to him directly from his faith, Islam, and in particular, Shi'ism. He elucidated this in his work *Red Shi'ism vs. Black Shi'ism*. Red Shi'ism (*Alid* Shi'ism) refers to the Shi'ism of the Imam's which believed in martyrdom while the Black Shi'ism (*Safavid* Shi'ism) refers to the Shi'ism of mourning. Shari'ati was a staunch critic of the Safavid Shi'ism which he called an institutionalized Shi'ism. His approach towards understanding the religion and orienting towards actions is indicated in his words, "every day is the Day of Ashura, and every place is Karbala" (Sachedina, 1983, p. 207). Shari`ati's Islam was "Shi`ism in a movement for constant reproduction of itself, rather than an institution of 'mourners' and 'dead rituals'" (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2004, p. 512). As this paper is not studying the other works of Shari'ati which are pertinent to the revival of Shi'ism, its limitation is highlighted.

Tabrizi argued that Shari'ati articulated Islam as being a contentious public religion if it is to have any significance in the profoundly traditional society such as Iran (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2004). Shari'ati argued that "a non-political articulation of Islam allowed the ideological hegemony of a secular tyrannical state while leaving the 'private' institution of religion in the hands of the traditional clergy" (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2004, p. 514). Shari'ati's articulation of Islam being a public religion was different from the way the revolutionary movement appropriated his ideology. He was never for the form of government in present-day Iran, i.e., *Vilayat-e Faqih* or the rule of the jurist (Rahnema, 2000). Shari'ati's work was used not only in context but also out of context during the Iranian revolution. In the course of the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Iranian revolution was turned into an Islamic revolution; and Shari'ati posthumously contributed significantly in the process (Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2004).

Critique of Shari'ati's 'On the Sociology of Islam'

Both the clergy and the sociologists have criticized the methodology of Shari'ati. The former group of people felt that Shari'ati for the sake of making Islam intelligible made sacrifices in the accuracy of his message as there were historical and theological flaws in his sociological analysis of Islam (Sachedina, 1983). For example, the highly controversial question of succession of Imam Ali (RA) after the death of the Prophet (peace be upon him) which caused the split was seen as a mere difference of opinion with each group having a logical argument to support their thesis. Also, the co-founders of the institute in Tehran, Murtaza Mutahhari and Seyyid Hossein Nasr, resigned from the management as they felt that, Shari'ati was "…deviating from the original goals of the institution by

over-emphasizing the sociological fact of Islam at the expense of its intellectual dimension" (Sachedina, 1983, p. 206).

The latter group, most notably Hamid Dabashi, noted an inherent contradiction in his thought. While Shari'ati looks at Islam with the world-view of *tawḥīd*, an inherent and consistent unity of the universe with God, Dabashi (1993) noted that Shari'ati's sociology and anthropology hinge on the dialectic class struggle as expressed in the story of Cain and Abel in his book, 'On the Sociology of Islam.' The other critique is by Barbara Celarent, who noted that work of Shari'ati in his book 'On the Sociology of Islam' is of a young and an active political mind rather than a mature academician.

> They are notes to himself, or lectures explaining complex insights in simple terms, or celebrations of common religious stories and events. They are not systematic, disciplined arguments. Moreover, he wrote under a regime that permitted no overt political critique. Thus, for him, Islam was not only his faith but also the only available language for political and social discussion". (Celarent, 2012, p. 1290)

There is no running theme or coherence in the book as intended by the author. Instead, what we find is that the lectures delivered by him having a sociological and anthropological significance are compiled to present a 'sociology of Islam.' Strictly speaking, the topics contained in the book are not purely sociological but are treated in a sociological tone. Shari'ati left behind a vast corpse of works, which can be categorized into sociological and revival of Shi'ism. Only a few of his works have been translated into English, which has been utilized here. While understanding his methodology, his book 'On the Sociology of Islam' was used, but to understand the nuances involved in the Ideology behind the use of his methodology, we need to look at his works on the revival of Shi'ism, which are mostly in Persian. The scope of this paper is only limited to his book, 'On the Sociology of Islam.'

However, with the focus of this paper being on the methodology adopted by Shari'ati, it agrees that it was apt for studying a profoundly traditional society such as Iran, which has a strong historical tradition of religious dominance in the public sphere and only through such a methodology could one understand religion in such a society and be able to bring about a change.

CONCLUSION

Ali Shari'ati, an ideologue of the Iranian revolution, was able to communicate with the youth through his writings and fiery speeches; and prepared them for the cataclysmic movement. Being both a student of the modern western social sciences and the traditional Islamic sciences, he sought to synthesize the modern scientific tools with religious thought of Islam, in particular with the precept of Shi'ism, to present his sociology of Islam. Shari'ati shifted in his methodology from the classical sociologists Weber and Durkheim, while study religion, as presented in his book '*On the Sociology of Islam.*' In his approach, though trained to be a sociologist, Shari'ati did not adopt the value-neutral approach as expounded by Weber. Shari'ati disagreed with Durkheim's idea that society is the source of religion, but instead, his epistemology was based on the worldview of *tawḥīd*. The tools used by Shari'ati for his theorization was based neither on ethnographic or statistical data like Durkheim or Weber, but instead, the source of his theorization was the Quran. He undertook a Qur'anic exegesis to explain the event of the Quran and re-interpret them. His methodology was different both in its approach and the tools adopted by him to study religion. While considering him as an Ideologue, whose objective was social, political and religious reform, with his methodology, however different

and objected with, he was able to showcase some immediate impact on the society in terms of reform. Ali Shari'ati was indeed a reformist Muslim social thinker.

REFERENCES

Abedi, M. (1986). Ali Shariati: The Architect of The 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran. *Iranian Studies*, *19*(3–4), 229–234. https://doi.org/10.1080/00210868608701678

Alridge, A. (2007). *Religion in Contemporary world*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Byrd, D. J., & Miri, S. J. (Eds.). (2018). *Ali Shariati and the Future of Social Theory: Religion, Revolution, and the Role of the Intellectual*. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004353732

Celarent, B. (2012). On the Sociology of Islam by Ali Shariʾati Marxism and Other Western Fallacies by Ali Shariʾati. *American Journal of Sociology*, *117*(4), 1288–1294. https://doi.org/10.1086/664620

Dabashi, H. (1993). *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*. New York: New York University Press.

David, D. A., & Orenstien, M. (2012). *Sociological theory: Classical statements* (6th ed.). New Delhi: Pearson Education Ltd.

Durkheim, E. (1995). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press.

Fenn, R. K. (2009). *Key thinkers in sociology of religion*. London: Continuum.

Ghamari-Tabrizi, B. (2004). Contentious public religion: Two conceptions of Islam in revolutionary Iran - Ali Shariàti and Abdolkarim Soroush. *International Sociology*, *19*(4), 504–523. https://doi.org/10.1177/0268580904047371

Hall, J. R. (2007). History, Methodologies, and the Study of Religion. In J. A. Beckford & N. J. D. III (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (pp. 167–188). London: Sage Publications.

Hasnanin, N. (2013). Scholars of Islam / Muslims: Ali Shariati. *Islam and Muslim Societies: A Social Science Journal*, *6*(1), 159–161.

Hegazy, H. (2006). Bias in Curricula and Course Contents. In A. M. Elmessiri (Ed.), *Epistemological Bias in the Physical and Social Sciences* (pp. 145–157). Herndon, VA: IIIT.

Hussein, A. (2006). Bias in Western Schools of Thought: Our Heritage as the Starting Point for Development. In A. M. Elmessiri (Ed.), *Epistemological Bias in the Physical and Social Sciences* (pp. 77–104). Herndon, VA: IIIT.

Keddie, N. R. (1981). *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretative History of Modern Iran*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Mahdavi, M. (2014). One Bed and Two Dreams? Contentious Public Religion in the Discourses of Ayatollah Khomeini and Ali Shariati. *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, *43*(1), 25–52. https://doi.org/10.1177/0008429813496102

Means, R. L. (1970). Methodology for the Sociology of Religion: An Historical and Theoretical Overview. *Sociological Analysis*, *31*(4), 180–196. https://doi.org/10.2307/3710087

Mills, C. W. (1959). *Sociological Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rahnema, A. (2000). *An Islamic Utopian: A political biography of Ali Shari'ati*. (I. B. T. Publishers, Ed.). London.

Riis, O. P. (2011). Methodology in social sciences. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Roberts, K. A., & Yamane, D. (2012). *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (5th ed.). Los Angeles: Pine forge press.

Sachedina, A. (1983). Ali Shariati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution. In J. L. Esposito (Ed.), *Voices of Resurgent Islam* (pp. 191–214). New York: Oxford University Press.

Shari'ati, A. (1980). *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*. (Trans by R Campbell, Ed.). Berkely: Mizan Press.

Shari'ati, A. (2009). *Collected Works, 14. Tarikh ve Shenakht Adyan (Revisiting the History of Religions)*. Tehran: Sahami Enteshar Publication.

Shariati, A. (1979). *On the Sociology of Islam*. (Translated by Hamid Algar, Ed.). Berkely: Mizan Press.

Swingwood, A. (1991). *A Short History of Sociological Thought* (Second). New York: St. Martin's Press.

Weber, M. (2001). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Routledge Classics.