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"What is to be Done?" Contesting Modernity in Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati's Islamic Revival

Nicole B. Carroll
Bard College

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“What is to be Done?”
Contesting Modernity in Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati’s Islamic Revival

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Nicole Carroll

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Introduction

Revival, Reform, and Modernity

The onset of colonial modernity presented the Muslim subject with an unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutions, new social modalities, and new anxieties.¹ Industrial production, print media, the steam engine, individualism, secularism, and Enlightenment rationality created as many concerns as opportunities for the “modernized” subject. However, the modernity experienced by the colonial or post-colonial Muslim subject was, in the Western imagination, never quite “modern” enough. Modernization was and continues to be understood as a European process, from where it has been exported via colonization of non-European regions, whose destiny has been to unsuccessfully mimic the historical process of the West.²

Although the interjection of modernity into the intellectual and lived tradition of Islam took varied courses depending on numerous contextual factors of the colonized country, the colonial moment presented a dramatic shift to the global narrative of Islam.³ Alongside the technological advancements of modernity, like the printing press, telegraph, and the steam engine, the ideological relocation of religion outside of the public sphere posed particular challenges to the organization of religious life, in many cases fracturing the authority of the

¹ In what follows, I will refer to “Western modernity” as the processes historically located in “the West” such as the capitalist world-system, the nation-state, the religious-secular binary, communication technologies like the printing press, the commodification of information, the public-private binary, the emphasis on egalitarianism over hierarchy, etc. (Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), 515.

When I use “colonial modernity,” I refer to effects of “Western modernity” on the colonial or post-colonial, imperial or neo-imperial subject.

² Timothy Mitchell, “The Stage of Modernity,” *Questions of Modernity*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 1

³ Sherali Tareen, “Narratives of Emancipation in Modern Islam: Temporality, Hermeneutics, and Sovereignty,” *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 52, No 1, (Spring 2013), 6

'ulama, or Islamic scholars traditionally held to be the custodians of the faith. Modernity also shifted the way in which history, time, and knowledge were formulated, contributing to the reorientation of the conceptual space within which Islam was imagined.⁴

Within the Western imagination, Orientalist scholarship constructed a vision of Islam as a cultural monolith standing in opposition to modernity. Prominent contributors to the Western social science tradition like Marx, Durkheim, and Weber delineated the key traits of modernity mentioned above to Western Europe, perpetuating the notion of a singular modernity that needed to be pushed upon the backward nations of the “Orient.”⁵ This theory of modernization conceptualized modernity as an object, a Western monopoly that could be exported to the Orient. The dichotomy of Occident/Orient, as explained by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), served a critical function in the spread of empire, contributing to the articulation of and justification for the colonial modernizing project.⁶ This Orient/Occident dichotomy marginalized the Muslim subject, inhibiting self-representation. However, as this project will show, through the Islamic revival and reform tradition, Muslims utilized the Orientalist dichotomy to assert their agency within the hegemonic structures of colonial modernity, reflecting the oppressor’s dichotomy as a rhetorical mode of critique. This project analyses how two mid-twentieth century reformers, Egyptian Sayyid Qutb and Iranian Ali Shariati, contend with modernity in their reform projects, paying particular attention to the ways in which their rhetorical methods deconstruct and reconstruct the Orientalist dichotomy of East and West. By analyzing their most influential texts,

⁴ Sherali Tareen, 6

⁵ Armando Salvatore, “Modernity,” *Islamic Political Thought: An Introduction*, ed. Gerhard Bowering, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015) 135

⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage, 1978)

Qutb's *Milestones* and Shariati's *Islamology*, I argue that this de/re-construction is one way in which these thinkers undermine modernity.

As stated above, one of the ways in which Muslims contended with the interruptions of modernity was by reconceptualizing Islam through the tradition of revival (*tajdid*) and reform (*islah*). However, this tradition of revival and reform has been present throughout Islamic history. *Tajdid* stems from the Arabic root *j-d-d*, which connotes newness; *tajdid* is the act of renewal, creation, re-presentation, reorganization. *Islah* emerges from the root *S-l-H* which connotes improvement, reconstruction, and reform. The concept of revival and reform has been used differently by a range of Muslim actors in a variety of contexts, therefore, the meaning, goals, and function of revival and reform changes according to the specific political and social context of a given period in Muslim history.⁷

According to anthropologist Talal Asad, a tradition consists of discourses, or continuing moral arguments, that relate to a past and a future through a present.⁸ In other words, a tradition is the set of discourses that connects a community's past and present through the cultivation of collective memory. Reform is intimately connected to the conceptualization of tradition. Though reform has no singular manifestation, generally reform in Islam wishes to restore the archetypal form of a practice or idea, to recover or rehabilitate a tradition to its imagined original form. In seeking restoration, though, the reformer inevitably risks re-creation.⁹ In this way, one can

⁷ Ebrahim Moosa and Sherali Tareen, "Revival and Reform," *Islamic Political Thought: An Introduction*, ed. Gerhard Bowering (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015) 204

⁸ Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Qui Parle* vol. 17, no. 2, Spring/Summer (2009), 20

⁹ Moosa and Tareen, 204

understand reform as inherently innovative, for in sustaining the the connection between a community's past and present, the reformer also invents that connection. The reformer is both the custodian and the creator of the community's collective memory.

In addition to cultivating the connection between past and present, the project of reform necessitates the identification of the object of reform. Therefore, in identifying the current maladies hindering Islam from becoming its true form, the reformer also produces a definition of Islam that relates to an imagined past, the circumstances of the present, and a vision of the future. Furthermore, the authorization of a reform project often relied upon the contextualization of the questions the reform seeks to answer, and the proposed answers themselves, in the time of the Prophet.¹⁰ By locating these questions and their answers in the community's imagined past, the reformer authorizes his project with the symbolic capital of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad.

This project is a modest attempt to highlight some of the ways in which Muslim reformers contended with modernity in the rhetoric of their reform. In particular I look at the work of two influential mid-twentieth century reformers, Egyptian Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) and Iranian Ali Shariati (1933-1977), who, despite differing contexts, personalities, and objectives, rhetorically engage modernity in comparable ways. This project presents a reading of Qutb and Shariati's work that, through close literary analysis, highlights the ways in which specific rhetorical moves work to undermine hegemonic structures of modernity. Qutb and Shariati's reform projects rely on the rhetorical power of dichotomy, however, in their construction of dichotomies that define Islam in opposition to the West, both Qutb and Shariati draw from

¹⁰ Moosa and Tareen, 205

“secular” “Western” ideological structures. I do not wish to suggest that this indicates the failure of their rhetoric to critique modernity, rather, I argue that through utilizing vocabulary from the Western philosophical tradition and the Islamic tradition, Qutb and Shariati subvert the narrative of modernity in which modernity characterizes itself as a distinctive break from the past. Both thinkers employ rhetorical methods rooted in the revival and reform tradition which work to subvert modern time-space in their construction of rival timelines.

The first chapter of this project introduces the reader to Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati in their personal and political contexts. This chapter frames the following chapters by highlighting the intertwining of thought and context, exploring how the life experiences, political, and historical forces frame and constrain the arguments of their reform.

Utilizing the lens introduced in the first chapter, the second chapter analyses the relationship between two rhetorical methods employed in Qutb’s *Milestones* (1964) and Shariati’s *Islamology* (1968): the refashioning of classical Islamic terms and their placement in dichotomies. Through textual analysis I show the ways in which the construction of dichotomy allows both Qutb and Shariati to present a narrative of history that is legitimized through the refashioning of classical Islamic terms. This chapter highlights the ways in which Qutb and Shariati utilize the Orientalist dichotomous framework of Islam versus the West to frame the critique of their reform. The reformers re-contextualize the Orientalist dichotomy within the memory of the Islamic past through the refashioning of classical Islamic terms and characters. Through these rhetorical methods, the reformers legitimize their project by linking their contemporary moment to the contents of the Qur’an and the memory of the Prophet.

The third chapter takes a closer look at Qutb and Shariati's conceptualization of time and history, paying particular attention to reformers' use of secular ideological infrastructures in their imagining of the Islamic past. Throughout *Milestones*, Qutb argues against nationalism as a means of Muslim liberation, characterizing nationalist government as a rejection of God's sovereignty. While he rejects the nation-state, Qutb simultaneously utilizes its ideological infrastructure to imagine the ideal *umma* in seventh century Medina. The amalgamation of secular and Islamic ideologies appears in Shariati's writing as well. In his essays "The Philosophy of History: Cain and Abel" and "The Dialectic of Sociology," Shariati utilizes Marxist historical analysis as a vehicle of imagining the socialist condition of primordial time. The implementation of secular ideologies and modern structures in Qutb and Shariati's reform complicates the dichotomies discussed in the last chapter, however, it is through this complication that Qutb and Shariati pose a challenge to modernity; by locating modern political structures, like socialism, capitalism, and the nation-state, in the Islamic past, Qutb and Shariati subvert modernity's self narrative, which articulates itself as a distinctive break from the past, forever moving forward toward the future. Qutb and Shariati challenge this linear timeline by constructing alternative timelines that bend and twist modernity's straight and narrow track. By looking at the specific arguments made by Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati, this project wishes to articulate some of the ways in which twentieth century Muslims utilized the revival and reform tradition to contend with the issues raised by their contemporary situations.

Chapter One
Cultivating an Ideology of Reform:
The Life and Times of Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati

Dubbed by scholars as two of the most influential ideologues of the Islamic Revival, Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) and Ali Shariati (1933-1977) expressed visions of Islam that were at once particular to their specific historical context and universally revolutionary. This project offers a reading of Qutb and Shariati's work which understands their universal message in the context of their political and personal experiences that are located within a broader intellectual and historical context. This chapter details the biographies of Qutb and Shariati in order to contextualize their personal experiences within their political and historical conditions to inform particular rhetorical methods of their reform I take up in the following chapters. Rather than separate the biographies of Qutb and Shariati into disconnected blocks of text, I have chosen to weave their narratives together in order to visualize the parallel paths of their lives. Although these reformers were separated by land, language, and circumstance, their work converses on the question of Islam in colonial modernity. Despite differing political situations, Qutb and Shariati conceive a reform which centers temporal revolution against injustice, in particular, against tyrannical government. In this chapter I invoke Qutb and Shariati's contexts to highlight the intertwining of thought and context in order to explore how life experiences, political, and historical forces frame the ways in which they construct their reform.

The Beginning

Sayyid Qutb was born in 1906 in the town of Qaha in Asyut Province, Middle Egypt. The oldest of five children, the majority of Qutb's siblings would too become active in Islamist movements throughout their lives. His brother Muhammad would become known for his writing on Islamic

activism, his sister, Hamidah would be imprisoned for seven years for her involvement in the Muslim Brotherhood, and another sister, Aminad, would write for several Islamist periodicals.¹¹ The year Qutb was born, a confrontation broke out between the residents of the village of Dinshaway and occupying British soldiers. Although nominally a part of the Ottoman Empire, Egypt had been occupied by Britain since 1882. In the summer of 1906, British soldiers stationed in Dinshaway hunted for sport the pigeons who were a local source of income. Agitated, several residents confronted the soldiers and in the midst of the struggle, a soldier's gun was fired, wounding a local woman. Although only one soldier died, likely due to heatstroke, British authorities responded harshly, setting up a tribunal to try the villagers for the death of the officer. The severity of the trial proceedings and their resulting punishments sparked an outpouring of emotion from Egyptians that was utilized by Mustafa Kamil, who would become the leader of Egypt's nationalist movement, to rally up Egyptian anti-occupation and nationalist sympathies.¹² The next year, the National Party was founded.¹³

Qutb's father, al-Hajj Qutb Bin Ibrahim was a delegate to Kamil's National Party and hosted many political meetings in his home. Qutb's parents cultivated in their children a sense of deep religious devotion that would prove to be the cornerstone of their intellectual development. By the age of ten, Qutb memorized the Qur'an. This particularly pleased his mother, to whom he later dedicated his Qur'anic exegesis; in his introduction he recounted how she would sit and

¹¹ Albert J. Bergesen, "Sayyid Qutb in historical context," *The Sayyid Qutb Reader: Selected Writings on Politics, Religion, and Society*. ed. Albert J. Bergesen, (New York: Routledge, 2008)

¹² The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Dinshaway Incident," In *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Last modified September 8, 2008, Accessed May 1, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dinshaway-Incident>.

¹³ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Mustafa Kamil," In *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Last modified July 15, 2008, Accessed May 1, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mustafa-Kamil>

listen with visible pleasure to Qur'anic recitations on the radio or during recitations she often sponsored in their home. Another of his exegetical works is dedicated to his father, "You planted in my consciousness while I was a small child—the fear of the Last Day. You did not preach to me, nor did you reprimand me, but you lived with an awareness of the Last Day."¹⁴ At the age of thirteen, Qutb was sent to Cairo to continue his education and in 1929, he entered Dar al-Ulum's Teacher's Training College, where in 1933 he received his BA in education.

The same year Qutb received his diploma from Dar al-Ulum, Ali Shariati was born in a small village in the Northeast of Iran during the reign of Reza Shah. Like Qutb, Shariati was born into a country torn by political tensions—inspired by Mustafa Kemal's secularization of the former center of the Ottoman Caliphate, the Shah implemented "forced secularization policies" which worked to minimize the power of the Shia clergy. As a part of his modernization process, the Shah implemented policies that regulated religion to nonpolitical spaces.¹⁵ Reza Shah's policies aimed to de-politicize the clergy by "modernizing" the legal system, reducing the role of the religious courts by implementing a number of requirements in order to practice law. National secular dress codes also served to bring the clerics under the control of the state. In order to dress in the traditional clerical frock and turban, one must be registered with the state. By banning formerly public religious ceremonies, like Murharram parades and passion plays, the Shah attempted to re-locate religion to the private sphere.¹⁶

¹⁴ Yvonne Y. Haddad, "Sayyid Qutb: Ideologue of Islamic Revival" *Voices of Resurgent Islam* ed. J Esposito (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) 94

¹⁵ Gelvin "State Building by Revolution and Conquest" *The Modern Middle East: A History*. 4th ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) 210-211

¹⁶ Gelvin 210-211

In the brief period of time after the deposition of Reza Shah, there was a breakdown of the centralized and autocratic political system which allowed space for ideological developments. Founded only a month after the Allied invasion of Iran in 1941, the communist Tudeh Party began its recruitment, finding support throughout Northern Iran, including Mashad, Iran's second largest city and home to Iranian intellectual Ali Shariati.¹⁷

1933-1950

Ali Shariati was born in 1933 in a village outside of Mashad, in the Khorasan province in Northeastern Iran. It was in Mashad that his father, Mohammad Taqi Shariati, a reform-minded cleric, ran a religious lecture hall and taught Qur'an at the local high school. From very early on, Mohammad Taqi fostered young Ali's intellectual training: "It was he who first taught me the art of thinking and the art of being a human."¹⁸ Shariati grew up in the intellectual tradition of his father, spending hours in his library, reading scripture and the works of great Shi'i thinkers. Mohammad Taqi was a passionate teacher who tried to convey to his students the urgency to act in their present moment, he wanted his students to cultivate a sense of responsibility to respond to their current conditions.¹⁹ In 1941, when Shariati was eight years old, the Allies invaded Iran, forcing the Axis-sympathizing Reza Shah to abdicate his throne. His son, Mohammad Reza, took his place. For a period of time after the departure of Reza Shah, Iran experienced a stretch of political freedom that fostered the growth of new social, philosophical, political, and religious thought. During this time, the Marxist Tudeh party emerged, and the thought of Muslim reformer

¹⁷ Gelvin 210-211

¹⁸ Sachedina, Abdulaziz. "Ali Shariati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution" *Voices of Resurgent Islam*, ed. J Esposito (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) 193

¹⁹ Ali Rahnama *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati*. (London and New York: I.B. Taurus Publishers, 2000) 11-12

Ahmad Kasravi spread to the alarm of the *'ulama*. Kasravi was critical of the veneration of the Imams, deriding the building of and pilgrimage to shrines as idolatry and mocked the concept of mediation, which describes the Imams' intercession on a sinner's behalf on Judgement Day if, during his life, the sinner mourned the Imams, visited their shrines, and petitioned them with prayers. Kasravi was critical of the *'ulama* for promoting these "superstitions," he considered his contemporary Islam to be a morally bankrupt institution run by clerics. He believed the object of Islam was to benefit people by solving daily problems like poverty and illness.²⁰

A year before the Allied invasion of Iran, Sayyid Qutb began his eight-year long post as inspector in Egypt's Ministry of Education, where he planned several educational reform projects.²¹ During this time, Qutb wrote works of fiction, poems, and literary criticism. His role at the Ministry was able to nourish his literary career by putting him in contact with many of the influential literary figures of his day. His mentor, journalist and literary critic Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, introduced Qutb to the editors of several newspapers for whom he would later write numerous articles over the course of his career. A major advisor to the Ministry of Education and the figurehead of the Egyptian literary renaissance, Taha Husayn encouraged Qutb's work.²² Qutb writing mostly consisted of short stories and poetry, though he wrote several autobiographical works. After 1945, his writing took a political turn. Qutb's work shifted from

²⁰ Rahnema 8

²¹ Bergesen 3

²² Shahrough Akhavi "Sayyid Qutb" *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* ed. J Esposito vol. 3. (Oxford University Press, 1995) 400-401

literature to the social and political problems facing Egypt, around this time his work reflected his particular interest in nationalism.²³

While Shariati was still in high school, Mohammad Taqi, as a response to the growing secularization of Iranian youth and the fast growing presence of the Tudeh party in Northern Iran, founded the Center for the Propagation of Islamic Truths in 1947. The objective of the Center was to defend Islam from secular or Tudeh critique using scientific and rational sources, to teach the Qur'an in an accessible manner, to create a platform for religious debate, and to house and propagate Islamic literature.²⁴ The Center offered a space for Modernist discourse that promoted progressive socio-political ideas.

The Center was not the only place Shariati was exposed to leftist Islam. Around the same time the Center was founded, Shariati and Mohammad Taqi joined a group called The Movement of God-Worshipping Socialists, the first group in Iran that attempted to synthesize Iranian Shi'ism with European socialism.²⁵ The Movement professed many of the ideas and thoughts circulated by members of the Center, and thus attracted many of the Center's young and politicized members. The Movement of God-Worshipping Socialists upheld socialism as an economic system that promoted social justice and monotheism as its theoretical foundation. The Movement believed that the eradication of exploitation and poverty was the essence of justice in Islam. They criticized materialism, arguing that socialism could only work in conjunction with the sacrifice and altruism promoted by Islam—thus, faith in God and the struggle for socialism

²³ Bergesen 3

²⁴ Rahnema 14-15

²⁵ Abrahamian, Evrand. "Ali Shariati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution" *MERIP Reports*, no. 102, Islam and Politics (Jan 1982) 25

and social justice were intrinsically linked.²⁶ Later on, Shariati would expand on this conviction in his reconceptualization of Islam as a comprehensive system, a unified world-view of tawhid, that provided Muslims a means to achieve salvation in the present through religious reform and political revolution.

Muhammad Taqi's Center had been open for a year when the Egyptian Ministry of Education dispatched Sayyid Qutb to the United States to study Western educational methods. After landing in New York in November of 1948, Qutb moved on to Washington, D.C., where he attended Wilson's Teacher's College. Qutb took issue with the spiritual emptiness he observed while living in New York and Washington, he later described the America he saw as "a reckless deluded herd that only knows lust and money."²⁷

While in Washington, news traveled to Qutb of the death of Hassan al-Banna, leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. Although Qutb was not yet involved with the Brotherhood, the news came as a great shock, he and al-Banna had never met, but they knew each other by reputation. The event of al-Banna's death would create a leadership opening in the Brotherhood which Qutb would fill upon his return. After attending a dinner party in Washington hosted by British Orientalist James Heyworth-Dunne, Qutb decided after hours of Heyworth-Dunne lecturing him on the dangers of the Muslim Brotherhood that he would enter the Brotherhood upon his return to Egypt.²⁸ In the summer of 1949, Qutb moved to Greeley, Colorado to attend the Colorado State College of Education. The small town of Greeley was very different from the

²⁶ Rahnema 24-27

²⁷ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (New York: Random House, 2006) 15

²⁸ Lawrence Wright, 20

bustling, vice-driven cities of New York and Washington, but Qutb saw in the citizens of Greeley the same disturbing traits present in the metropolis.²⁹

The 1950s

Qutb returned in 1950 to a politically frenzied Egypt. Humiliated by the 1948 war against Israel, Egyptians mistrusted their submissive government, and their weak King Farouk. Undercurrents of revolution were in the air. A year after his return, Qutb was offered a position as assistant to the Minister of Education which he refused due to disagreements over governmental education policies and submission to British authority. Free of ministerial duties, Qutb joined the Muslim Brotherhood who welcomed him with open arms. Published two years prior, *Social Justice in Islam* expressed a vision of Islam many members of the Brotherhood found appealing—Qutb’s vision of an Islamic society promised a freedom under limited government, within which Muslims would live only under the sovereignty of God and never under a tyrant. The government of this society would only be responsible for upholding *sharia* and collecting *zakat*, and the Qur’an would be the only guide Muslims would follow, leading to an egalitarian society free of capitalist greed.³⁰

After Shariati graduated high school, with encouragement from his father, he entered the Teacher’s Training College in 1950. The air in the city was politically charged—three years before the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian oil company and the coup that ousted Mosaddeq, students in pro-Mosaddeq groups frequently clashed with pro-Soviet Tudeh party members. Shariati was frequently involved in these fights, more often than not instigating them by agitating

²⁹ Lawrence Wright, 20-27

³⁰ Elizabeth F. Thompson. “Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati: The Idea of Islamic Revolution in Egypt and Iran.” *Justice Interrupted* (Harvard University Press, 2013) 281

his Tudeh classmates in open-air debates. In 1952 Shariati graduated from the Teacher's Training College and began teaching at a primary school near Mashad. The next year, Mossadeq was removed from his seat as Prime Minister in a CIA/MI6 orchestrated coups. Shariati's allegiance to the nationalists would last for only two more years, when his dismay over the fractured political scene would cause him to retreat from politics.³¹

The tension that riddled the Egypt to which Qutb returned would break in 1952 with the Free Officer's coup. Fueled by a powerful Egyptian nationalism, the coup ousted the monarchy and established a secular nationalist government headed by Gamal Abdul Nasser.³² Initially, the Muslim Brotherhood supported the Free Officers, who promised drastic reform and an end to British occupation. Qutb was the vehicle through which the Free Officers and the Muslim Brotherhood communicated; one of the only civilians allowed to attend meetings of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) and head of the government mass mobilization Liberation Rally, Qutb hosted Nasser in his home shortly before the coup.³³ However, this friendship was not meant to last. Leading up to the coup, the different language employed by the Muslim Brotherhood and the nationalists to articulate their vision for Egypt worked in favor of the revolution. The Muslim Brotherhood's Islamicized language spoke to Egyptians who were unresponsive to the nationalist movement or alienated from the political sphere.³⁴ However, it soon became clear that the visions of Egypt held by the Brotherhood and the RCC could not be

³¹ Chatterjee, Kingshuk. *Ali Shariati and the Shaping of Political Islam in Iran* (New York: Palsgrave Macmillan, 2011) 76

³² Derek Hopwood, Peter M. Holt, et. al. "Egypt" In *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Last modified September 15, 2016, Accessed May 1, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Egypt/World-War-II-and-its-aftermath>

³³ Shahrough Akhavi "Sayyid Qutb" 403

³⁴ Gelvin 207-208

reconciled. The nationalists in power were more interested in land reform than religious reform, and envisioned Egypt as a modern socialist state freed of colonial oppression. The Muslim Brotherhood's vision of Egypt included the anti-colonial aspect of the nationalists, however, the Brotherhood's Egypt was a society governed by *shari'a*, a system of Islamic law derived from the Qur'an and the Sunnah, rather than secular socialist policies. Their standoff came to a head in October 1954 when, during a speech, shots were fired at Nasser. Qutb was caught up in the sweeping arrests that followed. In July of 1955, he was sentenced to fifteen years in prison.

The 1960s

In 1958, while Qutb was serving his time in prison, Shariati enrolled in Mashad University to study French and Arabic. Throughout his higher education, Shariati was still very involved in the Center for the Propagation of Islamic Truths, frequently giving lectures and writing long letters to the young participants urging religious awareness and critical thought. His relationship with his students, the youth of the Center, and his teachers cultivated within Shariati an awareness of the importance of the role of the intellectual as a leader in society.³⁵ This awareness found its way into Shariati's reformist thought, in which he imagined the intelligentsia as leaders of a revolution within Islam.

The same year, the Shah announced that high-ranking university graduates would be sent abroad to continue their higher education. Upon his graduation in 1960, Shariati received a state-sponsored scholarship to the Sorbonne to study for his doctorate. The discipline of his doctoral studies is not agreed upon in biographical scholarship—Abrahamian states Shariati received his PhD in sociology and Islamic history, Chatterjee and Sachedina argue his PhD was in medieval

³⁵Abdulaziz Sachedina 192-193

Persian literature. Ali Rahnema, Shariati's primary biographer, offers some clarity to the source of the confusion: Shariati's thesis was submitted to the Sorbonne's *Faculty Des Lettres et Sciences Humaines*, theses in history, sociology, or literature would all be submitted to this Faculty, and as was the case at the time, doctoral diplomas would not bear the field of a student's doctoral work. However, based on an official document from the Sorbonne and the subject of this thesis, Rahnema concludes that Shariati graduated with a doctorate in the history of Medieval Islam with a focus in Persian hagiography.³⁶ However, Abrahamian's conclusions mostly reflect Shariati's coursework while at the Sorbonne, that is to say, Shariati enveloped himself in the analytical and critical school of French sociology.³⁷ While at the Sorbonne, Shariati worked closely with several distinguished French intellectuals, whose thought would later inspire much of Shariati's reform. His teachers included the Orientalist Louis Massignon, Jacques Berque, a prominent sociologist of Islam, and George Gurvich, a Russian-Jewish sociologist.³⁸

Shariati worked closely with Massignon during his time at the Sorbonne, serving as his research assistant between 1960 and 1962. Shariati helped Massignon gather documents for his last work, a biography of the Prophet's daughter Fatima, which Shariati would later engage in a 1972 lecture, "Fatima is Fatima," in which he meditated on the role of women in Islam. He began his lecture by paying homage to Massignon, stating that his lecture was only a report on Massignon's work. Shariati characterizes his relationship with Massignon in terms of mystical adoration, Massignon was a 'thunderbolt' that struck the young scholar. Shariati compared the

³⁶ Rahnema 118-119

³⁷ Sachedina 194

³⁸ Chatterjee 77

significance of meeting Massignon to the first encounter between Rumi and his mentor Shams-e Tabriz; one can gather that Shariati considered Massignon as more than an academic teacher, but rather as a Sufi sheikh.³⁹ However, Shariati did not quite realize the impact of this relationship until he left Paris and became interested in Sufism.

Massignon's conceptualization of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as three branches of the Abrahamic faith, according to Shariati's biographer Ali Rahnema, "left an indelible mark" on Shariati's understanding of Islam.⁴⁰ Impacted by Rumi's similar message, Shariati embraced this view of religion in his lectures, urging listeners to transcend their differences in the search for a common truth. This understanding of religion permeates his call for socio-political action, "In reality Islam is the doctrine that Abraham introduced," Shariati stated in 1972, "if one regards Islamology from this perspective, it contains Christianity, Judaism and Islam... Thus Islam is one religion of different manifestations."⁴¹ The understanding of Islam as a unitary truth grounds Shariati's call to revolution, in other words, the expression of Islam, or radical monotheism, in society was the establishment of unity among mankind. In Shariati's reconceptualization of Islam, a Christian or a Jew struggling against injustice was more of a Muslim than a member of the *'ulama* who maintained the status quo. Shariati found the perfect manifestation of this theory in his sociology professor George Gurvich.

Shariati admired the political and moral courage of George Gurvich, professor of sociology at the Sorbonne. Gurvich was a Jewish-Russian emigrant, who was staunchly anti-Stalinist and outspoken in his opposition to the French colonial occupation of Algeria. In

³⁹ Rahnema 120-121

⁴⁰ Rahnema 122

⁴¹ Rahnema 122

Gurvich, Shariati found a crusader against injustice who he later considered to be a spiritual brother.⁴² In a letter to his father written in 1972, Shariati, under attack by conservative clergy, referred to Gurvich as “a model to be emulated...[as someone] who had spend all his life fighting against fascism, Stalinist dictatorship and French colonialism in Algeria...[he is] closer to the spirit of Shi‘ism than Ayatollah Milani.”⁴³ Shariati considered a Jewish man struggling for the social and economic rights of others as a monotheistic brother. Milani on the other hand, despite his alleged piety, was a polytheistic foe for maintaining the status quo at the expense of the oppressed.⁴⁴ Throughout his career as a public intellectual, Shariati and the *‘ulama* had a hostile relationship. Shariati’s understanding of Islam as an inherently revolutionary religion was the primary source from which he derived his critique of the *‘ulama*, who were generally accepted as the authoritative voice of Islam. Ayatollah Milani was a high-ranking member of the *‘ulama* who, along with other clerics and ayatollahs, participated in a campaign to condemn Shariati as an apostate for questioning their clerical authority. They accused Shariati of having an instrumentalist relation to Islam, of collaborating with SAVAK to destroy Islam from within, of downplaying the differences between Sunni and Shi‘i Islam. Many members of the *‘ulama* issued *fatwas* condemning his “Islamic ideology” as heresy, and banned their followers from attending his lectures.⁴⁵ Despite this powerful opposition, Shariati remained steadfast in his critique.

⁴² Rahnema 123

⁴³ Behrooz Ghamari-Tabrizi, *Foucault in Iran: Islamic Revolution after the Enlightenment*, (University of Minnesota, 2016) 90

⁴⁴ Ghamari-Tabrizi 90, Rahnema 124

⁴⁵ Ghamari-Tabrizi 87

Studying under Gurvich, Shariati received a thorough account of current theories and debates happening in the contemporary field of sociology. Through his lectures, Gurvich presented a practice of critically employing particular sociological methodologies; Gurvich would frequently utilize Marxist analysis while criticizing other aspects of Marx's thought. Shariati would later absorb this practice into his own methodology by incorporating an idea, reinterpreting it in relation to a particular topic, and transforming the idea into a tool for political action.⁴⁶ Later, I will highlight this method in Shariati's re-telling of the story of Cain and Abel, in which he utilizes Marx's philosophy of history to transform the Qur'anic story into a cosmological battle transcending time-space.

Shariati also developed a close relationship to sociologist Jacques Berque, with whom he audited a class on the sociology of Islam. Shariati claimed that it was Berque who "showed [him] what religion was and who revealed to [him] how one could observe the world through a sociological perspective."⁴⁷ Shariati later employed this sociological perspective in his Islamic ideology which builds upon a sociology of Islam that situates man in a dialectical contradiction between two opposing structures. Shariati was most struck by the concept of *degree de signification*, which refers to the "real" meaning of words. Shariati understood this to mean that despite the literal meaning of words, their purpose and intent was subject to change based on their context. Idle words in one context in another can be used as tools of political change. Shariati frequently utilized this method by re-contextualizing classical Islamic terms or figures, invigorating these terms or figures with revolutionary meaning. In doing so, Shariati utilized

⁴⁶ Rahnema 122

⁴⁷ Rahnema 126

vocabulary from both the Islamic tradition and the Western philosophical tradition in his “sociology of Islam.” According to Rahnema, Shariati “took each commonly used term in the vocabulary of every Muslim and reinterpreted it until gentle lullabies became electric currents.”⁴⁸

In Paris at the height of the Algerian and Cuban revolutions, Shariati immersed himself in the city’s radical political scene. He joined the pro-Mosaddeq Iranian Student Confederation, and edited two journals, “Free Iran” and “Pars Letter,” both pro-nationalist publications.⁴⁹ At the University’s *Restaurant Musulman*, Shariati spent time with students from Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and the Congo who through conversation taught him about the sociopolitical conditions of their countries. These experience-centered conversations supplemented the theoretically heavy discussions of anti-colonial independence struggles happening within the classrooms of Massignon, Gurvich, and Berque.

Although not his teacher per se, Algerian liberationist Frantz Fanon also became one of Shariati’s influential interlocutors. Building upon the language of Fanon, Shariati’s work calls for a “return to the self,” or *bazgasht*. In his work “Bazgasht be Khishtan” (1967), Shariati locates the “self” outside of one’s corporal body. The “self” Shariati speaks of is a part of a collective Iranian consciousness that has been barred from experiencing this collective consciousness due to the pervasiveness of Western imperialism.⁵⁰ The first step for the colonized subject to regain his autonomy from the colonizer is to return to their indigenous tradition, using the elements of this tradition to rebuild the identity from which they have been alienated. Shariati criticized the

⁴⁸ Rahnema 126

⁴⁹ Abrahamian 25

⁵⁰ Davari, Arash. “A Return to Which Self? Ali Shariati and Frantz Fanon on the Political Ethics of Insurrectionary Violence.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* Vol 34, No. 1, 2014

Iranian intellectual class of perpetuating this alienation in their captivation with materialism, he believed, in contrast to Fanon, that only distinctly Islamic language could reach the Iranian people and guide them toward a return to the self.⁵¹ Shariati was so taken with Fanon that he translated a number of his works into Persian, including *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Five Years of the Algerian War (A Dying Colonialism)*.

Upon his return to Iran in 1964, Shariati was arrested for taking part in anti-Shah demonstrations in Paris. While Shariati was entering prison, Qutb was being released, at least for the time being. Due to the intervention of Iraqi president, ‘Abd al-Salam ‘Arif, Qutb was released ten years into his sentence. His time in prison was spent mostly in the infirmary, where he recovered from injuries of torture. He frequently witnessed the torture of his fellow Muslim Brothers and in 1957, witnessed the killing of twenty-one Muslim Brotherhood inmates after they refused to complete their back-breaking labor.⁵² Despite, or perhaps because of the emotional and physical trauma of his successive injuries, Qutb was extremely prolific while imprisoned. Between 1953 and 1964 he wrote his thirty volume Qur’an exegesis, *In the Shade of the Qur’an*, and began producing drafts of what was to become his most influential work, *Milestones*. It is possible that Qutb’s horror at the brutality with which the prisoners were treated and Nasser’s dictatorial mode of governance significantly shaped two critical aspects of Qutb’s eventual critique: his rejection of worldly authority in favor of the all-encompassing sovereignty of God, and the classification of the ignorance of temporal authority as the most heinous sin of

⁵¹ Arash Davari, “A Return to Which Self? Ali Shariati and Frantz Fanon on the Political Ethics of Insurrectionary Violence,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* Vol 34, No. 1, 2014

⁵² Shahrough Akhavi, “Sayyid Qutb,” Bergesen 4

mankind.⁵³ Upon his release in 1964, *Milestones* was published. Circulating first among the Brotherhood, the radical text eventually made its way into the hands of government officials who arrested Qutb on charges of terrorism and sedition.⁵⁴ The only evidence prosecutors put forth against Qutb was *Milestones*, which presents an alternative to colonial modernity that places temporal political action at the center of Islam. Apocalyptic in tone, *Milestones* denounces popular sovereignty and expresses discontent in the present state of Islam in which men submit to other men rather than God alone. *Milestones* presents a plan for reform that hinges on the organization of the Muslim community within an Islamic state that differs from the liberal vision proposed in *Social Justice in Islam* (1948), which describes a self-regulating society living under a democratically elected ruler and legislature.⁵⁵ In *Milestones*, however, Qutb seems to have lost his faith in the ability of the majority of Muslims to achieve this goal, and introduces the character of the vanguard who must lead the Muslim community. Through metaphorically rich descriptions of moments in Islamic history, Qutb puts forth a critique of the nationalist government, though never explicitly calling for armed revolution against the Nasser regime. Despite lack of incontrovertible evidence, Qutb was sentenced to death. As protestors flooded the streets of Cairo, the regime rethought the effect of sending a figure like Qutb to the gallows. Qutb, however, deeply understood the consequences of his death, “Write the words,” he said to his sister Hamida who visited him before his death, “My words will be stronger if they kill

⁵³ Bergesen 4

⁵⁴ Shahrough Akhavi, “Sayyid Qutb”

⁵⁵ Elizabeth F. Thompson, “Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati: The Idea of Islamic Revolution in Egypt and Iran” *Justice Interrupted* (Harvard University Press, 2013) 281

me.”⁵⁶ Qutb was hanged on the morning of August 29, 1966. He was buried by government officials in an undisclosed location, for fear that his grave might become a shrine to his followers.⁵⁷

After his six-month imprisonment, Shariati applied for a number of teaching positions until he was appointed to the University of Mashad in 1966. It was there that Shariati taught a series on the sociology of Islam, his course titled *Islamshenasi*, taught in the 1966-1967 academic year, was later published as a book in January of 1969. These lectures and their subsequent text contain elements of the ideas on which Shariati shaped his career and defined his reform. *Islamshenasi* presented an egalitarian Islam as the religion’s true and original form and identified the obstacles current Islam must overcome to realize this ideal Islam. The argument of *Islamshenasi* shows why Muslims, in order to follow what Shariati names as the most fundamental aspect of the religion, must challenge and ultimately eliminate these obstacles.⁵⁸ The popularity, unorthodox style, and anti-Pahlavi undertones of Shariati’s lectures led to his eventual dismissal from the university, headed at the time by conservative pro-monarchists.⁵⁹

The 1970s

Beginning in 1968, Shariati frequently gave lectures at the Husayniya Ershad, a religious institution dedicated to the veneration of the Imam Husayn and his sacrifice at the Battle of Karbala. His lectures at the Husayniya had a nationwide impact due to the public nature of the forum, compared to his courses at the University of Mashad. The institution of the Husayniya,

⁵⁶ Wright 36

⁵⁷ Haddad 78

⁵⁸ Rahnama 196

⁵⁹ Sachedina 195

present in Iran since the Safavid dynasty, provided popular preachers, religious leaders, and intellectuals a platform to narrate the events leading to the battle of Karbala. This ritual retelling of history is critical to arousing the sympathetic emotions of participants, who lament the loss of Husayn in his battle with the oppressive Umayyads. In twentieth century Iran, it was not uncommon for the Muharram gatherings at Husayniyas to take on a political character. Therefore, the method and content of Shariati's politically charged lectures was not necessarily revolutionary within the history of the Husayniya, however the popularity and subversive content of his lectures were likely to have led to the State's suspension of the Husayniya Ershad's activities in 1975.⁶⁰

From February to mid-November of 1972, Shariati gave a set of lectures at the Husayniya modeled after his *Islamshenasi* course at Mashad. In these lectures, Shariati conveyed to the diverse attendees the details of his reformist project, or what he termed "the Islamic Ideology." These lectures described a sociology, philosophy of history, and an anthropology emerging from a worldview of *tawhid*. Shariati described a dialectical model of understanding history in which a class struggle is played out in the clash of Cain and Abel, of *shirk* (idolatry or polytheism) and *tawhid* (monotheism). His anthropology reflects this historical dialectic with the fight between God and Iblis continuing within every man. Through this dialectic, history moves forward, and man, in cultivating his essence as the ideal vicegerent, ushers in the establishment of the *umma* and the subsequent triumph of *tawhid* over *shirk* that will mark the end of history.⁶¹ Shariati's

⁶⁰ Sachedina 196, Jean Calmard, "Hosayniya." In *Encyclopedia Iranica*, edited by Encyclopedia Iranica, Last modified December 15, 2004, Accessed May 1, 2017, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/hosayniya>.

⁶¹ Hamid Dabashi, "Ali Shariati: The Islamic Ideologue Par Excellence" *Theology of Discontent* (New York University Press, 1993)128-129

dialectic constructs a revolutionary cosmology that places liberation from temporal tyranny at the center of Islam.

In 1972, due to widespread criticism of the Shah, the regime utilized the power of the state to silence voices of opposition. The political impact of Shariati's Husayniya lectures led to his arrest by the regime in 1973, two years before the suspension of Husayniya Ershad. Due to the outcry of intellectuals associated with Third World and Algerian liberation movements, Shariati was released from prison in 1975, he remained under house arrest until 1977. In the same year, he was permitted to leave Iran and travel to Europe where, shortly upon his arrival in England, he died. According to Rahnema, the coroner's report issued on June 21, 1977 identified the cause of death as cardiac failure.⁶² However, the circumstances of Shariati's death are highly contested due to his negative relationship with the Pahlavi regime, and the frequency of disappearing political enemies. It is commonly held that Shariati died under mysterious circumstances that suggest the involvement of SAVAK, the regime's secret police.⁶³ The importance of Shariati to many revolutionaries, and his subsequent saintly status in post-revolution Iran contribute to the hagiographical way in which he and his death are imagined. Shariati was buried in Damascus next to the shrine of Zaynab, Imam Husayn's sister and heroine of Karbala with whom Shariati greatly identified, for without Zaynab, the revolutionary message of Husayn would have died with him.⁶⁴

⁶² Rahnema 368

⁶³ Sachedina 196

⁶⁴ Rahnema 368

The Life of an Ideologue

When Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati are discussed together in scholarship, their biographies are typically separated into disconnected blocks of text. This method constructs two linear narratives that are only connected after the fact, that is, within the work of the scholar. However, for a period of thirty years, Qutb and Shariati's lives were lived concurrently. In order to visualize the thinkers as contemporaries, I have chosen to weave together their biographies to create a narrative arc that represents the simultaneity of their lived experience, while maintaining the particularities of their individual social and political contexts.

While Shariati was deeply engrossed in the radical politics of Paris, exploring the Fanonian Third Worldism and Marxist sociology that would later appear in his work, Qutb was experiencing the tail end of his prison sentence, watching his fellow Muslim Brotherhood members being tortured by prison guards. These concurrent events left a lasting impression on the ideologues, contributing to the tone and mode of their reform. Scholars link Qutb's imprisonment to the radicalization of his thought; years of torturous hard labor and witnessing the murder of his fellow Muslim Brotherhood members at the hands of nationalist prison guards seems to have inspired in him a vehemence toward not only Egyptian Nasserist nationalists, but an outright rejection of secular nationalism as a vehicle of Muslim liberation. However, as I will later show, Qutb's zealous rejection of nationalism in *Milestones* plays out in an interesting way: although he rejects the ideology of nationalism, the language Qutb uses to describe the ideal Islamic society of the *umma* relies on the infrastructure of the nation in order to advance its goals. Qutb's use of the term *jahiliyya* can also be interpreted as a reflection of his prison experience. His letters written to friends back in Egypt describing the vanity and godlessness of

America and the brutality he both experienced and witnessed in prison can be understood as developments in Qutb's conceptualization of *jahiliyya* as the current godless state of society.

Although Shariati was exposed to Marxism, communism, and socialism at a young age from the Tudeh Party and the God-Worshipping Socialists, Shariati's time in Paris seems to have had a specially impact in the development of his Marxist thought. What might be seen as a love-hate relationship with Marxism is transformed into a coherent mode of analysis when read with an awareness of Shariati's engagement with interlocutors like Gurvich and Fanon.

Islamic reform and revival are products of the changing circumstances of the Islamic community, therefore I begin this project with a focus on the particulars of Qutb and Shariati's personal lives and political situation in order to contextualize the questions their reform seeks to address, the problems it seeks to remedy. Both Qutb and Shariati's reform gravitates around the reconceptualization of terms and characters from the Islamic tradition; although this method is common throughout Islamic history, the way in which Qutb and Shariati refashion these terms is particular to their surrounding conditions. While their personal and political context informs my reading, in what follows I will broaden the scope by looking at the ways in which modernity frames and constrains the method and content of Qutb and Shariati's reform

Chapter Two

Rupture and Reinscription:

The Refashioning Terms, Dichotomy, and Dialectic in the Revival Narrative

This chapter will analyze one of the key methods of constructing a reform/revival argument for Qutb and Shariati, the implementation of classical Islamic terms in dichotomies. I will relate these rhetorical choices to motifs of the revival and reform tradition, and highlight the way in which these motifs allow Qutb and Shariati to reformulate the Orientalist dichotomy of Islam and the West in their call for reform. Inherent to the Orientalist dichotomy is the conflation of Islam with tradition, a negative association which is opposed to progressive Western modernity. I argue one of the ways in which Qutb and Shariati assert their agency over this reductive dichotomy is by co-opting it, turning the language back on the oppressor in order to frame their critique of Western modernity. As I will show, the Islamic revival and reform tradition provides the tools to reconstruct this dichotomy; by refashioning classical Islamic terms, Qutb and Shariati contextualize their critique in the Islamic past, legitimizing their reform and asserting ownership of the dichotomy.

Though Qutb and Shariati's dichotomous constructions are similar in form, they differ in function. In *Milestones* (1964), Qutb transforms the meaning of the Qur'anic term *jahiliyya* from a period of time to a state of being, through this refashioning, Qutb defines modernity as a condition associated with the morally depraved West, which is then contrasted with Islam. Through this opposition, Qutb identifies the object of his reform, simultaneously re-defining Islam. This is a motif of the reform tradition, in which the reformer, in seeking to manifest an original form of a tradition inevitably creates something new, therefore participating in the continuous communal process of defining a tradition. In addition to identifying the object of their

reform project, the reformer must contextualize the current issue and its proposed solution within the authoritative corpus of the tradition. Qutb's application of *jahiliyya*, a Qur'anic term which refers to the age of ignorance before Islam, to the modern moment compares contemporary issues to the issues of the Islamic past. By linking the diagnosis and its cure in the imagined Islamic past, Qutb justifies his project which seeks to re-form the actions of the past in the present.

Shariati's work *Islamshenasi* (1968) is abundant with dichotomies that reflect the Orientalist contrast between Islam and the West. Through the dialectic of *tawhid* and *shirk*, Shariati is able to absorb the Orientalist dichotomy into his reform project. Shariati naturalizes the colonial construction of Islam versus the West by characterizing them as manifestations of a larger dialectical contradiction, which lends the dichotomy a sense of divine purpose. In other words, Shariati explains the Muslim's experience of the imperial as a manifestation of a cosmological battle between the forces of good (Islam and *tawhid*) and evil (*shirk*, Western modernity, and the contemporary authoritarian regimes produced by Western imperialism.) Shariati's anthropology, philosophy of history, and sociology that constitute his "Islamic ideology" are all framed by related dichotomies. In this chapter, I highlight the way in which Shariati's refashioning of *tawhid*, and other reform motifs allow the Orientalist dichotomy to be transformed into a dialectic. Shariati uses the term dialectic to refer to the process in which two opposing forces converge to create something new. By refashioning *tawhid* from theology to worldview, Shariati creates a lens which "regards the whole universe as a unity,"⁶⁵ allowing Shariati to illuminate the hidden connections between seemingly opposing forces. Where Qutb's

⁶⁵ Ali Shariati, "The World-view of *Tawhid*" *On the Sociology of Islam*, tr. Hamid Algar. (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979) 82-87

dichotomy aids his construction of a linear narrative, Shariati's dialectic creates a sense of grandiose movement within the narrative, it creates a metaphysical trajectory. Additionally, the power of Shariati's dialectic lies in its ability to infuse everyday interactions with universal meaning, giving the struggles of oppression a cosmological purpose.

Sayyid Qutb: Rethinking Jahiliyya in Mid-Twentieth Century Egypt

In Qur'anic and classical usage, *jahiliyya* refers to the "age of ignorance," or the time before revelation in which mankind was unaware of God's unity.⁶⁶ In the pre-modern period, *jahiliyya* referred to a past moment, rather than a state of existence unbound by time or place. Where pre-modern *jahiliyya* resulted from ignorance, modern *jahiliyya* is a conscious transgression of God's sovereignty through daily engagement with morally bankrupt modern infrastructures like capitalism, communism, and nationalism. Qutb disengages *jahiliyya* from time, instead conceptualizing *jahiliyya* as a condition associated with Western modernity. Through *jahiliyya*, Qutb advances essentialist versions of "Islam" and "the West" that inverts Orientalist theories, for it is the essential, all-encompassing religious and political authority of authentic Islam that redeems it from the *jahiliyya*, the moral bankruptcy and alienation of Western modernity.⁶⁷

Though the precise understanding of *jahiliyya* depends on its particular context, *jahiliyya* is consistently defined as the absence of Islam. *Jahiliyya*, like any product of a tradition, has been contested and reformulated within the parameters of its context. For Qutb and his interlocutors, the context of colonial modernity caused certain pressing anxieties that raised

⁶⁶ Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Jahiliyah," *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*. vol. 2. ed John Esposito, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)

⁶⁷ Roxanne Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Nationalism*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 51

questions of identity and methods of political and spiritual emancipation. Perhaps most pressing for Qutb's primary interlocutor, Indian reformer Sayyid Abdul 'Ala Mawdudi, was the question of Muslim colonization and what was needed for their deliverance. Like Qutb, Mawdudi was a subject of colonial modernity who utilized the revival and reform tradition to contend with issues presented by his contemporary situation.

Sayyid Abdul 'Ala Mawdudi is noted as the first to formulate the concept of *jahiliyya* in the modern era. Like Qutb and Shariati, Mawdudi constructed a conceptual framework that related to his political agenda; therefore, his political context can be understood to inform aspects of his reform. In the 1930s, when Mawdudi was beginning his career in activism, the anti-colonial movement in India was reaching its apex. As a young man living under colonial rule, the question of Muslim power was certainly a personal issue. Mawdudi recognized power as a defining force of life, however, he understood human power as temporarily borrowed gift from God.⁶⁸ This relationship to colonial power structures and the quest for political sovereignty is the context in which Mawdudi formulated the concept of "modern *jahiliyya*," which categorized modern productions, like colonial governance, as the "new barbarity," that was incompatible with the system of Islam.⁶⁹ This aspect of Mawdudi's thought gained popularity through the work of his student Abdulhasan 'Ali Nadvi, whose work "What Did the World Lose due to the Decline of Islam?" utilized Mawdudi's concept of *jahiliyya* to conclude that Muslims were to be held accountable for their loss of sovereignty. This work, published in 1950, placed the blame of colonialism onto Muslims who implemented what he perceived to be non-Islamic, Western

⁶⁸ Farzin Vahdat, "Sayyid Abdul 'Ala Mawdudi: A Theorist of the Disciplinary Patriarchal State," *Islamic Ethos and the Specter of Modernity*, (Anthem Press, 2015) 57

⁶⁹ Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Jahiliyyah" *Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*. ed. J Esposito. (Oxford University Press, 1995)

structures into their lives.⁷⁰ Both Mawdudi and Nadvi's reform utilized *jahiliyya* to produce a definition of Islam that allowed them to claim colonial modernity, and by extension Western modernity, as anti-Islamic.

In the early 1950s, much of Mawdudi's work was translated from Urdu to Arabic, and was made available in Egypt in 1951.⁷¹ At this time, Qutb had taken on leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood and was working closely with Nasser's Free Officers who were planning a coup of the British authorized monarchy. Though Mawdudi's *jahiliyya* was known to him at the time, the term did not appear in his work until his 1964 Qur'an exegesis *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, written during his imprisonment. While in prison, it became clear to Qutb that secular systems like nationalism could not liberate the Muslim from colonial oppression, and the concept of "modern" *jahiliyya* took on greater significance. Also written during his time in prison, *Milestones* depicts *jahiliyya* as a transgression of God's authority embodied in modern political systems. Where Mawdudi conceptualized *jahiliyya* in relation to his reality of British colonialism, Qutb refashions *jahiliyya* to relate to the conditions of his post-colonial Egypt, in which the foremost question was the construction of the nation-state.

The first mention of *jahiliyya* in *Milestones* occurs late in the introduction, but appears consistently throughout the remainder of the text. The introduction begins with an apocalyptic warning about the current state of mankind, who Qutb diagnoses as "devoid of those vital values which are necessary not only for its healthy development but also for its real progress."⁷² Qutb

⁷⁰ Doumato, "Jahiliyyah"

⁷¹ Yvonne Haddad, "Sayyid Qutb," 70

⁷² Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*. tr. Mohammed Moinuddin Siddiqui. Salimiah, (Kuwait: International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations, 1989) 7

refers to the existential crisis of the modern subject, to whom modernity presented a plethora of malaise, including alienation, meaninglessness, and a sense of impending social dissolution.⁷³

If we look at the sources and foundations of modern ways of living, it becomes clear that the whole world is steeped in *jahiliyya*, and all the marvelous material comforts and high-level intentions do not diminish this Ignorance.⁷⁴

In this passage, Qutb rejects modernity's claim that it is somehow better than the past. The materialism of capitalist modernity, rather than contributing to man's progression, has actually caused a regression within mankind to the age of ignorance before Revelation. This passage implies Qutb's blacklisting of "modern ways of living," but is the problem intrinsic to modernity?

This *jahiliyya* is based on rebellion against God's sovereignty on earth: it transfers to man one of the greatest attributes of God, namely sovereignty, and makes some men lords over others. It is now not in that simple and primitive form of the ancient *jahiliyya*, but takes the form of claiming that the right to create values, to legislate rules of collective behavior, and to choose any way of life rests with men, without regard to what God has prescribed.⁷⁵

We see now that in addition to modernity's moral malaise, Qutb's issue with modernity is the function of political power, characterized by *jahiliyya*. Unlike the simple *jahiliyya* of antiquity, modern *jahiliyya* is a purposeful transgression of divine authority. Human legislation, or more accurately, human power, reflects narrow interests and prejudices, it is entirely contingent upon human whims. Divine law, however, is universal. Islam, to Qutb's understanding, has been revealed by God to be a complete system, whose perfection lies in its divine origin. Any laws, behaviors, or way of life proscribed by man are not only imperfect, but a rebellion against

⁷³ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004) 1

⁷⁴ Qutb *Milestones* 14

⁷⁵ Qutb *Milestones* 15

revelation. Additionally, these transgressions are not only a sin against God, but against mankind, for “only in the Islamic way of life do men become free from the servitude of some men to others and devote themselves to God alone.”⁷⁶ Qutb uses this moment to directly attack specific systems of modernity:

Thus the humiliation of the common man under the communist systems and the exploitation of individuals and nations due to greed for wealth and imperialism under the capitalist systems are but a corollary of rebellion against God’s authority and the denial of the dignity of man given to him by God.⁷⁷

Written during the Cold War, *Milestones* offers an alternative to the choice between communism and capitalism. Both capitalism and communism are manifestations of the larger societal problem of divine transgression, encapsulated in the term *jahiliyya*. Qutb offers Islam as a tool of emancipation from the confines of this choice. Submission to divine authority, according to Qutb, is the only path toward human empowerment.

The dichotomy between *jahiliyya* and Islam creates a clear distinction between products of modernity, like nationalism, capitalism, and communism, and products of divine will, like Islam. This dichotomy necessitates a choice—one can either choose Islam and reject modernity, or choose *jahiliyya* and rebel against divine sovereignty. The act of choosing is inherently ontological, for your choice reveals a particular aspect of your nature and ultimately, your future. There is no sense of simultaneity in this construction, one is either a subject of *jahiliyya* or Islam. Additionally, the implication of good and evil, right and wrong in this dichotomy heightens the urgency of the choice, which works in favor of Qutb’s goal. *Milestones* is imbued with this sense of urgency as a guidebook for the individual who will lead the Muslim community toward the

⁷⁶ Qutb *Milestones* 15

⁷⁷ Qutb *Milestones* 15

goal of unilaterally establishing divine sovereignty on earth in the creation of an Islamic state. However, the power in the dichotomy between Islam and *jahiliyya* lies in its inversion of the Orientalist dichotomy which argues an ontological difference between Islam and the West. Qutb accepts the naturalization of this constructed difference, but states that it is the West's innovation, individualism, the anthropocentric view of the universe that causes the universal malaise of modernity that only Islam can cure.

In addition to cultivating a sense of urgency, the contradiction between *jahiliyya* and Islam aids Qutb's construction of a linear narrative and contextualizes the problems raised by modernity in the Islamic past, authorizing his reform project in the corpus of the tradition. Framing the problem of modernity, or *jahiliyya* in the Islamic past allows Qutb to also locate his solution within the past, thereby authorizing the project of re-forming "original" practices in the present. In addition to legitimizing his project, disengaging *jahiliyya* from a particular time-space allows Qutb to construct the metaphorical road upon which Islam travels, alluded to in the title of his work, often translated as *Signposts along the Road*. Though Qutb makes several distinctions between the *jahiliyya* of the past and the present, its presence as the sole obstruction to Islam has remained consistent throughout time. When discussing the unique Qur'anic generation of Muslims, Qutb uses *jahiliyya* to describe a key difference between past and present:

When a person embraced Islam during the time of the Prophet—peace be upon him—he would immediately cut himself off from *jahiliyya*. When he stepped into the circle of Islam, he would start a new life, separating himself off completely from his past life under Ignorance of the Divine Law... Thus, there would be a break between the Muslim's present Islam and his past *jahiliyya*, and this after a well thought out decision, as a result of which all his relationships with *jahiliyya* would be cut off and he would be joined completely to Islam.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Qutb *Milestones* 30-31

Throughout *Milestones*, Qutb highlights several key distinctions between the first generation of Muslims and the current generation which support his claim for an Islamic revival. The difference between generations lies in the “purity” of the source of Islamic guidance. The idea that one could cut oneself off from *jahiliyya* relies upon an essentialist dichotomy between *jahiliyya* and Islam. The first Muslims, as the quote above states, embodied this distinction by removing themselves from the world of ignorance. Implied therein is the necessity of revival—modern Muslims have allowed *jahiliyya* to subvert the integrity of Islam. Qutb states,

We are also surrounded by *jahiliyya* today, which is of the same nature as it was during the first period of Islam, perhaps a little deeper. Our whole environment, people’s beliefs and ideas, habits and art, rules and laws—is *jahiliyya* even to the extent that what we consider to be Islamic culture, Islamic sources, Islamic philosophy and Islamic thought, are also constructs of *jahiliyya*!⁷⁹

Here, Qutb gestures to the way in which modernity has shifted the conceptual space in which Islam is both imagined and enacted. Although the nature of *jahiliyya* has remained consistent, it has spread like a cancer throughout the body of humanity. Due to the pervasive hegemony of modernity, *jahiliyya* has encroached upon the territory of Islam. However, Qutb’s stark dichotomy eliminates the possibility of a hybrid so that one drop of *jahiliyya* negates any aspect of Islam. The absorption of non-Islamic elements into “Islamic culture” nullifies their claim to Islam, since it has been polluted with *jahiliyya*. With this we come closer to one of Qutb’s key claims—there is no Islam but the Islam practiced by the first Muslims.

Within *Milestones*, Qutb employs several motifs of the Islamic revival and reform tradition, through which he constructs a critique of both Western and colonial modernity. By refashioning the Qur’anic term *jahiliyya* and making it the center of his reform, Qutb facilitates

⁷⁹ Qutb *Milestones* 32

the authentication of his reform. The utilization of *jahiliyya* relates the contemporary issue in the Islamic past. By illustrating to the reader the ways in which the “unique Qur’anic generation” dealt with *jahiliyya*, Qutb legitimizes his call to “re-form” the practice of cloistering the Muslim community from non-Muslim communities. The diagnosis of *jahiliyya* necessitates the identification of the object of inquiry, leading to a definition of Islam that is necessarily two-fold: the Islam that is practiced now and the Islam of the past. Though he continually refers to contemporary Islam as “Islam,” it is clear that Qutb regards “Islam of the past” as true “Islam.” One can assume, then, that Qutb maintains an authentic, pure Islam that is consequently “watered-down” the further Muslims stray from particular practices, like disengaging from *jahiliyya*. Indeed he describes Islam of the past as “that clear spring from which the first generation of Muslims quenched their thirst.”⁸⁰ He continues, “Perhaps something has been mixed with that clear spring. We should look at the manner in which they received their training. Perhaps some changes have found their way to it.”⁸¹

Through these reform motifs, Qutb participates in the cultivation of collective memory in presenting claims about what Islam is and is not. Qutb, in seeking to reclaim an original Islam, actually produces a “new Islam,” just as he produces a new definition of *jahiliyya* in applying the Qur’anic term to modernity. This is the paradox of the reformer who, in trying to attain the past, is inevitably restrained by the present. This paradox is exemplified in the framing of his reform around the Orientalist opposition of Islam and the West, in which Qutb accepts the characterization of Islam as anti-modern and “traditionalist,” arguing that this is, in fact, Islam’s

⁸⁰ Qutb *Milestones* 23

⁸¹ Qutb *Milestones* 23

strength. In trying to return to the past, Qutb continually refers to the assumptions, conditions, and discourses of the present.

Ali Shariati and the Dialectic of Tawhid

Like his contemporary Qutb, Ali Shariati utilizes the rhetoric of dichotomy to frame his ideology of Islam. Through the refashioning of classical Qur'anic terms, *tawhid* and *shirk*, Shariati constructs a worldview in which man and history are conceptualized in the terms of a dialectical contradiction. The implementation of these classical Islamic terms in his "Islamic ideology" grounds his dialectical battle in Islam's struggle against *shirk*, or polytheism.

Although this strategy seems similar to Qutb's dichotomous construction of *jahiliyya* and Islam, Shariati's dichotomy functions differently within the context of his argument. Qutb's dichotomy categorizes the world into *jahiliyya* and Islam, creating a clear separation which coerces the reader into a choice. Shariati's use of dichotomy, however, is consciously dialectic; he wishes to go beyond the separation, looking instead to the higher truth of *tawhid*. Additionally, the dialectical framework of his reform imbues the oppression of the Muslim subject by colonial and imperial powers with a sense of cosmological purpose. As *shirk* takes on the characteristics of the Western-oriented, oppressive Pahlavi regime, *tawhid* comes to represent the Muslims who are oppressed by colonial modernity. Shariati makes this connection more explicit in his dialectic of Cain and Abel, described in his sociology and his philosophy of history.

Like Qutb, the reform motif of refashioning of Qur'anic terms is essential to the construction of the dichotomy/dialectic and therefore to Shariati's ideology, authorizing his reform by linking the problem he is addressing and his proposed answer to a moment in the authoritative corpus of Islam. As I will show, Shariati's essay "The Worldview of Tawhid" in

Islamshenasi expands *tawhid* in a way that allows him to construct the dialectic that characterizes his anthropology, philosophy of history, and sociology. The resulting dichotomies absorb the Orientalist assertion of ontological difference between Islam and Western modernity, characterizing this battle as a divinely crafted struggle.

Composed of lectures given at the University of Mashad during the 1966-1967 school year, *Islamshenasi*, or *Islamology*, was published in 1969.⁸² *Islamshenasi* presented a model of Islam that Shariati would continue to expand throughout his intellectual career. *Islamshenasi* presents an egalitarian democratic Islam as the religion's true form, and identifies the contemporary obstacles to achieving this 'original' Islam. Implied in the text are the ways in which Muslims can, and are in fact obliged, to challenge these obstacles.⁸³ *Islamshenasi* is a societal critique that, although never attacking the monarchy directly, admonishes absolutist rule as a usurpation of God's authority, "Anyone who imposes his will on the people and rules according to his own whim, has made a claim to being God...absolutist rule, will, power, dominance, and ownership is only in God's monopoly."⁸⁴ Shariati's critique of the clergy was much more explicit, reproaching the institutionalization of Islam and characterizing societal reverence of the *'ulama* as religious idolatry.⁸⁵ Muslims are obliged, Shariati states, to combat polytheism by challenging injustice, tyrannical authority in particular.⁸⁶ Shariati's reform continually addresses contemporary issues by drawing from the imagined past. The reform

⁸² Rahnema, 197

⁸³ Rahnema 196

⁸⁴ Rahnema 198

⁸⁵ Rahnema 198

⁸⁶ Rahnema 198

tradition provided Shariati with the tools to root his societal critique in Islam, declaring a distinction between “true” Islam and the Islam practiced by the clergy. Through the grandiose label of *shirk*, Shariati’s reform encapsulates the *’ulama* and the Pahlavi regime.

Shariati’s critique is embedded within the rhetorically powerful, poetic, often mystical language of *Islamshenasi*, in which the ideologue’s contemporary world is transformed into a meaningful, metaphorically rich cast of characters taken from Shi’i history, reinventing these terms and characters in the process. The narrative arc these characters travel is framed by the worldview of *tawhid* that allows Shariati to construct a lens through which his readers can understand Islam. Within the text of *Islamshenasi*, “The Worldview of *Tawhid*” precedes Shariati’s essays on anthropology,⁸⁷ philosophy of history,⁸⁸ and sociology,⁸⁹ effectively acting as an introduction to Shariati’s Islamic ideology, systematized into these three categories. The essay “The Worldview of *Tawhid*,” can be understood as the keystone of Shariati’s Islamic ideology, and therefore, analyzing its function will color the way in which we can understand his argument for reform.

“My world-view consists of *tawhid*,” Shariati begins his essay. “*Tawhid* in the sense of oneness of God is of course accepted by all monotheists. But *tawhid* as a worldview... means regarding the whole universe as a unity.”⁹⁰ Shariati begins his essay by alerting the reader to the

⁸⁷ Ali Shariati, “Anthropology: The Creation of Man and the Contradiction of God and Iblis, or Spirit and Clay” *On the Sociology of Islam*, tr. Hamid Algar. (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979) 88-96

⁸⁸ Ali Shariati, “The Philosophy of History: Cain and Abel” *On the Sociology of Islam*, tr. Hamid Algar. (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979) 97-110

⁸⁹ Ali Shariati, “The Dialectic of Sociology” *On the Sociology of Islam*, tr. Hamid Algar. (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979) 111-118

⁹⁰ Shariati, “The Worldview of *Tawhid*” *On the Sociology of Islam*, tr. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979) 82

alternative interpretation of *tawhid* he is about to present. *Tawhid*,⁹¹ alluded to by Shariati, is commonly understood as a central tenet of Islam. However, this term, like Qutb's *jahiliyya*, is the subject of an Islamic discourse that dates back to the classical age of Islam. The concept of *tawhid* was used by early theologians to discuss the relationship between the divine essence and divine attributes, but was later expanded on by Muslim thinkers from the classical to the modern era. Ibn Taymiyah (1263-1328) and Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) can be understood as Shariati's key interlocutors, the former for grounding of *tawhid* in the social, and the latter for using *tawhid* to promote the idea of Islam as a religion of reason. Both Ibn Taymiyah and Muhammad 'Abduh were reformers who, like Qutb and Shariati, utilized the reform tradition to address contemporary issues facing the Muslim community. Though they both use *tawhid*, the term's meaning changes in relation to the context within which it is employed. Because Ibn Taymiyya, Muhammad Abduh, and Ali Shariati are addressing different questions, and different problems facing their contemporary Muslim community, the reform motifs they employ will be formed by its context. I meditate on these thinkers to highlight the ways in which Shariati is a participant in a reformist discourse that continually reinvents the meaning of terms like *tawhid*, and consequently reinvents Islam, to fit the current needs of the Muslim community.

Ibn Taymiyah's understanding of *tawhid* is distinct in his application of the doctrine to the "political" sphere. *Tawhid*, and the submission to *tawhid*, is the cornerstone of Islam, though it is beyond the human capacity to fully comprehend *tawhid*. Additionally, it is beyond human capacity to prove the existence of God, describe God, or achieve mystical union with the Divine. Rather, the human being's sole obligation is to submit to and enact God's will. The essence of

⁹¹ توحيد Arabic term meaning "to make one," or "to unify" (Wehr, Hans, J M. Cowan, *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966)

faith exists beyond the intellectual, but requires action through religious practice and most importantly, virtuous behavior on the individual and collective levels. Humanity's role is not to understand *tawhid*, but to submit to it. This submission is the purest virtuous action.⁹²

Writing in a time of religious and political turmoil, Egyptian reformer Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905) synthesized the early theological discussions of *tawhid* and the later ethical and political implications. 'Abduh understood the study of *tawhid* as the inquiry into the being and attributes of God, and the ways in which humankind relates to the divine. Although Abduh maintained the esoteric nature of God's unity, he did not believe the incomprehensibility of the divine necessitated blind faith. Abduh believed in the importance of reason and theological inquiry, as it is reason in tandem with revelation that allows us to know of God's existence, and it is the spirit of *ijtihad*, or intelligent initiative, that recognition of *tawhid* requires. However, this intellectual exercise should not distract, but inspire the Muslim toward the pursuit of the practical goal of creating an Islamic society. In this way, *tawhid* is the harmony between human reason and obedience to God's will.⁹³

The first line of Shariati's "Worldview of *Tawhid*" self-consciously evokes a paradigm shift in the conceptualization of the term. "My world-view consists of *tawhid*," Shariati states—from this first sentence Shariati challenges the reader's preconceived understanding of the term denoting monotheism. In transforming *tawhid* from a theology to a worldview, Shariati moves toward a conceptualization of Islam as a comprehensive system that removes the veil between material and the divine, as evidenced by the following line:

⁹² Tamara Sonn, "Tawhid" *Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*. ed. J Esposito. (Oxford University Press, 1995) Vol 4

⁹³ Tamara Sonn, "Tawhid"

But *tawhid* as a world-view in the sense that I intend in my theory means regarding the whole universe as a unity, instead of dividing it into this world and the hereafter, the natural and the supernatural, substance and meaning, spirit and body.⁹⁴

Seemingly in contradiction to the above statement, Shariati introduces a dichotomous opposition to *tawhid*:

I take *tawhid* in the sense of a worldview, and I am convinced that Islam also intends it in this sense. I regard *shirk* in a similar fashion; it is a world-view 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. *Tawhid* sees the world as empire; *shirk* as a feudal system.⁹⁵

Here Shariati refashions the Qur'anic term *shirk* to compliment the worldview of *tawhid*.

Like *tawhid*, the meaning of *shirk* is not static; even within the Qur'an, the term's meaning is continually reframed according to its situational usage. The Arabic root of *shirk* denotes partnership, and within the Qur'an is often connected to the idea of idolatry. The idolater associates man-made objects, people, institutions, or nature with God, however, in English translations of the Qur'an, *shirk* is frequently translated as "polytheist," which is semantically dissimilar to idolater, as the polytheist may, but does not necessarily, worship a concrete, inanimate object.⁹⁶ *Shirk* is a descriptive term that can be understood as an element of inter- and intra-religious polemics—it is an a-moral charge that implies contradiction with Islam. By invoking *shirk*, a term that implies an ontological distinction from Islam, Shariati contributes to the discourse of tradition, in which the parameters of the given tradition are continually redefined.

⁹⁴ Shariati "The World-view of *Tawhid*" 82

⁹⁵ Shariati "The World-view of *Tawhid*" 82

⁹⁶ Gerald R. Hawting, "Idolatry and Idolaters", in: *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, (Washington DC: Georgetown University)

The use of the terms *tawhid* and *shirk*, denoting monotheism and polytheism, emphasizes Shariati's quintessentially Islamic language which, among other things, works to combat criticism aimed at him from the Iranian *'ulama*. Additionally, the language of *tawhid* creates an epistemological foundation for an Islamically grounded, coherent ideological argument for revolution.⁹⁷ It seems strange, though, after asserting a worldview of unity that proclaims a rejection of division, to introduce a dichotomy between this worldview and another. How do we make sense of a worldview of *tawhid* in relation to Shariati's dichotomous rhetoric of *tawhid* and *shirk*, and in the tripartite disciplines that construct his ideology? Later Shariati states that history is a result of the continual clashing of the pole of Cain and the pole of Abel⁹⁸—how is this not, to use Shariati's term, produced by a worldview of *shirk*?

The seeming contradiction of the construction of a *tawhid/shirk* dichotomy with his unifying worldview is remedied by the introduction of the dialectic. In Shariati's thought, the dialectic is the battle between two contradictory forces that results in a new creation. Within the Western philosophical tradition, though, the dialectic is a rhetorical device in which the thesis of an argument is placed in opposition to its antithesis, resulting in a synthesis of these opposing points. Shariati's dialectic argues for the manifestation of dialectics in reality, rather than the rhetorical dialectics of Plato and Hegel. The three essays that comprise his "Islamic ideology" frame their respective arguments through the construction of dialectics. Shariati's anthropology understands man as a "dialectic reality,"⁹⁹ a product of the contradiction between the spirit of

⁹⁷ Hamid Dabashi, "Ali Shariati" *Theology of Discontent*, (New York and London: New York University Press, 1993) 129

⁹⁸ see Shariati, "The Philosophy of History: Cain and Abel," and "The Dialectic of Sociology"

⁹⁹ Shariati, "Anthropology: The Creation of Man and the Contradiction of God and Iblis, or Spirit and Clay," 89

God and putrid clay. Within man these forces are in constant battle—the spirit representing man’s movement toward moral perfection, the clay representing man’s lowliness. It is in this essay Shariati directly states this terms:

Half of man is the spirit of God; this is the thesis, the given, the fundament, that enables him to fly in ascension toward the absolute... There is, however, a powerful factor opposed to the first, which summons and drags him down to stagnation... The factor that brings all this about is the antithesis, that which negates and contradicts the thesis, what impels man in a direction imposed to the thesis. From the combination of these two opposites, struggle and motion arise, as a result of which a perfecting synthesis comes into being.¹⁰⁰

In addition to introducing the structure of the dialectic, Shariati reveals its rhetorical power. The dialectic creates a sense of motion, a movement through time toward perfection in synthesis. Through the dialectic, Shariati states that man is both progressing toward the Spirit of God as that same Spirit exists within him. The duality of Spirit implies that man possesses the tools of perfection and liberation within himself.

Similarly, Shariati’s philosophy of history views history “like man himself, [as] dominated by a dialectical contradiction.” This dialectic is symbolized in the story of Cain and Abel, who come to represent the two sides of oppression. Here, too, the dialectic creates a sense of movement; Shariati states that history, as the linear progression of time, begins with the struggle between Cain and Abel. This dialectic is elaborated on in his sociology, which applies the dialectic of Cain and Abel to society. The characters come to represent the superstructure of class struggle, in which Cain represents the ruling class throughout history, and Abel represents the ruled. This specific application allows Shariati locate the question his reform addresses and the answer his reform presents in the primordial past; Shariati, through the language of the story

¹⁰⁰ Shariati, “Anthropology” 90

of Cain and Abel, is able to root his critique of Western capitalist modernity in a primordial superstructure that, like man, results from the will of God. Shariati imbues the specifics of the legend, like the brothers' occupations, with a meaning that speaks to the realities of the universe. This focus allows Shariati to utilize Marx's theory of class formation and saturate it with the Cain and Abel superstructure.

Offering an example of an expression of the "system of Abel," Shariati describes the ideal *umma*. Shariati's *umma*, like his anthropology, history, and sociology, contains a sense of movement. "The word *umma*," Shariati states,

derives from the root *amm*, which has the sense of path and intention. The *umma* therefore, is a society in which a number of individuals, possessing a common faith and goal, come together in harmony with the intention of advancing and moving toward their common goal.¹⁰¹

Like Qutb's *umma*, traveling on a path laid out by Islam, Shariati's *umma* moves decidedly forward toward a divine goal. Central to this goal is the structure of the *umma*, or the "system of Abel," described in Shariati's sociology. The social philosophy of Shariati's *umma* is based in equity, justice, and collective ownership, which underscores the *umma*'s classless society. Within this description of the *umma* is a critique of modern political and economic systems; continuing the project of the class struggle of Cain and Abel, Shariati embeds his socio-economic critique in Qur'anic structures, rooting his critique in the authority of Islamic language. The *umma* is society's revolutionary leadership which moves society toward the realization of divine destiny, or universal revolution.

The narrative of *Islamshenasi*'s narrows its focus from history and society to the singular man. Shariati's anthropology, philosophy of history, and sociology lead to "The Ideal Man—

¹⁰¹ Shariati, "The Ideal Society—the *Umma*," 119

Viceregent of God.” The revolutionary tone of the previous essays culminates in the description of the ideal man, who has surpassed the dialectic to become a “theomorphic” being. Although this character has shed the lowly characteristics of man, he does not discard mankind. Rather, it is

in struggle for the perfection of the human race, in enduring hardship, hunger, deprivation and torment for the sake of liberty, livelihood and well-being of men, in the furnace of intellectual and social struggle, that he attains piety, perfection, and closeness to God.”¹⁰²

Shariati clearly states that perfection, or the divine purpose of man, can only be achieved through present revolutionary action. It is only through societal revolution against the “system of Cain” that paradise can be realized. In Shariati’s terms, this revolution will be the “system of Abel” overthrowing the “system of Cain,” thus, ending the dialectical battle that results in the synthesis of a classless society. True Islam is implied as the “system of Abel,” Western modernity, through imperialism, capitalism, and secular authoritarianism, is a manifestation of the “system of Cain.” Shariati characterizes this relationship between oppressor and oppressed as not only inevitable, but a necessary conflict in order for the continuation of history. However, Shariati states that the system of Abel, through human action, will one day overcome the system of Cain, giving the conscript of colonial modernity a sense of purpose in his struggle. Through the dialectic of Cain and Abel, Shariati claims agency over the Islam/West dichotomy for the subject of colonial modernity, attempting to alleviate the sense of powerlessness one might feel by assuring the Iranian-Muslim reader that revolutionary action, first within Islam, then within the political sphere, is God’s will.

¹⁰² Shariati, “The Ideal Man—the Viceregent of God” 123

Within *Islamshenasi*, Shariati lays out his “Islamic ideology” by constructing a system of thought grounded in an anthropology, theory of history, and a sociology. These disciplines are constructed through dialectics that express discontent with the status quo and evoke a sense of movement toward a revolutionary future. Conveyed in Islamic terms, this discontent claims divine intent, which lends authority to Shariati’s ideology. Shariati clearly states *tawhid* as the metaphysical foundation of this ideology. As the epistemological union of diversity, *tawhid* functions as a comprehensive vision of the universe, which allows Shariati to understand a dichotomy like *tawhid* and *shirk*, spirit and clay, Cain and Abel, not as separate structures, but as two sides of the same structure. This lens allows Shariati to see the connection between seemingly contradictory forces and their existence as manifestations of a larger truth. In other words, Shariati’s reconceptualization of *tawhid* allows him to interpret dichotomies as dialectics while connecting his reform to the authoritative corpus of the tradition. The format of dialectic creates a sense of divinely intentioned movement within the narrative of his ideology that links his revolutionary agenda to primordial time.

Reform and Modern Dichotomy

Tradition, as it is generally accepted in scholarship today, is a continuing moral argument that connects a community’s memory of the past to its present and future. Reform can be understood as a process of restoration, in which an imagined shared history is reinvented to inform the present.¹⁰³ In attempting to restore an imagined original form of Islam, Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati make similar rhetorical moves to construct their arguments that contribute to the cultivation of the collective memory of the Islamic past. Central to Qutb’s reformist argument is

¹⁰³ Moosa and Tareen, “Revival and Reform,” 204

the concept of *jahiliyya*, a Qur'anic term he refashions to fit the contemporary moment described in *Milestones*. Qutb defines *jahiliyya* in opposition to Islam, presenting the reader with a choice between two distinct, opposing lifestyles and world-views. Additionally, this dichotomy works to create a sense of linear time in which *jahiliyya* has been the primary roadblock on the Muslim community's path to perfect Islam. Placing refashioned terms in dichotomy aids Qutb's reform argument by creating a clear distinction between Islam and the products of Western modernity, and rooting both the distinction and his proposed Islamic form of governance in an imagined original Islam. However, in attempting to invoke the past by applying the Qur'anic term *jahiliyya* to his contemporary moment, Qutb produces a new term; by applying the dichotomy of *jahiliyya* and Islam to his contemporary moment, Qutb encapsulates the imagined dichotomy between Islam and the West, redefining the parameters of what Islam is and is not.

The worldview of *tawhid* is the core of Shariati's "Islamic ideology." Within his work, Shariati imagines *tawhid*, commonly understood to refer to the oneness of God, as a comprehensive worldview in which God's oneness is transposed onto every aspect of life. By refashioning *tawhid* in this way, Shariati links his project to the central tenet of Islam, authorizing the lens created by the world-view of *tawhid* that allows him to understand the seemingly dichotomous components of the universe as part of a larger dialectical battle between *tawhid* and *shirk*. The dialectic presents the reader with the esoteric movements of the universe in a way that characterizes contemporary maladies as manifestations of divinely intended realities. In other words, Shariati presents the reader with a worldview that understands oppression as a necessary component to universal revolution.

Within both Qutb and Shariati's arguments, the authorization of the reform project requires the contextualization of the contemporary issue and its proposed answer in the imagined Islamic past or the corpus of the tradition. Within their reform, this motif manifests in the implementation of Qur'anic or classical Islamic terms, like *jahiliyya*, *tawhid*, and *shirk*, to describe the modern condition. In their application of these re-formed dichotomies to the reformers' contemporary moment, the terms are framed by contemporary conflicts, such as the conflict between the Pahlavi regime and the Iranian citizenry, between the Nasser regime and the Muslim Brotherhood, or between the imperial West and the colonized Muslim. This points to the ever ambiguous role of the reformer who, in trying to re-form the tradition by pointing to the past, is inevitably restrained by the present. Rather than improve the current state of Islam by returning it to its "original" state, the reformers create new practices, new terms, and new understandings of Islam.

Chapter Three
 (De) Construction of Reform:
 Traversing Dichotomy and Modern Time-Space

In the previous chapter, I outlined Qutb and Shariati's use of dichotomy and related this rhetorical device to common reform motifs. This chapter seeks to complicate these dichotomies by highlighting the way in which Qutb and Shariati traverse their own dichotomous constructions in the process of authenticating their reform. In his influential work *Milestones* (1964), Qutb projects the nation, a modern structure of imagining political communities, onto the pre-modern Islamic past. To frame his argument for the unification of Muslims under an Islamic state, Qutb imagines the first generation of Muslims living in Medina, the *umma*, as a nation living within a state governed by the Qur'an. In the process of authorizing his reform, Qutb imagines modern structures in antiquity, subverting the characterization of modernity as a distinct break from the past. Shariati's Marxist retelling of history and his sociological analysis evades modern conceptions of linear time. He conceptualizes time as the battlefield upon which the struggle between Cain and Abel is continually fought. It is this battle, this dialectical contradiction, that constitutes history. As I will show, both Qutb and Shariati utilize modern, secular structures to undermine the ubiquitous authority of modernity; highlighting the ways in which traversing modernity's imagined barrier between past and present subverts their own constructed dichotomies.

Sayyid Qutb: Locating the Nation-State in the Islamic Past

Sayyid Qutb's relationship with nationalism began at a young age. A delegate to Mustafa Kamil's nationalist party, Qutb's father al-Hajj Qutb bin Ibrahim often hosted nationalist meetings in his home. After his graduation from Dar al-Ulum, Qutb joined Sa'd Zaglul's

nationalist party and was involved with its offshoots until 1942.¹⁰⁴ Nationalist thought was deeply embedded in the intellectual context of Qutb's Egypt. In 1952, Qutb was no longer a member of a nationalist party, but, as a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, worked with Gamal Abdul Nasser's Free Officers before the coup that would overthrow the monarchy. Published in 1948, Qutb's *Social Justice in Islam* hints that Qutb at this time already distrusted the use of secular ideology as a means of liberation, his position was concretized during the time of his prison sentence when he wrote *Milestones*.¹⁰⁵

A multilayered critique of the modern world, *Milestones* primarily focuses on the role of the Muslim within *jahili* society, and as such, acts primarily as a handbook for the "vanguard of the revolution." Not unlike the Leninist vanguard, Qutb's vanguard is one who embodies what Qutb understands to be the true message of Islam; this vanguard is a warrior of God's unity who will lead the revolution against *jahiliyya* by unifying the *umma* in an Islamic state. The character of the vanguard was new to Qutb's thought. Qutb's *Social Justice in Islam*, published in 1948, promoted a vision of a spontaneous, leaderless revolution inspired by the Qur'an.¹⁰⁶ However, the period of his prison sentence seems to have prompted a shift—"The whole world is steeped in *jahiliyya*" Qutb states, "This *jahiliyya* is based on rebellion against God's sovereignty on earth: it transfers to man one of the greatest attributes to God, namely sovereignty, and makes

¹⁰⁴ Shahrough Akhavi, "Qutb, Sayyid," *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*. vol. 3. ed John Esposito, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 401

¹⁰⁵ Written from 1953 to 1964

¹⁰⁶ Elizabeth F. Thompson, "Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati: The Idea of Islamic Revolution in Egypt and Iran." 283

some men lords over others.”¹⁰⁷ The hope Qutb once expressed in the vitality of a Muslim’s social responsibility is absent from this text.¹⁰⁸

Nasser’s betrayal of the Muslim Brotherhood seems to have deepened Qutb’s conviction that secular ideologies are incapable of leading humanity to liberation:

All nationalistic and chauvinistic ideologies which have appeared in modern times, and all the movements and theories derived from them, have also lost their vitality. In short, all man-made individual or collective theories have proved to be failures.”¹⁰⁹

Qutb and the Muslim Brotherhood initially supported the Free Officers’ coup of the monarchy, which promised a drastic change to Egypt’s relationship to the British. Regarded as one of the intellectuals of the revolution, Qutb frequently hosted Free Officers meetings in his home and spoke to a packed auditorium of Free Officers on the need for Egypt’s revolution to embrace Islam. Later, after the revolution, Qutb worked as cultural advisor to the Revolutionary Command Council. However, Nasser’s feelings toward the Brotherhood changed post-revolution. Rejecting the Brotherhood’s Islamist vision of Egypt, Nasser began to see the organization as a pest that needed to be eliminated. After an assassination attempt on Nasser in October 1954, Qutb and several other Muslim Brothers were arrested. During his trial, Qutb lifted his shirt to reveal scars of torture, stating, “Nasser has applied to us in jail the principles of the revolution.”¹¹⁰

Qutb came to reject popular sovereignty, democracy, and the republic. It became clear to him that God was the only sovereign, and man-made claims to sovereignty were steeped in *jahili*

¹⁰⁷ Qutb, *Milestones*, 15

¹⁰⁸ E.F. Thompson 281

¹⁰⁹ Qutb, *Milestones* 10

¹¹⁰ EF Thompson, 282

ignorance. Qutb's rejection of nationalism is explicit in *Milestones*. However, this rejection is complicated by a closer look at the language Qutb utilizes to describe the *umma*. This investigation highlights the ways in which Qutb applies nationalistic thinking to his Islamic reform. While he vehemently dismisses the theory of nationalism, he accepts the validity of the ideological construction of the nation and redefines the nation in relation to the *umma*. This reveals the ways in which the reformer is bound to contemporary structures which root him in the present while he gestures to the past.

Umma, the Arabic term for community, has continually been negotiated according to the thinker's contemporary situation. *Umma* is usually translated as "people" or "community," yet throughout its sixty-two occurrences in the Qur'an, its meaning ranges from "a religious community" to "those who follow the righteous model of Abraham" to the specific "community of Muslims."¹¹¹ Despite these diverse signifieds, *umma* always refers to a community bound by certain religious or cultural beliefs and practices. In the Meccan surahs, *umma* is more likely to refer to non-Muslim religious communities—an *umma* is a community who has been graced with a prophet. More often than not, then, *umma* will refer to the community of the People of the Book, either Christian or Jewish communities. Later, in the Medinan period, the word *umma* comes to take on the prescribed characteristics of the developing Muslim community. With the establishment of a politically authoritative and autonomous community in Medina, the Muslim *umma* is often referred to as the 'midmost/central community,'¹¹² an *umma* foremost among other *ummahs* (*ummam*). In sum, there is a chronological development of the meaning of *umma* in

¹¹¹ F.M. Denny, "Umma" *Encyclopedia of Islam*, New ed. Vol. X (Leiden: Brill) 2000.

¹¹² *ummat wasat*

the Qur'an from a broadly applied description of all religious communities to a more focused reference to the Muslim community. The evolution of the term coincides with the development of the Muslim community from a small community of believers to a politically autonomous community in Medina.¹¹³

I include this brief description of the development of *umma* to highlight Qutb's place within a tradition of negotiating the parameters of community. As I will show, Qutb's redefining of the *umma* not only reveals the specifics of his call for reform, but uncovers one of the ways in which Qutb negotiates himself and his religion in relation to modernity. By accepting the ideological structure of the nation as a given, Qutb reveals himself as subject to characteristically modern approaches to the conceptualization of "community."

Qutb's definition of the *umma* gestures to the definition used to describe the Medinan community. The *umma* is intrinsically tied to the "role" of Islam as the leader of mankind. In order that Islam may fulfill this role, it must take "concrete form in a society, rather, in a nation."¹¹⁴ Qutb understands the Medinan community as the ideal community for the fulfillment of Islam's role. He grounds this assessment in two Qur'anic verses, "You are the best community raised for the good of mankind. You enjoin what is good and forbid what is wrong, and you believe in God."¹¹⁵ and "Thus We have made you a middle community, so that you be witnesses for mankind as the Messenger is a witness for you."¹¹⁶ The inclusion of these verses highlights the place of the *umma* in mankind's role as vicegerents of God. As the middle community, the

¹¹³ F.M. Denny, "Umma"

¹¹⁴ Qutb *Milestones* 11

¹¹⁵ Q 3:110, AJ Droge, *The Qur'an: A New Annotated Translation* (Equinox Publishing, 2013)

¹¹⁶ Q 2:143, AJ Droge, *The Qur'an: A New Annotated Translation* (Equinox Publishing, 2013)

umma, in their correct behavior, leads mankind on a righteous path with the Qur'an as their guide. Qutb understands the perfection of the *umma* as dependent on their relationship to the Qur'an, which he imagines as a guidebook. To Qutb's imagining, this ideal Medianan community did not ponder and philosophize over Qur'anic verses, but responded with action, like soldiers on a battlefield. It is this hermeneutical mode that freed the *umma* from the ignorance of *jahiliyya*.¹¹⁷

Building on Mawdudi's reconceptualization of the term, Qutb's *jahiliyya* refers to the state of the modern world, where men claim sovereignty over each other, and therefore undermine the absolute sovereignty of God.¹¹⁸ *Jahiliyya* is not only a sickness of the Western, non-Muslim world—the real danger of *jahiliyya* is its existence within Muslim society. In order to cure this sickness, the Muslim must

return to that pure source from which those people [the First Muslims] derived their guidance, the source which is free from any mixing or solution. We must return to it to derive from it our concepts of the nature of the universe, the nature of human existence, and the relationship of these two with the Perfect, the Real Being, God Most High. From it we must also derive our concepts of life, our principles of government, politics, economics and all other aspects of life.¹¹⁹

Qutb's imagining of the Qur'an as the pure word of God, in conjunction with his understanding of the role of the *umma* as harbingers of Islam informs his claim, not only for an Islamic

¹¹⁷ Qutb *Milestones* 33 “We must return to it with a sense of instruction for obedience and action, and not for academic discussion and enjoyment. We should return to it to find out what kind of person it asks us to be, and then be like that...Our primary purpose it to know what way of life is demanded of us by the Qur'an the total view of the universe which the Qur'an wants us to have, what is the nature of our knowledge of God, taught to us by the Qur'an, the kind of morals and manners which are enjoined by it, and the kind of legal and constitutional system it asks us to establish in the world.”

¹¹⁸ Eleanor Abdella Doumato, “Jahiliyyah”

¹¹⁹ Qutb *Milestones* 32-33

government, but for the form the modern *umma* must take in order to accomplish these goals. As Islam's purpose is "to bring human beings into submission to God, to free them from servitude to other human beings, to deliver them from the clutches of human lordship and man-made laws, value systems and traditions,"¹²⁰ the *umma*'s role is to lead humanity toward this goal by example. In Qutb's utopic imagining of the Islamic past, the *umma*'s existence as a self-sustained community was essential to the overcoming of *jahiliyya*, because non-Muslims were able to see the message of Islam materialized in a society. In the introductory chapter of *Milestones*, Qutb states,

Islam cannot fulfill its role except by taking concrete form in a society, rather, in a nation; for man does not listen, especially in this age, to an abstract theory which is not seen materialized in a living society. From this point of view, we can say that the Muslim community has been extinct for a few centuries, for this Muslim community does not denote the name of the land in which Islam resides, nor is it a people whose forefathers lived under the Islamic system at some earlier time. It is the name of a group of people whose manners, ideas and concepts, rules and regulations, values and criteria, are all derived from the Islamic source. The Muslim community with these characteristics vanished from the earth a few hundred years ago. Islam cannot fulfill its role except by taking concrete form in a living community. If Islam again is to be the leader of mankind, then it is necessary that the Muslim community be restored to its original form.¹²¹

The *umma*, which at one point in time was the leader of mankind, fell into extinction long before Qutb's time. From his ensuing argument, one can conclude a number of elements are to blame for the disintegration of this community, the most consequential of which, however, was the loss of urgency with which Muslims looked to the Qur'an. No longer read as a guidebook, but rather as a philosophical text, Muslims began to distance themselves from the role which had been prescribed to them. The loss of this hermeneutic was the loss of the *umma*. Now, although a

¹²⁰ Qutb *Milestones* 80

¹²¹ Qutb *Milestones* 11

Muslim's "manners, ideas and concepts, rules and regulations, values and criteria," are derived from the Islamic source, they are diluted interpretations rather than directly proscribed actions. Muslims have allowed *jahili* society to penetrate their practice. Loss of a direct-action reading of the Qur'an allowed other aspects of *jahiliyya* into the Muslim's life which contributed to the disintegration of the *umma*, in particular, the formation of secular governments whose claim to sovereignty was supported by Muslim submission. The *umma* was separated and replaced by secular nation-states.

Qutb approaches Islam in a characteristically Protestant Christian manner, in which a religion is defined by the content of its sacred text, rather than by ritual or a set of beliefs. Through colonial missionary trips to the "Orient," Protestant Christian sensibilities spread to Muslim lands, and were implemented in the Muslim's social imaginary through imperial and post-colonial state enforcement of religion's definition. As a conscript of British colonial modernity, Qutb's conceptualization of Islam was influenced by the modern Protestant Christian understanding of religion.¹²² I highlight Qutb's scripturalist approach to Islam to point to one of ways in which his imagining of the Islamic past is framed and constrained by the structures of modernity. The centralization of the Qur'an in the *umma*'s imagined "direct action" reading rests upon an seemingly egalitarian characterization of the Qur'an as an approachable text, gesturing to the Protestant reformation, which privileged the text of the Bible over the interpretative authority of the clergy. I say "seemingly egalitarian," for Qutb clearly promotes a particular reading of the Qur'an, invalidating other hermeneutical practices.

¹²² Carl Ernst, "Approaching Islam in Terms of Religion," *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*, (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003) 47

From the passage quoted above, we can see another way in which Qutb's imagined past relies on modern structures, in particular, Qutb relies upon the language of the nation to describe the pre-modern *umma*. Qutb states that his contemporary Muslim community "does not denote the name of the land in which Islam resides, nor is it a people whose forefathers lived under the Islamic system at some earlier time." This mirrors the common understanding of the nation as a community of people whose claim to sovereign autonomy relies upon an imagined bond usually related to language or ethnicity. Nationalists often maintain the legitimacy of their nation by referring to an idealized past that illustrates the nation's primordial existence. The nation, therefore, has always existed, but comes to full fruition within its own sovereign territory. Qutb's call for Islam to take "concrete form in a society" recalls Weber's definition of a nation as, "a community of sentiment which would adequately manifest itself in a state of its own; hence a nation is a community which normally tends to produce a state of its own."¹²³ The first step toward an Islamic era is the reformation of the *umma* who will forgo allegiances to secular governments and live by the Qur'an and its "principles of government, politics, economics and all other aspects of life."¹²⁴

As mentioned above, the particularities of Qutb's engagement with nationalism reveal some of the ways in which his argument is inherently modern. Although the seeds of nationalism had been planted before and during the early modern period, nationalist sentiment did not begin

¹²³ As quoted in Brykczynski, "Radical Islam and the Nation: The Relationship between Religion and Nationalism in the Political Thought of Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb" *History of Intellectual Culture* Vol 5, No. 1, 2005.

¹²⁴ Qutb *Milestones* 32-33

to mold political realities until late eighteenth century Europe.¹²⁵ During the nineteenth century nationalist sentiment spread through central Europe before appearing in eastern and southeastern Europe, and then, during the twentieth century, nationalist movements began to appear throughout Africa, the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia.¹²⁶ Nationalism is deeply embedded in the ways in which modern subjects imagine social organization. Within the modern social imaginary, the nation is one of the key structures that informs our understanding of political communities. Therefore, an argument which seeks to claim the right of a group of people to establish their community in the form of a state will utilize the language of the nation to legitimize their claim.

The pervasiveness of the idea of the nation appears again later in *Milestones*, when Qutb imagines the contemporary situation of Arab nationalism playing out in the Islamic past:

It can therefore be said that Muhammad—peace be upon him—[because of his lineage and social status] was capable of kindling among his compatriots the fire of Arab nationalism and would thus have united them. They would have responded gladly to this call, for they were weary of continual tribal warfare and blood feuds. He would then have been able to free the Arab lands from the domination of Roman and Persian imperialism and would have been able to establish a united Arab state...It can be said that if Arabia had thus been united under his leadership and the authority had once devolved into his hands, he could have used all this to make them accept the belief in the Unity of God, for which purpose he was sent, and to bring people to submit to their Sustainer after they had submitted to his own human authority.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Benedict Anderson, “The Origins of National Consciousness” *Imagined Communities* (London and New York: Verso, 1983) pp 37-46

¹²⁶ Hans Khon, “Nationalism” In *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Last modified January 1, 2009, Accessed on May 1, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/nationalism>

¹²⁷ Qutb *Milestones* 42-43

Embedded within his argument for the divine intentionality of the historical formation of Islam is a critique of the contemporary phenomena of Pan-Arab nationalism whose most vocal and charismatic spokesperson was Egyptian leader Gamal Abdul Nasser. Originating in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a major defining moment of pan-Arab nationalism was the formation of the Arab League in 1945, which sought to form a political and economic support system among the Arab states. In addition to supporting Arab states, the Ba‘thist brand of nationalism promoted by Gamal Abdul Nasser sought to unify Arab peoples under a socialist state.¹²⁸ Sayyid Qutb rejected this vision of unity as an emancipatory method, equating the Arab nationalist system of government with the submissive Egyptian monarchy. In his 1966 trial, Qutb declared that the new anti-colonial government was more oppressive than the regime it had replaced.¹²⁹ This fact illuminates the anti-Nasser undertones present throughout *Milestones*, “The way is not to free the earth from Roman and Persian tyranny,” he states, “in order to replace it with Arab tyranny.”¹³⁰

Looking past the fact that the contributing factors to the birth of national consciousness were not present during the time of the Prophet, we can see how Qutb utilizes characters from Islamic history to form an argument against nationalism. Through the character of the Prophet, Qutb shows the effectiveness of Islam as an emancipatory and unifying force. To quell any doubts over the success of the Islamic system of governance he explains the ways in which Islam and its codes of governance found in the Qur’an improved Arab society by providing a justice

¹²⁸ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, “Pan-Arabism” In *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Last Updated July 6, 2011, Accessed on May 1, 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pan-Arabism>

¹²⁹ Lawrence Wright, 36

¹³⁰ Qutb *Milestones* 44

and welfare system, in addition to a moral code. “All this was possible,” Qutb states, “because those who established this religion [established it] in the form of a state.”¹³¹

The Muslim *umma* is central to the existential question at the heart of Qutb’s *Milestones*. The question of identity is brought up throughout the text, as it is one of the key anxieties raised by colonial modernity.¹³² In his critique of the current state of the Muslim world, which heavily focuses on the inadequacy of nationalism, Qutb proposes a new society modeled on the original community of Muslims. First, though, Qutb must identify the object of reform. Qutb’s *umma* is a community of Muslims who, through their direct-action reading of the Qur’an, became the embodiment of Islam in society by establishing their religion as a state in Medina. Utilizing the Islamic past as a narrative tool, Qutb argues against Arab nationalism in favor of his proposed Islamic state, however, this rejection is complicated by the language Qutb utilizes to define his *umma*. By describing the *umma* as a nation, Qutb shows that although he rejects nationalism as *jahiliyya*, he accepts the validity of the ideological structure of the nation. In the process of identifying the object of reform, the *umma* comes to take on characteristics of this modern political structure, for Qutb, by attempting to restore the *umma* to its original form is bound to the present hegemonic structures. These structures, like the nation, are the lens through which Qutb views the past and the frame of his reform. Qutb’s locating the nation in the pre-modern past poses a challenge to modernity as a self-authorizing discourse that marks itself as a unyielding break from the past.¹³³

¹³¹ Qutb *Milestones* 52

¹³² Sherali Tareen, “Narratives of Emancipation in Modern Islam: Temporality, Hermeneutics, and Sovereignty” *Islamic Studies* 52.1 (2013), 6

¹³³ Tareen, 8

Ali Shariati: Marxism Islamicized

Within scholarship, Ali Shariati's use of Marxism is rarely taken as an integral component to the structure of his reform. Rather, Shariati's engagement with Marxism is often considered in relation to his audience of "secularized" students.¹³⁴ The goals of this line of inquiry are often considered separately from other aspects of his thought. In what follows, I present a close reading of Shariati's Marxist methodology that illuminates the ways in which his Marxist construction of history in "The Philosophy of History: Cain and Abel" and "The Dialectic of Sociology"¹³⁵ works to subvert the narrative of modernity in which the modern moment stands distinct from antiquity. Shariati does this by constructing an alternative timeline through the dialectic of Cain and Abel.

Modernity characterizes its time-space as a radical break in the seamless passage from past to present. Through this self-narrative, modernity characterizes its time-space as distinct entity from "the past." History is objectified into successive "periods," and time is conceptualized in terms of linear movement.¹³⁶ In his philosophy of history, Shariati constructs an alternative timeline that complicates the modern understanding of history as distinct periods and time as a linear progression of events. Shariati conceptualizes history as a cycle in which the battle between Cain and Abel continually plays out in time. The characters of Cain and Abel present in our perception of time as "the oppressors" and "the oppressed." Shariati uses Marx's philosophy of history to argue for this cyclical time and the manifestation of this cycle in

¹³⁴ Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006)

¹³⁵ in Ali Shariati, *On the Sociology of Islam*, tr. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1979)

¹³⁶ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, (London and New York: Verso, 2002) 24

mankind's experience of history. In Shariati's timeline, the present is not distinct from the past or future. In the divine truth of the dialectic, there are no distinct periods or narratives, but the one continual narrative of Cain and Abel.

Shariati was not the first thinker from the Iranian intellectual class to synthesize Marxism and Islam. In the mid-twentieth century, Marxism was a prominent discursive tool employed in order to analyze and make sense of the condition of life and society in Iran. Sociopolitical criticism, often steeped in symbolic or metaphorical language to obscure critique from censors, utilized materialist explanations, which aimed to transform the status quo. The Marxist position, which inspired the ideology of armed struggle against the regime, addressed topics relating to the Iranian encounter with the West, generational conflict, consumerism, Third World political economy, and the nature of Iranian pre-capitalist and capitalist modes of production.¹³⁷

Shariati's work is rich in allegory, using idioms and episodes from early Islamic history to present his revolutionary-minded arguments. Central to the construction of an Islamic ideology, laid out in *Islamshenasi* (1968), is the dialectical contradiction that "began with the creation of humanity and has been waged at all places and at all times, and the sum total of which constitutes history."¹³⁸ Shariati's characterization of the battle of Cain and Abel is rich with Marxist undertones, which depart from traditional Muslim conceptualizations of the allegorical tale. According to Shariati, this story concerns the end of primitive communism and the establishment of its replacement, the agricultural economic system which relies on private ownership of the means of production. The story of Cain and Abel is the story of the formation

¹³⁷ Ali Gheissari, "Critique of Westernism and Debates over Modernity," *Iranian Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 83

¹³⁸ Shariati "The Philosophy of History: Cain and Abel" 97

of the first society divided by class.¹³⁹ The Qur’anic account of Cain and Abel, to which Shariati continually refers, follows the Genesis narrative, in which the unnamed sons of Adam offer sacrifices to God, but only one is accepted. The giver of the rejected sacrifice, named Cain in the Genesis account, threatens his brother’s life out of anger and shame. Abel, whose sacrifice was accepted, responds with passivity, so that Cain would bear the full burden of sin. After the fratricide, Cain repents his sin, and thereafter lives under God’s protection. The following passage issues a warning: “From that time We prescribed for the Sons of Israel that whoever kills a person...it is as if he has killed all people.”¹⁴⁰ Due to the juxtaposition of these passages, it is commonly held by Muslim exegetes that the moral of the story is the denunciation of murder.¹⁴¹

Shariati’s retelling of the story challenges this reading, he argues that there is much more one can extract from the story than its moral position on fratricide. For Shariati, the fact that the Abrahamic traditions hold this story to be the “first great event...in this world,”¹⁴² necessitates a closer reading to reveal the deeper message embedded in its revelation. Shariati interprets this episode from early Islamic history through the lens of Marxist historical materialism, which allows him to situate his critique of the *’ulama*, the Pahlavi regime, capitalism, and Western modernity in the primordial Islamic past. To begin his retelling which aims to lay out a critique of socioeconomic class, Shariati introduces his “scientific and logical method” of analysis which states that

¹³⁹ Shariati “Cain and Abel” 104

¹⁴⁰ Q 5:32, AJ Droge, *The Qur’an: A New Annotated Translation* (Equinox Publishing, 2013)

¹⁴¹ Heribert Busse, “Cain and Abel” *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an* ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Brill, 2001) 271

¹⁴² Shariati, “The Philosophy of History: Cain and Abel” 103

when two phenomena, though similar in every respect, develop in different or opposing directions, we should draw up a list of all the causes, factors and conditions that affect each of them. We will then be able to delete all that they hold in common and arrive at the factor or factors that are in opposition or contradiction.¹⁴³

In a materialist analysis of the lives of Cain and Abel, pieced together from the Qur'an narrative and Muslim exegeses, Shariati concludes that there are no material or external factors other than their occupation that would produce the difference between the brothers that would lead to one's end. In the Genesis narrative, Cain tends to the fields and Abel to livestock. These differing occupations placed the brothers in particular economic and social positions that have contradictory types of work, structures of production, and economic systems.¹⁴⁴ For Shariati, the correspondence of the brothers' occupations to the class division of pastoralist and landowner is no coincidence, but a revelation, proof that class exploitation has existed since the beginning of history. This comparison reveals the significance of God rejecting Cain's sacrifice. Rather than a cursory denial, the dismissal now comes to symbolize His rejection of the landowning class whose wealth is created from the exploited labor of the passive pastoralist. Shariati's Marxist lens allows him to place modern labor divisions in the imagined primordial past.

The message of Shariati's essay strongly echoes the opening of the Communist Manifesto: "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."¹⁴⁵ His retelling is informed by a philosophy of history that uses Marx's historical materialism, a characteristically secular framework, as its chief frame of reference.¹⁴⁶ Cain and Abel represent,

¹⁴³ Shariati, "The Philosophy of History: Cain and Abel" 103

¹⁴⁴ Shariati, "The Philosophy of History: Cain and Abel," 103

¹⁴⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, (New York and London: WW Norton and Co., 1978) 473

¹⁴⁶ see Karl Marx, "The German Ideology: Part I," *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker, (New York and London: WW Norton and Co., 1978) pp. 146-200

for Shariati, historical ages or economies. “Abel, in my opinion, represents the age of a pasture-based economy, of primitive socialism that preceded ownership,” Shariati states, “Cain represents the system of agriculture, and individual or monopoly ownership.”¹⁴⁷ The murder of Abel by Cain symbolizes the replacement of the pastoral economy with the age of agriculture, or the establishment of the system of private worship. “Abel disappeared, and Cain came to the forefront of history,” Shariati writes, “And there he still lives.”¹⁴⁸

Shariati goes on to describe the ways in which the economic shift altered the moral state of mankind. Communal natural resources colored the moral characteristics of man so that the spirit and norms of society were “paternal respect, steadfastness in fulfilling moral obligations, absolute and inviolable obedience to the limitations of collective life, innate purity and sincerity of the religious conscience, [and] a pacific spirit of love and forbearance.”¹⁴⁹ The introduction of agriculture into the pastoral economy caused a revolutionary moral shift; this system ushered in an era of civilization and discrimination.¹⁵⁰ At this point in the essay, Cain and Abel come to represent economic periods and their corresponding moralities. The parameters of these representations are then expanded; in addition to representing either side of the first historical economic division, Cain and Abel stand as ideal types for the winners and losers of the capitalist economic system.

The retelling of the Cain and Abel narrative lays the groundwork for Shariati’s philosophy of history, introduced in “Philosophy of History: Cain and Abel,” and expanded on in

¹⁴⁷ Shariati “Cain and Abel” 98

¹⁴⁸ Shariati “Cain and Abel” 98

¹⁴⁹ Shariati “Cain and Abel” 99

¹⁵⁰ Shariati “Cain and Abel” 99

“The Dialectic of Sociology.” The Cain and Abel essay introduces the reader to the formation of class division by highlighting the characters’ trades and hypothesizing the ways in which their differing occupations may have contributed to their moral development. Shariati concludes that the pasture based economy of Abel informed his passivity, because communal ownership of production resulted in “paternal respect, steadfastness in fulfilling moral obligations...[and] a pacific spirit of love and forbearance.”¹⁵¹ Agriculture and the individual ownership of land rescinded the sense of communal responsibility, which led to the moral deprivation that characterizes capitalist society. In “Dialectic” Shariati introduces the reader to the “superstructures” of Cain and Abel, which encapsulate the structures of slavery, serfdom, bourgeoisie, feudalism, and capitalism. Shariati breaks from Marx’s conception of a historical progression of economic systems, stating instead that throughout history, there have only been two social structures that exist in dialectical contradiction; however, Shariati’s Islamic ideology is decidedly framed by the secular lens of Marxist historical materialism.

The battle of Cain and Abel is the dialectical contradiction that defines history. Shariati states that what Marx saw as the developmental stages of capitalism were actually the historical manifestation of the systems of Cain and Abel. Rather than a steady progression of primitive socialism, to capitalism, to communism, Shariati’s theory of history implies that although mankind exists on a path of spiritual progression, history itself does not progress, but is stuck in the dialectical loop of the recurring fraternal battle. The dialectic of Cain and Abel, inspired by Hegel’s dialectic, does not necessarily follow Hegel’s philosophical method, in which two

¹⁵¹ Shariati “Cain and Abel” 99

opposing forces, thesis and antithesis, evolve into a synthesis.¹⁵² Shariati's result, rather than a synthesis, is the thesis's utter obliteration of the antithesis, ending the cyclical battle that constitutes history.

Shariati's dialectic contests modernity's narrative of time which rewrites the past as a dramatic rupture from the present. The primordial and cyclical class struggle between Cain and Abel ignores any constructed barrier between past and present. The battle, which takes place at all moments of history, alleviates any perceived difference between past, present, and future. The defining characteristic of antiquity continues onto the present, and will continue until the end of time. "The Philosophy of History: Cain and Abel" and "The Dialectic of Sociology" are found in *Islamshenasi* (1968), in which Shariati's Islamic ideology unfolds. The inclusion of a philosophy of history in his ideology is significant in that it lays the groundwork for the construction of a worldview. By engaging this particular aspect of Shariati's ideology, we can see one way in which the utilization of a secular Marxist framework allows for his Islamic ideology to subvert modern time-space.

Complicating Dichotomy, Subverting Time-Space

By analyzing the ways in which Qutb and Shariati engage with secular ideologies, this chapter seeks to illuminate another way in which these reformers engage with their tradition through the ideological structures of their present. In the previous chapter I presented the dichotomies used by Qutb and Shariati, arguing that these dichotomies, which seek to locate the argument of their reform in the imagined past, ground their reform in the present by taking on the characteristics of contemporary imagined dichotomies, like the Orientalist ontological division of Islam and the

¹⁵² Maybee, Julie E., "Hegel's Dialectics", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/hegel-dialectics/>

West. This chapter complicates the dichotomies presented in the last chapter by highlighting Qutb and Shariati's respective arguments that transgress the modernity's imagined divides between Islam and the West, religion and secular, modernity and tradition, through modern ideological infrastructures like Marxism and the nation. This chapter has also shown how, through these modern infrastructures, Qutb and Shariati disrupt modern-time space by traversing modernity's division of past and present.

Modernity forms a "distinctive time-space, appearing in the homogenous shape of the West and characterized by the immediacy of presence that we recognize as the 'now' of history."¹⁵³ Qutb and Shariati's fluid conceptualization of history, in which the past and present are mirrored in each other, questions the distinctiveness of this time-space, and the immediacy of the "now." For Qutb, the *jahili* society of pre-Islamic Arabia bleeds into the present moment, and characteristically modern structures, the nation and the nation-state, exist in the Islamic past. For Shariati, there is no ontological difference between the past and present, for the cyclical battle between Cain and Abel is waged throughout time. By rejecting the inherent differences of the past and present, Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati reject modernity's narrative of itself, while simultaneously solidifying their position as modern conscripts.

¹⁵³ Timothy Mitchel, "The Stage of Modernity," *Questions of Modernity*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 23

Conclusion

The Contradictions of Contestation

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well, then, I contradict myself.
(I am very large, I contain multitudes.)*

Walt Whitman “Song of Myself”¹⁵⁴

This project is a result of my engagement with the contradictions I perceived in the work of Sayyid Qutb and Ali Shariati, two exemplary contributors to the modern reform tradition. The project you have just read is, in many ways, the inversion of my thought process, for I began this project contending with the paradox presented in the last chapter—how should one make sense of Qutb and Shariati’s forthright disavowal of Western ideological systems when they employ these very systems in their Islamic reform? In order to conceptualize this contradiction, I have looked at these thinkers in their contemporary political and intellectual contexts to locate their personal engagement with nationalism and Marxism. The first chapter highlights the intertwining of thought and context, exploring how life experiences and political forces constrain and frame the content of their arguments. The second chapter focuses on the function of dichotomy in Qutb and Shariati’s reform, paying particular attention to the way in which their dichotomies of *jahiliyya* and Islam, *tawhid* and *shirk* locate the object and argument of their reform in the Islamic corpus, while absorbing the contemporary Orientalist ontological distinction between Islam and the West, thus creating new definitions of these classical terms. I suggest this contradiction points to the ambiguity of the reformer who, in his attempt to restore original meanings and practices, is continually creating new practices, new terms, and new

¹⁵⁴ Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” *Leaves of Grass*, (New York: Modern Library, 1993) as quoted in Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016)

understandings of Islam, for tradition is an ever-changing set of *socially* and *historically* embodied arguments.¹⁵⁵ This assertion flows into the final chapter, my paradoxical intellectual starting point. The final chapter complicates the dichotomies presented in the previous chapter by highlighting the way in which Qutb and Shariati's drawing from Western ideological infrastructures undermines their constructed dichotomy between Islam and the West. Qutb and Shariati utilize these infrastructures in their construction of timelines that subvert the modern understanding of time as a linear trajectory, consequently rejecting modernity's narrative of itself as a distinct break from the past by placing modern constructions like the nation, nationalism, socialism, and capitalism in the pre-modern past. To conclude this final chapter, I suggest that it is the interruptions of modernity (the nation-state, the religious-secular binary, the favoring of egalitarianism over hierarchy, etc.) which allow the modern reformer to contest modernity, establishing Qutb and Shariati as conscripts of modernity.

The body of this project highlights the contradictions present in Qutb and Shariati's reform; I suggest these contradictions can be understood through the very definition of tradition as a historically and socially embodied set of arguments. In the introduction to this project, I stated that "reform is intimately connected to the conceptualization of tradition," meaning that the reformer, in attempting to restore an original idea of Islam contributes to the cultivation of a community's relationship to its past and present. The reformer is both the custodian and the creator of the community's collective memory. The reform arguments of Qutb and Shariati are historically and socially embodied, meaning that they engage with the tradition, particularly the Qur'an and the imagined Islamic past, from their personal, political, and historical standpoint.

¹⁵⁵ Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring the Islamic Tradition: Reform, Rationality, Modernity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) 4

When Qutb and Shariati engage with the Qur'an or the Islamic past, they do so through the ideological, social, and political structures of their contemporary moment.

I wish to end this project with a question that places it in conversation with Shahab Ahmed's *What is Islam?* which seeks to redefine the ways in which scholars approach the intellectual and lived tradition of Islam by embracing the contradictions present in this heterodox tradition. This question is present within the project, yet at this point feels beyond my reach—given the parameters of Qutb and Shariati's definitions of Islam, constructed through the stark opposition between *jahiliyya* and Islam, *tawhid* and *shirk*, would their reform, which undoubtedly contains elements of the Western, secular intellectual tradition, be considered Islamic?

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